

AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE TO GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION

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Abstract

In this paper I argued that the problem associated with gender based discrimination has not been holistically addressed. There is an erroneous notion that once gender-based discrimination is mentioned, it presupposes discrimination against the female gender thereby overlooking every possibility of male gender discrimination. I argued that this erroneous presupposition has created a negative divide between both genders. I contend that gender discrimination can in actual fact affect any of the gender. Both male and female genders suffer discrimination; hence the discriminating tendency is not attached to any gender. Using hermeneutical method, I posit that not everything that is tagged gender discrimination is gender discrimination; some are gender limitations which should open humanity to complementarity instead of competition. In view of the aforesaid, I finally advocated for gender equity in place of gender equality.

Keywords: Complementarity, Gender Discrimination, Gender Limitations, Gender Equality, and Gender Equity

Introduction

The idea of gender based discriminations especially discriminations against women has reasonably gained global attention. Why is it that there is a global outcry against female gender discrimination? Is female gender discrimination the only existing gender discrimination? What is the role of nature in gender discourse? There are so many unanswered questions in relation to gender discourse. In addressing the following questions, I will adopt Asouzu's philosophy of complementarity to argue that the holistic adoption of Western model in gender discourse in Africa has the tendency of disrupting African social cohesion. Using Asouzu's principle of complementarity I will argue that both genders were created or made to complement each other. On this basis, the social roles of both genders are complementary and not competitive.

For many years I have been troubled with the question of male and female biological differences. From whichever angle one may look at human existence, whether theistic or atheistic, one fundamental question associated with human biological differences or gender differences is; why were they different from each other biologically? This question can lead to further questioning. Were they made to complement each other or were they really equal to each other or independent of each other? What is the nexus between their biological differences and their social roles? Is it possible to interpret or argue about human social roles without recourse to their biological differences? This takes us to Asouzu's principle of complementarity, where he argued that every reality that exists serves as a missing link. That is to say that, there is interconnectedness of reality. For Asouzu, the principle of complementarity is the characteristics exhibited by humans “wherever human beings understand that their survival depends on their ability to reach

out to others like themselves (2004, 23-24). Complementarity is the idea of mutual help, and readiness to work with others for the overall benefit of all. A reflection on this *vis a vis* gender roles have drawn my attention to these twin concepts that are often misinterpreted; gender limitations and gender discriminations. Is gender limitation the same as gender discrimination? Most often, what some feminists refer to as gender discriminations are actually products of gender limitations. This position does not negate the fact that there are clear cases of gender discriminations.

However, the paper will consider the following concepts; gender limitations, gender discriminations, gender equality and gender equity with a view to finding the balance between these terms. The importance of gender discourse cannot be over emphasized especially in this our contemporary time. It is much more apt in Africa, considering the fact that most traditional family value systems in Africa are the worst hit of gender discourse. Globalization and interculturalism emanating from feminists movement from Europe and America to some extent have created a lot of crisis in African family system. By way of cultural dissimilarities, I will argue that gender discriminations as perceived in Europe and America cannot be transposed to mean the same in Africa. In Africa, what is seen as gender discrimination to a very large extent is actually gender limitations, which are products of nature and as such ought not to be altered. The global influence of these feminists on the issue of gender has become a serious challenge that cannot be ignored. In conclusion, the essence of this research is to put certain terms in perspectives, in order to reengineer the process of a better understanding of gender roles. This paper will derive its substance from Asouzu's principle of complementarity to argue that both genders (male and female) were made to complement or complete each other and not to compete with each other. It therefore becomes more of a fruitless struggle to push for equality, since the biological cum physiological differences in both genders will make it practically impossible for one to arrive at a standard for measuring equality.

Our first effort after the introduction will be the conceptual clarification of gender limitation and gender discrimination. There is a thin line between gender limitation and gender discrimination, any misconception of these concepts lead to intellectual confusion and misinformation. Since our focus is on African perspective, we shall consider Asouzu's principle of complementarity and finally consider this principle (complementarity) in the light of gender discourse.

Gender Limitations and Gender Discriminations: Conceptual Clarification

My first challenge here is to establish the difference, if there is any between gender limitations and gender discriminations. Is gender limitation the same as gender discrimination? These two concepts are often mistaken to mean or represent the same thing, but in reality they are not. In most cases, the idea of gender limitation is not even discussed by scholars. My effort here is to establish the clear cut differences between both terms. The concept or idea of gender limitation is not much pronounced in gender discourse. The most popular concept among the two is gender discrimination. However, I will like to begin with the concept of gender discrimination. What is gender discrimination? There are myriads of definitions of gender discrimination. I will restrict myself to a very few definitions that conform to the focus of this paper. In fact I will like to summarize definitions of gender discrimination into two. The first group has to do with defining gender discrimination as discrimination against women or female gender. The

second group was the more balanced group that sees gender discrimination as discrimination against any individual based on the person's gender.

Esteve-Volart, B. (2004) definition of gender discrimination represents the first group that I have mentioned. For him, gender discrimination is the complete exclusion of females from the labor market or the exclusion of females from managerial positions. This definition is more or less about female gender discrimination. It erroneously assumes that the only gender that can be discriminated against is the female gender. Most definitions of gender discrimination have taken this posture. The implication of this definition is that the female gender plays the role of the victim, while the male gender is considered as the victimizer. Indirectly, this kind of definition tends to pitch the female gender in perpetual conflict with the male gender.

On the second group, the definition by Insight Policy Research (2022) captures their views. For Insight Policy Research, gender discrimination is defined as the unequal treatment of an individual based on their gender identity. This kind of unequal treatment can be against any of the gender. This implies that both the female and male gender can be discriminated against. It is no longer a question of male gender against the female gender. The issue is about the possibility of any human being discriminating against a fellow human being based on the person's gender. To elaborate it further, this kind of definition creates the possibility of male gender discriminating against fellow male gender or female gender against a fellow female gender. So, it is no longer a gender battle, rather a battle against negative human disposition. `

The challenge we have with most definitions of gender discrimination is their feminists' posture. Feminists are basically concerned with women's inferior position in the society. Hence when they talk of gender discrimination, they are actually concerned with female gender discrimination. It is an unbalanced argument to think of gender discrimination as only discrimination against women. There can also be discrimination against men. The point is that discrimination is against fundamental human rights and should be kicked against, whether it is against women or against men. I will like to align my notion of gender discrimination with the view that states that, gender discrimination is when one is treated less favorably because of the person's gender. These discriminations are of various forms. In a country like Nigeria, police officers are more likely to arrest a man when there is a suspicion of crime than a woman. In fact there is a popular view in Nigeria that it is difficult for a man who is up to 40 years old not to have something to do with the police. The same cannot be expressly said about women. Again men are always forced to take up the financial responsibility of raising their biological children. In some countries (especially Islamic) women are not allowed to work. They are restricted to domestic chores, Nigerian former president Muhammed Buhari in one of his interviews with Channels Television in 2017, said that his wife belongs to his kitchen and other rooms. On the other hand, female gender is more prone to sexual harassment. Having looked at the fundamentals in the definition of gender discrimination, let us consider gender limitations.

When what is seen as gender discrimination is as a result of limitations imposed by a person's biological composition, we can no longer call it gender discrimination rather it should be seen as gender limitations. It is a common knowledge that the concept of gender is a social construct. I will like to argue that gender as a social construct is not baseless.

The sex of a person is what determines the individual's gender. It suffices to say that, the differences in sex to a large extent is a determinant in the differences in gender roles. A man by his sexuality cannot breastfeed a baby, cannot carry pregnancy, does not experience mensuration and so on. These are 'sex limitations'. By his biological composition, a man cannot do any of these without undergoing serious surgery that will transform his sexuality. My point is that, the sex of a person has a correlation with the person's gender role. Gender roles though socially created, were actually meant to fittingly accommodate a person's sexuality or biological features. A major challenge in gender debate has to do with the feminists' gender category as distinct from sex in the analysis of the man/woman relationship. Laura Palazzani (2012, 22) puts it thus: "Sex is how we are born: therefore, it is – indisputably – a natural element or biological fact. Gender is how we become.... Feminist perspectives affirm that what we become does not coincide with what we are and how we are born". This is the bane of misconception in gender debate. The differences in sex necessitate the differences in gender role. There are jobs which some societies may not allow a woman to do because she is a breastfeeding mother. In as much as it is a form of discrimination, this kind of discrimination is nothing but gender limitation. When a woman who is still bearing children is restrained from occupying certain managerial positions, though this may sound discriminatory, but this kind of discrimination is basically in the interest of the woman and the society at large. As such it should not be seen as gender discrimination rather as gender limitation.

The bane of contention is derived from the idea that whatever a man can do a woman can even do better. What happens to the traditional Africa value system and social cohesion when every member of the society competes for the same position within the society? Just as the biological differences of both genders when harnessed within the confines of intimacy leads to procreation. The man produces the sperm, while the woman produces the egg, the synergy between the both produces a result. We can put it this way M for male and F for female: $M + F = \text{offspring}$, but $M + M = \text{no offspring}$ and $F + F = \text{no offspring}$. In the society, when a particular social role becomes so attractive that every member of the society begins to move towards its direction, it will create a dysfunctional society. The social structure is like the human body, where every part must make its contribution for the proper functioning of the body. All cannot do the same function. It is in the light of this position that I will like to bring in Asouzu's principle of complementarity. The idea of equality is anti-nature, therefore in the place of gender equality, I propose gender equity.

Asouzu's Principle of Complementarity

The principle of complementarity was advanced by Innocent Asouzu in his book *The Method and Principle of Complementary Reflection: In and Beyond African Philosophy*. The basis of his argument is the view that individuals cannot survive or make meaningful progress in isolation of each other, but through mutual cooperation they can withstand whatever challenge they are faced with. This view was derived from Igbo traditional notion of survival through social cooperation. He pointed the Igbo idea of (nnukwu azu kpata nnukwu nku, obere azu kpata obere nku), "each person has to make his contributions according to his nature as a condition for authentic existence" (Asouzu 2004, 107-108). He also added that another imagery or metaphor traditional Igbo uses to express the idea or principle of complementarity is the collective effort needed by ants to carry heavy things (bunu bunuoo ibuanidanda). The point of argument in these Igbo

traditional folklores is that for the survival of the society each individual within the society has a contribution to make. This contribution is capacity based, hence 'nnukwu azu kpata nnukwu nku and obele azu kpata obele nku'. The notion that nearly captures this is the communist slogan which was popularized by the German philosopher Karl Marx 'from each according to his capacity, to each according to his need' (Bovens, L. and Lutz, A. 2019). Marx was focused on economic distribution, but the Igbo notion is ontological. We must cooperate in order to survive; you will contribute what you can contribute, while the other contributes what he/she can for survival. This kind of commitment helps in creating synergy. Another dimension is the recognition that all are not of equal capacity, hence each should focus on his or her area of strength.

Azouzu argues thus “For the traditional Igbo, without complementarity, human life would be unbearable isolated struggle that can easily lead to self-abandonment” (Asouzu 2004, 108). The idea of complementarity sprang from the understanding that, I without the other cannot make meaningful progress or survive. “It is an opportunity to form communities and adhere to the principle of authentic existence in society” (2004, 109). In complementarity, there is this understanding of the diversity of contribution from each person. What one does not have and cannot contribute, the other has and can contribute. If we relate this to gender, the biological differences in both genders presupposes that what a particular gender cannot offer, the other gender can. A good example is when we consider the process of procreation; the male gender provides the sperm which fertilizes the female egg/s. The male gender all alone cannot further itself in existence, the same is applicable to the female gender. Both need to complement each other in order to further their existence. It is through complementary relationship, that both can make meaningful existential impact. If both genders were to understand that they are mutually inclusive to each other; that is to say, one cannot survive without the other. This will lead to the dismantling of the competitive notion erroneously held by most feminists. We shall consider how gender discrimination is addressed in the light of complementarity.

Gender Discrimination in the Light of Asouzu's Principle of Complementarity

My effort is not to make light the negative impact of gender discrimination, rather to clarify the concept in order to ensure that whatever is tagged gender discrimination is actually gender discrimination. In applying the principle of complementarity, the focus is to ensure that gender discourse in Africa conforms to the ontological nature of Africans. There is a whole lot of differences between Western discourse on gender and African understanding of gender. For a proper understanding of African idea of gender discrimination, there is need for us to consider it within the context of complementarity. In the Western world, there is this understanding that both genders are equal and no role is attached to any specific gender. It is not so with Africans, roles are specifically attached to each gender. The attachment of roles to gender within the African context does not in any way demean or reduce any gender. Roles that are assigned to genders in Africa do not create superior and inferior dichotomy. Rather the gender roles are designed to complement or complete each other. This is in line with African understanding that each gender has its area of strength and weakness. In order to ensure the continuity of the human race, the complementary gender relationship in Africa is gear towards maintaining continuing human existence.

In Africa one may ask, at what point can we say that there is gender discrimination? Is a female gender allowed to get involved in whatsoever activity or career she desires? Let us remember the interconnectedness of reality in Africa. The Ubuntu saying “a person is a person through other persons” (Desmond Tutu 2008). Unlike Western society which is characterized with individualism, the African society is communalistic. The individual is located within the whole and is an essential part of the whole. This is best understood when we consider how the different parts of the body contribute to the proper functioning of the body. In Africa, the conception of individual or gender is not in isolation. The individual is perceived as an integral part of the whole. With this understanding, the role of the individual is not strictly tailored in the interest of the individual, rather it is tailored to suit the interest of the whole. Hence, “anything that exists serves as a missing link of reality” (Asouzu 2005, 277). It is not about the individual pursuing personal goals and aspirations, rather about the individual becoming an effective functional member of the whole. Gender discrimination, just as we have earlier established is any form of discrimination against any individual based on the person's gender. Gender discrimination is not much pronounced in Africa, because the Africa individual sees him/herself as part of the whole. So even if there is something that could be seen as discrimination, the African individual perceives it not so, on the fact that the interest of the whole overrides the individual's interest. The interest of the individual is better served within the interest of the group.

Moreover, the basis of Asouzu's idea of complementarity is “derived from the general and fundamental human feeling of insufficiency” (2004, 104). It is this human feeling of insufficiency that leads to human inclination for solidarity, togetherness and community. This eventually leads to mutual co-existence, co-dependability, co-responsibility and so on (2004, 105). Uzoigwe (2020, 42), in citing Asouzu puts it thus; “entities confirm their existence only by entering into relation”. I will like to infer that, this is the ontological basis of gender relationship in Africa. When a woman is assigned the role of taking care of the welfare of the family in Africa, and restrained from some adventurous ventures, it is with the understanding that both the male and female genders cannot be allowed to be adventurous at the same time. As one is allowed to be outgoing, the other is constrained to take care of the home front in a complementary manner. One without the other cannot satisfactorily serve the interest of the whole. It is important to note, that it was the high social prestige attached to the role of men that has pushed the female gender to desire to function in the same manner as male gender. It is on this note that I argue for equity, in the place of equality. Equality will create a dysfunctional African society, while equity will grant the same honour and prestige to both genders irrespective of gender roles. It is important also to note that the determinant of social roles in Africa is the biological composition of each gender. Let us consider the structure of a cooperate organization; the reason every member of the organization is aiming at becoming the General Manager or the CEO is because of things (dignity and honor) attached to the position. My argument is that every member of the organization is as important as the other. Starting from the security, driver, receptionist, messenger and others, the effectiveness of the organization depends on the mutual cooperation of all. None can function optimally in the exclusion of the other. The same is applicable to gender, and in Africa, gender roles are basically complementary. I will like to posit that the idea of gender discrimination is actually alien to Africa, it was culture contact with the West that introduced it. This view is corroborated by Nigerian feminist scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi in Coetzee, as she famously argued that

gender is a Western cultural construct which is alien to traditional African society (Coetzee 2018, 1). The introduction of gender discourse in Africa to a large extent distorts the social structure of African society.

Conclusion

Gender based limitations and gender based discriminations as we have observed are often mistaken to mean one and the same thing. From the arguments I advanced above, it is obvious that gender limitations are quite different from gender discriminations. Gender based limitations are products of nature, and humanity has little or nothing to do about it. But gender based discriminations is a social construct. Humanity has a lot of role to play in addressing the challenge. My effort in making this distinction is to clarify both concepts in order to ensure that what is called limitation is really limitation and what is called discrimination is really discrimination.

On the other hand I observed that arguments against gender discrimination are basically to ensure gender equality. This position or argument that seeks for gender equality is also defective. Gender roles are products of social construct, but they are also rooted in the biological nature of each gender. In other words, we cannot separate gender from sex. My argument against gender equality is anchored on Asouzu's principle of complementarity. Asouzu in his method and principle of complementary reflection argues that every reality serves as a missing link. Hence, the biological differences in both genders were to complement and not to compete with each other. I also posit that no gender role is superior or inferior to the other, rather each role is as important as the other, as they help to ensure and maintain social balance and cohesion. One may argue about the reward system by asking; why is it that some social role tend to attract more reward than others? I am more concerned with what happens to social equilibrium in Africa if all genders are striving towards a particular social role rather than the reward system.

For Asouzu (2004, 81), a system can only be meaningfully conceptualized when considered as the interaction of complementary forces. By implication, gender discourse should be understood as interaction of complementary forces. In this case, male and female gender should be seen as serving the purpose of complementary interaction. But Asouzu argues that this evident fact does not receive the type of attention that it deserves. One of the major reasons for this human negligence for him is the tendency to defend those things that people imagine give them some advantages over others, and those things that enhance their self-image. In the case under review, it seems as if the role of the male gender tends to fulfill all these, hence the clamour for gender equality. This also does not suffice, as one without the other cannot perform optimally, both gender are mutually inclusive. In the final analysis, I propose for gender equity in the place of gender equality. Within gender equity, our biological differences are properly recognized not as an instrument of discrimination, rather as instrument for fairness and justice.

In this era of globalization and interculturalism, traditional African society is faced with a lot of crisis occasioned by the unguarded inflow of western feminist discourse in Africa. The argument presented in this paper aims to put into perspective the linguistic confusion associated with gender limitation and gender discrimination, as this will help create a stable (complementary and not competitive) society. It is also a means to further equip scholars who are interested in gender discourse, to properly align their arguments, taking cognizance of the fact that there is a correlation between our biological nature and our

social roles.

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