

NAME: LONGJOHN  
BOMAFINTAMUNOPIRI ADANGO

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## ***Unveiling Femininity; A Glimpse into the Social Status and Challenges of the Female in Nigeria.***

Sexuality is an integral part of identity on both personal and social levels, and like gender, is a social construct. Popular culture also plays its own quota in molding gender roles. Nigeria has a male dominated society where women are subordinate and face discrimination for the mere fact of being themselves, whether they are rich or poor, educated or uneducated, or live in a rural or urban area. Meanwhile this should not be so rather, the women/girl child should be deemed priceless because amidst her femininity comes the innate ability to nurture. She has been designed to be able to show love and care that spurs growth. However, due to these qualities, popular culture has defined her “weak” and has taken undue advantage of her. In Nigeria the social status of the female differs according to religion and culture. Regardless, there are some common characteristics nationwide. Modern challenges for the women of Nigeria include but are not limited to child marriage, poor female education, girl child labor, domestic violence, low political representation, weak economic bases.

The issue of child marriage is a practice that is prevalent in Nigeria, with 43% of girls being married before their 18th birthday, and 17% before they turn 15. However, the degree to which this is practiced varies greatly by region. This has put Nigeria's total fertility rate as at the 2017 statistics at 5.46 children per woman. With such high fertility rate, socio-economic problems and under-development are bound to persist. The problem of child marriage goes parallel with the problem of female education because if the female child spends more of her teenage years in school then she wouldn't have to be whisked off into an early marriage. While these practices have been carried out majorly because of the low economic capacities of the parents, some people still hold on to it as tradition because of ancient ideologies that the female does not contribute economically to the society. The most powerful agent of change for the modern woman has been Nigeria's formal education system, from which many elite women have emerged. Intelligent, educated, and confident, they can be found in all leading occupations constantly challenging patriarchy and gradually reorganizing the political arena to accommodate them. This is the reason why female education should continue to be championed, more support systems put in place to integrate females into “formerly male dominated fields” and empowerment campaigns for the female to acquire skills be encouraged.

Child labor remains one of the persisting problems that plague the girl child. In Nigeria female children aged between 5 to 14 years are often involved in economic activities outside of education and leisure. The pervasiveness of this is largely due to unequal wealth distribution among the Nigerian public, illiteracy of parents, peer pressure and high demand for domestic and sex workers. Also, in many rural Muslim communities in Northern Nigeria, children are sometimes asked to aid religiously secluded women or mothers with domestic work. The use of

girls prematurely in economic activities exposes them to the dangers of sexual assault and exploitation while missing core formal and informal training.

On another hand, domestic violence in Nigeria is taking high tolls. Traditionally, domestic violence takes on the physical form and has the female at the receiving end although it can also be sexual, emotional, and mental. This stems from a deep cultural belief in Nigeria that it is socially acceptable to hit a woman as a form of discipline. Overtime, reports of domestic violence have become a matter of significant concern. Although, marriage is a highly valued institution, male adultery is extremely notorious and the onus of making a marriage successful falls on women most time. This is the idea of Celestina, where Nigerian women sacrifice a lot to keep the sanctity of marriage, avoid rebuke, dishonor and the disgrace of divorce by condoning domestic violence. The Nigerian government has begun to take legal action prosecuting men who abuse women in several states. Also, NGO's that help in reorientation of couples and female rights' empowerment are taking a forefront to avert this issue.

Although female participation in politic has improved since the colonial era, it still grossly pales in comparison to that of the average Nigerian man, even though they both possess the same voting rights. Nigeria is Africa's largest democracy but has one of the lowest percentages of female political representation on the continent. According to the International Parliamentary Union, women make up less than 6% of the country's parliament and no Nigerian woman has ever been elected president, vice president or governor. They comprise a small percentage of elected officials in the Nigerian Senate and House of Representatives, even in ministerial positions. Due to these women are largely under-represented in all law-making bodies. The ability to change this lies in the hands of the Nigerian public as female politicians often encounter a lack of support from a society that is both conservative and patriarchal.

The non-existence of a strong economic support for a working female can certainly not be overlooked. In the aspect of maternity leave allowance or occupation of sensitive economic positions, gender bias still exists. Working women in Nigeria are entitled to maternity leave for 3 months at the state level and up to 4 months at the national level during which they are entitled to receive hundred per cent of their wages. However, discriminatory practices still exist in Nigeria in the private sector where many employers force young, single and married women to sign job contracts stipulating that they will not get pregnant for the first three years of their employment. Also, women occupy 21% of non-formal sector positions, fewer than 30% of all posts in the public sector and only 17% of same in senior cadre, regardless of their educational qualifications. Access to financial assistance is also restricted by limited financial resources and difficulty in obtaining necessary collateral. In certain cases, financial institutions demand consent of the woman's husband prior to granting a loan. The National Poverty Eradication Program's (NAPEP) micro-credit scheme offers low interest business-oriented loans and vocational training programs for women, but access is still low as statistics show that less than one-third of such loans in Nigeria are awarded to women.

Decades behind us since independence, yet the modern Nigerian woman still faces several challenges as highlighted previously. In order to combat and eliminate discrimination against women in Nigeria, a step in the right direction would be to solidify the laws that give men and women equal rights and actively reprimand individuals or organizations that break such laws. There is also a need for the reorientation of the cultural mindset that sees the female as inferior through empowerment programs. A great societal development awaits Nigeria as its women are being empowered.

## References

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