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Gender Disparity/Gap

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ABSTRACT

Gender disparity is one of the most persistent forms of inequality globally despite decades of advocacy and legal reforms. Gender disparity is a major social and developmental challenge that involves unequal opportunities, rights, resources, participation, and outcomes between men and women. It occurs across various sectors such as education, employment, income, healthcare, political participation, leadership, technology, property ownership, and access to financial resources. Despite the significant progress in promoting gender equality, disparities still continue to exist due to poverty, cultural practices, gender stereotypes, discrimination, unequal distribution of household responsibilities, institutional barriers, and gender-based violence. The above inequalities can bring about limitation of human potential, reduce economic productivity, increase poverty, and also hinder sustainable national development. The elimination of gender disparity is essential for achieving social justice, inclusive economic development, and Sustainable Development Goals. This paper looks at the various challenges facing gender disparities, the pros and cons and the ways forward towards national development.

KEYWORDS: *Gender disparity, gender gap, gender equality, discrimination, women's empowerment, social justice, sustainable development, Sustainable development Goals (SDGs), gender-based violence, cultural practices, institutional barriers, patriarchy, economic inequality, political empowerment, Nigeria.*

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INTRODUCTION

Gender disparity or gender gap refers to the unequal differences, opportunities, status, education, income, access to finance, healthcare, ownership of property, technology, leadership, social decision-making, and treatment between men and women, boys and girls in society based on socially constructed roles, as shown in Figure 1. This is not about biological sex, but about gender – the social norms, power relations and access to resources. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF) gender gap is defined as the difference between men and women in four key dimensions: economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Gender disparities can affect people of all genders. Evidence shows that women earn 20% less than men for similar work, constitute only 32% of senior management globally and hold only 26.5% of parliamentary seats worldwide, as shown in Figure 2. This gap is more pronounced in Nigeria, ranking 122 out of 146 countries, with female literacy at 52% compared to 72% for males, and women occupying only 4.2% of National Assembly seats. These are caused as a result of patriarchal social structures, discriminatory customary laws, unequal socialization, and limited access to education and finance, as shown in Figure 3. The resultant consequences of gender disparity include reduced GDP growth, intergenerational poverty, high maternal mortality, and vulnerability to health risks including consumption of fake and substandard products.

Gender disparities occurs both in developed and developing societies, although their form and magnitude may vary considerably by country and social group. Some of the barriers affecting girls as reported by the World Bank include domestic responsibilities, inadequate facilities, social norms, early pregnancy, child marriage, cum limited access to technology and other educational resources. Gender equality is incorporated into the United

Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5, which calls for achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, as shown in Figures 4 and 5. There is need for the comprehensive understanding of the gender gap as being essential for designing policies and institutions that provide equitable opportunities and participation for all [1-14].

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. Pre-Colonial and Ancient Era

Gender disparity is not natural but is historically constructed. In early hunter-gatherer societies, roles were complementary but relatively egalitarian [15]. The emergency of patriarchy is traced to around 3100 BCE with the development of private property, agriculture, and state formation in Mesopotamia, where male control over surplus and inheritance became institutionalized. Lerner argued that patriarchy was created as a historical process, not biological inevitability.

However, in pre-colonial Africa, gender relations were more balanced. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, women had powerful institutions such as *Umuada* (daughters of lineage), *Omu* (female king in Anioma), they controlled markets and also had economic autonomy in trade [16]. However, even then, political leadership was largely male-dominated.

2. Colonial Era (1880s-1960s)

Gender disparity in Africa was deepened by colonialism. The colonial administration only recognized men as landowners, chiefs, and wage earners. The British indirect rule excluded women from native courts and introduced the Victorian ideology of male breadwinner and female housewife, and as well as how colonial cash crop economy displaced women from agriculture and concentrated resources in men [17]. In Nigeria, colonial education favored boys. By 1960, only 20% of primary school pupils were girls [18]. The missionaries only trained girls for domestic roles and the boys were trained for clerical jobs.

3. Post-Independence and Early International Feminism (1960-1975)

After independence, women were largely excluded from nation-building. Nigeria's first parliament in 1960 had only 1 woman. Globally, gender was not on development agenda until the UN Declaration on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in 1967. The first UN World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975 launched the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985) and brought gender gap to global attention [5].

4. Second Wave Feminism and CEDAW Era (1979-1995)

The Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 became the international bill of rights for women. The term "gender and development" replaced "women in development" in 1980s, and focusing on power relations [19].

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted by 189 countries, identifying 12 critical areas of gender inequality including poverty, education, health, violence, and decision-making, as shown in Figure 6. It was in 2000 that Nigeria adopted the National Policy on Women to domesticate Beijing.

5. Millennium Development Goals and Gender Mainstreaming (2000-2015)

The MDG 3 is aimed at promoting gender equality, as shown in Figure 7. Progress was made: global gender parity in primary education rose from 0.86 in 2000 to 0.98 in 2015 [20]. However, economic and political gaps remained. In Nigeria, the return to democracy in 1999 increased advocacy but women representation remained below 7%.

6. Sustainable Development Goals Era (2015-Date)

SDG 5 specifically targets gender equality. World Economic Forum (2023) Global Gender Gap Report showed evolution: at current rate, it will take 131 years to close gap. COVID-19 widened the gap – women lost 5% of jobs v 3.9% for men [2].

Furthermore, in Nigeria, Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act 2015 and National Gender Policy 2021 (35% affirmative action) were enacted, but implementation is weak due to patriarchal customary laws and non-domestication in many states [4, 21].

Gender gap is seen to have evolved historically from the construction of patriarchy, worsened by colonialism, but is being challenged through global feminist movements. Despite this, progress is still slow, most especially in developing countries like Nigeria where traditional norms persist.

Reasons for Male Dominance in Gender Disparity/Gap

Male dominance, also called patriarchy, is the central or major cause of gender disparity. It refers to the social system where men hold primary power in politics, economy, culture, family and control access to resources [6, 15]. This explains why gender gap consistently favors men. This is also traced to:

1. Historical Origin Theory

Male dominance is traced from 3100 BCE in ancient Mesopotamia. This was when agriculture produced surplus, men were known to control private property and needed to control women's reproduction to ensure inheritance for their sons. This created first patriarchal family, state and law code that treated women as property [22-24]. Engels argued that emergence of private property overthrew earlier matrilineal systems and installed monogamous patriarchal family to preserve male wealth [25].

2. Structural Theories of Patriarchy

Walby identified six structures that maintain male dominance i.e.:

- Household production
- Paid work
- The State
- Male violence
- Sexuality
- Culture [1, 5, 6, 26, 27].

3. Socialization and Ideological Factors

From childhood, boys are socialized to be assertive, dominant and leaders, while girls are socialized to be submissive, caregivers and to obey [19]. Proverbs, textbooks and religion reinforce this. In many Nigerian cultures, the male child is called the "heir" and while the female child is "to be married out." Colonialism worsened this by giving education, land titles and wage jobs only to men, making male dominance official [17].

4. Economic Basis of Male Dominance

Capitalist system benefits from male dominance because it gets women's unpaid labor free (childcare, cooking) which subsidizes male workers [16]. Men therefore control income and decision-making. In Nigeria, women own less than 20% of land despite producing 70% of food, so they depend on men economically [29, 30].

5. Biological Determinism Misconception

Some early theories justified male dominance with physical strength and motherhood [31]. This is rejected by some feminist scholars, showing that in pre-colonial societies like Igbo, women were warriors, traders and had female king institutions like *Omu* [16], so dominance was social not biological.

Why it Persists

- Customary law: Many customary laws in Nigeria deny women inheritance, treating them as minors.
- Religious Misinterpretation: Selective interpretation of texts to exclude women.
- Political Economy: Men who benefit from the system resist change.
- Lack of Enforcement: Good laws exist [32] but are not enforced [33].

Challenges faced by women

Some of the challenges faced by women due to gender disparity or gender gap include:

1. Gender discrimination in employment
2. Gender gap pay
3. Unequal burden of unpaid care work
4. Limited political representation and decision-making
5. Gender-based violence
6. Poverty and limited access to economic resources
7. Unequal access to education and skills opportunities
8. Digital gender divide
9. Restrictive social norms and gender stereotypes
10. Barriers to justice and protection of women's rights [2, 13, 27, 34, 35].

PLAUSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO GENDER DISPARITY/GAP

Some of the possible solutions to the challenges of gender disparity or gender gap can include:

1. Legal and Policy Reforms

- Full Domestication and Enforcement of Laws: Domestication of CEDAW, Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act 2015 in all 36 states, and Maputo Protocol. Strengthened enforcement by training police and judges on gender-based violence [4, 21].
- Affirmative Action/Quota System: The implementation of the 35% affirmative action in political appointments and elective positions as stipulated in National Gender Policy 2021. Countries like Rwanda achieved 61% women in parliament through constitutional quota [1].
- Land and Inheritance Reform: The need to amend customary laws that deny women inheritance. Enforce the Supreme Court judgment in *Ukeje v Ukeje (2014)* which declared female disinheritance unconstitutional [36].

2. Economic Empowerment Solutions

- Financial Inclusion: Expand microfinance and Bank of Industry loans targeted at women, remove collateral requirement for women. Evidence do show that women's access to credit increases GDP [26].
- Equal Pay Enforcement: The need to enforce ILO Equal Remuneration Convention C100. Regular wage audit and transparency laws [37, 38].
- Support women in Agriculture: provide inputs, extension services and land titles to women farmers. FAO estimates closing gender gap in agriculture could feed 150 million more people [29].

3. **Education Solutions**
- Girl-Child Education Programs: Scale up UNICEF AGILE program, conditional cash transfer for girls to stay in school as done in Kaduna State. Abolish school fees and provide sanitary pads to reduce dropout [20].
- Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) Encouragement: Scholarships and mentorship for girls in STEM. Reduce gender stereotypes in textbooks.
- Adult Literacy for Women: Second-chance education for older women [3].

4. **Health Solutions**
- Free Maternal Health Services: This will involve the implementation of free antenatal and delivery under National Health Insurance Authority Act 2022. Need to also train more midwives in rural areas to reduce maternal mortality [39].
- Reproductive Health Education: Comprehensive sexuality education and family planning access.
- GBV One-Stop Centers: Establish Sexual Assault Referral Centers in all states as recommended by WHO [27].

5. **Political Empowerment Solutions**
- Reduce cost of Politics: Need to subsidize nomination forms for women by parties, as done by PDP and APC.
- Leadership Training: National Women Leadership Institutes to build capacity for public speaking and campaign strategy.
- Zero Tolerance for Electoral Violence: Protect female candidates.

6. **Socio-Cultural Solutions**
- Community Engagement with Traditional Leaders: Work with emirs, obas and religious leaders to end child marriage. Program by UNFPA in Sokoto state that uses Islamic scholars to preach against child marriage was reduced by 15% [40].
- Male Engagement: involve men as allies through HeForShe campaign [5].
- Awareness and Media Campaigns: The use of radio and local languages to challenge patriarchy [6].

7. **Digital Inclusion**
- Bridging the mobile gender gap by subsidizing phones and digital literacy for women farmers and traders [41]. This will also help women verify fake drugs via NAFDAC mobile authentication service.

8. **Monitoring and Evaluation**
- Gender-disaggregated data collection by NBS and enforcement by National Senior Citizens Centre and Ministry of Women Affairs.

Closing gap is estimated to add $12 trillion to global GDP and $229 billion to Nigeria's GDP by 2025 [42]. Some of the dimensions of gender gap include: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, political empowerment, and other dimensions.

CONCLUSION

Gender disparity or gap is not natural or biological phenomenon but a socially constructed and historically institutionalized system of male dominance that started from ancient legal codes like the Code of Hammurabi around 1754 BCE which was entrenched through patriarchy, private property and customary laws. It manifests across all sectors of economic, health, politics, education and culture. Gender disparity can be closed as achieved in Rwanda. In Nigeria, this can be solved through the three-pronged approach of: (i) legal enforcement of Section 42, VAPP Act and ILO C100 through pay transparency and job evaluation, (ii) economic empowerment through financial inclusion and land reform, and (iii) cultural re-orientation through education and community engagement. If this is not done or enforced, gender gap will continue to produce poverty, and fake drugs vulnerability, and underdevelopment, because women are poor and powerless they cannot afford or demand quality healthcare. More information on gender disparity or gender gap can be obtained in the books in [43-58] and the following related journals:

Gender & Society

Journal of Gender Studies

Feminist Economics

Women's Studies International Forum

Gender and Development

International Labour Review (ILO)

African Journal of Reproductive Health

Journal of Gender and Social Issues (Nigeria)

Gender & Behaviour

African Journal of Gender and Development

Journal of law and Gender (Nigeria)

Harvard Journal of Law & Gender

International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies

World Bank – Women, Business and the Law (Annual)

UN Women – Gender Equality Reports

OECD – Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) – Nigeria Report 2023

Gender, Work & Organization

Gender & Development

World Development

Journal of Women in Culture and Society

International Studies in Gender, State & Society

Gender, Place & Culture

Journal of Gender, Work & Organization

Journal of Economic Literature

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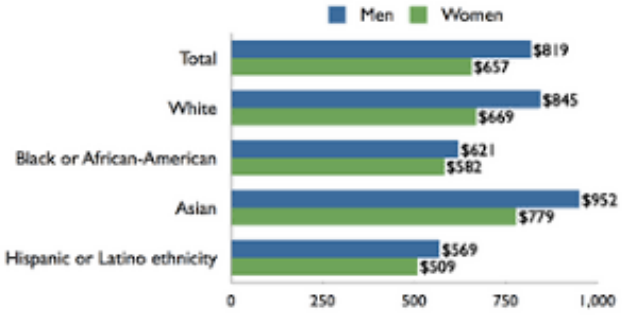


Figure 1. Gender inequality
Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_inequality

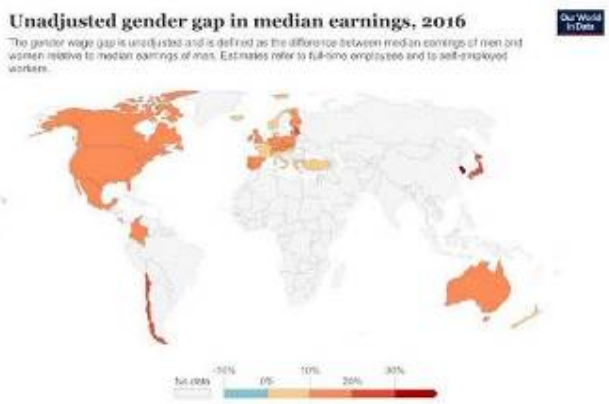


Figure 2. Gender pay gap
Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_pay_gap

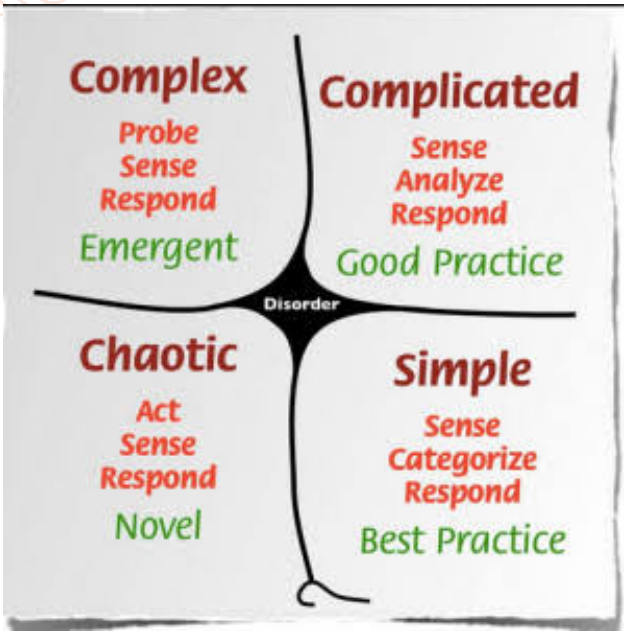


Figure 3. Gender bias: complex problem simple solution



Figure 4. SDG 5
Source:
https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/



Figure 5. Sustainable Development Goals



Figure 6. Importance of girls' education

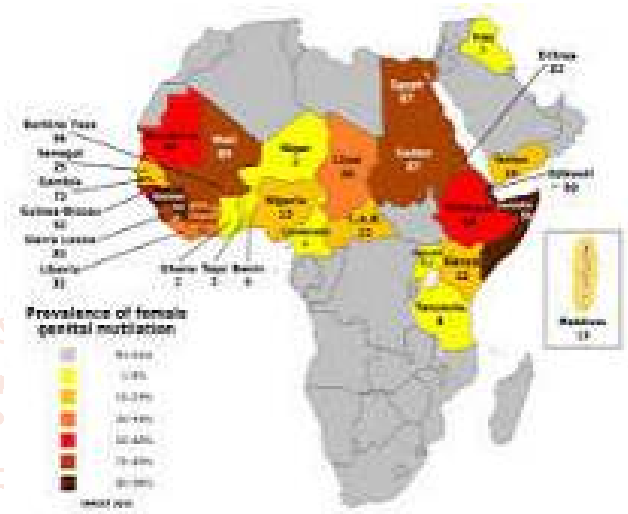


Figure 7. Gender equality
Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_equality