

## **Gender is a psychological issue**

Adedeji J. Ogunleye,<sup>(Ph.D)</sup>, Olawa, D. Babatola, M.Sc

<sup>1,2</sup>*Department of Psychology Faculty of the Social Sciences Ekiti State University Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria.*

**ABSTRACT:** *The issues around ‘gender’ have become a phenomenon in contemporary literature. This phenomenon has had debilitating effects on social integration, sustainability, justice and development. The current paper attempts an exposition of the phenomenon for equality, egalitarianism, growth, and national development by reviewing existing literature and theories of gender role development. The paper therefore contended that gender is only a psychological issue and submit that a change of gender role attitudes through direct trainings involving modelling, imitation, and reinforcement of non gendered attitudes and behaviours, and an introduction, development, and use of cognitive intervention that attacks gender stereotypes directly or that remove constraints on children’s thinking and permit them to construct rigid gender schema is most potent to enthrone an egalitarian society and sustainable development.*

**Keywords:** *Gender, gender role attitudes, trainings, egalitarianism, sustainable development.*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

‘Gender’, in conversational English, refers to the anatomy of a person’s reproductive system as either a male or a female. It is a mere biological characteristic of being male or female.

In psychology however, the term refers more inclusively to the social and cultural dimensions of being one sex or the other. It refers to socially constructed expectations regarding the ways in which one should think, feel, or act, depending on sexual classification. These stereotypical expectations are commonly referred to as gender roles. Gender roles is embedded in gender issues and gender issues can include the ways people identify their gender, how they have been affected by societal structures related to gender, the role of gender in the individuals life, and any other gender related issues.

Attitude towards gender roles are assumed to result from complex interactions among societal, cultural, ethnic, religious, political and familiar influences.

Gender affects many aspects of life including access to resources, styles of interacting with one another, self-evaluation, spirituality, methods of coping with stress, and expectations of others. Psychological gender studies examines the roles of gender in human behaviour and the development of attitudes to better understand the relationships between gender and health, emotion, leadership and violence.

#### **1.1 Theories Of Gender Role Development**

Several theories have provided explanations for differences in gender roles which have existed throughout history. Evolutionary theorists attribute differences in gender roles to the psychological characteristics of men and women that prescribe their best functions for survival of the species. Evolutionary psychologists contend that men and women faced different evolutionary pressure over the course of human history and that the natural selection process conspired to create fundamental differences among males and females that determined gender division of labour<sup>[1,2,3]</sup>. In primitive societies, men adopted the roles of hunting and protecting their families while the women nurture the young, prepare and gather foods for the families because of their less physical strength as compared to men. The gender dependent labour roles of men and women continued into the periods of written human history, when people began to live in cities and form the earliest civilized societies.

Sigmund Freud, in his psychoanalytic theory of human development<sup>[4]</sup>, asserted that as children, boys recognise that they are superior to girls when they discover the difference in their genitals. To Freud, girls equate their lack of penis with inferiority and the feeling of inferiority thus cause girls to idolize and desire their fathers, resulting in passivity, masochistic tendencies, jealousy and vanity – seen by Freud as feminine characteristics.

In a sharp reaction to Freud’s theory of penis envy, Karen Horney, a neo-Freudian psychologist, founded a psychology that is focused on gender and discovering how gender affected the individual<sup>[5]</sup>. Horney argued that

men manifest womb envy and unconsciously resent women through behaviours designed to harass and belittle women<sup>[5]</sup>. Thus, women maintain their allegedly inferior status because of the resenting behaviours of men. To Horney therefore, the fundamental reason for masculine behaviours in men is a sense of inferiority resulting from their womb envy.

Whereas Freud's psychoanalytic theory of gender development is seldom discussed in contemporary explanations for the development of gender<sup>[6, 7]</sup>, much is still being said about the evolutionary theories in many history books because they situated the place of women to homes and families. Matlin, while also corroborating that women are often confined to homes and made invisible, submitted that women artists express themselves in music, dance, embroidered tapestries and quilting<sup>[8]</sup>. These relatively fragile and anonymous art forms were less likely to be preserved than men's artistic efforts in painting, sculpture and architecture. Also, few women had the opportunity or encouragement to become artists.

Other contemporary gender development explanations include the social learning theories and the cognitive development theories.

Albert Bandura, a social learning theorist, and other social learning theorists argue that through observation, modelling and imitation and by direct learning through reward or punishment, behaviours of people of the gender of children are learnt and internalized<sup>[9, 10, 11, 12]</sup>. Lott and Maluso, for example, posited that a little girl would be particularly likely to imitate her mother, especially if someone praised her mother for her action<sup>[12]</sup>.

Also, these scholars argued that direct learning by means of rewards and punishments is the major way that young children learn 'gender appropriate' behaviours. This is different from learning through observation. Direct learning, otherwise called direct intuition or differential reinforcement, involves the teaching of children on how to behave by reinforcing 'appropriate' behaviours and punishing or otherwise discouraging 'inappropriate' conduct<sup>[13]</sup>. Leaper, Anderson and Sanders argued that parents are, indeed, actively involved in teaching boys how to be boys and girls how to be girls<sup>[14]</sup>. Fagot and Leinbach, Leve and Fagot for example found out that parents are already encouraging gender appropriate activities and discouraging cross-gender play during the second year of life of children (i.e. before children even acquire their basic gender identities); lending credence to the social learning approach to gender development<sup>[15, 16]</sup>.

Whereas the social learning theorists emphasise the importance of children's behaviour however, the cognitive developmental theorists argues that children's thoughts are important in developing powerful gender schemas or gender typing – (a nature-nurture controversy in psychology)<sup>[17, 18, 19, 20, 21]</sup>. The cognitive developmental theorists argued that children first establish a stable gender identity before actively seeking out same sex models and other information to learn how to act like a boy or girl. Thus, rather than 'being a boy because I am treated like a boy' (the argument of the social learning theorists), it is more like 'I am a boy and so must and indeed, behave like a boy. To Kohlberg therefore, children pass through three basic stages of:

- i. Gender identity – acquired by age 3
- ii. Gender stability – gender is perceived as stable over time
- iii. Gender consistency – gender is perceived as stable across situations as they acquire a mature understanding of what it means to be male or female<sup>[13]</sup>

From a careful analysis of the above explanations, it seem clear that all theories of gender role development agree that children actually learn about being a male or a female from what their societies offer them in the way of 'gender curriculum' either from their parents or through peers, the media, schools or other learning institutions.

## 1.2 Current Researches On Gender Role Development

A major topic of research in psychology is that of gender differences in emotion. Whereas stereotypes of emotion view women as the more emotional sex, feminine psychologists opined that emotion is culturally controlled and that the differences lie in its expression across gender rather than the actual experience<sup>[22]</sup>. Brannon argued that the way a person shows his or her emotions is defined by socially enforced rules which guide the acceptable forms of expression for particular people and feelings. Thus, whereas women are viewed as expressing passive emotions such as sadness, happiness, fear, and surprise more strongly, men are viewed as more likely to express emotions of a more dominant nature such as anger. This is because, according to Shibley, men and women are socialized throughout their lifetimes to view and express emotions differently<sup>[23]</sup>. Shibley further argued that girls and boys are further socialized by peers where girls are rewarded for being sensitive and emotional and boys are rewarded for dominance and lack of most emotional expression<sup>[23]</sup>. Other supporters of the similarities perspective argue that women and men are fairly similar in their concerns about helping and caring since the two genders do not live on separate planets. Psychologists overall, however, have found out that

gender differences emerge only on task that are dangerous or require expertise<sup>[24,25]</sup> and when the result are based on self reports and expression<sup>[26]</sup>.

Whereas Kohlberg, for example, argued that men are more likely than women to achieve sophisticated levels of moral development<sup>[27]</sup>, Gilligan criticized the masculine bias in the moral dilemmas that Kohlberg had tested<sup>[28]</sup>. And other researchers<sup>[29, 30]</sup> have argued that men and women are more likely to show similar styles of moral reasoning. Kunkel and Burleson posited that men and women share basic values that include both justice and care<sup>[31]</sup>.

On health issues and in the health care profession too, there are arguments on gender differences. Some authors have opined that although several biological gender differences have important consequences for women's health; nonetheless, women are often seen as discriminated against on health issues. It need to be noted however that women's body are said have less fluid in which alcohol, for example, can be distributed. So, even if a man and a woman weigh the same and consume the same amount of alcohol, the woman will end up with a higher level of alcohol in her body<sup>[32, 33]</sup>. Matlin argued that both women physicians and women patients have often been mistreated because of popular beliefs about men and women<sup>[8]</sup>. Problems, with maintaining reproductive health, for example, have been indicted as the leading cause of illness and death of child bearing aged women world-wide. Crawford and Unger argued that poor health is associated with abuse, exploitation, disease, unwanted pregnancies, and death<sup>[34]</sup>. And psychologists have traced the problems to cultural practices and belief systems that threat men and women differently. Chrisler, for example, argued that some of the differences in gender can probably be traced to the fact that morbidity (i.e. generalized poor health or illness) is usually assessed by self report<sup>[35]</sup>. And a woman may be more likely than a man to report that she is bothered by her arthritis. Some of women's health problems can also be traced to the fact that their incomes are lower than the incomes of men. Their low income will therefore mean that they will more likely receive inadequate health care. Chrisler argued that economically poor women are more likely to experience psychological stress which can intensify the symptoms of many chronic illnesses<sup>[35]</sup>.

Current researches on whether women and men differ in their leadership effectiveness and styles have found no overall differences in the effectiveness but a small difference in the leadership styles of male and female leaders in facilitating accomplishment of their group goals<sup>[36,37,38,39,40,41]</sup>. These scholars noted that the limiting factors for women leadership are cultural differences, stereotypes, and perceived threats. According to the authors, women constitute about half of the work force of the world population. Yet only a small amount of women hold high positions in corporations and in the political sphere. Omede, for example, argued that only about 2 percent of the population of females in Nigeria are politically involved<sup>[42]</sup> and Olaoye posited that females' participation in Nigeria politics at the gladiatorial level in the modern era has been negligible in terms of decision making<sup>[43]</sup>. Olaoye observed that the bulk of women's participation in Nigeria politics and leadership are at the spectatorial and apathetic levels<sup>[43]</sup>. He blamed these on value-related and social structural factors. Olaoye argued that the patriarchal and hence male dominated structure of Nigeria infringes on free will and freedom of females to actively participate in politics and decision makings<sup>[43]</sup>. Udegbe argued that women tend to experience a 'glass ceiling effect' when taking on leadership positions<sup>[36]</sup>. The 'glass ceiling effect' refers to invisible, yet powerful barriers which prevent women from moving beyond a certain level in the work place. Also, they experience a 'sticky floor effect' which prevents them from having a job path or ladder to higher positions. The glass ceiling effect makes it rather impossible for the existence of female mentors to assist new employees and when a woman have a male mentor, they could experience difficulty in gaining bonding and advice from out of work experience. Regarding perceived threats at work, Beaton, Tougas, and Joly posited that it is not a matter of sexual harassment or harassment in general<sup>[39]</sup>. The fact, rather, is that women could possibly take over. Hence, the more women working in a place of employment, the increased threat a man feels over job security. Therefore, when a woman displays male traits to tackle tough decisions or handle leadership roles, she is portrayed as mean, butch and aggressive.

It may be important to add here that despite cultural limitations and stereotypes, history has proven that women are able to achieve what men could, even sometimes, not achieve in fields of endeavour. Examples abound in the biblical women like Esther and Jezebel, historical records of Margret Thatcher of Britain and Helen Johnson Sir-leaf of Liberia in politics, Moremi of Ile-Ife and Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, Queen Amina of Zaria, and Madam Efunroye Tinubu of Lagos, Nigeria in socio-economic liberation and Professor Grace Alele-Williams of University of Benin, Nigeria; in the academia. The feats achieved by these women of substance and virtue attests to the fact that gender is only a cultural definition of roles between men and women.

## II. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the theories of gender development and from researches on gender issues examined here, it is most potent to reason that it is socio-cultural expectations and meanings that place barriers on the roles of men and women in societies.

Societal gendering has its consequences on sustainable development. Shaffer submitted that the world would be a better place if sexism or gendered lives were eliminated and if boys and girls were no longer pressured to adopt the confining 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles<sup>[44]</sup>.

In a non gendered culture, women would no longer suffer from a lack of assertiveness and confidence in the world of work<sup>[44]</sup> and men would be freer to display their sensitive, nurturant sides that many now suppress in the interests of appearing masculine. Bem believes that parents must take on active roles by: i. teaching their young children about genital anatomy as part of a larger lesson that one's biological sex is unimportant outside the domain of reproduction, and ii. delaying children exposure to gender stereotypes by encouraging cross sex as well as same sex play and by dividing household chores more equitably (with fathers sometimes cooking and sweeping and mothers washing the car or making repairs)<sup>[45]</sup>. This belief of Bem is consistent with findings and argument of Turner and Gervai; Tennenbaum and Leaper who found out that children whose parents hold non traditional attitudes toward gender roles or whose fathers routinely perform 'feminine' household and child care tasks are less aware of gender stereotypes and are less likely to display gender stereotyped interests and ability profiles<sup>[46, 47]</sup>. Therefore for a change of gender role attitudes to enthrone an egalitarian society and sustainable development, it is expedient that societies made commitments to gender equality through direct trainings involving modelling, imitation, and reinforcement of non gendered attitudes and behaviours. It is also recommended that cognitive intervention that either attack gender stereotypes directly or remove constraints on children's thinking that permit them to construct rigid gender schema should be developed and used. Katz and Walsh ; Tennenbaum and Leaper have also suggested that efforts to change gender role attitudes may be more effective when the adult in charge is a man, possibly because men normally make stronger distinctions between 'gender appropriate' and 'gender inappropriate' behaviours than women do<sup>[48,47]</sup>.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Buss DM. Psychological sex differences: Origins through sexual selection. *American Psychologist*, 1995;50: 146-68.
- [2]. Buss DM. Evolutionary psychology. In: Kazdin A, Editor. *Encyclopaedia of Psychology*. Washington, DC & New York: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, 2000.
- [3]. Kenrick DT, Luce CI. An evolutionary life-history model of gender differences and similarities. In: Eckes T, Trauter HM, Editors. *The developmental social psychology of gender*. Nahwah NJ: Erlbaum, p. 35-63; 2000.
- [4]. Freud S. *Three contributions to the theory of sex*. New York: Nervous and Mental Diseases Publishing co; 1930.
- [5]. Horney K. *Feminine psychology*. New York: Norton; 1967.
- [6]. Bussey K, Bandura A. Social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation. *Psychology Review*. 1999; 106: 676-713.
- [7]. Jacklin CN, Reynolds C. Gender and childhood socialization. In: Beall AE, Sternberg RJ, Editors. *The psychology of gender*. New York: Guilford, p. 197-214;1993.
- [8]. Matlin MW. *The psychology of women*. Belmont CA: Thompson and Wadsworth; 2004
- [9]. Bandura A. Social cognitive theory. In: Vasta R, Editor, *Annals of child development*. Greenwich CT: JAI Press, p.1-60; 1989.
- [10]. Mischel W. A social learning view of sex differences in behaviour. In: Maccoby E, Editor. *The development of sex differences*. Stanford CA: Stanford university press, p. 56-81; 1966.
- [11]. Mischel W. Sex-typing and socialization. In: Mussen P, Editor, *Carmichael's manual of child psychology (Vol 2)*. New York: Wiley, p. 56-81; 1970.
- [12]. Lott B, Maluso D. Gender development: Social learning. In: Worell J, Editor. *Encyclopaedia of women and gender*. Sam Diego: Academic press, p. 537-49; 2001.
- [13]. Shaffer DR. *Social and personality development*. Balmont CA: Wadsworth; 2005
- [14]. Leaper C, Anderson KJ, Sanders P. Moderators of gender effects on parents' talk to their children. *Developmental Psychology*.1998; 34: 3-27.
- [15]. Fagot BI, Leinbach MD. The young child's gender schema: Environmental input, internal organizations. *Child development*. 1989; 60: 663-72.
- [16]. Leve LD, Fagot BI. Gender role socialization and discipline processes in one and two parent families. *Sex Roles*. 1997; 36: 1-21.
- [17]. Kohlberg L. A cognitive developmental analysis of children's sex-role concepts and attitudes. In: Maccoby EE, Editor. *The development of sex differences*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1966.
- [18]. Martin CL, Halverson CF Jnr. A schematic processing model of sex typing and stereotyping in children. *Child Development*. 1981; 52:1119-134.
- [19]. Martin CL, Halverson CF, Jnr. The roles of cognition in sex-roles and sex-typing. In: Carter DB, Editor. *Current conceptions of sex roles and sex-typing: Theory and research*. New York: Praeger, 1987
- [20]. Bem SL. Gender schema theory: A cognitive account of sex-typing. *Psychological Review*. 1981;88:354-64.
- [21]. Bem SL. *The lenses of gender: Transforming the debate on sexual inequality*. New Haven CT: Yale University press; 1993.
- [22]. Brannon L. *Gender: psychological perspectives*. Boston MA: Pearson Educational Inc; 2005
- [23]. Shibley HJ. *Half the human experience: The psychology of women*. Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin Coy; 2007
- [24]. Hamiton MC. Sex-related differences research: personality. In: Worell J Editor, *Encyclopaedia of women and gender* Sam Diego: academic press, p. 973-81; 2001
- [25]. Fiala SE, Giuliano TA, Remlinger NM, Braithwaite IC. Lending a helping hand: the effects of gender stereotypes and gender on likelihood of helping. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. 1999;29: 2164-176.

- [26]. Garner PW, Estep KM. Empathy and emotional expressivity. In: Worell J, Editor Encyclopaedia of women and gender. San Diego: Academic press, p. 391-402; 2001.
- [27]. Kohlberg L. Essays on moral development. vol 2. The Psychology of moral development. San Francisco: Freeman; 1984.
- [28]. Gilligan C. In a different voice. Cambridge MA: Harvard University press; 1982
- [29]. Lerner H. Women in therapy. New York: Harper and Row; 1989.
- [30]. Tavis C. Mismeasure of woman. New York: Simon and Schuster; 1992
- [31]. Kunkel AW, Burleson BR. Social support and the emotional lives of men and women: An assessment of the different cultures perspective. In: Canary DJ, Dindia K, Editors. Sex differences and similarities in communication. Mahwah NJ: Erlbaum, p. 101-25; 1998
- [32]. Hamilton JA, Yonkers KA. Sex differences in pharmacokinetic of psychotropic medication. In: Jeusvold MF, Habreich U, Hamilton JA, Editors. Psychopharmacology and women: sex, gender, and hormones. Washington DC: American Psychiatric Press, p. 11-42; 1996.
- [33]. Haseltine FP. Conclusion. In: Haseltine FP, Jacobson BG, Editors. Women's health research: A medical and policy primer. Washington DC: Health Press, p. 331-36; 1997.
- [34]. Crawford M, Unger RK. Women and gender. New York: McGraw Hill; 2004.
- [35]. Chrisler JC. Gendered bodies and physical health. In: Unger RK, Editor. Handbook of the psychology of women and gender. New York: Wiley, p.289-301; 2001.
- [36]. Udegbe IB. Gender, power and political leadership in Nigeria. Centre for Social Science Research and Development, Positive Leadership Monograph Series. 2003; No 8.
- [37]. Shaw MS, Lee J. Women's, voice feminist vision: classic and contemporary readings. New York: McGraw Hill; 2007.
- [38]. Ogba O. Women for ordination: An analytical look. Ibadan: Daystart Press; 2006
- [39]. Beaton AM, Tougas F, Joly S. Neosexism among male managers: Is it a matter of numbers? Journal of Applied social Psychology. 1996; 26:2189-2203.
- [40]. Eagly AH, Johnson BT. Gender and leadership styles: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*. 1990; 108: 233-56.
- [41]. Eagly AH, Karau JS and Makhijani MG. Gender and effectiveness of leaders: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*. 1995;117(1):125-45
- [42]. Omede OJ. Women and the 2003 general election in Nigeria: observable trends. *Nigeria Journal of the Social Sciences*. 2004;3(1):63-80.
- [43]. Olaoye EO. The Nigerian state and women's participation in politics: Challenges and options. *Nigerian Journal of Counselling and Applied Psychology*. 2004;2(1):236-50.
- [44]. Shaffer DR. Social and personality development. Belmont CA: Wadsworth; 2005
- [45]. Bem SL. Genital knowledge and gender constancy in pre-school children. *Child Development*. 1989;60:649-62.
- [46]. Turner PT, Gervai J. A multidimensional study of gender typing in pre-school children and their parents: personality attitudes, preferences, behaviour, and cultural differences. *Developmental Psychology*. 1995;31:759-72.
- [47]. Tennenbaum HR, Leaper C. Are parents' gender schema related to their children's gender related cognition? A meta-analysis. *Developmental Psychology*. 2002;38(4):615-30.
- [48]. Katz PA, Walsh PV. Modification of children's gender stereotyped behaviour. *Child Development*. 1991;62:338-351.