



Feminism – the need for gender perspective to modern issue (The Nigeria Case)

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ABSTRACT

Women play diverse roles in the society. These roles include biological, social and political functions. However, in carrying out their duties, women encounter different and sometimes, needless difficulties. It is an attempt to tackle these difficulties in different parts of the world and different spheres of life that gave rise to the current spate of feminism. The term tends to be used for the women's rights movement. This paper therefore deals specifically with development of the ideas behind that movement and their influence and impact. It examined feminism in Nigeria and constraints to women development. It proffers recommendations as a solution to these problems. Among others is that the present ministry of women affairs and social development should be change into ministry for gender and minority development, in which the minister may not necessarily be in women.

Keywords: feminism; women's rights movement; women's part

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminists are united by the idea that women's position in society is unequal to that of men and that society is structured in such a way as to benefits men to the political, social, economic detriment of women. However, feminists have used different theories to explain these inequalities, and there are marked geographic and historical variations in the nature of feminism.

According to Emejulu (2003) she said that an attempt to tackle the inequalities and needless difficulties that women face in different spheres of life gave rise to the current spate feminism. What women found oppressive in 1860 was the fact that the world was basically divided into two- male and female world. While men belonged to money-making ventures,

politics, military activity, intellectual life, and also through their activities protected and produced for their women who were left at home to look after the children and performed other domestic chores. With this arrangement the women felt used and cheated. They were not allowed to contribute to the larger society. Their intelligence and talent were left latent.

An attempt by women to address this issue increased the rising wave of feminism, a medium through which women want their aggrieved voices to be heard. Other issue like oppressive laws contributed to the spate of feminism. Josephine Butler led a campaign against the contagious diseases (CD) Act, which was passed between 1864 and 1869. This Act required women, who lived in ports where sailors or soldiers were positioned to go for medical examinations because they were suspected of being prostitutes. Due to the dogged fight of the women, this obnoxious law was later repealed.

In addition to fighting discriminatory laws, the rising wave of feminism aims at the formulation of befitting programmes for women. These programmes include improved maternity leave and the provision of child care facilities. Other issues relating to health, food supply, education and morals are addressed. As a result of this, in the early 20th century in Britain, attention was focused on the needs of poor women. The women's cooperative guild mounted pressure on the government to pass a law giving all women the right to free ante and post natal care, adequate attention childbirth and maternity benefit.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING FEMINISM

Feminism is a concept, a theory or an idea towards actualizing equality with men. Feminism is a collective term for system of belief and theories that pay special attention to women's right and women's position in culture and society.

The term tends to be used for the women's rights movement, which began in the late 18th century and continue to campaign for complete political, social and economic equality between women and men.

According to Oxford advanced learner's dictionary, 6th edition, feminism is "the belief and aim that women should have the same right and opportunities as men, the struggle to achieve this aim is what feminism is all about.

The Concept of Gender

According to Akubue and Enyi (2001) gender means a psychological construct associated with either male or female which result from social, physical and psychological traits associated to each and all that has to do with their specific and respective role. Gender refers to all characteristics of men and women which a particular society has determined and assigned each sex. Maimuna (2006). Gender refers to socially constructed roles and socially learned behaviours and expectations associated with males and females. Nwagbara (2003)

Concept of issues

This is a subject or problems which people are thinking and talking about. It connotes difficulty or disagreement with someone or something.

Perspective - it is a view; that is noticing and understanding ideas many people do not notice. seeing gender issues in another angle.

Modern: it means recent time or present, especially in the period of history. In this case, it stands for ideas designed and made using the most recent method.

Historically Overview of Feminism

Historically, feminist thought and activity can be divided into two waves. The first wave, which began according to Summer Field (1996) in about 1800 and lasted until the 1930s, was largely concerned with gaining equal rights between women and men. The second wave, which began in the late 1960s, has continued to fight for equality but has also developed a range of theories and approaches that stress the difference between women and men and that draw attention to the specific needs of women.

The First Wave

Although the word feminism was not used until the end of the 19th century, recognizably feminist beliefs began to emerge in the late 18th century. The earliest form of feminism was concerned with equal rights for women and men; this meant equal standing as citizens in public life and, to some extent equal legal status within the home. These ideas emerged in response to the American revolution of (1775-1783) and the French Revolution (1789-1799) both of which advocated values of liberty and equality.

From 1850s onward, the campaign for equal rights for women became focused on winning the right to vote, also known as women suffrage. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton led the campaign for women's suffrage in the United States. Suffrage movements also appeared in New Zealand, the Soviet Union, Germany, Poland, Austria and Sweden. Toward the end of the 19th century, another strand of feminist thinking appeared that questioned social attitudes toward women. These attitudes were expressed through representations of women in literature and other art forms and social rules for women's behaviour. By the turn of 20th century, the media in North America and Europe became preoccupied with the image of the "New woman". This woman challenged patriarchy not only by demanding equal rights but also by defying social conventions and choosing her own lifestyle and clothes.

By the 1920s, feminists began to turn their attention from questions of equality between women and men to issues that mainly concerned women. They called for example for improved welfare provisions for mothers and children. These issues would become stronger in the second wave of feminism. **The Second Wave**

The original impetus for the so-called second wave of feminism came from the civil rights movement and antiwar protests that emerged in the 1960s in North America and from social protest movements in Europe and Australasia. The women's liberation movement, which started in the United States, combined liberal, rights based concerns for equality between women and men with demand for a woman's right to determine her own identity and sexuality. These two strands of ideology were represented in the seven demands of the movement established between 1970-1978. These were equal pay; equal education and equal opportunities in work, financial and legal independence, free 24-hour day care for children; free contraception and abortion on demand, a woman's right to define her own sexuality and an end to discrimination against lesbians and freedom from violence and sexual coercion violence, family violence and rape. Microsoft (R) Encarta (R) (2009).

Central to second-wave feminism is the notion that the personal is political – that is, individual women do not suffer oppression in isolation but as the result of wider social and political systems. Second-wave feminism emphasized the physical and psychological differences between women and men. Some feminists criticized traditional psychoanalysis, notably the work of Sigmund Freud, for assuming that all people are, or should be, like men. They became concerned with ways in which women's perceptions were determined by the particular nature of the female body and the female roles in reproduction and childbearing. The strand of feminism, which became known as cultural or radical feminism, focused on

differences between women and men that they believed make women superior to men, and it advocated female forms of culture.

A powerful strand of feminism is concerned with the ways in which men have controlled and subordinated women's bodies. Feminist have argued that sexual and domestic violence are not isolated incidents but are central to the subordination of women by patriarchy.

Nigerian Women and the Wave of Feminism

The Nigeria women are not left out of this growing wave of feminism. They, like other women all over the world are fighting against so many odds to make their impact felt in the society. However, Obiora (1997) cautions that in trying to make their impact in the society felt, and to contribute their own quota to societal development, there should be further calls for a re-awakening and a re-orientation of women.

The year 1975 was declared the international year of women and the decade 1976-85 was declared by the United Nations as the decade for women. In 1985, there was the adoption of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (NFLS) for the advancement of women. The NFLS enumerated measures aimed at overcoming the obstacles against the achievement of goals and objectives of the UN decade for the advancement of women.

The Nigeria government in pursuance of the above objective embarked on the formulation of policies and programmes aimed at elevating the status of the Nigerian women. With the declaration of 1994 as the international year of the family, Nigeria focused attention on the status and welfare of the family. To effectively do this as well as achieve other objectives the then first lady, Mrs. Maryam Abacha initiated the family support programme on 1994. The main objectives of this programme were the improvement and sustenance of the family and the initiation of policies and programmes that strengthen the observance and protection of woman rights.

In pursuance of the objective of improved status for women, the United Nations organized a conference for women in Beijing China from August 30th to September 15th 1995. The conference was attended by about 46,000 women from all works of life and from 183 countries. Major issues concerning women discussed at this conference covered areas like health, media violence against women, increased resources for woman qualitative and quantitative education, women rights as human rights, empowerment and so on. Professor Felicia Ekejiuba writing on the objective of the Beijing conference stated that the Beijing conference was organized "to map out a plan of action, which would enable government and the world in general but especially women to press for the transformation of the society to peace, sustainable development and gender equality; (Nigerian report to Beijing conference (1995)).

Feminism should not be seen as an attempt by women to usurp the position of men and take what right fully belongs to men. On the contrary, feminism according to Patai et Koertge (1994) attempts to counsel women to refuse to be silenced by coercive ideological systems and also to criticize and dismantle traditions and institutions that harm women by impeding their development in all spheres.

However, so many reasons have been given why a gender perspective should be given to global and national issues. For Hilary Clinton, democracy cannot thrive without active participation and co-operation from women. For, according to her, "No women, No democracy" because democracy can only flourish if families flourish and families can only flourish if women and children flourish.

The good news, however, is that government of Nigeria under president Good Luck Jonathan has assured that his government would continue to give priority to the women folk

and even appoint them into challenging portfolios, hence the 35% affirmative policy. Constraints to Women Development Despite the numerous achievements and contributions of women, there are constraints, which hinder them from contributing more to the society. These constraints came in form of oppressive laws and cultural taboos and could be discussed under the following heading;

Poverty- According to a United Nations Development Fund for women (UNIFEM) publication, more than one billion people live in dire poverty, an overwhelming percentage of them are women. The main cause of this poverty could be attributed to illiteracy, which often leads to unemployment or acceptance to work as unskilled labourers.

Inadequate Health Care- Woman's special health needs are not specifically addressed by any policy or strategies except in Material and Child Health (MCH) programmes. Yet, women encounter major and peculiar health problems associated with biological functions of reproductive and in the pursuit of socio-economic activities for the maintenance of their families.

Violence- Women are often susceptible to violence. The violence could be physical, psychological or sexual in nature. Usually the income, status and the educational background of a woman do not exclude her from this malaise. Violence as it pertains to women can be experienced in the homes, during wars, even in the streets.

Lack of Education- This is considered by this work to be the bane of women. Most women lack the basic form of education and this often results in women doing low, manual and unskilled jobs. This results in women being unable to afford their basic needs.

Non-Participation in Policy Making- Lack of proper education makes women not to participate in decision-making. Women usually do not participate in the formulation of policies affecting them. Women should be encouraged to contribute formally and informally to policy making.

Lack of Favourable Employment- Women while performing the biological function of bearing children also take up regular employment often, carrying out these two functions effectively is quite difficult.

Some organizations do not offer sound maternity benefits. Even governmental agencies and ministries are often culprits.

Cultural Practices and Taboos- Women in the traditional societies through cultural practices and taboos are often subjected to ridicule and they are often punished for committing no offence. An example that readily comes to mind is the widowhood practices of many communities in Nigeria.

Impact of feminist thought

Feminist thinking has succeeded in drawing public attention to inequality between women and men and to the structures within society that belittle and work against women. It has led to a reconsideration of women's role in the workplace, resulting in policies that

promote equal pay and equal opportunities. And it has identified and tackled the problem of sexual harassment at work.

Feminism has also succeeded in challenging perception of women's skills, with the result that some women are entering nontraditional areas of female employment such as in the army and construction industries. Feminism has influence culture, resulting in greater coverage of women's interests and concerns, particularly by the mass media. Feminism thinking has adapted and diversified to tackling new issues including AIDS (Acquired immune deficiency disease syndrome) homophobia, technology, and warfare.

Feminism thinking has had a powerful influence upon many academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, literary criticism, history, theology, and the sciences. Feminist scholars are undertaking research that draws attention to neglected female concerns, and they are exposing the patriarchal assumptions that underline traditional approaches to scholarship.

3. CONCLUSION

Strenuous efforts has been made in Nigeria to promote gender equality and women empowerment by accessing to several policy instruments at global, regional and national levels. These include among others, the Beijing platform for action, the Paris declaration, the Millennium Development Goals framework, the protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, the ECOWAS Gender policy and the Nigerian Gender policy developed in 2007. Despite these pros and cons about feminism women still have a raw deal comparatively speaking with their male counterparts in Nigeria.

Recommendation

This work recommends that CEDAW (Crimination on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination) should be domesticated to give it power of operation and influence. It also recommended that the present ministry of women affairs and social development to changed into ministry for gender and ministry development, in which the minister may not necessarily be a woman. A man with passion for such ministry can be appointed under such ministry even men who are violated or discriminated can find redress by such a move, the hues and crises about divers discrimination will be a thing of the past.

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