THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINISM: LESSONS FOR THE NIGERIAN WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

An emerging issue throughout Third World countries is the treatment of women. In many of these countries women have the right to vote and other legally defined rights but are still treated as the property of their fathers and husbands. The so-called “dowry murders” in India are a major example of the problem, as is still-common practice of genital mutilation as practiced on women in some parts of Nigeria. In addition, in some Islamic counties women are required to wear the chador, in which they are covered from head to foot. At the same time, feminism is growing throughout developing countries. Women are insisting on significant change in their status, and legal gains have been made. It is also true that women have held positions of considerable power in developing countries; there have been and are a number of women prime ministers, like Benazir Bhutto (1953) Sheikh Hasina Wazed (1947) Khaleda (1945) and Sirleaf Johnson (2005). Thus, the picture is complex, fluid and elusive. Traditional restrictions on women are strong, but some women have advanced further than in many parts of the West. Still, women in developing countries have only begun to make significant steps toward the goal of achieving equally in daily life. They are fighting a strong tradition but have on their side the belief among most elites that change is necessary. Drawing heavily from the above, what lessons can the Nigerian women learn from these experiences and expectations? Should they continue to play second fiddle at respectable distance or should they be subservient in their social, economic and political activities? These are some of the questions the paper seeks to provide answer.

Keywords: Feminism, and the Struggle for fundamental rights of Women.
Background to the Study

Feminism is a recent term for the politics of equal rights for women. It is also a system of critique and has as its central focus the concept of patriarchy, which can be described as a system of male authority, which oppresses women through its social, political, and economic institutions. Feminism is therefore a critique of patriarchy, (which contradicts the liberty and equality of women) on the one hand, and an ideology committed to women’s emancipation on the other. The most important ideology to emerge in the twentieth century is feminism. It has a central core of agreed-on principles and a number of divisions and disagreements, which are the current focus of attention of writers. Many theorists say that it should now be called *feminisms*, rather than feminism, but because there is clearly still a central core, it is accurate to keep the earlier label.

Starting from a point of unity (sisterhood is global) feminism today is an ideology with many practitioners that have situated themselves on various theoretical intersections (Marxist feminists, anarchist feminists, and radical feminism (Cohen, 1992:43-177, Kaplan, 1987:8, Bleir, 2008:5 and Afshar, 2009:3-6). Modern feminism developed from a position of opposition, opposition not to men but to the oppression of women and, first by implication and then explicitly, all peoples who are treated as inferior by dominant groups. Feminists learned from the experience of African Americans and applied their understanding of racist oppression to their own experience (sexist oppression). African Americans had argued that racism in the United States had been internalized by blacks as well as whites; African Americans, who had been taught that they were inferior, came to believe in their own inferiority (Block, 1992:9, Hekman, 2009:9-12, Hooks, 1981:6-7, Susstein, 1990:9 and Spellman, 1988:4). This made it doubly difficult to break the pattern of oppression. Women and other minority groups have experienced the same pattern. The resurgence of feminism originated in the West but became an international movement, initially through the United Nations Decade for Women (1975 – 1985), and then through regular contacts both personally and through publications. As a result, there exists now a worldwide women’s movement both conscious of itself as a united movement and aware of the real differences among women. Feminism holds
strongly that women had been violated in so many ways and listed five areas of human endeavors as reference point of intellectual discussion. The debate is however illuminated with the focus on oppression, language, religion, socialization and abuse (Bulluck, 1987:8, Collins, 1990:7, Davis, 2009:8 and Chodorow, 1989:56).

**Oppression**

At the heart of feminist social and political analysis is the challenging of the public/private divide in politics, which has historically denied women access to the public political space and therefore representation of their interest deeply rooted in sexism. Sexism is the belief that women are inferior to men. Racism is the belief that one group of people is inferior or superior based on factors such as skin color. But sexism and racism are just examples of the much broader point that people are oppressed both individually and as groups by socially constructed patterns of beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Like racism, but to an even greater extent, sexism is pervasive in our languages, art, literature, and religions. More obviously, sexism pervades politics and the economy. Sexism is part of what feminists oppose and hope to eliminate. Eliminating sexism however, will be extremely difficult since it is, feminists contend, part of all Western languages and part of many clearly held beliefs, including religious beliefs (Brownmiller, 1975:5, Evans, 1979:6, Hartsock, 1983:8, Peter, 1987:7-8 and Rodda, 1993:4).

**Language**

Issues such as race, sexuality, class, and ethnicity have served to disperse the idea of an essential 'women' in which all women would recognize as themselves. Feminists have often been both criticized and laughed at for proposing changes in language use to remove the male bias. But taking the argument seriously and looking at the history of language use, we can see the force of their point. For example, a female first-year university student is called a freshman. Why? Well, at one time, not all that long ago, women could not attend a university and the term implies that. Off course, language use changes, and most people now use freshman to refer to both male and female first-year students, but the word is a relic of a past of greater sexual discrimination. The same for journalism as men and women are referred to gentlemen of the press. This
tendency has been further reinforced by feminism’s encounters with post-structuralism and post-modernism. Feminism today is not simply an ideology but a growing academic discipline. In Nigeria for instance, god-fatherism refers to male political gladiator who sponsor political office holders (Tong, 1984:3, Shaarawi, 1987:4 and Jaywardena, 2007:7-9). Although, we have few women who engaged in this act of sponsoring candidates, no reference is made to that effect. And so, we have no godmothers. The recent declaration by Maurice Iwu (the former INEC Chairman) that Nigerians women should be given certain elective position during elections (especially as deputies) smack hypocrisy and direct insult on womanhood as not qualify enough to hold position as governors, senate president, speakers, and party chairman. The use of a phrase “deputy” is another confirmation that women are inferior, second class citizen and people not fit to hold sensitive position as men.

To take another example, when Thomas Jefferson drafted the declaration of Independence (in the United States of America), and he wrote, “All men are created equal,” did he mean all human beings or just male human beings? We do not really know what Jefferson meant, but we do know that for many people at the time the words referred only to white, male human beings. And when we read major thinkers of the past, we often do not know what the word “man” means; we can read it to mean all human beings, but this may well lead us into simply missing what the author intended us to understand.

A particularly interesting example can be seen in the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) by Ursula K. Le Guin. When *The Left Hand of Darkness* was originally published, there was relatively little awareness of the gendered character of language, and Le Guin called her characters, who changed gender at different points in their lives, “he.” The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (1994) of *The Left Hand of Darkness* addresses the criticism she received for her lack of awareness by providing sample chapters with four different sets of pronouns, one using invented pronouns and genderless personal nouns and titles, one using feminine pronouns and personal nouns rather than the masculine of the original, one using pronouns that reflect the changes her characters go through –
neuter and gendered at different life stages, and one using masculine and feminine pronouns for the same character as that person goes through a transition. One’s understanding of the text varies remarkably depending on the set of pronouns and personal nouns used, which makes this exercise by Le Guin a striking contribution to the debate on language. Similar incident occurred in the novel by Ayikwe Ama: *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The author called one of the leading characters, man. The character had no other name than Man till the end of the story. This is gender bias and prejudice against women. Even the novel by a Nigerian writer called *The Anatomy of Women* portrays women as too powerful and awesome, something mystique.

**Religion**

Religion is concerned with the worship of transcendent or supernatural beings whose existence is outside or above the realms of the normal, which is mortal and temporal. In its most historically important and ethically demanding form, monotheism as exemplified in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions, the religious concerns is concentrated onto a single God who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscience, the creator of the universe (Daly, 2009:9). Religion is therefore normally of huge ethical significance. What people ought to do is derivable from the existence, nature, and will of God. It would be difficult to be seriously religious in any sense without that religion determining some of one’s political, social and economic life. For example, Orthodox Judaism makes a rigid division between men and women, with women defined as inferior. Liberal Judaism advocates, but does not always practice, equality. Only recently have women been allowed to be rabbis in liberal congregations, and the acceptance of women as rabbis is spreading slowly even where it is the policy to allow them (Davis, 2007:5 Boylan, 1991:34, Ferguson, 1991:1-3, and Heschel, 2003:2-5). Even though in the New Testament Christ is presented as treating men and women equally, the same pattern holds true in Christianity. Almost as soon as the first Christian churches were organized, women were placed in subordinate roles. In fact, some of the earliest heresies centered on the advocacy of equality for women, and such heresies continued to appear from time to time, particularly around the Reformation and again in seventeenth-century England (Bazuhabib, 1987:3-7, and Cardilot, 1991:4).
In a 'secular' society the principle that religion and prejudice are independent realms is accepted, but religion continues to influence oppression of women in a number of ways. Christian churches today are still divided over the role of women. The Episcopalian church in the United States decided, after a long, intense debate, to admit women to the priesthood, and an African American woman has been consecrated as a bishop in the United States (Elshtain, 2001:4-5). Some Episcopalian churches and priests have left the denomination as a result. And there are still four of the church's 113 dioceses where women are not allowed to serve as priests because the local bishop does not believe in a female priesthood. The Anglican Church has been deeply divided on the same issue. The Roman Catholic Church excludes women from the priesthood. Most Pentecostals denominations encourage the ordination of women as ministers, but there are still relatively few women ministers in most churches (Elshtain, 2001:5-9, El-Saadawi, 204:8-9).

These divisions reflect a deep ambivalence about women in Christianity, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church. Two women, Eve the rebel and temptress and Mary the mother of Christ, can symbolize the conflict. Roughly the position has been that to the extent women emulate Mary and remain subordinate to man they are correctly fulfilling their natures; to the extent that they emulate Eve they are dangerous. As a result, many feminists see Eve, the rebel, as a symbol of the real strength of women, but the message that most churches present to women is one of subordination to men (Gilligan, 1982:3-5, Lerner, 1986:9-12, Merchant, 2008:7).

**Socialization**

Socialization is the process whereby societal values, norms, traditions, ideology, beliefs, and cultures are transmitted into a naïve individual directly, indirectly, formally and informally. The five basic agents of socialization are: the family, the school, the peer-groups, church and the mass media. The consequences are either parochial, subject, or participant political participation, culture or representation. These are otherwise referred to as developed, matured, low or minimal political culture (Miles, 1996:8-9, Readon, 1993:1, Chodorow, 1989:5-6.). Feminists argue that
given the subordination implied in language and religion, it is not surprising that women have been socialized to believe that only certain narrowly defined roles are acceptable for them, and there is considerable debate over how much this has changed. As was seen in the introduction, socialization is the process by which individuals are given the fundamental values of their society. In the case of women this means that they internalize the sense of inferiority that has been the dominant image of women. Feminists argue that the process of socialization should not eliminate options for women; women should be allowed to see all the possibilities open to them, not just a few. For example, at one time women could not be secretaries or telephone operators; these jobs were reserved for men, both because women were not thought capable of doing them and because women were not expected to have paid employment. But, of course, poor women have always worked in paid employment, and women on farms have always worked along with other family members. And feminist historians have discovered multitudes of women who refused to be limited by stereotypes of acceptable female behaviour. This illustrates how the work of recovering the history of women, African Americans, ethnic minorities, and other groups provides psychological support for individuals living today and a basis for political arguments against discrimination.

**Abuse**

The politics of gender abuse can be described as the politics of post-racialist racist institutions. In its most important forms it has consisted of powerful interest groups maintaining the structures of power which had existed when racialism was predominant. Feminists argue that men socialize women to accept both physical and mental mistreatment (Basu, 2007:12). Rape has been considered the most underreported crime in Nigeria, but the “discovery” of the extent of incest and child abuse indicates that there are a number of rarely reported crimes, almost all of which are crimes against women and children who are the most helpless in any society. First, women who report rape must still generally deal with male police officers who, even if they are – too – rarely – sensitive to the woman’s trauma, are still men. Second, the legal system has traditionally treated the women as the offender. Third, women have been taught to accept such abuse from men and to
consider it almost normal. This socialization process also leads women to accept abuse from husbands or companions, and our educational higher institutions are not left out sexual harassment. Most victims are helpless females vulnerable to attack by some men (Balara, 2008:76, Stefano, 2007:6, Dura, 2009:3-7, Ferguson, 1991:1-3, and Pateman, 1988:2). In addition to physical abuse, feminists note that women are subject to pervasive mental abuse. It consists, in large part, of treating women as objects or things rather than as individuals or persons. The commoditification and objectification of women is enough abuse. Clearly rape is the most extreme form of treating a person as an object, but many other ways of objectifying women do not involve physical abuse. Pornography, which may or may not include physical abuse, is an obvious case of treating women as objects. This has led many women’s groups to mount campaigns against pornography (Okin, 2001:5, and Rowbotham, 1992:9-11).

Pornography does not directly touch most women, but feminists argue that there is a very fine line between the objectification found in pornography and that encountered by every woman in her daily life. Advertising that sells products using a women’s body as a lure is everywhere. Comments by men about a women’s body as she walks down the street are a form of assault. These forms of mental abuse constantly surround women.

Physical and mental abuse are part of the oppression of women, as is the fact that in many jobs women are not paid the same as men for doing the same work and women are frequently sexually harassed at work. In addition, although political discrimination has been reduced, more subtle forms are still common. When a man wants bribes from women they may tend to suggest kind or cash. This is absurd, vulgar and derogatory and, forms an aspect of abuse.

The Development of Feminism
Debates over the social roles of men and women go back to classical and biblical times. Both the Old and the New Testaments contain passages that have been used to argue either those women are inferior or that women are equal. Plato’s Republic has been interpreted as contending both that women should be treated as equals to men and that they are naturally inferior to men.
Such debates are a constant of Western history. For example, in March 1776 Abigail Adams (1744 – 1818) wrote to her husband John Adams (1735 – 1826), then involved in the movement for American independence and later second president of the United States, entreatying him to "Remember the Ladies" in the laws drawn up for the newly independent country. John Adams responded, "I cannot but laugh," and continued, "We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems (for instance, see Basu, 2007:12, Card, 1991:4, Davis, 2009:8). At about the same time in England, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 – 1797) was writing the first major work arguing for rights for women. Her Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) was part of a European and American movement to develop a theory of individual human rights. Thomas Paine’s The Rights of Man (1791 – 1792) and the French Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) is other expressions of the movement. But in most cases, these rights were only for male human beings. Thus Wollstonecraft's book was an early and generally neglected plea that the radical thinkers of the time should argue for human rights rather than man’s rights.

Earlier, writers like Mary Astell (1668 – 1731) in A Serious Proposal to the Ladies (1694) and Sarah Scott (1723 – 1795) in Millennium Hall (1762) had so despaired of being treated as autonomous human beings that they argued that women should separate themselves from men. And, as we shall see, many women still argue today that real freedom for women can come only through separation from men.

In the nineteenth century, the women’s movement began as a general movement for sexual equality and to end dominated by a single issue – the campaign for the vote. In the United States this pattern was repeated in the recent past with the attempt to pass the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which was temporarily the sole political focus of the U.S. women’s movement. In both cases the general feminist arguments tended to get lost in the political campaign.

In the first half of the nineteenth century in the United States women like Angelina Grimke (1805 – 1879), Sarah Grimke (1792 – 1873), Margaret Fuller (1810 – 1850), and Frances Wright (1795 –
1852) became involved in the abolitionist movement and, from there, moved into other areas of reform including the rights of women. As Angelina Grimke put it, “I recognize no rights but human rights – I know nothing of man’s rights and women’s right.” Later Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815 - 1902) argued for a wide-ranging emancipation of women. As she put it in a famous statement to the court on being found guilty of voting, “You have trampled underfoot every vital principle of our government. My natural rights, my civil rights, my political rights, are alike ignored. Robbed of the fundamental privileged of citizenship, I am degraded from the status of a citizen to that of a subject” (see Bock and Susan, 1992:9, Frieddan, 1987:5-7, Heschel, 2003:2-5, and Evans, 1979:6). In 1848 a convention in Seneca Falls, New York, was called “to discuss the social, civil, and religious conditions and rights of women.” This convention passed the famous “Declaration of Sentiments” modeled on the U.S. Declaration of Independence. It started “that it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.” It also stated, much more radically, in words similar to those of Henry David Thoreau’s “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” (1849), that “all laws which prevent women from occupying such a station in society as her conscience shall dictate, or which place her in a position inferior to that of man, are contrary to the great precept of nature, and therefore of no force or authority.”

Similar movements existed in most West European countries, and they generally followed the same pattern of radical demands for equality giving way to the sole demand for the vote. In Britain three works in the nineteenth century were particularly important in establishing the early stages of the women’s movement. *Appeal of One-Half of the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of Other Half, Men* (1825) by Harriet Taylor Thompson (1775 - 1833), *The Enfranchisement of Women* (1851) Harriet Taylor (1808 - 1858), and *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill (1806 - 1873) all pointed to the maltreatment of women and argues for emancipation. Emmeline Pankhurst (1858 - 1928) was one of the leaders in the movement for the vote. Her group, the Women’s Social and Political Union, used civil disobedience in the campaign. As a result, Pankhurst and many of her followers were repeatedly jailed, thus bringing more attention to the movement. Her
daughters Christobel (1880 – 1958) and Sylvia (1882 – 1960) were also active. Sylvia attacked marriage and bore a child out of wedlock.

Before World War I the single most important issue for the women’s movement besides the vote was birth control. The most prominent figure in the birth control movement was Margaret Sanger (1883 – 1966), but others like the anarchist Emma Goldman (1869 – 1940), whose broad radical agenda included many issues of particular interest to women, supported her. Others who were concerned with more than the vote included Charlotte Parkins Gilman (1860 – 1935), whose journal *The Forerunner* was a forceful advocate for women, and Jane Addams (1860 – 1935), who exemplified and argued for an active role for women in improving life in the cities. Gilman’s *Women and Economics* (1898) was a widely acclaimed study that argued for the need to restructure social institutions to permit women to work. Her utopian novel *Moving the Mountain* (1911) shows fictionally such a changed society (Hartsock, 1983:8, Heckman, 2009:8).

When the vote was won there was little noticeable effect on social policy. But with the coming of World War II women were encouraged to join the work force for the war effort and learned to do things that they had been taught were impossible for women. After the war these same women were told to go back home and give up the money and independence that they had come to expect. The publication in France in 1949 of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexes* (published in English in 1952 as *The Second Sex*), a study of the treatment of women by various academic disciplines, helped fan the anger at this loss.

Still, it was not until the 1960s and the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedman, combined with the rejection of women’s issues by the New Left, that a renewed feminist movement began. While this early movement was predominantly white, a number of African American women were also active in the burgeoning feminist movement. Today, the women’s movement is acutely aware of the importance of speaking to the needs of minority women and to those of women in the developing nations.
And, of course, these women are finding their voices and speaking for themselves (Ferguson, 1991:1-3, and Hooks, 1981:6-7).

All feminists share a concern with freeing women from the tyranny of unwanted childbearing. This concern has been called reproductive rights or the right of a woman to control her own body or, more recently, reproductive freedom in an attempt to separate it from the narrow, legal conception of rights. For most feminists this means that all methods of birth control should be available and either free or very inexpensive and, since no system of birth control is 100 percent effective, that safe and affordable abortions should be available for all women. For a few feminists this means the end of biological motherhood and the development of artificial means of reproduction, but for most feminists it means the transformation of society that will allow women to fully participate in both reproduction and production. They envision a remodeling of all institutions of socialization so that all human beings can participate fully in all life activities as they freely and independently choose. Developing countries have only begun to make significant steps toward the goal of achieving equality in daily life. They are fighting a strong tradition but have on their side the belief among most elites that change is necessary.

Some Lessons for the Nigerian Woman
Feminism is developing a critical apparatus for analyzing contemporary society that is challenging all contemporary ideologies. Feminist philosophers and political philosophers are proposing new ways of understanding the world. Feminist's economics are analyzing the economic roles of women and suggesting a transformation of economic life. Specifically, feminists have discovered the central role that women play in the agricultural economics of Third World countries and are arguing that the bias rooted failure to recognize this fact has undercut all attempts to improve agricultural production in developing countries. Feminist writers and artists are developing a substantial body of literature and art that speaks to different concerns than had been previously addressed.

Feminists are encouraging all human beings to envision the possibility of a society rid of sexism, racism, homophobia, and all
the other ways in which human beings have subjugated other human beings. At present feminists are divided over exactly how to go about this transformation, and reform feminists are not convicted that it is either necessary or desirable, but feminism is potentially the most radical of ideologies and the most likely to change the way most of us live today. Drawing heavily from the above, what lessons can the Nigerian women learn from the ongoing feminist project so as to achieve political, economic, and social liberty in all-male dominated world? This has been the central focus of the paper urging Nigerian women to wake-up and take their destiny in their hands. The solution lies in developing feminism approach. It is clear that the barriers to the development of feminism in Nigeria are more of socio-cultural than legal, with the implications of a psychological nature. The following are some of those limitations.

- Poverty, ignorance, and illiteracy;
- Low self-esteem which makes women susceptible to the divide and rule of strategy of men along religious and ethnic lines, this attitude makes women subservient to men.
- Lack of self-control, self-confidence, and self-determination in other women;
- Cultural stereotypes/religious bias, violent and in-conducive political environment in the form of money, politics, intimidation, and structural violence;
- High registration fees during politics (which scare women away)
- Harmful traditional practices and violence against women.

What are the Strategies to Remedy the Problems?

- Empowerment
- Advocacy
- Capacity building
- Development of egalitarianism, liberty, and fraternity among women.

Recommendations

The paper recommends that women should:

- Encourage the education of the girl-child so as to make the plights of womanhood felt more deeply, stronger, and
objectively. This can be done through an effective and dedicated scholarship for female best undergraduate students in respective of religion, tribe, creed, and discipline;

➢ Make the campaign of feminism have human face, a situation whereby all the issues of oppression, prejudice, blackmail, intimidation and rape are discussed in a feminist tone, content and language, so that all socio-cultural constructed ideologies preferred against women by men could be re-defined, re-constructed and re-valued;

➢ Should support all female candidates seeking elective position so as to make their political participation, representation, and socialization have integrity, relevance and added value. It will further enhance the quality of women’s inputs and outputs in decision-making, implementation and execution leading to equality, justice and equity;

➢ Take the issue of wealth creation seriously. Political participation requires money. Without meaningful and gainful employment, women can hardly participate in politics. This will also discourage both old and young women from (illegal business) social vices;

➢ Encouraged young women to take the issue of ICT seriously and make useful contribution concerning their plights and suffering in the hands of men. Their views should make open for public consumption. This will draw international attention/outcry;

➢ Appeal to religious leaders, politicians, and NGOs to reconsider all socially, culturally and artificial prejudice preferred against women. This will give women some psychological lift and make the development of feminism ideologically rooted and holistically accepted.
References
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