

Achieving Equality for Each Gender in the Workplace: The African Dimension

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Abstract

This paper offers an analytic discourse of gender issues in the workplace from the African viewpoint. Gender is one of the intersecting factors in workplace discrimination that has been highly contested. With its varied meanings and values, its cultural underpinning precludes any meaning other than the one associated to males and females. People do not have equal access to opportunities, benefits, rewards and resources in the workplace due to gender discrimination and stereotypes. Although gender issues in the workplace affect both males and females, yet, females are most commonly the target of gender discrimination. There exist measurable differences in men and women's experiences in the traditional or modern workplace and the way their works are viewed. Gender issues are the differences between men and women in traditional and modern labour market outcomes. Women have made tremendous progress in improving their educational outcomes which have not translated into labour outcomes. A significant shift in the labour market has seen the growing involvement of women in work outside the home. The status of women and the resultant relations of work in the traditional and modern workplaces are the focus of this paper. With the changing, varied and complex nature of contemporary gender relations, it is expected that these barriers and discrepancies in the workplace opportunities and benefits would be removed to enhance equality.

Keywords: *Gender issues; workplace; equality; valuation; African societies.*

Introduction

Gender is a sociological category that had gained prominence in scholarship, advocacy and policy formulation within the last three decades and offers a propitious field of inquiry. The term gender has been commonly contrasted with sex. The binary sex/gender distinction highlights the heteronormative understandings of sex and gender. Most African societies subscribe to the binary sex distinction but recognize the exceptionality of sexual indeterminates which mix both physiological and anatomical components that essentialise males and females. Sociologically, the concept of sex is used in reference to the biological and physical characteristics that distinguish males from females. The physiological and anatomical characteristics of male and female include the variations in the chromosomes (XY and XX), hormones (androgen, testosterone and oestrogen, progesterone) genitals and breasts for male and female respectively.

On the other hand, the meanings attached to gender have varied over time. It is construed as socially/culturally learned beliefs, feelings, attitudes and behaviour attributed to members of each sex as a man, woman, bisexual, transvestites, and transgender, gay or lesbian. Gender is linked to 'socially constructed' qualities associated with men and women in each sex (Giddens and Sutton, 2013). Gender is construed as the generality of the meanings and value linked to males or females in a given society (Richardson, 2008; Vartabedian, 2018; Kramer, 2001). Gender entails being a man/woman, gay/lesbian, transgender and the roles/behaviour expected of them in dressing, acting, speaking, walking, caring, working, dominating and being subordinated. Specifically, in most African cultures gender is construed in terms of the roles/behaviour associated with men and women. It is in the context of the African perspective that this paper seeks to explore the prospects and challenges of achieving equality for each gender in the workplace. Like most cultures, African societies are patriarchal to a great extent therefore certain norms are attributable to each sex. Men's positions have authority and adumbrate women except in the absence of men. Patriarchy perpetuated hegemony by according privileges to males as subjects of history but institutionalized female subordination through relegation as objects. It is a socio-cultural norm that prices men over and above women even in bureaucratic organisations like the University of Port Harcourt, Anele (2010).

Gender in the Traditional Workplace

Traditionally, men and women played complementary roles in the family. Prior to European colonisation, they worked collaboratively in foraging, farming and fishing societies. Some roles were given a male status whereas others were designated for females in different societies. Roles were assigned to men on the basis of the energy and risk involved in performing a task. Murdoch's study of preliterate societies affirmed this position. The labour system in pre-capitalist African economies produced for subsistence, were non-monetised and operated a system of reciprocity. Labour was either exchanged for labour or commended and not commercialized. Generally, the job of housework, cooking, care of the man, children, aged and sick members of the family were vested on the woman. Men's labour elicited positive cultural valuation. Women's labour were devalued and considered insignificant in relation to men. However, role dichotomies in parenting and nurturance exist among the foraging cultures of Efe and Aka pygmies of the Central African Republic and Northern Congo Brazzaville where high paternal care and bonding had been recorded (Hewlett, 1991; Winn, Morelli and Tronick, 1990). With the exception of these gender egalitarian cultures, most traditional African societies were gender structured.

Intellectually, the controversy over the hereditary and socio-cultural determinants of sex/gender differences had raged over many decades. Essentialist frameworks situate gender division of labour in sexual dimorphism and the attendant inequality as genetically rooted or adapted. These pre-determined essentialist postulates analysed hegemonic gender expectations in relation to social divisions. The essentialist ideas of anthropologists and sociologists attributed male strength, aggression, bonding behaviour and women's childbearing capability as the bases of sexual division of labour. Being male was explainable in terms of work done. House construction is perceived a male activity in most African societies whereas some reserve it for women. Studies on women participation in strenuous or physically demanding jobs previously regarded as men's work further weaken the credibility of the essentialist reasoning. Kalabamu (2001) noted that African women particularly in Botswana and other sedentary pastoral communities traditionally played key roles in house construction. Gbadebo, Kehinde and Adedeji, (2012) studied the

participatory roles of women in blasting and crushing of rocks in Western Nigeria. Women are doing strenuous jobs previously done by men in order to survive.

Talcott Parsons opined that instrumental and expressive roles of men and women in the family respectively were biologically determined (Haralambos and Heald, 2004; Ifeanacho, 1998). The view of man as the breadwinner persists even when the woman makes meaningful financial contribution to the family upkeep. Radical approaches like feminism, queer and postmodernism challenged this notion of biological determinism in the understanding of gender issues. Feminist perspectives underscore the import of cultural variations in gender role differences. Friedl (1975), affirmed the cultural relativity of gender roles by implication, gender inequality. Men and women performed various tasks in different societies depending on the value placed on such tasks. She focused on the unequal power relations in societies that subjugated women to a peripheral role. In the Igbo culture, the role played by men in farming and the crops they plant are highly valued over the women's role. Yam is elevated to a male crop therefore highly placed as against cassava from which 'garri' a major staple food is produced.

Significant changes in the African society have further deepened the gender gap between men and women. Colonialism launched African societies into the world capitalist economy characterized by wage labour and profit maximisation (Ifeanacho, 2012). The introduction of the money economy among others radically changed the nature and notion of work in Africa. Gender issues resonate through labour market relations in modern times. Women have remained vulnerable to varying issues of gender that either exclude them from participation in the labour force or discriminate against them at the workplace. Traditional gender expectations, conceptions and roles are barriers to women inclusion and participation in the labour market. Women's wage-earning capacity had been punctured by husbands who believe in domesticating wives. Some married women are barred from working outside the home due to androcentric belief that the woman's place is in the kitchen, nurturance and the other room. The housewife tag is usually associated with women without wage labour who perform house chores in addition to wife and mother roles on a full scale. Exclusion of women from wage labour reduce their visibility in the workplace. Never the less, African societies do not economically value women's work at home.

The Modern Workplace

Radical changes in the labour market have given rise to a growing trend of women's involvement in work outside the home. Women have made tremendous progress in the improvement of their educational outcomes but with marginal progress in labour market outcomes. Certain institutional and cultural factors inhibit women's effective participation in the labour force and responsible for the modern workplace inequality. Increased educational fortunes of women indicate an upswing in female enrolment in all levels of education. They include, non-arbitration clauses/unequal opportunities/wage gap, glass ceiling, sexual harassment, segregation/discrimination/stereotypes, discriminative policies, bias and work-life balance.

Women face discrimination in the workplace. Employers of labour in the organized private sector show inclination and preference for male employees over females. Women in top executive positions similarly face insubordination and discrimination from subordinates particularly males. Gender segregation and male preference buttress the cultural expectations on women of child-bearing age. The responsibilities of marriage, child-rearing and family account for the gender bias

against women in employment. The World Bank (2012) identified three main factors that result in gender segregation across all sectors. The role of care-giving particularly predispose women to part-time informal jobs that ensure flexibility of arrangements with lower earnings than straight jobs. Persistent differences exist in the job men and women do. Some subjects, courses, professions or jobs were considered appropriate for men and women respectively. Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, Engineering, Medicine etc, were male dominated. Others like Arts, Nursing, teaching, secretarial work remain appropriate for women. Gender segregation of occupations show a slow and downward movement due to women's improved educational outcomes. There are still professions that are clearly dominated by men because of the high risk factors involved.

It is common knowledge that female marketing bank workers are exposed to varying degrees of sexual harassment in a bid to meet extraneous targets set for them. Female marketers are expected to shore up the banks' capital by attracting huge deposits to the bank. For this reason, single young ladies are preferred in marketing staff recruitment. Sexual harassment in the workplace constitutes a human rights issue which is offensive and creates a hostile work environment. Males as well as females are affected but females are more vulnerable. In most cases, superior officers take advantage of their positions to impose sexual gratification on subordinates as a condition for promotion, job security, higher privileges and better working conditions. Strategies adopted to achieve this violation range from coercion, intimidation, sexist jokes/humours/remarks, sending pornographic photos, deprivation and outright denial of opportunities. Sexual harassment is predominant in gendered jobs particularly, male dominated jobs, low-paid jobs and caring jobs. This is an act that may be perpetrated by employers, employees, clients, associates, teachers/lecturers and students.

Wage gap reflects the persistent differences in the earnings of men and women in the workplace. It is purely targeted at women. People do not have equal access to opportunities, benefits, rewards and resources in the workplace. Marriage and family responsibilities lead to periodic interference in performance of duties. Women are categorized as dependent relatives in fiscal policies even if they are gainfully employed. The responsibility of provision for children, wife and aged parents are officially endowed on the man. These responsibilities rub off on the taxable income of the man. Consequently, the burden of taxation is passed down to the woman since it is assumed that she has no financial obligation. Family and motherhood activities are presumed to interrupt women's participation in the labour force. Work-life balance is an essential attribute of gender issues in the workplace that results in conflicting family issues with work. This perceived disruption results in women leaving the workplace to give support to family.

Glass ceilings are equally employed as a barrier or limit to which a woman would be promoted in the workplace. Glass ceilings proscribe female representation in top management positions and deliberate exclusion from career advancement. Organisations put in place an invisible limitation or impediment that determines the height which women can attain in the workplace (Albrecht, Borland and Vroman, 2003). Again, Anele (2010) aptly describes how women are subordinated in a bureaucratic organisation such as the University of Port Harcourt by limiting female representation to the top management positions like Vice-Chancellor and council membership.

Conclusion

The call for equality of each gender has become topical in recent times as the world marks another 'international women's day'. The problem of achieving equal opportunities and outcomes for men and women especially by improving women's work experience in Africa becomes imperative. From the discussion so far, it can be deduced that gender barriers in the workplace are not biologically but socially created to reinforce male domination. Feminist studies have shown that modern workplace gender inequality is rooted in institutional factors that produce unequal power relations between men and women. These factors encumber the prospects of achieving equality for each gender in the African workplace.

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