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QUESTION: Is gender relations changing in the 21st century? What are the areas of change and the factors driving

**Gender** is a state of being a male or female. In most cases, it’s typically defined with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological differences. Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) defines it as ‘relations between men and women, both perceptual and material’ It is not determined biologically as a result of sexual characteristics of either women or men but is constructed socially. It is a central organizing principle of societies and often governs the processes of production and reproduction, consumption and distribution’ (FAO, 1997). Despite all the above definitions, Gender is often misunderstood as being the promotion of women. It therefore implies in the above definitions that the relationship between men and women, their roles and responsibilities, control and access to resources, involvement in labour market, interests and needs. Looking at the history, gender was understood differently according to different cultures and societies by specific roles and responsibilities which are often conditioned by household structures through access to resources and control, traditional believes and norms. Society in many occasions have set standard for women that limit them from other roles and responsibilities. Their most common image is that they are very passive and always try to avoid conflicts despite provocative acts of men in any situation. History has it that men have been the dominant sex in roles and responsibilities at all levels, social, political, economic and religious. The dominance doesn’t mean that women have no influence or didn’t play an important role and responsibility in history. This depended on culture to culture in different ethnic groups. Given example of Christian religion where they derive their gender roles and responsibilities of man and women from Historical Bible (Ephesians 5:22-33); wives submit to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the Church, His body and is Himself its Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word. While in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35; the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Again 1 Corinthians 11:3-10; But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered, dishonours his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a wife will not cover her head, and then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. For man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. In Genesis 3:16; To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing, in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you.” The above Biblical quotes in Christian religion explain gender roles and responsibilities that recognise male gender as a head over a female.

The traditional definition of man would be sole provider and protector of the family while a woman has domestic duties and has been for years till recently that this concept has taken shape by involving a woman. Both perform the same duties. Therefore sex highlights biological determinants thus remain unchangeable difference between male and female. Their relations are the ways which culture or society recognises their roles, rights, responsibilities and identities in relation to one another.

In the current generation of 21st Century, gender is often misunderstood as promotion of women who have taken more active role in different sectors and careers despite some traditions still hold women inferior in their society like numerous cases reported in Indian cultures women still come from traditional strict households, they have accepted their roles and feel comfortable in their decisions or lack thereof. Feminist movement gained momentum in the 1960’s and 70’s in the United States together with other Human Right groups that advocated for equal rights among all genders in recent centuries after observing women gender being domesticated by cultural norms, religious believes, traditional marginalisation yet for the few women who were out speaking role models showed great hope. Gender roles in communities changed lately whereby women now play equal role as men in owning lead large companies, very active in their families and communities, own personal businesses, manage big organisations, head political groups, earn higher academic degrees from all sectors equal to men, to mention but few as compared to early centuries. Both genders actively attend sporting events; go to bars and all other outdoor activities that were dominated by men alone. The 21st century demonstrates equal participation of both genders in different activities as compared to early centuries that kept women behind by being responsible for domestic chores. Gender being a central organising principle of society in social construction which governs the process of production, reproduction where consumption and distribution are elements in that setting, gender has remained a critical and major focus of society despite equal rights. Young genders both males and females are groomed up with knowledge of man being head of family. Religions across all denominations still hold believe of man being a superior being from woman gender. This naturally has left a gap between the two genders where by man still carries weight of being the head of the household though women headed families also perform equal roles but the family still remains incomplete without a man due to title, security, and other duties that women can’t perform.

**a. Marriage Proposals**

Marriage proposal in early centuries, men typically propose to women which was traditionally their role but in the 21st Century, women are stepping up by proposing to men as they get down on their knees. They have boldly come out elaborating men initiative proposals that can’t wait any longer for men to propose. Sometimes cultures term them as taboo breakers who boldly ask their future husbands to be hand in marriage. Men traditionally take head the process of proposing for marriage but this has changed in the 21st century where women now take bold action in dating and propose for marriage. This has left some traditional cultures thinking of women proposing as prostitutes desperate for marriage for example in my Iteso Culture, men take lead in proposing for marriage but when woman proposes, man shys off in fear of mockery and insults from fellow men or woman might be having HIV/AIDS as to why she boldly took men role of proposing for marriage and men prefer traditional marriage proposals or weddings. This happens in rural villages. However, todays women can propose for marriage. According to Chicago Tribune Article on marriage, more women are proposing than ever before. Some are giving men engagement rings.

**b. Dress code.**

Culturally dress code for men and women are defined by norms and expectations that relate to an understanding to tell difference between man and woman. The dress has the most direct contact with the human body and is therefore considered an integral part of the self. Garments influence and shape the appearance with significant impact on the construction of social identity (Tseelon 1989). Dress codes differ from culture to culture, religion to religion, tribe to tribe, some people use different dress code for different settings for different gender (marriage parties, church/mosque, offices, etc) for example the easiest identified dress code is men put on trousers and shirts while women put on skirts and blouses. However in the 21st century, the trousers are worn by both genders. Women dress on trousers, shirts and neck-ties like men while men as well take part in women dresses, skirts and blouse though not widely in public. This has been associated with gay proactive men. Meanwhile Brighton College in Britain is the first school to scrap uniform policy so all children can wear skirts or trousers (Mirror online by Steve Robson. January 20th 2016). In Islam women are required to wear modest forms of attire which covers from head to toe. Therefore all this depends on the traditional cultural environment either in rural or urban though in most urban settings adapt any kind of dress code. In other words the world of clothing is changing as new cultural influences meet technological innovations.

**c. Work**

Traditionally, both genders have different roles and responsibilities whereby men were considered responsible for taking care of the family financially; guiding the family while listening to their spouse though they make final decisions while women are to take care of children and household duties. During the 20th – 21st centuries, there strengthened Gender inequalities in all areas that are rooted in social structures but also in attitudes, said Professor Gillian Robinson, of the University of Ulster. Many arguments have shown imbalance at work. Others defend men to be more burdened while others argue that women are more burdened with daily chores such as laundry, cleaning, cooking food, shopping, looking after sick relatives and carrying our repairs while men only show significant contribution by other services of mending faulty items around the house. Both genders to some extent perform equal domestic duties though tradition still holds some societies.

**4. Gender challenges**

Gender has for the past experienced many challenges that have led to massive advocacy for equality with specific promotion of women to equate with men. This has always varied from country to country. Most activists in developing countries focus on more basic issues like combating violence against women and equal access to other services like education, health care, job opportunities etc which men have dominated. Below are some challenges faced by gender;

**Domestic violence**; the violent confrontation between genders in families, at work, in public etc which involves physical harm, sexual assault. More than 40% of domestic violence victims are male according to World Development Report, 2012 by MIT’s Esther Duflo. Victims of domestic violence are men dominating while number of women is always left battered and bruised. Men assaulted by their partners are in most cases ignored by police according to reports on equal treatment. However according to religious believe where man is treated as head of the family while woman is termed as weaker vessel quoted from holy bible 1 Peter 3:7 which states ‘Likewise you husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour to the wife as to the weaker vessel and as being heirs together of the grace of life that your prayers be not hindered.’ This is where gender challenge is embraced despite equality advocacy.

**Language**. There are some words used that are inherently biased against women. The words are arranged in such a way that they recognise men with superiority and exalted titles and women with more of lower positions. Phrases like Man and woman, Mr and Mrs, his and hers, boys and girls, brothers and sisters, husband and wife, King and Queen, curses like ‘mother fucker’, ‘mother scorn’ etc. The use of many terms shows gap between which can be described as biasness. This superiority titles create gap between genders which have always been understood between the two genders differently from each other despite efforts by feminists and human right groups to emerge the two understandings from both genders. In Living Language (p. 222) by George Keith and John Shuttle described gaps between the two genders as follows; women naturally talk more than men, are more polite, are indecisive/hesitant, complain and nag, ask more questions, support each other, cooperative whereas men gender swear more, insult each other frequently, are competitive in conversation, dominate conversation, speak with more authority, give more commands and do more of interruptions. Therefore language as a challenge in gender has element of stereotype against women gender more than men gender hence demarcates gap between the two genders.

**Decision making power**; Despite the fact that women hold positions of influence in both social, political, economic and religious levels, their decision making power still remains significantly lower than men gender. Decisions range from self-management to public management. At family levels (Married couples), money related decisions, women ability to visit friends and family, even managing own self still remains more powered by men gender. In Cultural settings, women are less powered to head tribes, clans or any cultural structure though Queen is recognised but the King has more decision making powers than Queen. For example in some other cultures like Bantu tribe in Uganda who have the King and the Queen. If the King dies, the Prince has to be crown as King. King Oyo of Toro in Uganda ascended to the throne in 1994 at the age of 3 years after his father’s death though his mother was alive. Therefore this limits women gender from having equal decision making powers than men gender in society.

**Inequality,** this has always been challenging in the sense that naturally genders are not equal in all forms. Physical, mentally, socially, economically, biologically despite demands and adjustments made towards equating both genders. Biblical description differentiates both genders in that God created man in His own image (Genesis 1:27) and then the God made woman from the rib he had taken out of the man and brought her to the man (Genesis 1:22). In many references, man gender and woman gender differ which has persistently left the gap in between despite bridging efforts of equality which has led gender being misunderstood as women empowerment though it’s the most affected gender. This discrimination and barriers prevent women gender from equating with men gender at all levels and through attempts on equity in both genders, it has in most cases exposed both genders to violence because socially accepted gender norms and values about what constitute acceptable behaviour and interpersonal relationships are instilled since childhood and to be more specific, girl child is raised to be more submissive while boys are raised to be more controlling, dominant and aggressive as per traditional gender roles of what they should be in their maturity age of becoming father and mother.

**Transgender,** this is a self-identity situation of not conformed unambiguously too conventional notion of man or woman gender. Persons are usually born with typical anatomies of man or woman but feels as though he/she has been born to unexpected organs. Person may be a man but feel like woman who in some cases seek to become woman by doing plastic surgeries in order to change organs. The change of organs is a complex process performed to alter phenotypic expression of the biological sex. This contributes to challenges which gender faces where stereotype takes its course that affects gender in our societies. In many occasions such people don’t come out of public for recognition though they have been recently categorised as gay or lesbians but still discriminated in many traditional societies.

**Gender imbalance,** this is the proportion of males to females across the world pauses challenges to gender. There are slightly more men than women in the world according to 015 estimates by United Nations. There are 101.8 men for every 100 women with the number of men rising gradually. This depends from country to country. In some countries, female population outnumber male population. In 2013, 49.59% of the global population were women. 81 countries had a majority of women, 37 countries had a majority of men, and 75 were within 0.5% of gender parity (United Nations Population Division's by David Bauer, 2014). The imbalance in gender is as a result of many factors that include wars, diseases, etc. It’s so challenging in gender in that the populated gender imposes pressure on the other in terms of violence, discrimination, abuse of rights etc hence having limited opportunities for equal right practices despite the fact that female gender have always fallen victims of abuse.

**Equality has increased divorce.** This analysis has proven fact that many families have broken up due to equality move between females and males. The move for equality was as a result of high prevalence of domestic violence and abuse on less active gender and in most cases affects female gender. However, due to introduction of equality in gender, this has increased the rate of divorce in marriages. For example, arguments about house work are not necessarily about labour but they are all about care, respect, believe together with ignorance of the meaning of equality. Tradition provides roles and responsibilities where man emerges as head of family and this makes male gender more autocratic leadership in family leaving female gender to be in charge domestic chores while male is to look up for the sustainability of family institution. Through this causes conflicts where man is expected to perform duties which tradition empowered female gender to be in charge hence divorce.

**Limited education and Exposure**, limited understanding and experience limits more opportunities because opportunities that seem to be good today may not be good tomorrow or in near future. More exposure will lead to new ways of thinking and new opportunities that are much better the ones now. In most cases both genders have limited understanding and exposure that limits them to a confined specific area of understanding that they feel comfortable. For example different genders that grow up in typical traditional cultural setting in rural areas on in specific believes that are strict with gender roles and responsibilities always find it hard to introduce new tradition of equality between the two genders. Like Moslem tradition and believe, Christians etc. Gender in this case finds challenging for the limited understanding to their tradition comfort zone of their culture.

**5. Solutions to Gender challenges**

In every problem that persists, there are always ways out of the problems. The world views gender in a more acceptable lens in the 21st century that there is a growing acknowledgement of diversity and differences where rights matter. This is evident in current government systems across the world through policy frameworks, economic incentives by corporations and programs by multinational organisations like United Nations. Below are some of the contributions towards re-enforcing other efforts in solving gender issues.

**Counter stereotypes through young generation**. It’s so challenging to erase gender stereotype from adults and old age. However, to counter the existing wide spread stereotype across the world on gender, there is need to start educating and sensitising young generation in schools and out of schools. These are categories to be changed despite long period of time to realise positive results but its sustainable and very effective solution. A child’s imagination when paired with experimental learning opportunities can be a powerful tool to confront gender challenges. This is a proven fact that children once instilled in them on gender solutions, they will always remain and believe in the same unlike adults who will remain referring to past practices whether good or bad but will always say ‘we are accustomed to’ based on past practices. Therefore stereotype can be resolved through young generation.

**Cultural transition**, Adapting new culture especially in the 21st Century of technology which has taken young generation by surprise has led to frustrations and disenchantment with new things that are both positive and negative to gender relations. This can be termed as cultural shock that has brought hard time in handling proper transition from tradition to technological culture that has always created gap in between genders of male and female. There is need for proper and sustainable cultural transition from traditional culture to technological culture that would not harm gender in any way.

**Equal economic empowerment,** this is a cornerstone of development. When both genders male and female have equal economic empowerment in a society, poverty will be reduced, economies flourish and the health improves among all genders as well as other service deliveries. Gender inequalities create gap for underdevelopment that is largely realised in developing countries despite strong efforts and campaigns on women empowerment by development agencies, there is need for both because some of the other gender (male) are incapacitated economically that has always created domestic violence. Therefore if women are more economically empowered may lead to vulnerability and can leave risks of high rate of divorce in families due to care and respect that male traditionally demand from their spouse. In women empowerment, there have been some improvements recorded in many reports like in United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2015 report. Reports show that men spend much time on leisure each day while women spend more time doing unpaid domestic works which traditionally are her roles and responsibilities while men’s role is to provide for the family. Therefore leaving man out of empowerment may mean women take role of being heads of families whereby it may inject in serious rate of divorce that might call for another advocacy on equal treatment for men. However, there is need for equal economic empowerment for both genders.

**Education and Exposure for both genders,** we are all responsible and have power to change the world the way that pleases us. There is need for education of genders and expose them to different environments so they can know what happens in each part of the world. Despite massive explanations about gender but still remains as if its unheard from different parts of the world due to inadequate education and exposure of genders to different environments and cultures. For example the traditional approach of understanding gender in Africa may be far different from understanding of gender in Europe. This inadequate exposure and education leads to misunderstanding of gender in the current generation. Some traditions in Africa in viewing gender interpret it in terms of their tradition whereby it’s a taboo for women to wear trousers likewise men to wear skirts while in Europe, its normal for a woman to wear a trouser for example Brighton College in Britain is the first school to scrap uniform policy so all children can wear skirts or trousers (Mirror online by Steve Robson. January 20th 2016). Therefore there is need for education and exposure for both genders.

**6. Conclusion**

In conclusion despite other approaches in the 21st century in creating an understanding of gender, the way people view others of the same and opposite gender as well as they see themselves which is a necessary component of the society passes the message of sometimes miss understanding while sometimes understand what gender implies to others. In other words others misunderstand gender as women promotion in the current century. The following recognises male roles and and responsibility which currently being handled by both genders in current generation, marriage proposal was done by male gender before but now done by both genders, dress code is being shared by both genders in the 21st century. Many challenges are face by gender in the 21st century that include; domestic violence, language for genders, decision making power, inequality, transgender, gender imbalance, equality has increased divorce, limited education and exposure which have creating challenging moments to gender. However, in any situation occurs way out of it despite threats. The following are suggestions to the above challenging moments of gender. They include; encounter stereotypes through young generation in schools by mentoring them about gender at the earlier age, handling proper cultural transition from tradition to current generations, equal economic empowerment for both genders other than focusing women gender as the most affected, education and exposure of both genders for easy understanding gender from different perspectives in different environments. Through above solutions, I do agree that gender perspective by 21st century generation would create an understandable meaning for gender. Otherwise gender remains as a unique topic of discussion if not handled amicably.

Reference:

Samson Esudu (Author), 2016, Gender in the 21st Century, Munich, GRIN Verlag, https://www.grin.com/document/333827