

IS FEMINISM AN INTELLECTUAL WASTE? A PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

By

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Abstract

The idea of feminism was centered on the concern for gender equality and the promotion of equal rights for men and woman; the expression of these concerns through theory or action, and the valuing of individuals for their contributions to society rather than their biological or sexual characteristics or roles. Women have played a lot of role in the development of the present society. In the society today yet unfortunately, women are seen as second-class citizens, hence leading to injustice. Using the analytic method of research, this paper makes an advocacy for the equality of men and women. In other words, granting equal right to both sexes enhances justice and development in the state. This paper concludes that, feminist's argument is never an intellectual waste; hence women are important in the society and should be allowed equal opportunities in all capacities.

Keywords: feminism, gender, equality, rights, waste, etc

Introduction

Feminism is both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms. Motivated by the quest for social justice, feminist inquiry provides many perspectives on social, cultural, economic, and political phenomena. However, since inception of the world, there has been this general notion that held the view that, men are superior to women. Among them is the subjugation of women in the world. This vision of male supremacy is reflected in all traditional families and societies to the extent that even women were made to accept inferior as their nature.

Over centuries, men and women have so internalized this culture of male supremacy, that even when a woman is known to have the actual power, especially in a family where the woman has the economic power the man would still be expected to assert his authority as the captain of the

family ship and the Lord of the society. Yet despite many overall shared commitments, there are numerous differences among feminist philosophers regarding the defence of equality of the sexes is found in Plato's writings, where he argues for the equality of women to the men. Plato sees men and women as equal in the state. In other words, granting equal right to both sexes enhance justice and even development in the state (Plato, 1953:56).

The questions now include, are women inferior as generally conceived? Or incapable of taking political position? What socio-political locations are they part of or excluded from? How do their activities compare to those of men? What do the various roles and locations of women allow or preclude? How have their roles been valued or devalued? Have any of women's experiences or problems been ignored or undervalued? Or is feminism an intellectual waste?

This paper therefore is to examine the issue of equality of sexes in our society as clamoured by feminist. This paper makes a philosophical assessment of feminist movement who seeks equality of both sexes. Specifically, this work wishes to achieve a reconstruction, re-interpretation, re-examination and correction of women's impression about themselves as people with unequal status and nature with men or with the potentials of contributing positively to the betterment of the society. Hence, the work wishes to awaken women from their slumber, encouraging them to re-activate their mindset and see themselves as major key players in nation-building.

Towards a Definition of Feminism

Feminism is derived from the Latin word *femina*, which means woman. The *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines feminism as the approach to social life, philosophy and ethics that commits itself to correcting bias leading to the subordination of women (Blackburn, 2019).

Feminism is the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Although primarily originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests (Wikipedia, 2021).

Feminism is an interdisciplinary approach to issues of equality and equity based on gender, gender expression, gender identity, sex, and sexuality as understood through social theories and political activism. Historically, feminism has evolved from the critical examination of inequality between the sexes to a more nuanced focus on the social and performative constructions of gender and sexuality. However, the basis of Feminism is:

- i. The advocacy of women's rights based on the equality of the sexes
- ii. The theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes
- iii. The belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities
- iv. The doctrine advocating social, political, and all other rights of women comparable to those of men

Feminism, therefore encompasses moral, cultural, anthropological and ideological factors. The inequality in the society concerning sexes and the suppression of women lead to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); and its Article I state that:

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 II state also that everyone is entitled to all right and freedom set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Kinds of Feminism

1. Liberal Feminism: This branch of feminism focus on achieving gender equality through political and legal reform within the framework of liberal democracy. Liberal feminism works within the structure of mainstream society to integrate women into that structure (Maynard, 1995:259-281).

2. Radical Feminism: Here, feminism is a perspective that calls for a radical reordering of society in which male supremacy is eliminated in all social and economic contexts, while recognizing that women's experiences are also affected by other social divisions such as in race, class, and sexual orientation (Giardina, 2010).

3. Marxist/Socialist Feminism: Socialist feminists assert that women are oppressed due to their financial dependence on males. Women are subjects to male domination within capitalism due to an uneven balance in wealth. They see economic dependence as the driving force of women's subjugation to men. Therefore, women's liberation depends on social, economic, and political justice (Buchanan, 2011).

4. Eco-Feminism: Ecofeminist theory asserts a feminist perspective of Green politics that calls for an egalitarian, collaborative society with no one dominant group. Ecofeminist analysis explores the connections between women and nature in culture, economy, religion, politics,

literature, and addresses the parallels between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women (Adams, 2007:1-8).

Women's Predicament in our Time

Women world wide claimed to have suffered long years of subjugation in the hands of the male folk. Before the advent of western civilization women were dominantly under the domination of masculine tradition. Amaku quoting Amuluche Nnamani supports this view by pointing out that, "In Igboland, like in most parts of the world where patriarchy prevailed, women were subjugated and denied many rights" (Amaku, 2010:134). In the families, the male child is accorded more respect than the girl child. As Jerome Mbat put it, "Male and female children, right from their birth, are attached different statues, values and roles, by the society, although in the African perspective childbearing generally remains one of the uncompromising indexes of a fulfilled marriage"(Amaku, 2010:134). The girl child has only a nominal status in the family; she acquires more dignity as a person only after marriage.

In all instances, women were reminded of their subordinate status in the society. They were forced to believe by tradition that men were superior to women and must be submissive in all things. They were brought to accept that a woman's rightful place is in the kitchen and in the care of her children. Consequently, they were hardly encouraged to aim at noble statuses in the society, as some exalted positions were dogmatically believed to be reserved for men (Amaku, 2010:135).

Women's education especially in Africa is still a battle in many parts. Some families in Africa think that it is of no use educating a girl that will eventually leave them for another family. The male superiority complex was carried into the academic sphere. It was expected that the boy were to lead the girls in the class, but when the expectations failed, it was common for a father to warn his son never to allow a girl outsmart him in the course.

Furthermore, it was believed that men were more intelligent than women, but surprisingly, a good number of women, when they were eventually allowed to attend school, proved unbeatable in the classroom. However, education was changing misconceptions about women but not so rapidly. Nevertheless, education did not free the women from the claws of traditional customs and traditions practices. Education might improve their financial revenues but not to change the woman image in the society. The above view points would compel any intellectual to agree with N.S.S. Iwe that "there is no doubt that in history the dignity of women has suffered

exploitation, humiliation, degradation and inhibitions because of the domineering ignorance and prejudice” (Amaku, 2010:138).

In marriage, women have experienced oppressions especially been battered by their husband, sexual harassment, denial of women's right to own property, the unfair frustration of women education, the prevention of women from political positions, sexist mentality in employment opportunities, the suppression of women voice in society. Though forced by tradition to be submissive to the men, many of the women have proved their worth in business, in the military, government services, in the higher institutes as lecturers, in various administrative agenda and social politics.

In Nigeria and indeed in Africa, women are not given the same rights and privileges as men, they are not even allowed to inherit property but only hold it in trust if they have (a) male child or children. There are a lot of don't women are to contend with. A woman is not allowed to pick a bunch of kola nuts that fall down from a kola-nut tree but a male can pick it for her, she can neither break kola nut nor even be 'shon' it when it is being passed round. At her traditional wedding, she must kneel to give wine to her husband, she does not take part in discussions on land matters neither does she play a decisive role in the customary demands and dowry of her daughter (Okoro: 2010:231)

By and large, Ukaulor C. Stella, *In Praise of African Feminism*, paints an unflattering portrait of the ideal women of our contemporary time. She highlights the ills women encounter in our Igbo tradition and opposed them by proposing the study of Igbo culture that is transforming and developing those outdated cultural elements that are at the expense of women's dignity, honour and right. She avers that women have their talents and should be given opportunities to perform. To deny women their rights of freedom and self-preservation is to sabotage God's divine work (2010:63).

The women liberation from the suffocating claws of androgenicity was thought to come from no other group than the women themselves. The Aba women riot in 1929 against colonial rules registered the view that women could successfully fledge muscles in the society and win. The roles of world-famous women in politics include Margaret Thatcher in Britain, Angela Merkel in Germany, Hilary Clinton in USA, Dr. Ngozi Okojo-Iweala of Nigeria. Women worldwide who have excelled in their perspective offices are demonstrations that women can meaningfully execute political and leadership positions equally as the male counterparts.

Feminism and its Goals

Women are oppressed not just by sexism, but in many ways, e.g., by classism, homophobia, racism, ageism, ableism, etc. One primary goal of feminism is to end all oppression that affects women (Crow, 2000:1). Note, that feminists ought to work to end all forms of oppression; oppression is unjust and feminists, like everyone else, have a moral obligation to fight injustice; without maintaining that it is the mission of feminism to end all oppression. One might even believe that to accomplish feminism's goals it is necessary to combat racism and economic exploitation, but also think that there is a narrower set of specifically feminist objectives. In other words, opposing oppression in its many forms may be instrumental to, even a necessary means to, feminism. Bell Hooks argues:

Feminism, as a liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal power shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression. There is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice (Hooks, 1989:22).

On Hooks' account, the defining characteristic that distinguishes feminism from other liberation struggles is its concern with sexism: Unlike many feminist comrades, women and men must share a common understanding; a basic knowledge of what feminism is; if it is ever to be a powerful mass-based political movement. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, defines feminism broadly as "a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression" would enable us to have a common political goal... Sharing a common goal does not imply that women and men will not have radically divergent perspectives on reaching that goal (Hooks, 1989:23).

Hooks' approach depends on the claim that sexism is a particular form of oppression distinguished from other forms, e.g., racism and homophobia, even though it is currently interlocked with other forms of oppression. Feminism's objective is to end sexism, though because of its relation to other forms of oppression, this will require efforts to end other forms of oppression as well. Furthermore because sexist institutions are also, e.g., racist, classist, and homophobic, dismantling sexist institutions will require that we dismantle the other forms of domination intertwined with them. As Elizabeth Spelman asserts that:

...no woman is subject to any form of oppression simply because she is a woman; which forms of oppression she is subject to depend on what 'kind' of woman she is. In a world in which a woman might be subject to racism, classism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, if she is not so subject it is because of her race, class,

religion, sexual orientation. So it can never be the case that the treatment of a woman has only to do with her gender and nothing to do with her class or race (1988:52-53).

However, several accounts of oppression are designed to allow that oppression takes many forms, and refuse to identify one form as more fundamental than the rest. Iris Young describes five “faces” of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and systematic violence. Sexist or racist oppression, for instance, will manifest itself in different ways in different contexts, e.g., in some contexts through systematic violence, in other contexts through economic exploitation. Acknowledging this, women’s oppression is due to the eroticization of male dominance and should be bridge to the barest minimum.

A Philosophical Discourse of Women in the Society

Women have played a lot of role in the development of the present society. Plato discusses his notion of women in the *Republic and Law*. He argues for the equality of women and the men in the city-state. Plato did not see women’s nature or sex as a barrier to their development. According to him, women are part of the human race and should concern themselves with the affairs of the state. In the society today, women are seen as second-class citizen. As a result of this ills, Plato sees this as an act of injustice thereby advocates for the equality of men and women. In other words, granting equal right to both sexes enhance justice and development in the state. According to him, women are part of the human race and be regulated by the law. They should concern themselves with the affairs of the state. He states:

That which has law and order in a state is the cause of every good but that which is distorted or ill-ordered is often the ruin of that which is well ordered... the careful considering, arranging as well as ordering a common principle of all institutions relating to men and women greatly contribute to the happiness of the state (Plato, 1953:144).

These above, Plato agrees that at the very outset of founding common wealth, everyone should do the work for which nature fit him or her. He maintains that although they have different sexes but they have the same nature and should have the same work. He also maintained that no occupation that belongs to either men or women as such natural gifts to him are found here and there in both creatures and every occupation should be opened to both.

Harriet Taylor Mill, in her essay discussed the condition of women is to remove all interference with affection or with anything which is, or which even might be purported to be, demonstrative of affection (1984:12). She criticized the fact that women are educated for one single object, to

gain their living by marrying. That is, to say that to be married is seen as the object of women's existence and that means that they do really cease to exist as to anything worth calling life or any useful purpose (1984:13). Harriet Taylor in this essay revealed the way in which women were brought up, women were educated for one single object which is for marriage and when they get married they cease to exist as anything worth calling life or having any useful purpose. She frowned at the fact that marriage is seen as a final destination of women and their actuality. She vouched for perfect equality of the sexes (1984:13).

Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) maintains that women are human beings and deserve the same fundamental rights of men instead of being viewed as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage. Sequel to education is the fact that men look upon women as alluring mistresses rather than rational wives. This highlights the sexual character of women which is the desire to love; and be loved and this their sexual character therefore has been turned into a means of their exploitation by men. About this, Mary writes:

I lament that women are systematically degraded receiving the trivial attentions, which men think it mainly to pay to the sex, when, in fact, they are insultingly supporting their own superiority (1792:4).

Mary argues that women are not naturally inferior to men but appear to be so only because they lack education. Her central argument is that women should be educated in a rational manner in order to give them the opportunity to contribute to society. Mary states that if women are not prepared by education to become the companion of men, they will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all. Wollstonecraft contends that society will degenerate without educated women, particularly because mothers are the primary educators of young children (1792:154-155).

In agreement, Alice Rossi's major thesis in the essay was to reassert the claim to sex equality and the search for the means by which it can be achieved. By sex equality, Rossi mean, "a socially and religious conception of the roles of men and women, in which they are equal and similar in such spheres as intellectual, artistic, political and occupational interests and participation, complementary only in these spheres dictated by physiological differences between the sexes" (Rossi, 1964:610). Rossi here is trying to propose a change in the social definitions of approved characteristics and behaviours of both sexes. For instance, the girls cultivating the quality of workmanship, constructiveness, aggression etc. which are seen as

qualities of male and then the boys cultivating qualities of tenderness etc. which are approved characteristics of the female (Rossi, 1964:608).

Rossi pointed out that the chief goals of the early leaders of the feminist movement were to secure the vote of women and to change the laws affecting marriage. For Rossi, women would have equal rights to property and to their own children. For Rossi, there is no equality until women participate on an equal basis with men in politics, occupations and the family. In order to actualize this men have a role to play because women cannot do it alone. To this Rossi opines:

To a greater extent than any other underprivileged group, women need not only vigorous spokesmen and pacesetters of their own sex, but the support of men to affect any major change in the status of women, whether in the personal sphere of individual relationships or on the level of social organizations (Rossi, 1964:611).

To this, Rossi points out the need for equality between the sexes as it helps keep the family independent even at the loss of a spouse and it also helps in maintaining the urban industrial society. Wollstonecraft state that morality is not based on gender. It is a mistake to believe that there is one morality for men and a different one for women. A single standard of morality applies to men and women.

Approaches Towards the Equality of the Sexes

Looking at humanity at large, one finds two species, commonly called male and female. The difference between the two sexes is necessarily biological having its full expression in their anatomy and physiology. In the social and cultural arena, the two sexes have their different roles to play in the society and these roles are believed to be assigned to both genders by the society. All societies views and understand the conduct of the sexes in different directions, just as they signalise the difference by the distinction in dress. No society treats its men and its women equally alike. In all societies the sexes think differently and do different kinds of work. In any event, it is certain that the biological fact of inequality between the sexes has manifold social consequences.

Inequality between the sexes negatively affects not only the lives of women but of men as well. Men and women alike are harmed by such a situation and consequently it negatively affects

the whole society. The subordination of one sex over another is a serious hindrance to the full development of reason. Any inequality represents a serious barrier to the advancement of an entire society, and is also an obstacle to progress on an individual level, that is, to individual improvement and prosperity. It is on this note that Mill argues for the need to dismantle social and legal relationship that subjugates one sex and establishes perfection equality and partnership between the sexes in both the public and private spheres (Szapuova, 2006:183).

To actualize equality, women alone cannot effect any major change in the status of women, whether in their individual relationships or on the level of social organization. To this Mill asserts: “Women can’t be expected to devote themselves to emancipation of women until considerable numbers of men are prepared to join with them in the undertaking (Bennett, 1986:49). Women cannot do much to achieve their emancipation. The men have a part to play towards actualizing this. Rossi also pointed out in her article on equality between the sexes that “to a greater extent than any other underprivileged group, women need not only vigorous spokesmen and pacesetters of their of their own sex, but the support of men, to effect any major change in the status of women, whether in the personal sphere of individual relationships or on the level of social organization” (Rossi, 1964:611).

In actualizing equality, there is a need to break the limitations set by stereotype is said to be a standardized mental picture that is held in common by all members of a group and that represents an over simplified opinion, prejudiced attitude or uncritical judgement, for example. In the society, women are seen as the weaker sex. The general belief everywhere is that man is the dominant sex and the women as the God’s second mistake. According to Rossi, “in the larger society women are seen as predominantly fulfilling nurturing, expensive active function.

Stereotypes, rigid rules and prejudices that hinders peoples’ ability to fulfill their potential by limiting choices and opportunities needs to be countered and fought because it negatively affect the women by depriving them of equal knowledge, exercise and enjoyment of rights and fundamental freedoms. Laws that change mind-sets should be enacted like those against domestic violence and other gender based violence, including sexual harassment and rape.

In the subjection of women, Mill talks about the role of women in marriage and how it needed to be change. Those marriage laws that subordinates a sex to the other should be change. Marriage should be something done out of one’s choice and freedom. The ideas of marriage

being the destination assigned to women by society should be change because it does ensure the equality of the sexes. The laws of marriage subordinates women as slaves, so therefore there is need to change such laws so that it does not just favour one sex over another but rather benefits the both of them.

Also, education is of great help in establishing equality and ensuring social justice but it can also add to the existing inequalities or at least perpetuate the same. In order to achieve equality there has to be improvement in the access to quality education, the both sexes should be given equal attention and access to education as it will aid in impacting the virtue of toleration among the sexes, they will grow seeing each other as equal and live in mutual understanding and friendship.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that women suffered untold hardship in the society. Feminism at its core is about equality of men and women, not 'sameness'. So many people argue that women are not the 'same' as men so there can't be equality. In other words, because their bodies are different, and because men and women have different physical capabilities, does not one superior to the other because these physical differences mean uniqueness of humans. The issue here is about equal rights and equal access to opportunities. Men and women don't have to be the 'same' in physicality to have the right to equality. From my view, it's a misguided one reasons is that, gender is only but a duality sets off men and women under certain circumstances that prevent them from saying, doing, desiring or perceiving the same thing.

The vast majority of people believe in equal rights for men and women, but the conflict is about how equality should be achieved. A female child in most societies of the world is seen to be fragile. Thus she grows up with this idea of her fragility and consequently sees herself as a weaker sex both socially and physically. While struggling for equality with men, women should examine the various ways in which they render themselves so cheap in their association with men. They are their undoing. Their liberation should begin first with themselves. Nature, we are told, made them male and female and the two collaborate to construct a healthy progressive human society.

There are thousands of people out there who feel we have already arrived at equality for men and women. Majority of women conceptually believe that equality of rights of men and women

does not exist; however, such a disbelief is a misconception or figmentation of imagination this is because 'feminism' is a word and a movement that does not align with their personal beliefs or values in a democratic or liberal society of today.

Many people fear that feminism will bring about negative shifts in relationships, marriage, society, culture, power and authority dynamics, business, job and economic opportunities if and when women are on an equal footing with men. To suppress the social growth of women regarding education, politics, employment, and economy in the name of cultural biases is tantamount to a crime against humanity and womanhood. So feminism is never an intellectual waste for its focus on liberation and equality of humankind no matter the gender.

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