

## GENDER STRATIFICATION: A STUDY OF DISCRIMINATION AND OPPRESSION IN SELECTED COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA

**Dr. Nsirim-Worlu Heoma Gladys**

Department of Sociology,  
University of Port Harcourt,  
NIGERIA  
worlu@yahoo.com

### ABSTRACT

*Stratification is a concept that often features in many social sciences literature. In spite of general improvement in living standard and the integration of the world into a ‘global village’, shades of discrimination and oppression which are aspects of stratification are still very evident in Africa. Stratification of humans into groups with varied unequal access to social reward in forms of power, prestige, valued resources and personal freedom (among men and women) in social positions bring about discrimination and oppression. The radical feminist theory is employed to discuss why and how stratification manifests and the possible ways to reduce the degree of gender inequality and its attendant consequences. This paper establishes that stratification, discrimination and oppression are intense and severe in developing economies where patriarchy is practiced. Patriarchy is that phenomenon which makes men to occupy positions of decision making and they in turn ascribe status and prestige to their members. A very important factor to the continued existence of stratification is self-Image which is an emotional phenomenon. The men deliberately ensure that women are excluded from decision making positions which would improve or enhance the latter’s social image. The women because of socialization of submissiveness recycle whatever social disadvantage some have suffered in the past. For an egalitarian society to be attained, both men and women should deliberately alter their self images.*

**Keywords:** *gender, stratification, discrimination, oppression, socialization*

### INTRODUCTION

The world over, a whole lot of literature on gender issues have been generated. While some scholars are for and others against for instance Introducing Women’s Studies by Robinson and Richardson (1997) and the Psychology of Women by Matlin (2004). However, given the varied stages of societal development, laws and policies aimed at making or reducing inequality of humans, especially along gender, it beats this writer hollow that, stratification by sex which brings about discrimination and oppression are still very observable especially in African societies where patriarchy uses culture as its vehicle to denigrate or devalue females.

This paper posits that an individual is a boy or girl by birth and nature instituted these biological differences in order to bring about balance and perpetuation of every species, be it animal, plant or man. To support this, is the biblical presentation in Genesis 2:18 which states that after creation God saw that Adam was incomplete and thereafter, created Eve from the former’s rib while he was in deep sleep.

In spite of the wisdom of God in the creation, it is almost an abnormal or plague to be a female in Africa. Women are considered as negative and evil especially during menstruation- which according to (Beers et al 2003:1346) is a series of cyclical events which occurs regularly on the average of

every twenty eight days .Menstruation therefore is a process which nature employs in preparing women for procreation for the perpetuation of human race .They are also deprived to partake in their families' wealth- be it family of orientation or procreation(inheritance right)and moreover, they are excluded from participating in decision making in families; the foregoing are corroborated by (Kottak 2000: 209).

From the forgoing, this work proposes that the more a society views the males as the sole authority-head, the more discriminated and oppressed the women are. Furthermore, the more women form allies with men the more the society is stratified along gender line. The forthcoming section is for the clarification of some concepts. The following concepts are hereby clarified for better understanding:-

**Gender** – Is a social construction whereby people are grouped and defined based on biological distinction of males and females and this distinction is based purely as a result of birth.

**Stratification** – Is a process by which resources and opportunities are distributed among various social actors based on certain criteria which may be by sex, age, race, ethnicity and / region.

**Discrimination** – This is an action which serves to deny members of a particular group equal rights and opportunities based on arbitrary bias determined by a minority who make decisions to suit their privileged position in society.

**Oppression** – It is an act whereby a segment of the society is not given equal rights and freedom as others; and this deprived group is restrained, subordinated and abused by the latter group.

**Patriarchy** – A process where men are the only ones that make decisions for the administration of the society and the women are completely excluded by a primary power structure sustained by strong and deliberate intention.

At this juncture, lets us consider the theoretical explanation for continued stratification of society by sex till date in all known societies but with emphasis in Africa. The theoretical perspectives are;

The functionalists or consensus theorists argue that society is like a biological organism that has different parts that are distinct in function and the functions are interrelated and interdependent but they work together for the good of the entire organism. However, this theory in the view of (Hale 1990:354) agrees that inequality is a pervasive feature of social life; even though it stresses individual merit. That is, that inequality reflects reward for individual contributions to the functioning of society.

For the Marxists, the importance of control over critical means of production for accumulating wealth in industrial society is stressed. Interpretative theorists look within the grand schemes of functioning social systems, capitalism and patriarchy to explore what people do in their everyday relations to produce the patterns of inequality that we subsequently perceive as merit, class or gender hierarchies. While the feminist, focuses on disparities in wealth, power, prestige and leisure between men and women; arguing that men on average are advantaged in all of these respects and that these disparities reflect patriarchy, or the power of men over women, which is distinct from, although associated with capitalism.

Justification for employing the radical feminist theory in this piece is not limited to the following assumptions by (Ritzer 1996: 454 – 456); first that woman's subordination results not from her biology, but from social arrangements and for (Blumerg 2000:154) therefore, "the relational basis for women's subordination lies in the family. Furthermore, that Society legitimizes this family system by claiming that such a structure is the fundamental institution in all societies.

These assumptions also explain that the exploitation of labour has developed into increasingly complex structures of dominating, most particularly class relations; the political order was created to

safeguard all these systems of domination; and the family itself has evolved along with the historic transformations of economic and property systems into an embedded and dependent institution, reflecting all the more massive injustices of the political economy and consistently enforcing the subordination of women.

In the forthcoming unit, we shall discuss some of the possible factors that encourage and sustain stratification along gender.

### **Forces Of Stratification By Gender**

Certainly many factors had been discussed by other scholars as being contributory to the sustenance of stratification by gender, which directly bring about discrimination, domination and oppression in society; but for this paper, the forces of stratification to be emphasized are in the forms of:

**Patriarchy**– Where ever it is practiced and it is predominant in Africa; it prescribes and emphasizes marriage and whenever marriage is contracted, women as a matter of best practice and accepted standard automatically move into their husband’s family or clan to reside. This is what (Anele 2003:105) considers as virilocal residential pattern. Following this residential pattern, the women are alienated from their family of orientation and people. In most communities, the women are regarded and treated as either strangers or intruders. This hidden practice exposes most women to series of conflicts which directly and sometimes indirectly predispose most of them to mental problems (disorders); (Eaton 2001:179). Among the problems that arise from this type of relation or interaction is what (Flanagan 1989:245) describes as “inequality in social resources which seems to be present in every current society”.

The last and most obnoxious aspect of patriarchy is the exclusion of women from inheriting properties from either their families of orientation or procreation; thereby making women powerless socially and economically. In support of the above is what (Hale 1990: 337) describes aptly as the family being the site of exploitation and oppression.

Another factor to be expanded upon is religion. Most of the world’s religions preach about the submission of wives to their husbands, without necessarily emphasizing that aspect which admonishes the husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church that He gave his life. The foregone presentation to a large extent in collaboration with other institutions emphasize the socialization process that encourages stereotyping of person along gender which will unequivocally bring about the submissiveness, intimidation and lack or none economic power of women as observed in Africa.

In the course of this work, about 150 women are purposefully sampled basically due to what the writer perceives to be the society’s conception of marriage and residential pattern in three selected communities of Nigeria.

### **Community Perspective on Marriage**

The women of Ikwerre extraction lamented that, to be a woman is more of a curse than a blessing. Some of the reasons preferred are that as soon as a girl child is delivered, the environment starts by educating her on the dos and don’ts that is expected standards of the society which some scholars tagged ‘double standard’. In the process, the girl is prepared for marriage as she is expected to be a source of wealth to her family of orientation. The well behaved and hard working she becomes, the more wealth the wealth expected to accrue to her family of orientation; therefore, she must not question her father and brothers’ decisions, her opinions and ideas would not be sort either and much more her husband’s and in-laws. Her father allocates no landed property to her, because it is believed that she belongs to another family. Through history, there are records of some fathers bequeathing little portions of their personal lands to their daughters as dowry. Such fathers are seen and viewed by many as paranoid. Paranoid, according to (Swill 1977:30 and Ida, et al 2002:485) is the delusionary

system of thinking based on misinterpretation of remarks or events. Also, a woman is excluded from decision making of any sort; and if by any event a woman asserts her right, she is seen as being abnormal and such derogatory word as "Owaruanya" is used to describe her and the entire society or community sees her as an outcast or mal-oriented person.

On the same pedestal, is the Igbo community, which cherishes and emphasizes marriage and also, encourages virilocal residence; but the fathers and brothers from that environment listen, value and cherish the contributions of their daughters when important family issues arise for discussion. The females from this part of Nigeria, are taught the importance of competition even in marriage, therefore, the females know that their personal achievements would be honoured in different forms and sometimes with chieftaincy titles as their male counterparts. To that effect, they acquire landed properties for themselves and their family of procreation which in turn increase the economic base of such families.

On the other hand, the kalabari kingdom was also investigated and it was established that, that kingdom is much more egalitarian in outlook than the other two kingdoms described earlier. There, the relationship between the males and females are observed to be based on ability and not merely on gender (Haralambos and Holborn 2000). Egalitarian society according to (Hale 1990:565); is that society where every citizen is given equivalent chance to compete for social positions that carry relatively higher rewards. In this community, marriage is permissive, that is, it is not a do or die affair for its members. Also established, is the fact that, that community practices bilocal and sometimes ambilineal residential patterns. Most interesting of all is the fact that a female child is highly valued and so, given adequate freedom and facilities to enable her achieve her optimum in any life endeavors. Therefore, no matter who or where she is married to, her contribution(s) by way of ideas, wealth, care etc are sort for by her family of orientation. In the light of the above findings, the issues of domination and oppression are near to none existent.

Given the above scenario, the forthcoming section shall be used to discuss the consequences of stratification based on gender on society.

### **Consequences of Stratification**

The consequences of stratification are many and vary from society to society. Highlighted below are some consequences that this investigation elicited which is subject for our discussion.

First, a very major effect of stratification is social inequality as corroborated by such scholars as Giddens (1996; 209), (Eaton 2001: 181); (Ifeanacho and Okaba in Anikpo and Atieme 2006: 102). Social inequality has many fangs with which it destroys society; some of which are domination and oppression. It is obvious that anything whether human or not that is ascribed with low status by the society is an object of elimination when the need arises. This fact is exemplified as recorded in China, India and Pakistan where females are killed, sent into prostitution and sometimes starved when the need arises. Such less valued individuals can be commoditized as object of economic or wealth accrument to their families; therefore, she can be given out in marriage very early in life. Following marriage, the only available option is for her to be a child making machine. The woman hence continues to make children in order to at least harp on her biology to attract some affection and relevance; even if she dies in the process of parturition is of no significance.

Nevertheless, both the economic and social status of this woman (individual) is irreparably lower. The woman is continuously denied property and inheritance right, in both her family of orientation and procreation. It is pertinent at this juncture to state that since 1925 that the right of women to acquire and accumulate property was passed into law in Nigeria; yet most women do not know about it and so do not access it, the educated and uneducated alike.

Ironically, it is very pitiable to state that majority of women are not aware and that the men that know about the existence of this, Endeavour to keep it eternally secret. Another discriminatory practice whereby a woman has any opportunity to travel outside her country and she is mandated to provide an authority/ permission evidence from her husband. However, this is fast going out of fad; as an influential woman who almost lost an opportunity to travel abroad for a business opportunity fought this practice to a halt.

Another consequence of stratification by gender is low self image. The women in this region of the world are denied certain opportunities; such as taking arrested people on bail, even though in Nigeria the law is to the contrary, the woman is also denied opportunity to obtain bank loans under the guise of providing collateral despite the fact that those establishments that make such demands are aware that women are not entitled to own landed property in their communities. This actual denial of certain rights of women by the society brings about low self image of women and this low self image makes most women timid. It this observed timidity which makes some to engage in anti-social behaviors some of which are; prostitution, gossips and the other majority become steady and regular faces in churches which also is a means of cushioning the effect of self image problem (deficit).

Furthermore, is the issue of low output. This is common especially as the labour of women are not quantified and priced. Therefore, the amount of time women spend on family care is not considered economically which is why no member of the society takes the women of wealth into consideration when families are ranked socially by wealth. Under the given circumstance, most women hand over whatever wealth they have accumulated to their husbands including land bequeathed to them as dowry during weddings. On the other hand, some women hand over money and property to their brothers who use such wealth to update their individual families and thereby receive societal approval; while the women are viewed as never do wells. This experience is totally contrary to what Farnham (1997:47); as gender equality in European society where men and women discuss and manage whatever resources that are at their disposal.

To climax these consequences is the health aspect of the women. Due to how the society views and treats women some of them present with what Wheaton in (Eaton 2000 :191) calls fatalism. Fatalism is a situation where external factors in the environment make the women vulnerable to psychological disorders. A woman is forbidden to complain aloud if she experiences difficulties with either her spouse or male siblings; she cannot decide or determine the number of children she should have, nor speak out if raped. Low and behold, the bottled up emotions over a long period manifest as mental disorders of varying magnitude of which she may not be given the opportunity of early or no medical attention. To add credence to this phenomenon is (Brown and Harris 1978:150) who state that there is evidence of a relationship of life event stressors to depression. Also to support this trend is (Brown, et al 1975:78) who account that there is evidence of a social class to depression. The foregoing statements confirm the fact that, some women present with depression as health malady, which occurs as a result of the position they occupy in the social world (family, office etc).

The most unappealable of stratification is discrimination and oppression. In societies where stratification is emphasized based on gender, it is observed that the women are discriminated and oppressed everywhere- whether in their homes, social organizations and not excluding religious settings. That is why, in every know society, women are expected to behave, talk and think in certain way. Therefore, females must dress in feminine forms which may include covering of the entire body- as their bodies are for their husbands exclusively; or the exposure of majority of their bodies which its main aim is to attract men to them. They also must cover their heads in religious places and town halls which are evidence of submissiveness. Again, they cannot independently express their feelings where people are gathered; nonetheless, if it becomes imperative for them to do so at all, such presentations must be through a male representative, no matter how young or inconsequential the male may be. The females as matter of tradition are the ones to care for children and to perform every known household chores. Anything to the contrary puts the woman in a bad light and she can be addressed in either of these repugnant names – macho-woman, wild woman and in native parlance as ‘Owaruanya’. This

method of describing a woman, automatically and completely posits her as an abnormal woman; who no right thinking person will want to associate with; women too are not excluded from regarding fellow women degradingly so.

Identified also as one of the consequences of stratification based on gender is sibling rivalry. Sibling rivalry is rife where ever the male children of the family pose as though they are repositories of all known knowledge and so, whatever contributions the daughters of the families make, such contributions are considered valueless and invalid and so must be discarded. This position has rocked the foundation of sibling unity in most homes and unhealthy competition is a common feature.

## CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

Though stratification is prevalent in all societies and it takes different forms and the consequences are numerous; however, stratification by gender is intense and severe in patrilineal and virilocal societies, where authorities rest with the men who occupy positions of decision making and are therefore considered as custodians of the peoples customs and traditions; and they in turn assign status and prestige to its members.

It has to be emphasized at this juncture, that, wherever, patriarchy is rife, domination and oppression of women are obvious and gratified by society. In the light of the foregoing, therefore, both the men and women strive as much as possible to maintain their status quo; this idea is supported by (Johnson 1997:28). The begging question at this point is, how? The men ensure that women are excluded from the position of authority, while the women due to socialization of submissiveness ensure that whatever disadvantages some of them have suffered in society are recycled so that a lot more others would experience same in the future; examples are; widowhood rites, inheritance rights and the likes. This view is in tandem with what (Satzler 2003:345); views as “gender stratification being enforced often by an ideology constructed by the dominant or majority group which has the power to define itself legally but also to shape a society’s values.”

Furthermore, it is understood that African societies and especially Nigeria are still traditional and therefore, conservative and retrogressive; and the people hide under the cloak (guise) of culture to subjugate, deny and deprive their sisters, wives and even daughters (certain population of the society) rights to decision making, wealth acquisition and accumulation, functional education and even ideology(philosophy).

Also found out is the fact that when women’s economic power relative to men is growing, what Blumerg (ibid) posits as “transition period”, men are likely to perceive such changes as a threat and to repress physically, politically and even emotionally women’s efforts to gain equal power. These stipulated facts are true and common and that is why it is very prevalent to hear and see women who are assaulted by men who are in close and emotional relationship with them. Finally, gender inequalities will cease only, when women as a matter of expediency change gender ideology, norm, stereotype and value; which accounts majorly for the continued discrimination and oppression of women in most societies and much more in Africa.

## RECOMMENDATION

This paper recommends that women of the world should unite to eliminate this obnoxious creation (patriarchy) which had continually oppressed and subjugated African women socially known as stratification by gender.

To be able to achieve such feat therefore, successful mobilization of women by all, will certainly raise their economic power which will translate to political power and influence. At the attainment of this process, then the political policies working against women will recede, male supremacist ideologies will recede and violence against women punished and record of offenders kept. However, we wish to

remind ourselves of Blumer's contribution earlier in this work which is that "when women's economic power relative to men is growing, men are likely to perceive such changes as a threat and to repress physically, politically women's effort to gain equal power". This therefore calls for caution especially by women and advocates of women empowerment.

Finally, the mobilization of women's resources will go a long in tackling such factors as kinship system and residential pattern after marriage; alter the position of women in relation to communal means of production and the exclusion of women from family inheritance scheme which collectively from time had been bane to women's attainment to enviable societal heights and the palpable sequel of gender discrimination and oppression of females.

When these identified configuration in gender relations are changed, then, those women who have attained the zenith of either their economic or political careers would henceforth cease to be described by the larger society as "Owaruanya" (wild women), since everyone will be given opportunities based on his or her capability or characteristics; and the society will be better for it.

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