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Globalization and the Question of Gender-Justice: the Nigerian Experience

Chris Okechukwu Uroh

Introduction

The philosophy underlining neo-liberal economy, a major component of globalisation, is that state intervention in the economic life of the people, however well intentioned, is 'counter-productive' and therefore undesirable. The major elements of globalisation policy thus include trade liberalisation, devaluation of national currencies against 'major' currencies like the US dollar, and deregulation of the public sector or, simply, privatisation of public utilities. The social and economic consequences of these policies have been the retrenchment of workers and consequently, massive unemployment, reduction in government spending on social infrastructure, cut in government subsidies for social services wherever they are available and subsequent increase in the cost of these services.

For women, the impact of market liberalisation and the integration of the national economy 'into the global economy' have been 'complex and equally contradictory'. The failure of neo-liberal economic policies, especially the structural adjustment programme (SAP), to achieve the envisaged economic empowerment of the general populace in developing nations is a copiously documented and almost over-researched issue by scholars (Mbiliyi 1991; World Bank 1998; 1994; Adedeji 1994, etc). Instructively, not so much attention has been paid to the fact that SAP has been more disastrous for women than their men counterparts. In Nigeria, for example, women occupy the lowest rung of the societal ladder and are the least educated thereby usually employed at the lower grades. As the 'domestic gender' whose 'traditional' roles include domestic chores and reproductive activities, women are also the first to feel the direct impact of policies that adversely affect social services.

This paper is an attempt to fill-in this theoretical and empirical void in gender studies in the Third World, using Nigeria as a case. It interfaces the prevalent patriarchal ideology and its cultural inferiorisation of women with the deplorable socio-economic conditions of the Nigerian woman. Specifically, the paper argues that while men and women in the developing countries suffer economic dislocation as a result of neo-liberal economic policies, women suffer even more because of their culturally constructed position as 'domestic gender'. It also makes the case that the main source of women disadvantageous economic positioning which has been further worsened by structural adjustment policies is not, strictly speaking, economic. It is in fact rooted in the age-long cultural biases and practices which devalue womanhood through patriarchy and socially sidelines her by 'domestication'. However, in line with the general theme of the Cairo meeting, I shall preface this discussion with the examination of some of the issues that have engaged the attention of gender scholars in Africa in the past millennium.

The African Gender Discourse

In a sense, one would be right to say that the early major attempt to theorise the gender issue in Africa equated it with feminism. Gender scholarship was reduced to the interrogation of 'the woman question.' Its main concern was the examination of issues relating to women's marginalisation and/or oppression by their men counterparts and the society at large. The recurring themes on gender discourse in Africa then remained the economic disintegration of the African woman, the discrimination against her in the labour market and work places, her political disempowerment; the neglect and sometimes deliberate denial of women rights and so on.

The second rating of the woman is the issue here. Sometimes this is clumsily put as: Women are not given the chance (Mohammed 1985:50) which then raises the question, 'not given the chance' by who? From this stand-point, feminist literati in Africa, engaged in a more or less deconstructive scholarship dictated and sustained basically by the desire to answer a cluster of questions made imperative by the social positioning of the woman: How did male domination arise? Why was it so widely accepted in the past? Why does it still have a lot of potency in many societies in the world till today? What are its consequences? How and why, until recently, did men manage, with a semblance of legitimacy, to exclude women from formal politics, gainful economic ventures, social recognition and so on? (Mansbridge and Okin 1996:271).

Many factors were implicated in attempts to respond to these questions. Among these is the exaltation of 'the male subject by conversely obscuring the female,' in such a way that women became 'absent in human history' (Ahikire 1994:41). By denying women the status of *historical actors*, and portraying, 'men, their lives and their beliefs as the human norm', (Harding and Hintikka 1983:x), we are left with only the account of human development as a narrative dominated by men. The

attempt to displace or deconstruct 'history' and properly situate the woman within what became known as *herstory* (an ideological enterprise whose goal is to 'reproach' *history* through the feminisation of accounts of human experience) was taken up by some scholars. The historicisation of womanity in this manner was aimed at centring as against the present *peripheralisation* of the woman. The end is to make the woman a *historical actor* rather a mere *passive spectator* in the crowded theatre of human history.

Another issue which dominated gender scholarship was the question of the *genderisation* of division of labour which assigns certain kinds of work to men and others to women (Mbiliyi 1994:4). As already mentioned, women are assigned more work in production and reproduction activities within household and small holder farming systems in agrarian societies and 'petty trading' and other *informal businesses*, in the cities. The idea that there are certain jobs men and women are tailor-made for has become crystallised in the psyche of the peoples, with the woman usually assigned the most debased and less profitable of these jobs. The woman thus experiences two kinds of marginalisation. First, certain jobs are formally reserved for men automatically knocking off the chance that any woman whatever her expertise would be employed to do them. Second, as a result of the feminisation of the domestics or the domestication of the feminine, women who work outside the mould end up suffering even more. For example, women are gainfully employed and perform full-time paid jobs work longer hours because tradition requires that they still perform unremunerated domestic chores such as cooking, washing and child caring from which men are excused. Therefore, beyond the possibility that they could be discriminated against in the labour market, even where they are gainfully employed, women are worse off considering the socially mandated domestic chores dubiously assigned to them.

The question of how this idea of domesticating the woman attained an almost universal presence, if not acceptance, has also not escaped the curious mind of scholars, some of whom have attempted some scientific theorisation of the subject. Socio-biology is one of such theories. The thesis generally states that there is a correlation between *physiology* (or is it the anatomy) and *natural* capabilities of sexes and by implications, the socially assigned responsibilities for both men and women. In other words, *social organisation is here conceived of as nothing short of the behavioural outcome of the interaction of organisms having biologically fixed inclinations*. In a plain language the biological make up of the woman as well as that of the man is such that each sex has been programmed or predetermined to effectively perform specific roles. Any deviation from these naturally assigned roles is considered abnormal. This thesis makes the subordination of women appear *natural*, a kind of validation of male and female biological capacities (Imam 1985:16).

A study by Barbara and Schildrout (1986) among women in the predominantly Muslim-Northern Nigeria underscores the extent to which childhood in-

doctrination can colour people's understanding of social phenomena, including their own oppression. According to the study most Muslim women in Northern Nigeria believed that God decreed that they should remain submissive to their husbands irrespective of their behaviours. Their research reveals that most women believed that the woman is only a *subject* of the law, and that the interpretation and use of the laws were the prerogative of the men. Aristotle (1952) does not see any leadership quality in women. 'The male is more fitted to rule than the female, unless conditions are quite abnormal,' he writes. And so, unless there are no men to hold positions of authority, it would be wrong to give it to a woman, which is why Aristotle was against democracy. Aristotle berates democracy because it gives everybody, especially women, equal opportunity to take part in the decision making process. 'Between male and female this relationship of superior and inferior is permanent', Aristotle says.

This idea of variations in the *abilities* of the two sexes, and the superiority of the man over the woman, was also shared by Hegel (1973). 'The natural determinancies of both sexes acquire through its reasonableness *intellectual* as well as *ethical* significance'. He writes further:

Thus one sex is mind in its self-diremption into explicit self-subsistence and the knowledge and volition of free universality, i.e. the self-consciousness of conceptual thought and the volition of the objective final end. The other sex is mind maintaining itself in unity as knowledge and volition in the form of concrete individuality and feeling. In relation to externality, the former is powerful and active, the latter passive and subjective. It follows that man has his actual substantive life in the state, in learning and so forth, as well as in labour and struggle with the external world and with himself so that it is only out of his diremption that he fights his way to self-subsistent unity with himself. In the family he has a tranquil intuition of this unity, and there he lives a subjective ethical life on the plane of feeling. *The woman, on the other hand, has her substantive destiny in the family, and to be imbued with family piety is her ethical frame of mind* (Hegel 1973).

Modern political theorists have equally affirmed that society's 'sexual differentiation' of roles and assignment of different political meanings to *womanhood and manhood* are biologically programmed. In politics, women take precedence only after the children. Because this perception has been internalised by women themselves, even when they engage in politics, it is usually at the peripheral level, at the level of *women wing* of their parties or the *first ladies* of their states. Thus, 'the different attributes, capacities and characteristics ascribed to men and women by political theorists have become central to the way in which each has defined the political' (Pateman and Shanley 1991:9-10). As Pateman and Stanley further put it, '[M]anhood and politics go hand in hand, and everything that stands in con-

trast to and opposed to political life and the political virtues has been represented by women; their capacities and the tasks seen as natural to their sex, especially motherhood (1991:3).

This 'systematic exclusion of women from taking part in and as full member and citizen of the polity in political debate, deliberation and contest' remains the greatest wrong to womanhood. Consequently women are perceived and treated as *objects* or at most *minors*, who cannot take decisions on their own and so, have to be decided for by men.

There have also been some attempts to implicate the colonial experience of African societies in the condition of the African woman. The argument here is that the 'colonial imposition of European systems in Africa undermined the traditional empowering structures of African women's socio-cultural systems,' (Amadiume 1995:37). Thus, by imposing and reinforcing 'patriarchal systems' colonial rule 'compounded the woes of African women by (further) augmenting their ordinary burdens with those of their Western sisters' (Oduyoye 1995:80). This was made possible, according to Lebeuf-Anne, 'by a habit of thought deeply rooted in Western mind (in which) women are neglected to the sphere of domestic tasks and private life, and men alone are considered equal to the task of shouldering the burden of public affairs (Lebeuf-Anne 1962: 93).

Implicit in the above is that colonialism 'corroded the privileged life of the African women' (Acholonu 1995:3). Since 'the question of *choice* is very central to the issue of women's status in traditional Africa,' (Ibid: 54) 'the presentation of the African woman as oppressed, suppressed by a male dominated culture, and with a status subordinate to that of the man, is a dangerous misinterpretation of the true state of affairs....' (Ibid: 2-3).

Let us pause for a while and examine some of the issues raised above and ask, to what extent they represent what should be our concern as pursuants of gender equity. One of the major flaws of the compensatory history or *herstory* project, like many other *African discourses*, is that of overgeneralization. The impression is usually created that there is a *uniform* cultural practice among pre-colonial African societies. We must acknowledge that 'there are many and not one African community. There are numerous communities on the vast continent of Africa which have lived in self-contained isolation, under varying conditions of life and experience' (Bussia 1975:147). Consequently, one can expect almost different status for women in different African communities. For instance, it would be totally incorrect to expect that the status of women in matrilineal societies was the same in patriarchal societies. I am not saying that these cultural practices were good in themselves. All I am saying is that some of them had been with us before we were colonised and so attributing them to colonialism would be a falsification of historical facts. Yet many such misrepresentations of the traditional African settings have occurred, in the name of *re-writing* women history.

Furthermore, while the idea of *herstory* to point out some of the *achievements* of women in history, may help to rouse consciousness and reveal past errors and oversights, such 'compensatory histories' have not shown any paradigmatic shift or alternative to the dominant discourse. In fact, what it has done is to further legitimise the already existing historiography; a historiography accused of male-domination or male-centred. In other words, the *herstory* project, with all its claim to *correct* a suppose prejudiced history, still remains within the paradigm of the traditional conventional history. Whenever women appeared in those stories, it was only the names of women whom great men loved or those who could enter fields customarily reserved for upper class men (Ahikire 1994:7) like Cleopatra of Egypt, Amina of Zaria, Efusetan of Ibadan, and so on.

By implication, what such historiography tells is simply that *women are capable of doing those things men have done*. Or as it has almost become customary to put it: *what a man can do, a woman can (also) do*. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, is the first Nigerian woman to ride a motor car', is an example of this kind of history.' By taking this rather *defeatist* position, feminist scholars and activists unconsciously (perhaps) submitted themselves to the same masculinist standard of measuring achievements. And in that case, they are left with little than search for parallels in the activities of a handful of women and their men counterparts, which leaves them with one conclusion: 'we can also do it' usually punctuated with 'if given the chance'. If the *herstory* project must achieve its ambitious goals (assuming this is desirable) it must transcend the existing paradigm and give us an alternative historiography.

There is also the danger that the methodology of gender discourse in the last millennium had the tendency of abstracting women or womanhood as 'a category, frozen in time and isolated from general historical developments' (Ahikire 1994:10). Yet, the 'women question' in Africa, as elsewhere, can hardly be 'divorced from the realities of local and international economic relations' (CLO 1991:24) which affect both men and women one way or the other. The impression that 'women as women, have been oppressed throughout history' (Bello, 1985:24) has further raised the question of whether or not 'history is not in fact a succession of class oppression and revolution'. Are women not an integral part of these classes? Has there been no qualitative change in the position of classes in general and women (as members of classes) in particular?' (Bello 1985:24)

Furthermore, a separate woman's history will only 'stress stereotypes. One of such stereotypes is the conception of women as victims of this or that system' (Ahikire 1994:6) giving the erroneous impression that *women have never fought back and have never been effective social agents on behalf of themselves* (Harding 1987). This implicitly presents women as a docile group marked out in every society for oppression. Not even the attempts to acknowledge the role of women in liberation struggles have helped matters in this respect. This is because in such accounts, 'women are defined as having 'contributed' to this or that movements - as if they

are contributing to something that exists/existed independent of them ... as though they are contributing to a project to which they do not have an intrinsic stake' (Ahikire 1994:89). Conceptualising women as 'contributing, participating or being manipulated' denotes a kind of separation between women and society, and this itself is grounded within the premise that primarily defines women as the 'other' (Ahikire 1994:89).

It is therefore doubtful if the *herstory* project has not in fact worsened 'the woman quest' in more ways than one. At the level of theory for instance, it has led to the continuous 'marginalisation' of women studies from the 'main-stream' social science. At the level of policy and practice, there has equally been the marginalisation of women's interests as represented in the so called 'women projects', isolated from the rest of development planning, poorly funded and, in the words of Ayesha Imam (1990:243), scarcely taken seriously.

Globalisation, Neo-liberalism and the Nigerian Woman

The concept, globalisation, is slippery and multi-vocal; 'used in so many different contexts, by so many different people, for so many different purposes, that it is difficult to ascertain what is at stake in the globalisation problematics, what function the term serves, and what effects it has for contemporary theory and politics' (Kellner 1998:23). In the economic sense, globalisation could mean the creation of a 'world market' where commodities in one part of the *globe* can easily get to other parts. It is thus a 'social process in which constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become aware that they are receding' (Waters 1995:3). In this context, globalisation implies 'that there has occurred an increase in the density of contacts between locations worldwide; that our life is structured in such a way that social interactions are embedded in global networks' (Axtmann 1998:2). It means, in other words, the absence of local as distinct from the universal or the national from the international. There is interface of everything with every other thing, of values against values, of distance in context of distances, of histories in context of histories, of *their* worlds against *ours*.

This *reconfiguration of space and temporal shrinking of the world*, 'has made the identification of boundaries and associated notions of 'here' and 'there', 'far' and 'near', 'outside' and 'inside', home' and 'away', 'them' and 'us'-more problematic than ever' (Scholte 1996:49). Whichever way one views it however, one thing that remains obvious is that globalisation 'is strengthening the dominance of a world capitalist economic system, supplanting the primacy of the nation-state by transnational corporations and organisations, and eroding local cultures and traditions through global culture' (Kellner 1998:23). To put the matter another way, *globalisation* is only an intellectual distraction, the displacement of the earlier focus by scholars of the South, especially in the *cold war* eras, on 'the domination of the developing countries by the developed ones, or of national and local economies

by transnational corporations'. Globalisation is a cover up for 'part of a discourse of neo-imperialism that serves to obscure the continuing exploitation of much of the world by a few super powers and giant transnational corporations, thus cloaking some of the more barbaric and destructive aspects of contemporary development' (Kellner 1998:25). One instrument that has sustained this domination is the neo-liberal economic policies forced on the less developed nations by the North-dominated International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank among other international finance institutions (IFIs). That unequal exchange sustained by globalisation has led to social dislocation in Nigeria, and more importantly, that it has further worsened the economic conditions of women, is the concern of this paper. It is to this that I shall now turn.

Though Nigeria formally introduced the structural adjustment programme (SAP) in 1986, it has always pursued dependent-capitalist or neo-liberal economic policies. The four 'National Development Plans' as well as the 'rolling plans' preceding SAP placed high premium on 'market and private initiatives' rather than public investments. By the time SAP was introduced, the Nigerian economy was in a bad shape and the expectation was that SAP would ensure 'national economic stabilisation and recovery through the simultaneous liberalisation of the market and the retrenchment of the state (Olukoshi and Agbu 1996:80). Nigeria's 'plummeting oil revenue was jeopardising the country's economic stability'. Thus devaluation was expected to boost 'government's Naira revenue in the short term'. Given Nigeria's precarious relationship with its creditors, it was felt that 'debt rescheduling would be acceptable to its creditors only under conditions defined clearly in an adjustment program'. Persuaded 'that the state intervention approach was not an effective development strategy', Nigerian policy makers concluded that a new development strategy that would turn 'away from government-led growth-was now most desirable' (Faruqee 1994:244). However, experience showed that the magic did not work and that SAP was destined to fail. The indices that could make it succeed do not exist in Nigeria.

Nigeria's economy falls short of the conditions that could make a country benefit from either the devaluation of its currency or liberalisation of its economy, the two major components of SAP. In the first place, the *demand* and *supply* of Nigeria's export produce are not *elastic*. The country's export goods cannot respond spontaneously to increase in demand. Secondly, Nigerian economy could not locally meet the domestic demands for some basic capital goods and services needed by the country. If it did, it would have ensured that whatever gains were made through the economies of large scale production were not 'recaptured', to borrow from Samir Amin, by the international market in the form of importation of needed capitals and services by Nigerians.

The sharp decline in Nigeria's economic fortune as well as the quality of life after SAP was introduced, was such that even the World Bank's acknowledged its

failure. In its impact assessment of SAP in Nigeria, the Bank notes for instance that:

Based on the World Bank Atlas Methodology GNP per capita (in Nigeria) in 1985 was estimated at some US\$760... about twice the average for sub-Saharan Africa. However, with the drop in oil prices and the sharp devaluation of the Naira in 1986 to correct for its previous overvaluation, per capita GNP fell to US\$370 in 1987 and it is expected to be about US\$280 in 1988 and US\$230 in 1989, as the effect of the exchange rate depreciation is more fully reflected in the factor for converting the Naira value of GNP into U.S. dollars (World Bank 1988:2)

Of course the obvious implication of the above is that within two years of the introduction of SAP, Nigeria's GNP had gone down by half of the pre-SAP period. SAP thus failed to 'stem decline in the country's fortunes and restore the economy to the path of growth'. It probably could not have been otherwise, especially since massive and repeated devaluation of the naira, the liberalisation of prices, interest rates and trade, and spirited efforts by the State, to curb public expenditures and recover costs, aided further decimation of the national manufacturing capacity (International IDEA 2000:93).

It was at this stage that women became perhaps, not the intended but the first target of the adverse effects of SAP in Nigeria. Certain underlining assumptions which have informed the general positioning of the woman in the Nigerian society have been responsible for the fate women suffered under SAP and it would be necessary to highlight them in the course of this paper. First, there is the traditionally held view that 'women's role was domiciliary and procreative' (Alele-Williams 1988). Second, the custom of most Nigerian communities, privilege the male child over his female counterparts, and so, when the choice is to be made between for instance, educating the male child and the female, the boy child gets it. Third, because, formal education has become the major determinant of ones placement in the employment ladder, women, being the least educated, (though not the least intelligent) are mostly 'found at the lowest rung of occupational ladder' (Mbanefoh 1995). Therefore, 'in spite of the fact that women are found in virtually all professions in Nigeria, they remain underrepresented at the top management level' (Ibid.).

The implications of the foregoing for women under a liberal economy, where 'rolling back the state' is a major policy guideline, are many. First, when there is any need for retrenchment, the first targeted groups are usually the junior level workers who are mostly women. Second, the withdrawal of subsidies from kerosene, the main cooking gas in the cities, forced many low-income families to resort to charcoal as alternative to kerosene. Coal cooking is not only tedious, it is equally hazardous for the coal has to be worked throughout the cooking. Several

women and children were reportedly killed in the several fire outbreaks at filling stations where they had gone in search of the commodity that became scarce.

Perhaps, the most profound of these impacts which has not been given adequate attention is in the way the number of female candidates admitted into higher institutions dropped immediately after the introduction of SAP. For instance in the 1982/83 academic session, the enrolment figure for female students was 42 per cent, 35 per cent, and 26 per cent for University of Ife and University of Benin, respectively. However, by the 1986/87 session, the percentage dropped to 23 per cent and 28 per cent, respectively. In fact, while the total female enrolment into 21 Federal Government-owned universities in the 1982/83 academic session was 23,855 representing 24 per cent, the percentage went down to 23 per cent in the 1986/87 session. The gap is higher when one considers the figure at the postgraduate level. The implication of this to the question of gender justice is quite obvious and, I think, one issue that must be covered by gender scholarship in this millennium.

The African woman has been a victim of a rather anti-feminist belief system that places more premium on the proper upbringing of the male child, at the expense of his female counterpart. The male child is seen in many African societies as the bearer of the 'family name', the heir apparent. He is the one who will carry forth the name of the family to subsequent generations and so immortalise the lineage. The female child, on the other hand, is more or less a temporary member of the family, who, soon becomes a member of her would-be husband's family. Whatever resources expended on training her is thus seen as a waste. The consequence of this is that less attention is paid to the education of the female child compared to the male counterpart. One implication of this for the question of gender equality, is that with literacy increasingly becoming 'a requirement for jobs, illiterate women who were denied educational opportunities in early life are' almost automatically, 'being displaced from employment opportunities' (Rathgeber 1992:18).

The African Regional Studies Program (1994:18) observed that 'men and women play different roles and face different constraints in responding to economic policy changes and to shifts in relative prices and incentives'. This point, said to be overlooked by scholars and anti-feminist literature, was equally elaborated on by the 1990 Report of a Commonwealth Expert Group on Women and Structural Adjustment. The Report highlighted women's disproportionate suffering from the debt crisis and adjustment policies, not only as producers and workers in formal sector employment, but also as reproducers who have been forced to provide private and individual basic health and other social services formerly provided by the State (Commonwealth Secretariat 1990).

The aftermath of these is that women have less time to engage in profitable ventures. With women's reduced access to regular formal employment, 'the gender division of labour in household economy' is further 'strengthened' (Ibid.).

Consequently, women and girls are forced 'to work harder in unpaid household work, casual employment and highly exploitative forms of self employed cottage industry' (Ibid.).

Another remarkable development from this is the way 'sexual works' have become one of the major sources of higher income for many women. Thus, prostitution among girls has been increasing. At the same time even many married 'women prostitute themselves on a part-time basis to bosses, teachers and other 'big' men in exchange for gifts of food, clothing, or an outing at one of the night clubs which flourish in all urban cities' (Ibid.). It could be that bad. Rathgeber has almost an exhaustive and graphic presentation of *what have become the lots* of the African woman in the face of the deepening crisis of economic adjustment in Africa:

Women in developing countries (now) work longer hours, earn less money, have greater responsibilities, are less literate and numerate and have lower caloric intake in proportion to body weight than do men. In countries and among social groups where there are few opportunities to escape from poverty women usually have none. In situations where everyone must work long hours to secure sufficient income to provide basic needs, women must work even longer for they are faced not only with the necessity to contribute to household income but also must undertake all or most of the reproductive labour, including bearing and caring for children, preparation of food, looking after the elderly, nursing the sick and the multitude of other tasks that are labeled 'women work' in most parts of the world (Rathgeber 1992:11).

When Tomorrow Comes

Let me conclude by suggesting that in the new millennium, our quest for gender-equity should acknowledge that while women-men relations are important, our research should focus more on the girl-boy relationship. In other words, it is not just women and men, but girls and boys who participate and are affected by economic adjustment policies differently. It is needless concentrating our researches on the effects of the globalisation of the neo-liberal economic values on adults at the expense of children. The girl child should be accorded equal status as the woman in our studies if gender-justice research must achieve one of its major goals of bringing sex-based injustices to the realm of public discourse. Therefore as the *state is painfully being rolled back in Africa, our policy makers should remember the most vulnerable of the vulnerable group in our society, the GIRL CHILD.*

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