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*The Nigerian Perspective*

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# 13. The Changing Role of Language in Gender Disparity and Cultural Change

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## Abstract

Language is a body of knowledge and rules that manifest in speech (Hudson, 1996). It is the major vehicle for the communication of the cultural heritage, beliefs and norms of a given society. It cannot be disassociated from a people's ways of life and this is why sociolinguistics stress is the relationship between language social group and culture. William Labov (1963) describes language as a social option defined in terms of the group of people who use it. Gender, on the other hand, has to do with the rules that the society allocates to the male and female sexes. Gender inequality has existed right from the beginning of human life; in fact based on the biblical perspective God Himself initiated it. But God never meant it to be a weapon of oppression and discrimination rather that one may complement the other for a better existence. In this paper, we cite examples of the operation of language in the culture of gender discrimination in the first section. In the second section we overview some of the efforts at the eradication of sexual inequality and the role of language thereof. We summarize and make recommendations in the third section.

## Introduction

Gender discrimination is a culture; fortunately, it is a vanishing culture. Presently, it is present in most cultures the world over, its presence is manifested in the use of certain terms and expressions. Here we present some of these terms and expressions as found in Ibibio, English and the Nigerian pidgin.

## The Ibibio examples concerning natural characteristics of womanhood

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| (1) Owonwaa ofon-ofon<br>woman cloth/cloth  | [ówonwàan òfòn òfòn]<br>'Ordinary womanhood' |
| (2) Ówonwààn èbà-ébá<br>woman breast-breast | [ówonwáán ébá-ébá]<br>'ordinary womanhood'   |

(3) ówónwààn itiábà woman seven	[ówónwáán ítiábá] 'woman of valour'
(4) ówónwáá éf^d mfi woman bottom periwinkle	ówónwààn éf^ð mfi 'simple womanhood'
(5) Àkpàrà ánwààn Harlot woman	[àkpàrà ánwàà] 'plain womanhood'
(6) Énàn ówònwàà cow woman	[énàn ówààn] 'Tongh woman'
(7) Ata-efit òwonwaan Chew-chew knife woman	[àtà-átá éfit ówònwàà] 'Daring woman'
(8) Ndanño owo cannot live with someone	[ndanño owo] 'a divorcee or old maid'

**Concerning Bad Motherhood**

(9) Èkà ábàsi mother god	[èkà ábàsi] [èkà éwà]
(10) Èkà éwà mother dog	[èkà éwà]
(11) Èkà únèn mother hen	[èkà únèn]
(12) Ákpán èkà àmàn àtá what are their closes? 1st son mother birth eat	[ákpán àkà àmàn àtá]

A sociolinguistic analysis of the above list of expressions reveals their connotational implications as follows:-

Owonwaan ofon-ofon implies that a woman is associated with clothing. By nature, she only knows how to dress and goes after more and more clothing. She is not expected to achieve anything more serious than just to look beautiful by putting on clothes. If she achieves anything positive and exceptional, it comes as a surprise and so people would exclaim.

**Au! Owonwaan ofon-ofon!**

If it is something wrong or stupid, that comes as no surprise it is accepted with sneering and ridicule after all she is *owonwaan ofon-ofon*.

If it is something tough and wicked then the people express shock that *owonwaan ofon-ofon* could do such a thing!

So one way or the other the woman does not win in this culture-her place is fixed and static *Owon waan ofon-ofon* is comparable to the English saying that the place of the woman is in the Kitchen. "*Owonwaan eba-eba*" carries a similar connotation. A woman is associated with breast and breastfeeding.

"*Owonwaan itiaba*" connotes valour, a woman that has made a mark positive or negative. A woman that is able to achieve such a feat is made a woman seven times, i.e. for her to be able to do what she has done the female substance to the power of seven is in her, a positive attribute in this case. "*Owonwan efɔd mfi*" portrays the fact that the woman is associated with cutting the bottom of periwinkles and the making of soup. That is much of what she is expected to do. If she tries to compete for a post with a male counterpart it is common to hear the question a, how can common '*owonwaan efɔd mfi do that?*' One of the retired state governors in referring to a lady that indicated an interest in the presidency during elections commented about her:

"*Owonwaan akese akpikke mfi*"

i.e. "a woman used to cut periwinkle" i.e. "what is she looking for in the presidential elections? Her aspiration could not go beyond the state level in the end. "*Akpara anwaan*" connotes a real woman but then the word 'akpar' means harlot. In normal peaceful conversation the expression is accepted normally and generally as referring to the "real" woman. In a non-peaceful context as in quarrels or conflicts the expression is seen as being abusive. The word 'akpara edeen' on its own in any context is derogatory and abusive. Besides the term "*akpara edeen*" (harlot man") may be heard only for emphasis occasionally by a woman who is upset with such a man. Sometimes it is even complimentary to the man.

"*Ndanno owo*" translated, "I cannot live with someone." This title is given to a single woman who perhaps has never married or a divorcee who is elderly or advanced in age.

“Uwuo utie [ùwùò ùtiè] (“Come out sit”). Another derogatory term “come out sit “ that refers to a separated or a divorced woman. The understanding is that she decided to come out of her marital home and remain alone.

“*Enan owonwaan*” means “acow of a woman”

She may be brave and strong or an achiever but she has no conscience. She behaves like a cow, she may be wicked or diabolical.

“*Ata - ata efit owonwaan*” refers to a woman you cannot bend, manipulate or pacify. She is hard, tough or wicked. She is a woman who may see a sharp knife and decide to hew it. She is not easily scared or fearful like a normal woman. The positive qualities of bravery or stout heartedness are relegated to the background by the society concerning such a woman.

In all we have discussed so far there are no equivalent terms or expressions that commonly or generally refer to the man in association with his behaviour except in the case of

“owodeen	itiaba”
man	seven

“Owodeen itiaba” is associated with a brave man a man of valour, an achiever, no negative connotation is associated with such a title. No matter how many women he marries or keeps he is not referred to as ‘*akpara owodeen*’ (“harlot man”). Rather he is condoned and referred to as “*uko edeenwo*” – ‘man of valour’ or “*ayara owodeen*” – i.e. the ‘male man’ or ‘he man’.

In the case of “*Eka Abasi*” mother god’ the implication is that such a mother is wicked and can destroy the child. The expression “*Eka Abasi*” is associated with a wicked female deity with big breasts that goes about hunting children to kill. It follows that a woman with big breasts who may be not quite beautiful in the face is referred to be *Eka Abasi*, an unkind and uncaring mother, a hard-hearted and demanding one. There is no equivalent term that “*Eka-ewa*” refers to a woman who cannot care for her children. She abandons the children to feign for themselves. If a father is unkind to his family or abandons them he is never referred to as “*ete ewa*”: the Ibibio language has no such expression that is generally accepted or heard. A mother who has taken very little care of the children and has not made much impact in

their lives but makes much noise and boasts about the number of children she has is referred to as “eka unen” but many fathers don’t take care of their children and there is no expression as “ete unen” (“father fowl”). Other linguistic terms and expressions in the Ibibio language that reveal sexual inequality are ódóm (he who bites) (husband) ódóm (usually bites) owo (person). The connotation here is that the husband has the right to bite, he paid the dairy. Literarily odom means “he bites” or “he who bites”. By structural analysis it constitutes two normally aw husband should be someone that takes care of the wife but from this word the husband is one that bites. By implication the husband is a suppressor and an oppressor; he is wicked, unkind, in considerate and practices violence on the wife.

As if to compensate or retaliate for many derogatory expressions only in the beating that he beats her as:

Èbé	ékpò
Husband	ghost or masquerade
Or	
Èbé	étim
Husband	millipede

The connotation here is that by the time a husband finishes dealing with you, you become tasteless, flat, no more sweetness.

### **The case of the English language (examples)**

In her paper, “Language and Social Stereotypes of Nigerian Women”, Dr. Mary D. Mbosowo comments that there are both conscious and unconscious discriminations which are probably a reflection of cultural stereotyping encouraged by the built-in masculine bias which actually exists in English. Some of such examples include

Mankind	not womankind
Fellow men	not fellow women
Foreman	not forewoman
Mastercraftman	not mistress crafts woman
One man show	not one woman show

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Praternize	not maternise
Mastermind	not mistress mind
Brotherly love	not sisterly love
Bachelors degree	not spinsters degree
Master's degree	not mistress's degree

Apart from the above examples, there exists another group or lexical items that although both male and female equivalents exist in the English language they convey or connote different meanings. For instance, the words

Bachelor (Mr)	unmarried male
Spinster (Ms)	unmarried female

The connotation attached to bachelorhood is that of a young man, confident in himself, who is still a bachelor because he wants to consolidate his position economically and otherwise, who is purposely taking his time in searching for the best catch for a wife. The society looks at him with respect and easy expectation knowing that one day he is going to satisfy their curiosity with the most suitable wife.

The spinster on the other hand is an object of pity to friends and relatives. To other groups, she is the object of scorn and mockery. She is held in suspicion in married circles. While the bachelor is referred to as 'Mr' like any other man the spinster is referred to as 'Ms' to differentiate her from Miss, the younger girls

### **Businessman versus Businesswoman**

The businessman is accepted by society as being brave, hardworking, confident and having potentials for unlimited successes. The businesswoman, on the other hand, is seen as a schemer, she is promiscuous, stubborn disobedient, a liar who loves money more than her home especially in the Nigerian context.

### **Master versus Mistress**

A master is a responsible male, may be an employer or holder of leadership position or has the potentials to do so. He is a responsible father or



responsible father to be. The mistress on the other hand, is a scheming, nagging, parasiting woman, who having been on the shelf may decide to become a paid lover to some rich man etc

### **Examples in Nigerian Pidgin**

Numerous lexical items and expressions used within pidgin reveal the culture of gender inequality, some of such include the following:

#### **Sugar Daddy versus Sugar Mummy**

A sugar daddy is an elderly rich man that is fond of young girls. He engages them in indiscriminate sexual activities. However, a sugar daddy is accepted as an inevitable societal occurrence that encourages life to go on the society and laughs about it.

The sugar mummy on the other hand, is an aberration. Disgrace womanhood. She is seen as the seductress, who goes about looking for the young men whereas it is the young men who may actually be searching for her because of her money.

#### **Cash Madam**

This label is given to a rich woman that society believes has made it through dubious means and manipulations of men.

#### **Madam de Madam or Tick Madam**

She is rich, proud, callous, and pompous, dresses well and is domineering. No equivalent title is given the man no matter how bossy or inconsiderate he is.

#### **Oga Madam**

This title is given to a woman that the society sees as strict, bossy, aggressive and ambitious

#### **Margaret Thatcher or Iron Lady**

Female lecturers, for instance, who are strict, confident and who insist on discipline in the exam hall are commonly referred to as Margaret Thatcher by

students after the one-time British Prime Minister. An alternative to that is iron lady.

Other sex discriminatory terms heard in pidgin are:

“*Waka-waka baby*” – A woman with itchy feet i.e. she is promiscuous, walking from on man to another but there is no *waka-waka boy*.

“*pancake baby*” “Baby Pancake” or a woman who covers her ugliness or real age by the application of pancake (powder) which hides her real age and makes her face more beautiful.

There is no ridiculous equivalent expression for the men – there is no “*after-shave man*”, for instance.

“*Corner-corner baby*” – a girl with twisted way of life, promiscuous, money loving and crooked.

### The case in the Ubang community

A peculiar case of gender differentiation of Ubang, the language of the Ubang people of Obudu in the Cross River State. In that language (Ubang) men and women employ different varieties in referring to the same items as in the following examples:

The Male Variety		Female Variety		Gloss
[ku]	/ku/	[kakam]	/kakam/	chest
[ohu]	/riron/	[ba]	/rerong/	feet
[rir]	/riron/	[rer]	/rerong/	kneel
[amue]	/amue/	[amu]	/amun/	water
[ribo]	/ribo/	[rebo]	/rebo/	kolanut

cf.. Opoola,1998.

This report includes the fact that the strangers who settle in Ubang land, including those who marry the women of Ubang, speak only the female variety since the male variety belongs only to the sons of the soil. Once again, we see a discriminatory role played out through language, the men who speak the female variety are actually referred to as women (Opoola, 1998). Other descriptions of the woman in Standard English as conveyed by the language of

the pres include some of the following: ravishing, enticing, delectable, shapely, matronly cuddly, voluptuous etc.

This class of nomenclature portrays the woman as a plaything, not serious, purposely and consciously presenting herself for sexual overtures. Dressed up to entice or to be ravished, and she is delectable as a delicious dish. These terms are derogatory. They portray the woman as a sex symbol not much more. These and many more examples from different languages undermine the integrity of the woman and her self-esteem. Many have actually consciously or unconsciously conformed with as they are depicted. What is spoken is only a manifestation of what is entrenched in the minds of the people that belong to that culture. Language as the mirror of the mind (Chomsky, 1957) only provides an outlet or a window through which one sees what really obtains in the society concerning the status of the woman.

At the heart of most cultures is the belief that the girl child cannot amount to much. In all kinds of subtle language the society gradually makes her prepared to accept her place as the second best sex. In some homes the girl child is told.

“Your brother will go to school first”!

Or “You are a woman; you belong to the back house”.

Or “As a girl you are the one to wash plates and prepare and prepare meals so that you will know what to do in your husband’s house in future”.

Or “you are not to worry about your brother who refuse to do their chores because they will grow up and marry wives who will do it for them” etc

Or “you are the one to help take care of your younger siblings so that you will learn how to care for yours in future etc.

With this orientation she is already made up and easily accepts her role. Most time, her understanding is that she will always be told what to do.

Someone will always help her take decisions

First, the father/brothers then the husband.

Many women in this way grow up finding themselves in too weak a position to forge forward.

From the above discussion we have seen the strength of language in perpetrating and upholding the practice of gender inequality in their own ways. The implication is that language has an even greater potential in not only reversing but eradicating it. Past and present efforts seem to have consciously or unconsciously taken cognizance of this fact as incorporated in the doctrine of empowerment.

## **Section II**

### **Empowerment as Solution**

As we mentioned earlier, gender discrimination or inequality is a vanishing culture, much having been achieved at the governmental interventional level. Most world governments have adjusted their policies to include or increase women's participation especially since the Beijing Conference of 1996, organized by United Nations (UN). The Commonwealth Secretariat has put in place a number of organs to assist in bringing about empowerment of the women through government agencies. Some of such organs are the Gender and Youth Affairs Division (GYAD) which in turn put developed Gender Management System (GMS) to help governments integrate gender concerns across all policy sectors (see Nigerian Tribune of 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2000). According to Guy Hewitt (Senior Program Officer who deals with GYAD) the GMS provide the know how needed to make a policy-making 'gender sensitive: "We provide a product and give direct advice to government" (Guy Hewitt). The GMS for instance is reported to have been employed in the budgetary process in Barbados, Sri Lanka and South Africa, also in designing better targeted health programs in Jamaica. The Commonwealth Gender Budget initiative (BIG) which applies the GMS principles in finance areas seeks to focus on gender concerns in formulating macroeconomic policy. Other organs involved in gender sensitive issues are UNIFEM, UNICEF, UNDP, CEDPA etc.

Many nations have successfully made use of these and similar assistance programs in formulating and implementing gender sensitive policies; but there are also many cases in which the implementations have run into a hitch. Francisca Issaka in(1996), her lecture at the British Council Workshop for women politicians mentioned the case of the Republic of a certain Republic in which government was very enthusiastic and brought out quite a number of

statements to resolve gender, but in the end could not implement the policies as stated; some of which included:

- (1) Same right to enter into marriage
- (2) Same right to choose a spouse
- (3) Same right to decide on number and spacing of children
- (4) Same personal rights as husband and wife etc
- (5) Same rights in property and land ownership

The implementation of some of these gender-oriented policies have failed because the society and the women themselves are not ready psychologically, financially and even linguistically.

The term women empowerment itself is gender discriminating. Empowerment in fact is a World Bank word that initially was associated with weak economies of nation states. It was not originally associated with the woman. The women really have come a long way up the ladder of self esteem from the Biblical times when she was a non-person counted only with children. Today, she is a person in her own right and she performs civil duties such as voting and holds leadership positions in governments and parastatals. The word 'empowerment' and the whole doctrine of it buttress the fact that the woman is still a long way from her male counterpart. If she still needs to be empowered, it means she is still something to be energized, propped up, stimulated, strengthened, made potent, authorized, influenced, vigorised etc. the strength of language in accomplishing this feat is entrenched in what we may term the language of empowerment. Francisca Isaaka (1996) in her two conceptual frameworks in a bid to analysis gender policies and suggest solutions uses a number of such expressions and terms.

(1) Underlying Cause Spectrum (Framework)

- Gender Gap
- Gender Discrimination
- Gender Myths

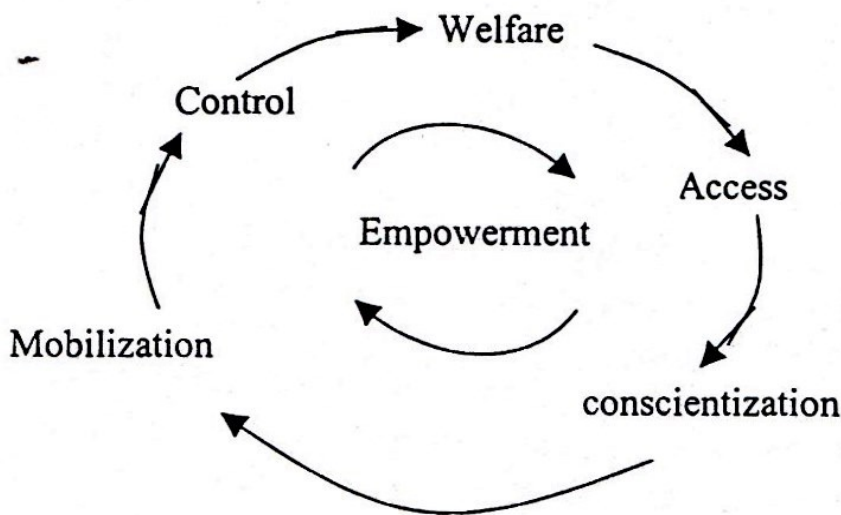
(2) Empowerment Spectrum

- Welfare
- Access

- Consciengization
- Participation
- Control

a list of other linguistic items associated with empowerment include: sensitize/sensitization; lobby/bbying; asseritive/assertiveness, brainstorming; mobilize/mobilization; evaluate/evaluation;affirmative/affirmativeness; enable/enabling; (enabling environment, affirmative action), participate/participation, network/networking, aware/awareness, conscience/concienzation discriminate/discrimination, ideology/ideological (idological principle; monitor/monitoring, model/modeling (role model;)globe/global; suatain/sustainable etc.

The above kinids of language ate found in association with the women empowerment cycle.



(cf.. Issaka 1996)

Empowerment is viewed as a cyclic process fed from five different levels. The women is empowered as one level mores into another. Access promoted improved conscienzation which provokes improved mobilization which leads to increased control.

Most of these are words that connote positivity. A sociolinguistic analysis and implications of each of these words will be too complicated and beyond the scope of this paper: it suffices to say that most of these words are meant to stimulate, encourage and provide a sense of direction. They are meant to strengthen the woman be it for political, economic self-reliance, educational

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health and reproductive health programs; but the woman has to be ready to be empowered.

In her presentation on the international woman's Day, Mrs. Joy Ogwu (Vanguard, Wednesday, March 28, 2001), a professor of Political Science and international Relations, rightly observes that women must be lifted to empower themselves: "a woman's empowerment must come from within herself, otherwise there is no genuine and self propelling empowerment". In other words, the final and lasting solution lies with the woman herself. Empowerment must come from within her. But what if she never possessed it or the potentials to develop it, what if such potentials were never inculcated in her? What if her parents and the society at large never gave her a chance to develop such potentials right from the beginning? For generality of the woman, the culture of keeping her in her place as a woman just continues from her parents' house into the husband's house, family and society. For this reason, most women grow up not possessing the potentials for effective empowerment within them.

### **Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation**

In the first section, we saw the culture of gender inequality promoted by language and the kinds of labels allocated to certain classes of women many times wrongly. We also saw the kinds of expectations and roles that the society allocates to the woman. Many women actually consciously or unconsciously actually aspire to fit not such roles and in the end grow up feeling inadequate, intimidated, fearful, indecisive and too dependent for any positive empowerment.

In the second section, we see the role that empowerment and the proponents have played in attempt to dissolves sexual inequality. We have also seen a corollary of the linguistic items available within empowerment cycle and their stimulating and encouraging potentials. We have seen that empowerment at the governmental, parastatal, NGO levels are interventional, they have really improved matters towards the desired direction. The final and enduring solution lies with the woman herself but this must start from the roots – at the level of the family in the education of not only the girl child but also the boy child. Education of children must emphasize gender relations, how to achieve a healthy and respectable coexistence between the two genders for the good and perfection of the society. The children of both sexes must be given the same opportunities in upbringing, formal education etc. the male child must

be taught how not to exercise the male weapons of oppression, suppression and discrimination on the female sex. The girl child should be taught to respect her femaleness, respect the opposite sex but learn to be confident, strong, bold, hardworking, assertive and knowing her rights from the beginning. In this way a new world of gender relationship based on understanding and equal opportunities shall emerge.

Societal attitudes have to change towards the woman, the very tool that has over the centuries been used in perpetuating and nourishing gender discrimination will continue to be the vehicle of gradual cultural change in that direction, that tool is language.

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