

## **Gender Discrimination: An Analysis of the Language of Derogation**

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**Abstract:** Language is a mirror which reflects every side of human society and culture. As a social problem, sexism exists in all language of the world including the English language. In a male dominated society, language is used to reflect the “women’s downgraded” social status. Women are treated as “second-hand citizens” so much so that language is used to degrade, derogate, downgrade, and maltreat widows, single mothers, and in some African societies, the female gender as a whole. Gender exclusive language presents stereotypes of both female and males but more often to the disadvantages of the female gender. This paper explores how language is used to discriminate the females even in their work places. It will also analyze the effect of language of derogation and its effect on the female gender and its attendant consequences. The paper concludes that language should not be used or applied to derogate and marginalize women by ignoring and deprecating them in favour of their male counterparts. In the workplace, both male and female gender should be treated fairly and equally to maintain a harmonious and peaceful environment.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The coming together of human beings for a particular purpose is made possible through language; verbal and non-verbal. The main purpose of language is communication. Language is an important means of human communication and serves a wide range of purposes. Edward Sapir defines language as “a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols” (1). Bernard Bloch and George Trager define language as “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates”. (10) A language – verbal or non-verbal- fulfils the communicative needs of its speakers. Language is a social phenomenon, so social factors like gender, class, education and wealth affect the way we use language. Language does not exist outside society. Languages function in social settings and express group identity. According to Josiane Hamers and Michel Blanc, “language does not exist in itself but has a use for the overall behaviour which is meaningful in a given culture.” (8) People use language to show gender, identity, power, class, status and age. Addressing a person as, Mr., Mrs., Ms, Dr., Professor, aunt, uncle or even the person’s first or last name transcends diction and extends to social factors like gender, class, power and age. Language choices are made bearing in mind social meanings like age, gender, situation, class, status, accommodation theory, politeness and so on. Sociolinguistics is the branch of linguistics that studies language in relation to society, i.e., the society that uses it. Language is a property of the particular society that uses it. Human relations are established through language. Language facilitates socialization and globalisation. The word derogation is insulting. It means to suggest or infer that something is not important or worthy of respect. It is used to belittle, denigrate, play down, talk down, bad-mouth, or write off someone or something. It has been said that women are to be seen and not heard.

#### **1.1 Gender (In)equality**

Socially, gender, is the state of being male or female. It also refers to societal roles assigned to different human beings based on their sex. Gender equality deals with equal rights and responsibilities for men and women. Men and women get to play same roles in society. Gender equality is a fundamental human right. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR):

**Article 1:** All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. **Article 2:** Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.... (UN General Assembly art.1-2)

The female and male gender need to have equal access to education, health care, work and salary. They need to be adequately represented in economic, social and political affairs. Gender inequality is the perception that men and women are not equal. It is the asymmetrical unfair treatment meted out to a particular group of individuals due to their gender. Despite the general principle of human rights, the discrimination of women in all spheres of life is still a reality. Women and girls still suffer violence and discrimination in different parts of the world.

## **1.2 Gender Discrimination**

Gender discrimination deals with sex-based discriminations, i.e., discriminating against a person due to the person's gender. According to Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

**Article1:** the term "discrimination against women" shall mean any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil, or any other field. (par. 1) Generally, men are privileged in many societies. A person's gender transcends the person's values, skills, abilities and capabilities. Due to Africa's patriarchal society, women and girls are mostly affected by gender discrimination. Men and women are not given equal chances in social transformations, meaningful careers, politics, religion and economic improvements. Women are found in these areas but not as key players. Many women are in politics but how many have had the opportunity of ruling a country or even a state. In religion, a woman gets to be the wife of the pastor/priest and that is it. The proverbial glass ceiling sees to it that women do not get to the apex of their careers.

## **1.3 The glass ceiling**

The glass ceiling is "a concept popularised in the 1980s to describe a barrier so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women from moving up the corporate hierarchy". (Ann Morrison and Mary Ann Von Glinow 200) A glass ceiling is a metaphor used to represent an invisible barrier that keeps the female gender and/or people of colour from rising beyond a certain level in a hierarchy. It represents obstacles/hindrances that women undergo while trying to achieve career advancements. This metaphor was coined by feminists in reference to barriers in the careers of high achieving women.

The United States Federal glass ceiling commission defines the glass ceiling as "the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements.

Lahle Wolfe asserts: The proverbial "glass ceiling" is a classic example of workplace gender discrimination – the unwritten code that cannot hold certain senior positions and are prevented from advancing beyond a certain point because of gender despite their skills, talents and qualifications. (1 web)

Culture (gender roles/gender stereotypes), sexism and religion have been identified as the causes of gender discrimination.

### **a) Religion**

Religious beliefs equally do same. Religion forbids women to speak out. The holy Bible clearly states: "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (*New International Version*, Gen.1:27) This Bible passage clearly states that God created men and women equally. When sin entered the human race, God stated that the man will rule over the woman. God says "... your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." (Gen. 3:16) Men and women are created equal by God. But in Christian marriages, the husband gets to be the head of the home. Apostle Paul, on the other hand, suggests that women should not speak out. He says: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet." (1 Tim. 2:12) Islam also has a woman's identity shrouded in a hijab (a veil); a symbol of modesty and privacy. Some women, as a matter of obligation, covers up down to her ankles in order not to seduce a man. She gets to be the face behind the mask while their men walk around with bare faces. Some Muslim women even go all out wearing the niqab and burqa which cover the entire body besides their eyes. Some feminists have argued that the hijab is a sign of the oppression of women. Muslims consider it an anomaly for a Muslim woman/girl to dress up without putting on the Hijab in order to cover up properly. A practical example is that of Aisha Ahmad, the recently elected deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, who has been called out by Muslim men for her 'inappropriate dressing'. She has been called a prostitute for her non-conservative dressing. Islamic fundamentalists have even called for the withdrawal of her nomination.

### **b) Sexism**

Sexism is the discrimination meted out against women and girls due to their gender/sex. It is a gender based prejudice. Patriarchy powers sexism. In a society where sexism is prevalent, one gender (usually the masculine gender) is seen to be superior while the other is inferior (usually the feminine gender). Shackles are placed on the feminine gender, and these shackles will not let them be great. Sexist behavioural patterns give birth to gender roles/stereotypes. Women and girls have social boundaries mapped out for them in society. They are instructed on what they can (not) be or do.

### **c) Gender roles**

Gender roles are specific, social roles and responsibilities considered appropriate and are the norm for women and men which are appropriate in a given society. Gender roles/stereotypes can be traced down to cultural beliefs. In a traditional African marriage setting, the man is forbidden from handling the affairs of the kitchen. That is obligatorily the woman's duty in the home. The woman cooks, cleans and takes care of the children while the man takes care of the financial needs of the home. Although things are beginning to change in this twenty first century and the woman works and contributes to the finances in the home, this does not exempt her from exclusively performing her duties as a wife; cooking and cleaning. Women are the cooks in families not minding the fact that world class chefs are mostly men. In 2016, the wife of the President of Nigeria, Aisha Buhari, criticised her husband's leadership. The president, Muhammadu Buhari, while on a state visit to Germany, addressed the issue by saying that his wife belongs to his kitchen and the other room. Succinctly put, the man categorically said that the woman has no say in politics. Her only concern is how to churn out delicacies from the kitchen and satisfy him in bed. In a bid to revolt against this gender role, a man, Noble Igwe, started a movement on Social media called – WifeNotCook. This was when a follower made reference to his wife's culinary skills.

### **d) Culture**

Culture is a people's way of life and it affects their thought processes. "The traditional African society is a patriarchal society characterized by current and historic unequal power relations between men and women where women are systematically disadvantaged, subdued and oppressed". (Ifechelobi 18)

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theory on which this research paper is based is Iwuchukwu's Focu-feminism. Feminism is a movement for the actualisation of parity between both genders. It addresses issues that bother on gender and works in defence of the woman. The issue of voice is central in feminism.

According to Chukwuma, Feminism means ... a rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes of women which deny them a positive identity. (ix) Ifechelobi asserts: Feminism seeks to give the woman a sense of self as worthy, effectual and contributing human beings. It is a theoretical and ideological framework that directly opposes sexism by supporting gender equality. This is to say that feminism is a reaction to such stereotype of women, whereby women are seen as indeterminate human beings, dependent, gullible and voiceless. (20) Iwuchukwu's Focu-feminism deals with women empowerment, self-actualisation and self assertion. It also x-rays the oppression of women by women and the role a woman plays in her own bondage and oppression. Focu-feminism postulates that the society is dynamic and cultures evolve, as they undergo transformations. This means that some of the inimical cultural practices will gradually fade away, but those who understand it must tackle it differently at its own level. Although several scholars have diversely expounded their views on gender issues, specifically, on how best to liberate the woman, But, there is need for self-assertion and empowerment of women geared towards her liberation from all forms of oppression, exploitation, marginalisation and subjugation (Par. 8).

Generally, feminism gives the woman a voice. It is believed that if one loses one's voice, one ceases to exist.

### **2.1 Gender Discrimination through Language**

Before the discrepancy in gender, we are, first of all, human beings. Gender is a social construct. The main purpose of language is communication. Whether verbal or non-verbal language, human beings communicate their thoughts, feelings, ideas and expressions through it. Language has been used to undermine women since the beginning of the world. The English word 'woman' sounds fluid and powerless to many people. Some people believe that it is not even a word in its own right since it cannot be spelled without 'man'. 'Female' cannot be spelled without 'male'. At times, in this patriarchal African society, it is not a nice thing to be called a woman. The word itself can sound derogatory. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a man that does not take any traditional title is called an agbala (an old woman). Okonkwo once chided himself for acting so sentimental and emotional on his way to kill Ikemefuna. He says: When did you become a shivering old woman,

Okonkwo asked himself, “you who are known in all the nine villages for your valor in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed.” (51) Achebe was only mirroring society, because it is actually praise worthy to be called a man. The person, irrespective of gender, is being complimented. The opposite is the case when someone says –irrespective of gender- ‘you are a woman’. Gender discrimination through language can be grouped into

**a) Derogatory words against women based on sexuality**

Women are flirts. Sexual derogatory words are being used against women all the time. Mistress, a woman with whom a man carries out an extra-marital affair, has no masculine equivalent. A woman with multiple sex partners is called a prostitute, but a man with multiple sex partners is called a player. It has been described as the difference between a master key and a lock that can be opened by different keys. This is totally absurd. The biblical instruction, “thou shall not commit adultery/fornication” (*New International Version*, Exo 20:14) is not gender exclusive.

Wolfe says: Women are insulted through references to sexual morals or being compared to sub-human entities, while men are insulted by being associated with women and weakness/femininity. So, abusive language directed at women might encompass unladylike sexual behaviour, such as *whore, slut, skank, pussy, cunt, dyke, twat*, etc. or might compare women to sub-human animals, such as *bitch, chick, dog, cow, horse, pig, porker*. Meanwhile, insults for men largely stem from allusions to weakness and femininity, either from references to women or stereotypically feminine men, such as *pussy, cunt, sissy, wimp, poofter, motherfucker, cocksucker, son of a bitch*. From the example above, the woman is *the bitch* while the man is the son of *a bitch*. Why can't the man be a bitch in his own rights?

Other examples are

1. Prostitutes
2. Frigid
3. Loose
4. Sluts
5. Cougars

**b) Derogatory words based on behaviour**

1. Gossips
2. Useless
3. Garrulous
4. Talkative

**c) Derogatory words based on intelligence**

1. Fish brain (unintelligent)
2. Lazy

**d) Derogatory words based on emotions**

**Sentimental**

1. Cry-babies
2. Drama queen
3. Emotional
4. Hormonal
5. Moody
6. Irrational

**d) Derogatory words based on work/vocation/achievements**

**Female doctor – (female doctor versus male nurse). A medical doctor has to be a man while a nurse will definitely be a woman. How dare women aspire to be nurses? Who will clean the patient's poop and urine?.**

1. Female engineer
2. Female professor
3. Housewife
4. Stay-at-home mum/ working mothers
5. Career women
6. Mumpreneur
7. Female cop
8. Female judge
9. Female CEO Useless prefixes are used to show that they are the exception and not the norm.

**e) Derogatory words based on looks.**

1. Blonde
2. Brunette
3. Redhead
4. Plus size/fat

Sexist language used against women is simply to demean them. Deborah Cameron says: “sexist language teaches us what those who use it and disseminate it think women’s place ought to be: second-class citizens, neither seen nor heard, eternal sex-objects and personifications of evil.” (91) Women are always put in a box and labelled. These sexist labels are utterly preposterous and usually irrelevant. But they are used as a way of forcing women into a certain category where they can be labelled incompetent and unserious. This linguistic violence against the female gender needs to be curbed. Women should rise up and reject all these labels. .

**III. CONCLUSION**

Gender inequality is still a reality. Women still have less access to property ownership. A core Igbo man still finds it preposterous to allocate inheritance to his girl child seeing that her inheritance are her husband and children. Many women still suffer and die from domestic violence, because to their husbands, they are just commodities bought from their fathers’ houses. A man can have many wives and it is called polygamy while a woman cannot. Many Nigerians do not even know the meaning of polyandry; it is not part of our culture/diction. Gender equality can only be achieved when women enjoy same opportunities, rights, responsibilities and obligations as their male counterparts. Women need to be empowered medically, politically, economically, and religiously in order to get a grip on their lives. Women empowerment will go a long way in sustaining our millennium development goals. Women should be taught that they do not need validation from men. Gender discrimination is a social problem and wo(men) need to alienate themselves from it. This will reflect in our language use. Women on the other hand, need to alienate themselves to the point of self-assertion and actualisation. Break boundaries. Raise their voices and roar. Gender neutral words should be employed as we continue to stand against gender discrimination against women and girls through language. A woman has a voice and should be allowed to speak.

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