
FEMINISM AND SOCIETY AS SYMETRICALLY RELATED
CONCEPTS

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ABSTRACT

It is a truism that no man can live successfully in isolation of fellow men. This notable truth depicts the fact that man is a social being who can only survive within the ambience of the society. The smallest unit of the society however is the family which is the relationship between a man and a woman. The society will function well where both sexes plays its roles adequately. In order for the women to adequately discharged their obligation in a given society and contribute their own quota is the consciousness behind the movement called feminism.

The focus of this paper is to examine the nature of feminism and its functions in society. Attempt is made to highlight the intricate relationship between society and feminism. Feminism and society are multi-dimensional concepts and this account for the existence of several definitions of these concepts. This notwithstanding, some definitions relevant to the subject-matter of this paper will be provided.

The paper is divided into different parts. The introduction constitutes the first part. Conceptual clarification of feminism will be provided in the second part. The third part considers the nature of society. The role of feminism in society or societal development is discussed in the fourth part. The summary or conclusion is presented in the final part.

KEYWORDS: Society, Feminism, Development, Gender, Rights.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Sociologists, there are three types of lifestyle. They are: Patriarchal, Matriarchal, and Symmetrical. In a Patriarchal society, men are considered superior to women and they are the breadwinner and decision- maker. Women are seen as inferior to men and whose major duty is to take care of the children and do the house chores. This kind of life style is common in African countries and the rest of the world with very few exceptions.

In matriarchal lifestyle, women are considered to be superior to men. They economically dominate the society and are regarded as the father- figure in the house. They are also regarded as the leader of the home. The latter is the direct opposite of the former. Men are considered to be inferior to women and they carried out the house chores. The symmetrical

lifestyle is a situation whereby men and women are on the same balanced proportion, this is no doubt the primary goal of feminism. Feminism is advocating for a symmetrical life style in the society. It is a range of movements and ideologies that share a common goal in order to define establish and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal and social rights for women.

It need be stated that a discourse on the concept of feminism will remain inchoate without reference to the concept of society and vice versa. This is so because feminism is not in isolation but a movement which tends to change the perspective of the society most especially in respect of the role of women. Society in this sense is not a collection of various individuals but rather, the relationship that exists between them. However, such relationship cannot be fully understood without proper and adequate comprehension of the concept of feminism. This is predicated on the premise that the smallest unit of the relationship that existed between human being can be traced to the family which is the relationship between the husband and the wife. The relationship that exists between husband and wife can only be based on any of the three kind of lifestyle highlighted above one of which (symmetrical) is the cardinal principle of feminism. This shows the existing intricate relationship between feminism and society which is the fulcrum of this paper.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF FEMINISM

Feminism is not a unitary concept, but instead a diverse and multi-faceted grouping of ideas and indeed actions. Many attempts have been made to answer the question ‘What is feminism? With a set of core propositions and beliefs central to all feminist theories, the task is made extremely difficult because many of the different strands of feminism seem to be not only divergent but sometimes forcefully opposed. Perhaps we should start from the assumption that we cannot define what feminism is but only try to pick out common characteristics of all the many different faces of feminism. Any attempt to provide a baseline definition of a common basis of feminism may start with the assertion that feminism concerns itself with women’s chauvinistic assumption owing to sex stratification as a major issue.

It is difficult if not impossible to define feminism in terms of a set of core concepts. Consequently, feminism can be defined better or further in terms of its historical origins and development. The term feminism is a relatively modern one. There are debates over when and where it was first used. The term “feminist” seems to have first been used in 1871 in a French medical text to describe a cessation in development of the sexual organs and characteristics in male patients, who were perceived as thus suffering from feminization of their bodies.

Feminism is thus a term that emerged long after women started questioning their inferior states and demanding an amelioration in their social position. Even after the word feminism was coined, it was still not adopted as a term of identification by many of those who campaigned for women’s right indiscriminately and this non-coincidence between these groups self-identification and subsequent labeling as feminist clearly relates to the problem of what criteria are to be used in deciding whether a person, group or action is feminist. Should all theories, actions and campaigns that improve women’s social position, whether intentionally or not be classified as feminist? Or must there be a conscious intent to undertake a feminist activity? If the first position is adopted, then it can be argued that the meaning of

feminism become almost impossibly diffuses. Similarly, there is a query over whether different types of women's political organization which do not have a specific goal, the furtherance of women's rights - for example, women peace movements- should be called feminist. Again a positive answer may lead to diffusion of the meaning of feminist beyond the bounds of what is theoretically or politically helpful. On the other hand, there are those who argue for a much tighter definition of feminism.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF SOCIETY

Society is a term used in everyday life with a particular meaning. A layman often defines society as an aggregation or collection of individuals. But in sociology, the term is used in a different sense. It is not just a congregation or collectivity of several individuals. It refers to the sum total of the relationship existing between them. In terms of common sense, society is understood as a tangible object, whereas in sociology, it refers to an intangible entity. It is a mental construct, which we realize in everyday life but that we cannot see.

In their book on "Society", MacIver and Page define "society in a system of usage and procedures of authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions, of controlling of human behavior and of liberties. This ever-changing, complex system, we call society. It is the web of social relationships and it is always changing. This definition reflects that society is a network of social relationships. An individual is related to others through the ties of kinship, marriage, neighborhood, caste, occupation, religions, political parties and peers. Thus, an individual becomes part and parcel of several layer groups through these different multiple' relationships. Such relationships do not occur at random, rather these are patterned. Therefore, sociologists define society as the pattern of social relationship formed through interaction of its members.

ATTRIBUTES OF SOCIETY

The collectivity of individuals created society over a long period of time. Sociologists have identified certain attributes of society. They are;

- i. Likeness and differentiation
- ii. Inter-dependence
- iii. Co-operation and conflict

In the first place, there should be an aggregate of individuals who share the sense of likeness. No society can come into existence unless its members feel that they are like one another. Members of the family and kin group, persons belonging to the same village or small town and members of the same caste generally have this feeling of likeness. The first likeness is that of physiognomy. Man along with other animals cannot make a human society.

However, we cannot say that society is not marked by differentiation. The members of a society differ from one another in terms of caste, class, occupation and education e.t.c. Even within the family, members differ from one another in terms of gender age, personality, outlook and personal preferences. However these differences complement each other in such a way that family stability is maintained. Similar principle is also applicable to wider society where the differences are subordinated to likeness, which is quite essential for maintaining social harmony.

Interdependence is another attribute of a society. The members of a society depend on one another for its smooth functioning. In a traditional village or your neighborhood, members of different case group depend on each other in everyday life. For example, washman, carpenter, cobbler, ironsmith, bus conductor, Brahmin, sweepers are seen to be doing their own tasks, yet depending upon each other. No individual can perform all functions on one's own. Therefore, individual depend on each other to live smoothly in the society.

Co-operation is another essential attribute of a society. No society can come into existence or sustain such unless her members co-operate with one another. Co-operation is obtained at every level of society such as inter-personal relationship like:

- i. between husband and wife and other family members
- ii. between neighbours and
- iii. at the level of wider society.

As you know that unless you co-operate with your siblings, you cannot have your way in family matters. On the other hand, we also know that relationship also have an element of conflict. For example, you and your brother both argue to get it. However, your parents soon resolve the conflict. In the same way, co-operation and conflict mark relationships in society. Conflicts as an essential attribute (feature) of society can also be explained in a wider sense. Groups can enter into conflicting relations if their interests are opposed to each other. The conflict between landlords and landladies can be observed in this context. However, no doubt, co-operation is more important in all respects.

Development is envisioned not just as a process of creating opportunities for individuals to earn sustainable livelihood, rather, it requires that men and women are able to operate within a conducive policy/social environment that allows them to seize these opportunities. Thus in addressing development from the feminist perspective, we are able to explore differential needs of women and men, girls and boys, in the development process. We are able to appreciate that policies affect them in different ways; while they have rights to share the benefits of development, if sustainable development is to be achieved.

Gender relations are thus taken as prime factors in explaining social differentiation and social inequalities in the society and provide the platform for social or policy reforms for sustainable development. However, sustainable development may be hard to achieve where one-half of the potential talent base (women) remain untapped resources. Partnerships and equality between men and women are found to be the basis of strong families and viable societies in a rapidly changing world.

THE ROLE OF FEMINISM IN SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT

In any discussion on society, "man" must be central. Apart from being an individual, man is also essentially a social being. As an individual, each man is complete, independent and distinct from other men. As a social being; man cannot fully live as man nor fully develop and actualize his potentials outside of fellowship with other men. It is the inability of man to by himself, meet his existential needs and develop his potentials that led to the emergence of society.

Society is formed by men in order to overcome their individual inabilities in the attainment of their common ends. For example, the protection of lives, properties and rights is an aspect of the goal of self-preservation which human beings share in common. While each individual may not be capable of providing such protection, it can be adequately provided when they act in concert in society or political community. Hence, society may be aptly described as a voluntary unity constituted by a group of men bound together by their need of mutual supplementation. Its essence seems to lie in the cooperation between men for the purpose of complimenting their various potentials in order to satisfy their existential needs. These needs include those of self-preservation and self-development.

Given the essence of society as a product of the cooperation between men, it is inevitable that men must interact with each other in society. In the course of this interaction, questions about the right mode of conduct and how people ought to relate with each other arise. Attempts to answer these questions generate the primary concerns of morality and philosophy of morality. Had it been that men do not interact in any way, these questions may not arise. It is thus respect that morality is said to be essentially social. That is, questions of morality arise solely by virtue of the fact that men enter into social relationships with each other. And the primary aim of morality is to facilitate peaceful and harmonious living between men in society.

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE ROLES OF FEMINISM IN SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT

i. Poverty and Economic Empowerment

Nigeria ranked amongst the poorest countries in the world despite its rich endowments with natural and human resources. The 2005 human development index presents Nigeria as one of the twenty countries with the lowest human development index. The feminization of poverty and the specific impact of poverty on women is the result of inequalities embedded in norms, traditions and practices that hinder women's access to critical resources such as land and credit. These curtail their inheritance rights, constrain their political participation. The causes and outcomes of poverty are highly differentiated between women and men; particularly because of persistent unequal access to and control over productive resources and decision making processes. Yet, traditional conceptualizations of poverty consistently neglect to take this into account, resulting in policies and programmes which fail to improve the lives of poor men and women and their families.

Widespread poverty remains the major challenge to development efforts in Nigeria. Some of the challenges of poverty are unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy, low status of women, environmental degradation and limited access to social and health services including reproductive health services. The outcomes of these poverty generated conditions include high levels of fertility, morbidity and mortality, and low economic productivity.

ii. GENDER RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE AND CORRUPTION

Notably, corruption drains public resources and takes much needed funds away from national economic development or social services, while it disproportionately affects women and the poor, who are most dependent on these structures. Women may also be in less powerful

positions to challenge corruption when it occurs. Alternatively, they may face gendered forms of corruption such as the demand for sex in return for particular services or resources.

A relationship is gradually being established between gender responsive governance and anti-corruption practices in public office. A central argument in this respect is that women may be more relationship-oriented; have higher standard of ethical behavior; and be more concerned with the common good than men are. Notably, gender differences are attributed to socialization, or to differences in access to networks of corruption, or knowledge of how to engage in corrupt practices among others.

There are sufficient evidences to prove that women are veritable access in public offices. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala successfully transformed the Nigerian economic platform when she succeeded in negotiating a debt relief package for Nigeria as a Finance Minister (JULY 2003 – JUNE 2006) under the Obasanjo regime. Also Dora Akinyuli transformed the face of the national agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) when she was appointed as the Director General of this organization starting April 2011.

FEMINISM IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Feminism is concerned with human development. The development of the human person is promoted when the mind is trained to see things critically and to seek the meaning and intelligibility of things. At this level, women have important roles to play to improve the structure of gender relations in the society. The following actions are needed at this level;

- i. Both men and women should embrace gender equity principles.
- ii. Individuals must build their competence to better improve their role in national building. Both men and women must start to see themselves as partners in progress. Shun retrogressive cultural practices that either hurt human dignity and /or make it difficult for families to move out of poverty.
- iii. The girl child must be re –orientated such that she values personal integrity and self esteem.
 - She becomes more assertive and pro-active
 - She is well prepared for the challenges of schooling, wage labour and in some cases participation in politics and the political life of the local communities.
 - She embraces motherhood, but she is also equipped to challenge the world around her as she makes demand for social network of supports to balance her multiple gender roles.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Feminism is an act of empowering women, in a bid to develop and not to see themselves like second class citizen. Feminisms concern themselves with women’s inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex. Furthermore, one could argue that all feminists call for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women. When women are liberated from being oppressed, it helps to bring about consistency and coherence in their ideas, beliefs and policies.

When feminists try to live a good life, when they are consistent and coherent in their ideas, beliefs, policies and impartial in their judgments, when they work toward building a good and virile country, then they are working toward a better future.

In order to address development from the perspectives of men and women, we are able to explore differential needs of women and men in the development process. Thus, the approach we want to use is a shift from focusing on women in isolation, to a focus on gender relations which explore relations of cooperation and/or competition (even conflict) between the two gender groups in the development process. Gender relations are thus taken as prime factors in explaining social differentiation and social inequalities in the society, while they provide the platform for social or policy reforms for development. However, development may be hard to achieve where women remain as untapped resource or second class citizen.

To correct the structure of gender inequality at society level, the traditional leaders, religious leaders and leaders of social associations must evolve new gender relations arrangements which allow men and women as equal partners in the development process. A start point is to build communities that are alert to the following, and make necessary adjustments to achieve equity in practice.

- i. Gender gaps in social relations and in the distribution of assets and resources in communities and families.
- ii. Women's lack of access to critical resources (land, capital, labour and entrepreneurial skills e.t.c)
- iii. Gender abuses, especially the abuse of the girl child.
- iv. Inability of women to participate in decision making in homes and at the community level.
- v. Men and women, boys and girls have important roles to play to improve the structure of gender relations in the society. The following actions are needed;
 - Both men and women should embrace gender equity principles.
 - Individual must build their competencies to better improve their role in nation building.
 - Both men and women must start to see themselves as partners in progress, shun retrogressive cultural practices that either hurt human dignity or make it difficult for families to move out of poverty.

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