THE FEMALE GENDER: IN SEARCH OF TRUE EMANCIPATION

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Following a successful lobby by the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and in recognition of the systematic oppression women had faced globally over the past decades, the United Nations (hereinafter referred to as the UN) declared the decade 1976 – 1985 its decade for women at the first world conference on women which was held in Mexico City in 1975.

One of the resolutions of the conference was to hold another world conference in 1980 at the midpoint of the decade, to review and evaluate progress made in realizing the recommendations of its 1975 world conference. The 1980 conference was subtitled “Equality, Development and Peace”. In its interpretation of equality, the UN noted that it meant “not only legal equality, the elimination of de jure\(^1\) discrimination, but also equality of rights” (p.4).

The UN recognized that sexual discrimination was a systemic phenomenon, often times sanctioned by governments, who were charged with the protection of human rights. Not surprisingly, a great deal of discrimination occurs in the developing world, those countries suffering from underdevelopment due to unfair international economic relations. Some of these countries have been excluded from the international community making them less obliged to achieve and sustain international standards of governance.

This essay will focus on specific areas of the developing world, West Africa and China, and gains using the last decade (2002 – 2012) as a
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benchmark. The glossary and references identify the resources applied. The findings show that women’s emancipation has been slow.
"…discrimination against women is incompatible with human dignity and with the welfare of the family and society," (UN declaration during the International Women’s Year, 1975).

The objectives of the UN-declared International Women’s Year 1975 as set by its General Assembly were:

- "To promote equality between men and women”;
- "To ensure full integration of women in the total development effort”;
- "To increase the importance of women’s contribution to the strengthening of world peace”.

In addition to the above objectives, the UN recognized the role of poverty and underdevelopment in discrimination against women as well as their conscription to domestic duties and childbearing functions, leading to unfair division of labor between the sexes. Women were only given limited access to resources and participation in all aspects of life, including economic opportunity and decision-making.
Mexico 1975: “World Plan of Action”

The 1975 Mexico Conference (hereinafter referred to as “Mexico”) made an unequivocal declaration on the equality of men and women. It acknowledged that the problems of women, who constitute half of the world’s population, were the problems of all. It also recognized the urgency of improving the status of women by creating an enabling environment for them to have the same opportunities as men. In particular, support for the women to participate actively in the development of their countries and the attainment of World Peace. Furthermore, it recalled that all members of the UN had subscribed to a charter to “…reaffirm faith in the equal rights of men and women…” (E/Conf.66/34 p. 2).

Principles of the conference’s World Plan of Action include, inter alia, the equality of rights, opportunities and responsibilities of men and women, equal access to education guaranteeing women equal opportunities as men to develop their intellectual potential to the maximum to receive equal pay for work of equal value.

Respect for human dignity includes the right of every woman to decide freely for herself whether or not to contract matrimony. Furthermore, she, like men, should be able to decide freely and responsibly whether or not to have children as well as determine their spacing and number. And women should be given adequate education to achieve these rights. The UN also acknowledged the need for effective economic development of countries, particularly the underdeveloped ones, criticizing what they described as “unjust world policies” (Principle 14).

Midway into the decade, the 1980 Copenhagen conference (hereinafter referred to as Copenhagen) set up a Program of Action which focused on gaining increased participation of women in the World Plan of Action. The program was to advance the realization of its three objectives stated above.

Copenhagen recognized domestic violence as an unacceptable crime against human dignity. It also traced the inequality of women to mass poverty, retarded development of the majority of the world’s population and underdevelopment caused by imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism and unjust international economic relations. Global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were criticized because they require countries, including underdeveloped ones, to adopt unfavorable fiscal policies to qualify for loans. These policies have devastating consequences for these countries’ economies, with women often suffering the most negative impacts, as they already occupy disadvantaged second-class positions in these societies. Furthermore, Copenhagen recognized that priority of (economic) development is usually given to men outside the family household (Copenhagen report, p. 7). Hauwa Mahdi, a human rights activist, challenged the influence of their policies on the Nigerian economy in the seventies. She criticized serious negative impacts on the women’s position and livelihoods.

Copenhagen also noted that despite the approval of the Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of
Others by the General Assembly in Resolution 317 (IV) of December 2nd 1949\(^2\), women and children of both sexes were still very much victims of physical abuse and sexual exploitation constituting implicit slavery.

**Nairobi 1985 ("Forward-Looking Strategies")**

The third UN conference on women, ("Nairobi") reviewed the achievements of the decade for women and adopted its resolutions and decisions. They found a growing gap between developed and developing countries. They also called for the establishment of a *New International Economic Order* based on equity, sovereign equality, interdependence and common interest. Its leaders sought political will on the part of member nations to develop a strategy that would first seek to change unequal conditions and structures that continue to relegate women to a secondary position of low priority.

Since Nairobi however, unequal conditions and structures among UN member nations persist; there is still a wide gap in the GDPs of developed and developing countries, and women continue to bear the brunt of these uneven economics. In a critique of the World Bank’s 2012 flagship publication, Shahra Razavi, a Research Coordinator for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRSD), argued that it had paid scant attention to the informal labor sector, which is mostly populated by women; that it had not given profound consideration for gender wage gaps nor addressed the unfavorable employment conditions women were still subjected to in their second-class position. For example, she found that in the export sector, employers managed
risk by using a core group of largely male, skilled permanent workers, supported by a periphery of “flexible” and “unskilled” female workers.

A Nigerian newspaper report (The Guardian, November 30th 2012) reveals that women have been discovered to be the greatest entrepreneurs both in Nigeria and Africa as a whole (over 50% of Africa’s GDP comes from women). However, due to various factors, majority have continued to thrive only as low scale entrepreneurs, especially in the export sector. In recognition of these challenges, the African Women Entrepreneurship Program (AWEP) recently organized a conference in Lagos to enlighten women entrepreneurs about how to expand their economic frontiers and export commodities to earn money.


Copenhagen acknowledged that even though Mexico helped to raise awareness about the plight, needs and problems of women as well as promote legislation safeguarding their rights, developing countries still struggled to overcome these issues, saddled with challenges such as inadequate allocation of financial resources, and lack of skilled personnel to carry out planned goals.

These constraints are to a large extent due to scarcity of resources and even under-utilization of existing ones due in part to a lack of know-how in the efficient utilization of these resources and in part to willful negligence on the parts of some governments who would not let programs work as planned for selfish, political and even criminal reasons. The UN acknowledges that this also
demonstrates the slight significance given to women’s issues by these governments.

Further to the lackadaisical approach of some governments to the plight of women is the absence of mandates for mechanisms limiting their scopes of action. The UN noted that some of these mechanisms only served to perpetuate the stereotypes of the feminine role as women were only usually given welfare roles to play in the economy.

The UN however acknowledged that a significant number of governments reported new constitutional and legislative provisions which guarantee or promote equal rights of both sexes, even though they are not always met with adequate enforcement policies or machinery. The British Council reports in “Gender In Nigeria Report 2012” that “Excellent policies and intentions have not translated into budgets or action to make the changes required if women are to contribute effectively to Nigeria’s development” (Executive Summary iii). It also confirmed that the National Gender Policy had yet to be executed, while the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) had stalled. Nigeria ratified the CEDAW in 2008 “without reservations” according to the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), which obliged it to fulfill all the requirements in its article 2 towards the promotion of its principles. The International Federation of Human Rights also referred to the “sorry state of women’s rights in Nigeria” in a 2008 report, demonstrating the Nigerian government’s lack of fulfillment of its own obligations towards the convention.
China ratified the CEDAW in 1980. In a report it issued in 1989, it confirmed that following a history of what it described as the humiliation and brutal oppression of women in a “feudal,…semi-feudal and semi-colonial society”, Chinese women had achieved historic liberation with the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Furthermore, the Chinese government claimed to employ legal, administrative and educational means to eradicate discrimination against women, resulting in great changes in the mental outlook of Chinese women, improving their spirit of self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance and self-improvement.

Just as predicted by the UN, China admitted that underdevelopment and culture were hampering factors in women’s progress. They state in their report that

“In real life, Chinese women’s equal rights to political participation, employment and education as well as in marriage and family life have yet to be fully realized. Disrespect for and discrimination against women, and even violations of their rights and interests, are not uncommon, and the overall talents and abilities of China’s women also need further improvement” (Part 1).

It is however committed to eliminating all backward ideas that discriminate against women and to fulfilling the objectives of the Beijing Declaration.

On the issue of equal recognition for work of equal value, not much progress was made. Hauwa Mahdi, a human rights activist, declared in Nigeria in the seventies that ‘According to the law we’re equal. But African women do at least 30 percent
more work than men, and most of it not recognized, especially care work. Care work is not valued.’ That position did not change much in the 1980s and has remained a major concern in the last decade (2002 – 2012).

Razavi’s critique of the World Bank’s 2012 publication included the critique of gender wage gaps, and she gave insightful reasons why its initiatives on gender still fell short of expectations. She argued that women’s disproportionate care responsibility, which limits their access to paid work, had not been acknowledged by labor markets. Unpaid reproductive work which contributes much to the functioning of any economy; a situation the World Bank had thus far failed to correct.

Razavi also argued that labor markets were gendered institutions, operating on the basis of formal and informal rules that view and value male and female labor differently. She had further scathing criticism for the bank’s acknowledgement of the gap between women’s and men’s wages even though education gaps had closed up considerably. The World Bank had cautioned that the remaining gender wage gap may demonstrate additional unmeasured differences in worker and job characteristics between both genders. Razavi debunked this argument, stating that the problem with it was that it reinforced the very same structural and discriminatory forces that the World Bank was trying to deconstruct.

The fourth World Conference for women (hereinafter referred to as “Beijing”) issued “The Beijing Declaration” recognizing among other items, that the status of women had improved in some important respects in the last decade, but that “progress (had) been uneven, inequalities between women and men (had) persisted, and major obstacles remained” (Declaration #5), with dire consequences for global well-being. They also recognized that the situation was worsened by global poverty, affecting mostly women and children. The recognition of global poverty, as opposed to poverty restricted to the developing world, was a refreshing change. At Beijing, representatives from various women’s organization recommended ways in which the World Bank could help achieve the global consensus to promote gender equality and empower women. In a World Bank report issued in 2005, it confirmed that, partly in response to these recommendations, it had increased its efforts on gender equality in its assistance to member countries, including its lending operations. Gender issues were now better integrated into its country assistance strategies more than was the case pre-Beijing.

“That…is where the problem really is – how we value women and girls in our societies” (Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive Director, UN Population Fund – UNFPA)⁴

One aspect all conferences had in common was the affirmation of a woman’s rights to control her health and in particular fertility and bear children at the right
age of maturity. Unfortunately, this is still not the case today, especially in the developing world. Osotimehin revealed that 58% of Nigerian HIV patients are female\(^5\). The World Bank also acknowledged in its *Beijing 10* report that the HIV/AIDS pandemic was an “emerging challenge” that threatened women more than men (p. 3). With a maternal mortality ratio of 704 to 1,000 per 100,000 live births, Nigeria continues to have one of the highest levels of maternal mortality\(^6\).

Early marriage leads to early pregnancy and childbirth with its attendant consequences: prolonged labor attributable to underdeveloped pelvises, which causes vesicovaginal-fistula (VVF), a condition where the vagina has abnormal connections with other organs. The victims usually have no control over their bladder and excretory organ, a situation that renders them pariahs in their societies as people, including their spouses ostracize them.

Related to sexual health is the deplorable situation of the sex trade which is just as prevalent today as it was a decade ago. *The Nigerian Tribune* of December 7\(^{th}\) 2012 reported that the Nigerian Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development, Hajiya Zainab Maina, revealed that Nigerian girls had been reported as being victims of trafficking all over the world. She added that 50 Nigerian sex slaves had been rescued from Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire. The girls, victims of human trafficking, were between the ages of 16 and 25 and had been tricked out of Nigeria with better job offers only to end up in brothels in the neighboring countries. Not surprisingly, the rising cases of human and sex trafficking in Nigeria has been attributed to poverty and employment among other factors.
Humantrafficking.org, a web resource for combating human trafficking, reports that China is a “source, transit, and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking”. It also revealed that China’s Ministry of Public Security reported in January 2011 that the number of Chinese women forced into prostitution overseas was rising as many women fell prey to international criminal gangs.

Furthermore, rape remains a weapon of war in many developing countries. The Ontario Women’s Justice Network reports on its website several examples of rape being used as a systematic or widespread weapon in violent conflict in the last century. However, Nigeria and China are not currently plagued by this problem.

On the other hand, rape in peace times is not adequately punished in these societies, with the female victims subjected to humiliating investigation which discourages future victims from reporting rape. Furthermore, sex offenders’ registers are non-existent in developing societies, exposing them to released sex offenders who are susceptible to re-offending. Spousal rape is not recognized as a crime in most developing countries. China\(^7\) and Nigeria\(^8\) are no exceptions.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) remains a practice in many underdeveloped countries, including Nigeria. Even though the World Health Organization estimates that it is harmful, has no health benefits, and is indeed a violation of human rights, it confirms that 92 million girls aged ten years and above have undergone the practice in Africa to date. Nigeria is one of the African
countries where it is practiced with impunity as the government has not taken any steps to end it.

**The Role of Education**

One of the resolutions of Nairobi was the development and implementation of appropriate incentives to ensure that women have an equal opportunity as men to acquire education, and to apply their education to a work or career context (Paragraph 165). It also makes a case for equal scholarship, boarding and lodging opportunities for both girls and boys. Furthermore, they included the need for institutions to expand their curricula to include studies in women’s contribution to all aspects of development as well as promoting men’s responsibility in the maintenance of the household and the upbringing of children.

However, some social studies textbooks in Nigeria still teach elementary school children that the role of the father is to go out and work to provide for the family, while the mother stays home to do the housekeeping. In China, the Hui Muslims do not see much point in sending daughters to school, according to a report by the *New York Times*. The same report also recounts how *Focus*, China’s most popular investigative television show, had profiled a middle school in rural Anhui Province where school officials forced 200 children who had dropped out to masquerade as students for the annual government inspection. In an August 2011 report, a Chinese newspaper admitted that deep-rooted parental discrimination toward girls, especially in China’s rural areas, had hindered many from receiving a high school education.
Conclusion

Despite all odds, the efforts made by women the world over during the last decade to hold their own are commendable. America’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, BLS, recently released figures demonstrating that women now earn 82% as much as men – up from 64% in 1980\textsuperscript{11}. The study showed that the gap widened as women aged – obviously due to time lost to childbearing and domestic functions. Progress has also been made on the sex segregation of the labor market, with many previously male-dominated fields such as law and medicine opening up to women. However, experts acknowledge that those trends are largely the result of women’s increased entry into higher education, in which female graduates have outnumbered male graduates since the mid 1980s. They also caution that there is still a tremendous amount of work to do before women have true equality in the workforce.

The slow speed of women’s emancipation globally is further demonstrated by the Chinese government who only passed the Law on Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, a law focused on women’s welfare, ten years post Beijing. Mao Zedong, the Chinese dictator once proposed to the United States envoy Henry Kissinger to send 10 million Chinese women to the United States, to “lessen (China’s) burden”\textsuperscript{12}. Nigeria, being a member of the African Union, is subject to the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa adopted on the 11\textsuperscript{th} of July 2003 to strengthen the protection and promotion of women’s rights. However, the situation in Nigeria today is still dire for women, due to the
patriarchal nature of the society as well as unwillingness on the part of the
government to “walk the talk” for various reasons.

It is obvious that the march to emancipation and equality is a long and
slow one for women. National governments, the United Nations and other global
organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund need
to intensify their efforts. Many declarations made in the course of history in
support of women’s emancipation still sound like rhetoric today.

The next conference on women should be more precise and action-
oriented. It should be geared towards immediate action with themes
demonstrating urgency. It should develop a strategy for compliance. Member
countries must be made more accountable with the possibility of sanctions for
non-compliance. Women are the nucleus of society. It is time they stopped
occupying second place in the global scheme of things. That time is NOW!
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