

## **TWO PEAS IN A POD : CONSTRUCTING GENDER WITHIN THE FEMINIST DISCOURSE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Over the years, the concept of feminism has witnessed an expansion. Set against this background, this paper critically explores feminism in Africa, especially Nigeria. In addition, it examines the distinction between the western perception of feminism and African perspectives on feminism by highlighting the marked differences between the contexts. The paper argues that the progress of feminism in Nigeria is piecemeal because of cultural barriers and strict adherence to native laws and customs. Furthermore, the paper appraises the proliferation of different thoughts on feminism, findings reveal that the concept of feminism has been overstretched beyond its meaning. This study uses a qualitative research method to investigate the development of feminism.

## **PATRIARCHY AND SEXISM: A PRELUDE TO FEMINISM**

Feminism is a series of movements to advocate for women's rights on gender equality. It is a political, cultural or economic movement that aims to establish equal rights and legal protection for women. Some commentators have argued that feminism seeks to demystify patriarchy. However, patriarchy is a concept embedded in systems.

Patriarchy is defined as:

*“a system of male authority that oppresses women through its social, political, and economic institutions. In all historical forms that patriarchy takes, whether feudal, capitalist, or socialist, a sex-gender system and a system of economic discrimination operate simultaneously. Patriarchy results from men's greater access to, and control of, the resources and rewards of the social system.”<sup>i</sup>*

Therefore, patriarchy expresses male values “through a system that rewards the upholders and punish the transgressors.”<sup>ii</sup> Thus, men are given priority and preferential treatment above their female counterparts in all aspects of economic, political and social contexts.

In a similar vein, another term resulted from the consequences of patriarchy-sexism. The term sexism may be defined as “a social relationship in which males have authority over females.”<sup>iii</sup> Given this situation, the man is believed to be the dominant one over a subordinate or repressed woman, which polarises both genders into a superior male and an inferior female.

The origin of sexism is traceable to Hebrews Beliefs, Christianity and Greek mythology.<sup>iv</sup> In the Old Testament, the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve's narratives in the Garden of Eden and the initial state of nature illustrated a perfect scenario of orderliness and perfectionism.<sup>v</sup> This original order also dictated a differentiation between the masculine and feminine. Eve disobeyed Almighty's instructions and persuaded Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, removing the veil of ignorance and stimulating their knowledge. Their subversiveness provoked the Almighty. Consequently, the Almighty expunged them from the garden of Eden. He instructed Eve to submit to Adam.<sup>vi</sup> It is worth mentioning that Eve was created from Adam's ribs. Hence, the scriptural reasoning suggests that Eve is inferior to Adam. It is noted that this narrative is open to different interpretations. One could also interpret it as Eve being a complementary part of Adam that completes the latter rather than a polarised battle of supremacy.

Similarly, Adam and Eve's narrative is analogous to Greek mythology. The Greek myth believes that the new life originates from the man while the woman sustains and nourishes it.<sup>vii</sup> These beliefs reinforce the supremacy of man and patrilineal descent while demoting matrilineal pedigree. Yet, arguably, the account also denotes a complementary relation between the man and woman.

In addition, Aristotle described the female as “a deformed male”<sup>viii</sup> and “infertile male.”<sup>ix</sup> He further writes: “A male is a male in virtue of a particular ability, a female in virtue of a particular inability.”<sup>x</sup> He explains further:

*“It is best for all tame animals to be ruled by human beings. For this is how they are kept alive. In the same way, the relationship between the male and female is by nature such that the male is higher, the female lower, that the male rules and the female is ruled.”<sup>xi</sup>*

Aristotle's analysis entrenches the inferiority of women to men. It places the value of a female in a male -a woman is an incomplete being whose value is found as a man's object, which should be kept for economic reasons. Arguably, sexism strips women of individuality, objectifies and devalues them. Plausibly, Aristotle's assertion unravels the connection between patriarchy and sexism.

## **EVOLUTION OF WESTERN FEMINISM**

The quest for women rights and feminism is not unconnected to the Western legal system's human rights frameworks.<sup>xii</sup> It is mainly traceable to the inherent discrimination against women in civil and political rights.<sup>xiii</sup> Equality and dignity are the foundations of human rights. It has been reported that feminism developed during the French revolution,<sup>xiv</sup> America and England suffrage movement.<sup>xv</sup> The western feminist movement was a response to the male-dominated conception of human rights.<sup>xvi</sup> The centredness of the male gender in all international human rights instruments precipitated women's state and position in reality. In America, after its independence from Britain, it is noted that neither the Declaration of Independence nor the constitution distinguished the female sex from the male sex<sup>xvii</sup> rather, women were considered “civilly dead”.<sup>xviii</sup> The continued women's exclusion and subordination reflected the marginalisation of women in human rights.<sup>xix</sup> In response to this repression, In 1848, about 300

women and men attended the two-day Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, to debate Elizabeth Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments, which accentuated women's inferior status and a request for suffrage.<sup>xx</sup> After this Convention, the annual women rights convention was organised to discuss women's legal and distinct identity, especially in married women's property rights, divorce, access to education, child custody, work rights, reproductive health, and protection against domestic violence.<sup>xxi</sup> Unfortunately, none of the concerns were fully legalised except for women suffrage.

Be that as it may, in France, Olympe de Gouge critiqued the exclusion of women in her published work, *Declaration of the rights of women and female citizen* in 1791.<sup>xxii</sup> As a French writer and activist, Gouge advocated for women's rights and the abolition of slavery. The continued gender classification and distinction was the basis for the alienation of women in political participation and social stratification.<sup>xxiii</sup> As explained by Olympe: "Woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights. A social distinction can be based only on common utility."<sup>xxiv</sup> Although Olympe's publication did not spontaneously influence the decrease in women's marginalisation, it brought people's attention to the issue.

The concepts of patriarchy, capitalism and white supremacy are intertwined instruments for women oppression in the western world.<sup>xxv</sup> Moreover, these instruments are embedded in the system, which makes the attainment of gender equality challenging-stubborn obstacles. The system came into being because of these factors. And as these concepts interplay, it overshadows potentially liberating strategies and generates a complex developmental issue with multifaceted angles. Hence, it is a structural entanglement; it is inconceivable to eliminate the system. However, it is expected that the structure should assimilate the dynamics of a changing society.

Feminism has progressed from a pilot scheme to the modern feminist movement and ideologies. This modern feminist movement is classified into waves or periods. However, it should be noted that before the emergence of this movement, some people advocated for women's equality. This group of people were referred to as "protofeminist"<sup>xxvi</sup> (early feminism). Some scholars have criticised this labelling for relegating the significance of the contribution of the early feminists. Margeret Cavendish was one of such contributors of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xxvii</sup> For instance, Matkin's study refers to Cavendish's knowledge as "over-tops many grave Grown-men". He also described her as a classic example of what women could become

through education.<sup>xxviii</sup> These early feminists contended for women's political and sexual equality and appreciated women's outstanding performance in male-dominated fields. It built the foundation for subsequent waves of feminism and ideologies.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a lot of enlightenment philosophers defended women's rights via intellectual reasoning. Jeremy Bentham and Mary Wollstonecraft consisted of philosophers of this period. Bentham was an English utilitarian and liberal philosopher. According to Bentham, the subjugation of women in legally inferior positions prompted him to become a reformist at eleven.<sup>xxix</sup> Bentham advocated for complete equality between males and females, specifically for voting rights and participation in government. He was also against the unequal sexual moral standards between men and women.<sup>xxx</sup> Besides, he argued against women's sexual slavery in many nations and advocated for women's total emancipation.

In her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792, Wollstonecraft promoted women's rights, cited women's oppression and unfair exclusion from society.<sup>xxxi</sup> Her publication highlights the defects in women's continued alienation in institutions to the detriment of a cohesive society. As the most cited feminist writer of the 18th century, Wollstonecraft, opined that both genders contributed to the inequality. She, however, suggested that education of both genders would change their perspective and attitude towards gender inequality.<sup>xxxii</sup> As such, to achieve the objectives of feminism, gender as an expression of difference must be construed as an integrative force for equality rather than a supremacy contest.

Furthermore, 19<sup>th</sup> century ushered in the first wave of feminism that raised awareness for women suffrage and property rights.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In addition, this “old wave” unravelled the women's struggle for sexual and reproductive health (contraception and abortion), welfare rights, protective legislation and their legal identities.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Therefore, merging women's civil, political, and private rights- women's autonomy over political participation and their bodies. The following section shall discuss theories of feminism.

## **THEORIES OF FEMINISM**

Different interests of feminism abound; the arduous task lies in striking a balance between rights and responsibilities.<sup>xxxv</sup> The varying degrees of women's interests echo the diversity in

women's aspirations, goals, contexts and idiosyncrasies. Perhaps this explains why feminism is a one-size-fits-all approach, and the focal point is women empowerment.

The feminist movement is derived from liberal feminism, marxist/socialist feminism and Radical feminism. As mentioned earlier, some commentators have categorised feminism into three waves: first-wave feminism, second-wave feminism, and third-wave feminism. The modern wave of feminism seems to lack precision; it is versatile. The following section will expand on these theories.

### ***Liberal Feminism***

Liberal feminism is also known as mainstream feminism. This theory of feminism is rooted in the human rights framework context.<sup>xxxvi</sup> It emphasises the equality of both genders via equal opportunities and freedom. This theory also posits that women's ability to attain their equality is best supported through their actions and choices by deconstructing the segregation of women.

According to Gerson, liberal feminism seeks the ability to attain autonomous personhood through the social condition.<sup>xxxvii</sup> It may be inferred that the liberation of women is directly dependent on social conditions. These conditions include but are not limited to voting rights, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, which means that the women as a unit need to enjoy social conditions to attain equality with men. The women as an isolated unit, is considered inferior to the men. This categorisation is derived from the binary system- word and opposite, positive and negative. For instance, good or bad; life or death.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The rationale behind this theory is to attain equal political, legal and social rights for women in all public institutions.<sup>xxxix</sup> Thus, the main objective of feminism is equality of access to opportunities.<sup>xl</sup> Hence, reduced opportunities is a reflection of the society's constraints.

Wollstonecraft and Stuart Mill argue for individuality and rationality. This binary opposition is reflected in the early stages of children's perception—the male-female pole. The male is perceived as positive, substantial, and superior, while the female is identified as lacking.<sup>xli</sup> In addition, the male is one while the female is zero, which brews the substantial one and the insignificant other.

In her book, *The Feminist Mystique*, Friedan examines the struggles of the white American middle-class women who were housewives (stay at home moms) and purchasers in the 1950s.

These women were unemployed yet subsumed in household chores.<sup>xliii</sup> Friedan coined the term “problem with no name” based on the survey and article on housewives' experiences and concerns in America. As a result, she co-founded an organisation known as National Organisation for Women (NOW). This group campaigned for women's equal rights, education, family and law. One of the aims was to empower women to access the labour force via education.<sup>xliii</sup> Subsequently, in her other book, titled *The Second Stage*, Friedan sought to balance women's roles as mothers and maintain accomplished jobs.<sup>xliv</sup> Balancing it shines a light on respecting differences, sameness and recognising subjectivity, a premise that one function does not impede the other. It is noteworthy that this feminist movement paved the way for gender politics in achieving the emancipation of women.

According to Mill, liberalism and gender are connected. He argues that women subordination to men offsets the principle of equality and egalitarianism. Rather, women should be treated as subjects because they are entitled to individual rights and the dignity of the human person.<sup>xlv</sup> Thus the initial state espouses a hierarchy of gender-subject and object. Therefore, one can infer that liberal feminism sought to empower women through participation in society by building on the principle of equality, individuality and non-discrimination.

However, there is a visible gap in the theory of liberal feminism. This theory does not take account of women's bodies, emotions and the power structures that regulate them.<sup>xlvi</sup> Patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy are embedded in the system that exerts influence on every aspect of their interaction with the system.<sup>xlvii</sup> Deconstructing these factors is a pedal for an inclusive society. Being the first theory of feminism, liberal feminism paved the way for the emergence of more theories.

### ***Socialist feminism***

Also known as Marxist feminism, socialist feminism propounds that class entrenches patriarchy, leading to oppression.<sup>xlviii</sup> Marxist theory enunciates that class relations regulate feudal, capitalist and slave-owning means of production.<sup>xlix</sup> Class is a social construct that divides people into groups according to their economic prowess. Therefore, class inadvertently oppresses economically disadvantaged people through patriarchy and capitalism.

Capitalism subjects women to the end of labour as workers with lower positions. Women in paid employment are constrained within patriarchal capitalism due to the latter's benefits, reinforcing economic dependence.<sup>l</sup> Thus, patriarchy, capitalism and sexism are intertwined in

suppressing women.<sup>li</sup>Marx and Engels's system developed the class system, promoting women's economic subordination by enforcing the sexual division of labour between men and women.<sup>lii</sup>Nevertheless, the classic Marxist theory fails to consider women's traditional roles like reproduction, child upbringing, and unpaid care work as labour productivity because these roles do not add value to the system.<sup>liii</sup>These unaccounted roles creates an imbalance in women's productivity.

Firestone and Mitchell assert that classic Marxism ignores women reproductive roles.<sup>liv</sup>Furthermore, Mitchell contends that women's inferior status to men is traceable to consistent traditional alterations in production.<sup>lv</sup>Finally, she argues that rectifying these connected contents of reproduction, production, sexuality, and socialisation of children would relax women's subservience.<sup>lvi</sup>Therefore, she suggests the overhauling of these contents to address women's subordination. However, it is not certain if these contents can be overhauled, given their intrinsic structures in the system.

Although patriarchy and capitalism are connected, their operation process is dissimilar. Patriarchy has been in existence to exert men's control over women and children's labour.<sup>lvii</sup>With this system emerged the hierarchy in organisations.<sup>lviii</sup>This assertion does not displace the role of patriarchy in the cultural subjugation of women. Capitalism enforces patriarchy by fostering economic benefits and labour relations via gendered polarisation.

In sum, as explained by Hartmann, the lengthened interplay between patriarchy and capitalism precipitates the continued lower status of women in the labour force.<sup>lix</sup>Interestingly, there seem to be changes in this ladder. It might not be a major shift or transformation, but a few adjustments are better than stagnancy. A few women hold top positions as there is progress in women's role in the labour force. More sensitisation and enlightenment will ensure social mobility for women in an enabling environment.

### ***Radical Feminism***

At the heart of radical feminism is the recognition and respect for women's bodies. It looks beyond liberal feminism and social feminists' conception of women as social beings. Instead, it seeks to include women's personal life as well as their physical bodies in feminism. While liberal feminism has emphasised on civil and political rights of women, Radical feminism engages the mind and body of women, which explains the phrase, "personal is political".<sup>lx</sup>

The theory of radical feminism seeks to eliminate male supremacy in all social and economic contexts. Hence, radical feminism posits a balance by reordering society. According to this theory, society is patriarchal in which men dominate and oppress women. This theory aims to end male privilege and sex distinction: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.<sup>lxi</sup> Biological differences, not economics enabled patriarchy and sexism.<sup>lxii</sup> These physical traits established a dichotomy that entrenched a “sexual class system”.<sup>lxiii</sup> However, they contended that the best response to women subordination is for them to quit reproduction.<sup>lxiv</sup> Firestone's analysis fails to resolve the contradiction between the continuity of the human race and seizing the means of reproduction. Suppose women stop the means of reproduction; inadvertently, human beings would become endangered or go into extinction given that artificially generated reproduction methods can not sufficiently replenish the earth. Thus, Firestones' recommendation is extreme and lacks pragmatism. Similarly, Ortner, in response to the women subordination, posits that women's reproductive and child-rearing practices should be revolutionised to address women's persistent devaluing and the metaphorical norm of nature and women's bodies.<sup>lxv</sup> She also suggested that the dual participation of men and women in politics and the labour force would deconstruct this imbalance.<sup>lxvi</sup>

Furthermore, radical feminism does not contest the equality between men and women. Rather, it addresses women's subordination to men as well as repression.<sup>lxvii</sup> With this oppression, men objectify women and exploit their sexuality for their satisfaction. This objectification may lead to sexual violence against women. MacKinnon compares the sexual objectification of women to the simple lexical structure (subject, verb, object). As explained by MacKinnon: “Man fucks woman”: subject, verb, subject.<sup>lxviii</sup> This structure espouses the superior-subordinate relationship or interaction between both genders as well as the devaluation and shaming of women through intercourse.

Mackinnon and Wollstonecraft draw on women's sexuality but with differing perspectives. Wollstonecraft argues for women's right to sexual autonomy and mutual pleasure.<sup>lxix</sup> Her opinion on *The wrongs of a woman* focuses on women exercising discretion in sexual relationships instead of participating in sexual relations solely on a sense of duty.<sup>lxx</sup> Wollstonecraft's analysis beckons an empowered woman with the ability to desire and choose to copulate with the husband as an individual rather than the man's property or baby-making machine.

On the hand, Mackinnon takes a different dimension on feminism. She deviates from the lens of sameness and differences but contends that gender is a social hierarchy that upholds inequality of power between men and women.<sup>lxxi</sup> This gender stratification polarises male dominance against female stratification as power structures. MacKinnon addresses women's repression by espousing women's rights and analysing the impact of sexual abuse, exploitation, rape, sexual harassment, trafficking, prostitution, and pornography within the feminist discourse.<sup>lxxii</sup> She is known to criticise the philosophical foundations of liberal feminism and champion the importance of individual choice.

Building on women and men biological differences, Shulamith contends that these distinctions directly promote sexism.<sup>lxxiii</sup> She concludes that biological differences are the root of gender conflict and class conflict as opposed to socialist/Marxist feminism, which argues that social strata, class and race are the main instruments of division.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

As the driving force behind the marginalisation of women, patriarchy portrays women as “other” in relation to the men, who are “the subject” and “the absolute”<sup>lxxv</sup> as such men benefit from male dominance through women's oppression. This dichotomy accentuates the “othering” of women hinged on the lack of identity, subsequently subsumed under men.

Moreover, radical feminist has also asserted the influence of male dominance in pornography, prostitution, and women's sexual objectification in general.<sup>lxxvi</sup> They argue that harm happens to women during pornography and social harm from the consumption of pornography.<sup>lxxvii</sup> They also assert coercion and poverty lead women into prostitution. Some women may be indirectly pressured into pornography because of poverty and the economic downturn in society. Arguably, there is a thin line between pornography and prostitution because both encourage selling sex within different but similar ambiances. Pornography and prostitution do not liberate women sexually. Instead, these channels reinforce the exploitation of women as sexual objects.

For instance, in one of its articles, *Jobless, Selling Nudes Online and Still Struggling*,<sup>lxxviii</sup> the New York Times recounts women's experiences who were indirectly compelled to create *Onlyfans* account and sell their explicit pictures online because of loss of jobs. The COVID Pandemic led to retrenchment, particularly affecting women. Reportedly, the pandemic impacted the website's popularity as there was an upsurge in the number of content creators and users of the website. Records reveal an exponential increase from 120,000 content creators

to one million content creators.<sup>lxxxix</sup> According to the article, "The pandemic has taken a particularly devastating toll on women and mothers, wiping out parts of the economy where women dominate retail businesses, restaurants and healthcare."<sup>lxxx</sup> Evidence suggests disproportionate earnings amongst the content creators on this adult website, as supply becomes more than demands.<sup>lxxxii</sup> The skyrocketing numbers of content creators on the *Onlyfans* website, especially during the pandemic, reveal the influence of harsh economic conditions on women and their diversions into adult entertainment to make ends meet. It is noteworthy that some of the women on this website are employed but still chose to tow this path in order to complement the meagre amount they make at work.

Arguably, dwindling economic conditions triggered some women to join adult websites for survival and complementary jobs. Radical feminism argues that such conditions indirectly exploit the vulnerability of women. As exhibited in prostitution and pornography, male dominance over women might find recourse in this situation that boils down to the use of pornography as a weapon to subjugate women and objectify their bodies.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

Arguably, moral perceptions and threshold might overtly or remotely be one of the determinants for some women's participation or refrain from selling nudes. Still, we cannot rule out the influence of economic meltdown, financial hardships, and its attendant implications on this issue.

In this vein, Dworkin and MacKinnon contend for the promulgation of pornography into civil offences.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> If pornography is sanctioned, this approach might limit sexual exploitation. However, it equally raises the question of freedom to make choices—choices are made provided it does not violate the age of consent. Hence, the consenting adult's discretion to participate in pornography or prostitution<sup>9</sup> might be criticised morally. Nevertheless, it becomes a grey area with consent, choice and legality.

Furthermore, the theory of radical feminism also highlights the rationale and implications of sexual and reproductive health like abortion and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). These are bodily structures that are linked to morals and cultural perspectives. The former intersects with the morality and health of the woman, while the latter is considered gender-based violence. FGM is a cultural practice that clashes with objective universalism.

Therefore, radical feminism protects the personal lives of women, which the early theories of feminism discountenanced. It also reveals the intersection between the private and public lives of women within society.

### ***Cultural /relational feminism***

This theory contends that the “difference” concept, which distinguishes men from women, should not be ignored.<sup>lxxxiv</sup>Female voices should not be relegated for male voices. Using the Kantian philosophy women's lives are not autonomous rather it is governed by some external factors like moral duties and developmental aspects. Each phase becomes relative, with an indispensable connection to women. As women evolve, they experience different stages of life such as puberty, aging, intercourse, pregnancy, breastfeeding and caring responsibilities.<sup>lxxxv</sup> Thus, there is a degree of interdependence between both genders, contrary to the idea of a distinct form, women’s roles are multifaceted and intertwined with the particular stage of life. These different stages weigh heavily on the choices they make and vice-versa.

Now that this section has examined relational feminism, the following area shall analyse impact of postmodern feminism.

## **POSTMODERN FEMINISM**

The late 1980s and 1990s ushered in the emergence of another approach to feminism.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Initially, it was referred to as “anti-feminism”.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> However, it is known to explore the relationship of feminism with postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Given these philosophies and how it interacts with feminism, this holistic approach also explores the “third world” and “non-western feminism”. It questions the sheltered thoughts on feminism. With postmodern feminism, feminism becomes fragmented. However, there are controversies as to whether postmodern feminism aligns with other theories of feminism because it points out the flaws inherent in liberal and socialist/Marxist feminism.

In addition, it opposes the classification of women as “other.” “Othering” is a similar connotation present in post-colonialism.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Both women and the colonised subjects narrate the social exclusion function inherent in oppression and subjugation politics.<sup>xc</sup> Looking through the lens of subjectivity and individualism, postmodern feminism seeks to deconstruct patriarchy and the universal classification of women experiences. Women experiences differ;

it would be insensitive to evaluate the experience of a group of women as representative of other women.

There is a shift from enlightenment epistemology by displacing essentialism and gender difference privileges.<sup>xcvi</sup> Its critique challenges the previous philosophical foundations of the first, second and later waves of feminism. Instead, postmodern feminism assesses feminism through a pragmatic and empirical lens by not only considering gender as the ultimate form of social identity but taking cognisance of ethnicity, class, age, race, and sexual orientation.<sup>xcvii</sup> Postmodern feminism explores differences in black women's situation and the role of race in the treatment of black women, especially in areas like education, health service and the labour force.<sup>xcviii</sup> It also examines how the media represents black women based on race.<sup>xcix</sup> Therefore, postmodern feminism challenges the unilateral thinking of liberal feminism. It transcends every area that influences women.<sup>xcv</sup>

The main critique of postmodern feminism is that it is too abstract and academic.<sup>xcvi</sup> It has been described as “too remote and politically effective”.<sup>xcvii</sup> Apparently, postmodern feminism reveals a paradox that could frustrate the intention of the feminist movement if not cautiously handled—a one size fits all. Arguably, one could submit that the theory of postmodernism mirrors a contradictory stance in the feminism discourse.

## **GENDER ROLES**

*“From the cradle, an artificial distinction between the sexes is created and fostered. Boys are taught self-reliance and self-control; girls are taught to lay their natural talents away like a holiday tablecloth.”<sup>xcviii</sup>*

Sex is a natural phenomenon; a biological distinction inherent in our physical characteristics. The sexual organs are the primary determinant of one's sex. However, there are situations in which an individual may possess both organs—intersex (hermaphrodite). In such a condition, depending on the functioning organ, the individual may choose their identity. It is also noteworthy that the individual has the discretion to select their identity regardless of the functional organ. The choice becomes the overriding factor.

We should bear in mind that no evidence supports sex as a conduit for social conditioning. Sex does not dictate a blueprint or model for a particular way of life. Interestingly, sex has been constructed into gender and divaricated into norms and roles with opposing connotations. The gender inference supposes a marked difference between male and female roles as well as what society expects of each gender. From birth, the male is assigned the colour blue while the female is assigned pink. This colour trails them from the baby shower, nursery decoration and cloth design into adulthood. Social conditioning dictates gender dispositions and roles. Any variation from these societal expectations may be construed as abnormal or aberrant. Gender roles are a social construct that has become the norm in society. Individuals are raised through socialisation from infancy until adulthood. The process of socialisation strengthens the polarisation of gender roles.

For instance, gender roles as social conditioning are why most women are responsible for unpaid care work. Arguably, women should be economically empowered via participation that restructures their marginalisation from the community—striking a balance between women's domestic care responsibilities and their contribution to the labour market.

So far, this part has briefly discussed gender roles. The following section will examine intersectional feminism.

## **INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM (BLACK FEMINISM)**

*"The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman."*<sup>xcix</sup>

Until the late 1980s, the concept of feminism was predominantly based on white women's narratives. Nevertheless, within a social reality, it is evident that a white woman's experience is different from a black woman's experience. The bifurcated classification does not displace patriarchy as a common denominator of gender inequality. However, it emphasises on unique traits and challenges of black women because of their historical background.

Black feminism arose from the black feminist movement. It explores the interrelations between race, gender, sex, political and economic factors.<sup>c</sup>Using this integrated approach, one can

examine how black women's existence, culture, and experience shape their emancipation and struggle in a predominantly white society.<sup>ci</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw invented the concept of “intersectionality” to address the relegation of black women within the discourse of white feminists.<sup>cii</sup> The interaction between different factors affects black women disproportionately. Sex/gender stratification promotes discriminatory practices against women; in the same way, overlapping factors affect women.

Initially, the feminist discourse was dominated by white women who could not relate to the intricacies of the politics of white supremacy, class struggle, racism and the capitalist system.<sup>ciii</sup> These “privileged” white women's lived experience was used as a metric to generalise the remaining women (other races) in the group.<sup>civ</sup> It is generally believed that modern feminism collectivises women struggle; “all women are oppressed”.<sup>cv</sup> While this statement is true, unfortunately, it is an oversimplified claim because it obliterates the impact of race, religion, sexism, and class discrimination on black women's experiences.<sup>cvi</sup> These factors are inexhaustible; some include ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, economic or social status, religion, age, immigrant status, place of birth, residency etc. Presumably, there is a significant disparity between the impression and ordeal of the bourgeois white women and the ordeal of the non-white women. Possibly, white supremacy's role in fostering racism might have triggered black feminism.

Moreover, difference and subjectivity are terms that shape the concept of feminism.<sup>cvii</sup> The term 'difference' in western feminism highlights women diversity as well as varied interests.<sup>cviii</sup> This difference delineates two connotations: the differences between men and women: women and men are seen as opposite identities-polarised identities. Interestingly the distinction between men and women does not end there. It goes beyond binary thinking.<sup>cix</sup> Difference also exists within the women category,<sup>cx</sup> Hence the *intersectional feminism*. This concept examines the interaction between the factors and their inequalities.<sup>cxii</sup> Addressing the factors and their resultant inequalities ensures a more inclusive classification of women-context and situations.

Nevertheless, Eagleton cautions that an inattentive reliance on differences could lead to commodification, resulting in the tokenism of black women and lesbians.<sup>cxiii</sup> In addition, she noted that stress on a distinction within the women category might disintegrate “common identity” as “we women”, which is significant for the emancipation of women and the political movement of feminism.<sup>cxiii</sup> In comparison, the concept of differences highlights the shared

grievance of 'othering' among women, -a common good. The collectivisation of concerns unites women, but it might also marginalise some women with differing or overlapping circumstances within the group.

Furthermore, "subjectivity" as the second constituent of feminism proposes equality based on particularism. Females are legal people like their male counterparts. Nonetheless, biologically women are different from men; depending on the situation, one of the genders will inadvertently possess an unfair advantage. Therefore, their bodies, in particular, should be considered subjectively as the physical body relates to gender, class, race, and age.<sup>cxiv</sup> Furthermore, it takes cognisance of the unique features of women, the impact of these characteristics on their livelihood and interaction in the community. A classic example is the dynamic nature of being a girl child, wife and mother. Each of these stages propels different societal expectations and cultural limitations on their capabilities.

The section that follows will critically analyse that cultural relativism and discriminatory norms hinder women emancipation in African countries. Unfortunately, due to research limitations, the analysis will be restricted to one African country, Nigeria.

## **FEMINISM WITHIN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT**

As mentioned earlier, the evolution of human rights accentuated a passive female gender riddled with marginalisation and lack of identity, which was mirrored in legal instruments and laws, referred to 'the man', a non-inclusive nomenclature. Interestingly, both domestic and treaties have used the same human rights instruments to reconstruct the non-inclusive notion of these frameworks. The politics of human rights dichotomise the western world and the third world country because of the unequal contribution of the latter to the evolution and development of human rights. Such power relations determine the structures and universal threshold. As a result, the dominant interests become legitimate.<sup>cxv</sup>

Most third-world countries struggle with recognising gender equality because of the cultural barriers that limit women's emancipation. Evidence suggests that some traditions and norms which have stood the test of time contradict the exercise of women's rights, thereby sabotaging their sense of belonging in society. This shows the limitations of using the human rights approach to empower women, especially in a conservative society. The dilemma demonstrates

a paradoxical relationship between the status of women in the past and their identity in contemporary society. Yet, the Western world seems to align with the progressive school of thought on women rights and empowerment for each part.

The universalism of human rights reinforces a western narrative that displaces a non-western approach. There is a disconnect between predominantly western values and the norms firmly rooted in some conservative societies- A conflict with the cultural values and norms that bifurcates the extent to which a third-world country can assimilate gender equality and women empowerment. Cultures, traditions and norms are embedded in the system. An attempt to demystify the status quo could be challenging, perhaps impossible. How do we adjust the cultural values/norms to accommodate gender equality? Are the people and custodians of these norms willing to accept and incorporate them? This analysis explains the need to search within.

Some women in third world countries cannot relate to western feminism because the feminist movement was a product of educated middle-class women who were described as being 'self-centred and elitist'.<sup>cxvi</sup> It is believed that middle-class women were too 'privileged' to comprehend and assert the conditions of the lower class women.<sup>cxvii</sup> While this assertion does not reflect the realities of some educated African women, the situation and context of western feminism deviate from what is applicable in third-world countries. To look at African feminism mainly through the lens of western feminism translates to denying the discernible factors which impact gender struggle in African countries. At the same time, there is a connection between these different schools of thought on feminism, race, culture, and idiosyncrasy impact feminism in third world countries.

Looking at feminism through the lens of culture posits a relativist approach to feminism as opposed to the inclination to compel non-western women to follow the western construct of feminism religiously.<sup>cxviii</sup> As such, the notion of western feminism is not used as a common ground for feminism. However, there is one common denominator-inequality, discrimination and marginalisation.

Having examined the role of culture and normative structures in women emancipation, it is necessary to assess the status of women in the precolonial and colonial era to shed light into the visibility and participation of women in society.

### *The advent of feminism in Nigeria*

This section shall discuss the development of feminism in Nigeria via the lens of cultural practices. It argues that although the evolution of western feminism brought our attention to women rights and emancipation, western feminism slightly differs from feminism applicable in Nigeria because of the different context of each situation. Building on diverse factors as enunciated by intersectional feminism, one would note a disparity in the development of feminism in the western world and Nigeria. The objective is the same, but there are different pathways. Arguably, some of our cultural practices still hinder the empowerment and emancipation of women in Nigeria.

Be that as it may, one may argue that the modern feminist movement is responsible for the liberation of women politically, economically and socially to some extent. However, a lot still needs to be done for women emancipation, especially within the African context.

Several western works of literature polarise the African women narratives into two personalities. The silent, repressed, passive and non-assertive women,<sup>cxix</sup> at the other end, is the second narrative describing African women as independent, liberated and unconventional individuals.<sup>cxx</sup> In Mohanty's words, the third world woman is “sexually constrained” “ignorant” “uneducated”, “domesticated”, “religious”, “victimised”.<sup>cxixi</sup> This narrative is from the description of a western woman with colonial connotations. However, it is noteworthy that these descriptions might be restricted to some rural women in indigenous African communities, thus, excluding the characteristics of urban or “exposed” women in Africa.

The western narratives do not fully reflect the realities of some African women. For example, third world women were actively involved in politics, especially the Yoruba tribes and some parts of Igbo tribes. Feminist movements in Nigeria is slightly different, although it shares similar characteristics with African-American women's experiences. Nevertheless, the context is different.

For instance, in Nigeria, Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Mary Ekpo, Hajiya Gambo Sawaba, Kudi Abiola, amongst others, were vibrant and active women who defied all odds to fight for independence, democracy and women inclusion. Thus, their representation contradicts Mohanty's adjectives. Moreover, a cursory look at the precolonial era shows that women in

some tribes actively participated in societal functions, politics, and economic growth. As described:

*“We passed several people, principally women, heavily laden with cloth, plantains, and a paste made from pounded Indian corn, wrapped in leaves called accasson, going to market...”<sup>cxxii</sup>*

*“The King of Eyeo's wives are to be found in every place trading for him, and like other women of the common class, carrying large loads on their heads from town to town....The top of the hill was covered with women grinding corn. They make round boles in the face of the rock in which they crush the grain with a small stone in the hand. This mount may be called a large corn mill.”<sup>cxxiii</sup>*

From Clapperton's journal, one may infer that women were actively involved in marketing and trade in the earlier times. Interestingly, despite their social strata, the king's wives also participated in commercial activities by representing their husbands. They supported and complemented the king's trading activities. Hence, the chronicle portrayed the women as industrious, economically driven and active members of society. In addition, they had a charged public life. It is worthy of mention that the king being referred to was a Yoruba king of Katunga. Katunga was the ancient reference for old Oyo.<sup>cxxiv</sup> The precolonial Yoruba societies operated a centralised government chaired by an active and powerful King, women were titleholders of designated and prestigious positions like Iyalode; Yoruba women participated in political and commercial activities.

The precolonial Igbo political system consisted of the Eze (King) and the Council of chiefs. The Eze cannot make a decision independently. His decisions are subject to the ratification of the Council of Chiefs. Therefore the Council of Chiefs wields the power to veto the decision.- they have the final say. Regarding the extent of women's participation in the political system, Okonjo contends that women participated in political activities by establishing their associations. The early Igbo society operated based on the dual sex political system.<sup>cxxv</sup> The dual sex political system appropriated each sex group, male and female, to manage their affairs.<sup>cxxvi</sup> A classic example is the Otu Umuada and the Otu Alutaradi. The former included both married and unmarried women, divorced, widowed, daughters of the lineage of a particular community. The latter consists of wives married to men in the village.<sup>cxxvii</sup> They

exercised autonomy in their meetings, kinship sets, market associations, and instruments like protests, strikes, and boycotts to influence decisions.<sup>cxxviii</sup> Their main activity was to act as peer pressure groups to impact settlement of disputes, enforce or negate decisions and protect the customs and traditions.<sup>cxxix</sup> However, there are limitations to the extent of their influence on some political issues. It is noted that the customs/traditions precluded women from being members of the Council of Chiefs. The Queen had no right to intervene in court matters; she could not influence the proposed decisions of the Eze, nor the vetoed decision by the Council of Chiefs. Therefore, in the Igbo precolonial era, although women exercised political powers, these political powers were limited. Some political issues were exclusively within the purview of the Kings and council of chiefs.<sup>cxxx</sup> Thus, there existed a connotation of discriminatory norms and customs against women. It was not that women were entirely able to participate in politics or influence every significant matter. Hence, the distribution of powers in the dual-sex political system was imbalanced.

It is noteworthy that women also held high titles and were very visible in societies. They were actively involved in communal, commercial, and political activities.<sup>cxxxi</sup> However, with the advent of colonialism, the introduction of warrant chiefs as middlemen between the colonial masters and the people disrupted the political system by creating a hierarchy and dichotomy between men and women.<sup>cxxxii</sup>

In the precolonial Igbo indigenous community, a man's social status (largess of his wealth) was judged based on his number of wives. He then, in turn, used them for farming, which increased his economic prowess. Arguably, men marrying many wives to use them for farming and monetary rewards could be considered the commodification of women.

In addition, the Igbo custom and tradition frowns at women inheritance. It is reasoned that once a woman gets married, her ties and individuality transfer to the husband—an Igbo man's property who dies intestate transfers to the male child(ren). A system of primogeniture.

In terms of coronation, when a king passes, the Yoruba rule allows the appointment of a female or younger male in an acting position pending the coronation of a new substantive king. Such females or younger males must be royalty. An interim replacement (*Adele*) rationale is to forestall the temp from converting the throne/crown. In some Igbo communities, there is no provision for a female temp King. Once the king passes, there is a new crown prince to be ordained.<sup>cxxxiii</sup> Interestingly, there was an exception, in history and up till date, there had been

one female king, Ahebi Ugbabe. Her story explores the gradual but steady rise of a lower class female to the only female king in Igbo history.

However, gendered identity formation was constructed as “male daughter” and “female husband.”<sup>cxxxiv</sup> The Igbos curated this specific gendered system to guarantee fluidity of gender and protect the family name in the absence of male child. With this approach, the lineage is protected from going into extinction—a defence mechanism for discriminatory norms. Sudaska contends that some women complemented men roles in the precolonial indigenous African context rather than the general misconception of female’s roles being subordinate to men’s. She described it as “neutral complementarity”.<sup>cxxxv</sup>

### ***Early Feminist Movements***

Over the years, the feminist movement has responded to under-representation/participation of women in politics. A cursory look at Nigerian history reveals that the feminism movement in Nigeria started as far back as the early 1900s. The Egba women revolt evidences the feminism movement in Nigeria. A revolution against taxes—Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti led the revolt. The development in political and economic changes under the Egba United Government (EUG) resulted in an increment in income for men and women.<sup>cxxxvi</sup> This development resulted from the proliferation in the trade of commodities like cocoa, palm kernels and kolanuts.<sup>cxxxvii</sup> In order to foster transportation and uninterrupted trade of these commodities. Subsequently, in 1905, the Order of Council authorised forced labour for road construction. A fine of £5 or three-month imprisonment with hard labour was the punishment for refusal.<sup>cxxxviii</sup>

In that era, the enforcement taxes were to ensure moral values, dissuade polygamy, and persuade single women to get married.<sup>cxxxix</sup> Despite that woman in Abeokuta were actively involved in the economy; trading and paying of taxes. They paid taxes independently of men. They had concerns about being exploited for excessive taxes, court fines and forced labour.<sup>cxl</sup> They were taxed directly and indirectly. Some women protested against the oppressive tax collection, questioned the tax structure's fairness and agitated for their recognition and inclusion in economic and political affairs.<sup>cxli</sup> This protest took place at the Alake of Egba's palace. In response to this, temporary measures were put in place to address their concerns. Such measures included recognition and participation of women in the local council, the king's resignation, restructure of the sole native system, revocation of a flat tax on women.<sup>cxlii</sup> The period of the colonial era in Abeokuta marginalised women, especially in their participation in

politics. Women contributed towards economic development through trade and payment of taxes. However, women were excluded from politics. It is worthy of mention that the situation was different in the precolonial era.

Similarly, the Aba women riot, a movement tactically planned and implemented by women to protest and seek redress against social, political, economic oppression embedded in the colonial administration. This was considered a revolution for the systemic and structural inequalities in British Nigeria.<sup>cxliii</sup> While most writers noted that this riot was anti-colonial, this riot/rebellion also addressed gender inequalities deep-seated in British Nigeria.

While there are variations between both Western and African contexts, it is worth mentioning that feminism within these two contexts is not irreconcilable. For example, some commentators believe in demystifying patriarchy and gender inequality; however, they refrain from the connotation of feminism.<sup>cxliv</sup>

Evidently, feminism as a western construct does not recognise the struggles of the female gender within the African context. This presupposes a disparity between what is applicable within both continents and jurisdictions. While this is agreeable, it is worth mentioning that feminism within these two contexts is not irreconcilable. The cross-cultural perspectives of gender and class provide an insight into the themes of identity, poverty, colonialism, cultural difference, patriarchy, religion, racism and classism. Women's liberation and social mobility may challenge the implications of the interplay of the themes.

A cursory look at this trajectory demonstrates discriminatory practices and inequality in the treatment of women. This position is still embedded in the system regardless of the proliferation of international legal frameworks, conventions, and treaties promoting women's rights and empowerment. Some customs and religious tenets dictate who gets what, the quantity and the value of the property/inheritance. As mentioned earlier, the cultural and religious differences within the country mirror the discrepancies in women's inheritance and property rights. While some regions are more accommodating to women's property rights, some frown at it. The position of the woman (as a descendant) transcends as a wife(widow) and daughter (legitimate and illegitimate). Native laws and customs on the rules of succession influences the dynamics of the female position within the family context.

This section contends that colonialism reinforced the marginalisation of women as well as discriminatory practices against women in Nigeria. Before the advent of colonialism and to date, it is evident that some cultural practices, traditions and norms institute discriminatory practices against women. Cultural relativism and norms disproportionately affect women.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that there is a marked difference between western and African feminism. Nevertheless, there are common denominators. Feminism may also be construed as a tool of identity politics used in addressing the suppression of the female gender. In Africa, some women actively participated in political and social affairs while maintaining their roles within family units. It seems colonialism overrode the status quo, thereby denigrating women's complementary roles to a lesser stance. Interestingly, feminist movements in Africa have accentuated the quest for gender equality.

Traditionally, patriarchy is the foundation of the family unit, it inadvertently flows into the societal structures and gradually became entrenched into the system. It becomes challenging to address the impact of patriarchy especially in Africa, given cultural barriers. It is important to note that patriarchy traverses both positive and negative corollaries. Dismally, the strains of patriarchy outweigh its benefits.

Postmodernism leaves a lot to wonder on the boundaries of feminism. Be that as it may, feminism remains a one size fits all, promoting social inclusion and eliminating gender bias is essential for our laws and policies, which addresses the systems by reviewing the validity and legitimacy of discriminatory customary laws and cultural practices. Therefore, using intersectional approach and relational feminism, we can promote women visibility and inclusion. However, we are cognisant that women empowerment cannot be addressed in isolation. Instead, we should recognise and integrate other overlapping factors. Summarily, feminism as a channel for gender equality remains a complex issue that requires a progressive and resilient strategy.

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