RETHINKING THE GENDER DISCOURSE IN AFRICA

Uwem Essia
Pan African Institute for Development – West Africa (PAID-WA)
Buea, Cameroon
uwemessia@yahoo.co.uk, Essia.Uwem@paidafrica.org

Abstract
This paper argues that the patriarchal orientation of most traditional African societies supports marginalization of women, though not all girls and women are vulnerable to gender abuses. Also, a growing number of boys/men and children are abused by women. Therefore, a more wholesome gender discourse that seeks to improve on the lot of disadvantaged and vulnerable persons, not only women, is expedient. This paradigm shift could be achieved when the gender discourse is focused more on the family instead of on girls and women. Accordingly, identifying and eliminating the unfair treatment of all vulnerable persons, reconstructing gender-specific roles, making education accessible and affordable to all, and eliminating the mental pictures that mystify marriage will make the gender discourse wholesome and value-adding. A reconstructed gender paradigm that focuses on promoting family values and giving comparable training to boys and girls will ultimately enhance gender equity and promote women’s inclusion.

Key words: gender discourse, gender-specific roles, gender equity, gender-based violence, women’s inclusion

I. Introduction
The dominant view in the current gender discourse is that girls and women are excluded, abused often, discriminated against, and inhumanly marginalized by boys and men. Donor organizations, governments and individuals have funded abundant gender-related research and intervention projects. A growing body of literature now exists on gender mainstreaming, gender accounting, gender mapping, among other related areas. Since bad reports easily make news, instances of maltreatment of girls and women by boys and men are well publicized. To garner more sympathy and support for the cause of women, the lot of children and the physically challenged is added to that of the entire female gender. By so doing, the fate of all women is placed at the same level as that of truly vulnerable children, the physically challenged and the aged, whose maltreatment and abuse can be caused equally by advantaged men and women. Indeed, many abused domestic workers blame their predicament on women than on men. Women are also known to be key facilitators of the global sex trade, which indisputably is an extreme form of abuse of womanhood.

It has become very convenient for gender experts to focus on how to change the perceptions and identities that support the marginalization of girls and women, provide the peculiar resource needs of women, and give special consideration to promoting women’s participation in community development and political governance. Admittedly, the patriarchal orientation of most traditional cultures and religions, and the biologically assigned roles of child bearing place an enormous burden on girls and women. At the same time, however, in different cultures,
women enjoy many favors, respect, special care, and preferential treatment because of their biologically determined role.

It is, however, correct to argue that some deprivations suffered by the woman which are accepted as normal in certain traditional societies can be considered discriminatory when compared to the liberties and opportunities that may be available to men in those same societies. The fact remains, nevertheless, that not all girls and women are vulnerable to gender abuse. Most appropriately, therefore, the present paper articulates a shift to a more holistic gender discourse, which focuses on improving the lot of a growing number of disadvantaged and vulnerable women, men, the aged, children and the disabled, not only women.

Section II explains why the family (and not the woman) should be the epicenter of gender discourse in Africa. Furthermore, Section III argues that in many cases the perceived unfair treatment of girls and women by boys and men is over exaggerated. The need to reconstruct socially set gender-specific roles is explained in Section IV. Also, the way to balance gender equity and the right to education is the subject of Section V, while the need to demystify marriage is discussed in Section VI. Lastly, the conclusion to the arguments raised in the paper is articulated in Section VII.

II. Focusing the gender discourse on the family
More experts now agree that achieving gender equity and women’s inclusion call for a paradigm shift from the piecemeal rectification of different aspects of inequality. There is need for a new vision of a world where men, women, children, the aged, and the disabled live and work together in balanced families and communities. The gender groups should be seen as actively concerting partners seeking to secure better lives for themselves, with all persons having comparable opportunities to achieve a better life if they so choose. Clearly, providing all gender groups the opportunities to achieve a better life for themselves also requires supportive communities, a favorable policy environment, and social systems that are fair and progressive (Gender and Development Network, 2013). The UNO (2010) notes, however, that the experiences of the last decades indicate no simple recipes for achieving gender equity and women’s inclusion, and explains why the “one-size-fits-all” approach should be avoided. It advises each country to adapt and tailor gender inclusion policies and programs to suit its cultural realities and peculiarities.

Furthermore, the UNO (2010) admits that women face daunting legal, institutional, and cultural barriers to their economic empowerment, and at the same time constitute a vastly untapped resource for economic growth and revitalization in the developing countries of Africa and elsewhere. Indisputably, the potential returns on investment in women’s economic empowerment could be very high. It is also true, however, that more women will be happy to live in stable families with the support and love of their husbands and children. Moreover, gender empowerment programs should address the productive and reproductive roles of women; incorporating social safety nets, nutrition, health, marriage and family related counseling, as well as accessibility and affordability of legal aid. Effective frameworks for involving boys and men in campaigns to promote gender equity and inclusion and in
reconstructing gender-specific roles are considered very essential. Regarding the involvement of boys and men, the UNO (2010) identifies the White Ribbon Campaign as an excellent example of a successful civil society initiative and the world’s single largest effort by men and boys to end violence against women in over 60 countries. It further recommends that gender perspectives should be mainstreamed into all poverty reduction strategies, and appropriate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes should be put in place to track and address deviation from achieving the desired goals.

To deal with gender inequality, the European Community (EC) adopts the dual-track approach. This comprises of a set of specific actions and gender mainstreaming, that is within the framework of the European Pact for Gender Equality adopted by the European Council on March 2006. The Pact focuses on the following means to achieving gender equity and inclusion:

1. Ensuring equality between women and men in employment.
2. Restructuring socially constructed masculine and feminine characteristics that tend to influence gender roles and the gender division of labor.
3. Strengthening the resolve and capacity of women to exercise their rights and utilize available opportunities to empower themselves.

The EC (2008) emphasizes the need to conduct gender impact assessment prior to implementing a policy, to determine its potential impact on the situation of women and men and ensure that a new policy or program does not contribute to the creation of inequality. It notes, particularly, that achieving gender equity and inclusion is linked to the promotion of women’s labor market participation.

For Harry et al (2004), demolishing harmful masculinity is a key step to reducing gender-based violence and promoting women’s inclusion. A number of social and institutional structures tend to support and incubate harmful masculinity.

Firstly, the ideal for manhood in many traditional cultures is that of a fierce and handsome warrior and, even in the twenty-first century, public leadership is widely associated with male dominance.

Secondly, the training methods and curricula of schools tend to produce boys imbued with a sense of their own importance and superiority to girls. By so doing, such systems incubate harmful masculinity.

Thirdly, the military, all-male fraternities, and hypercompetitive sports physically and symbolically express violence. Also, they tend to exclude women and men who do not perform like “real men”. Nonetheless, the meaning of masculinity to a man changes over his life cycle because the issues confronting a younger man may differ from those that an older man faces. Moreover, men are capable of change and with sufficient motivation, have capacity to end gender violence. Accordingly, it is proposed that boys and men should be engaged through the following means:

1. Sanctions mandated by courts – to publicly symbolize the key message that gender-based violence is not tolerated.
2. Engagement through rehabilitation – giving early offenders opportunities to learn harmonious family values.
3. Adopting development and interest-based models - promoting women- supportive roles by boys and men without labeling all men as violent and blame-worthy.
4. Engaging socially excluded men/communities – focusing on the survival issues of marginalized or excluded men to enlist their support for promoting gender inclusion.

III. Gender inequality and the fallacy of oversimplification

The gender development literature is awash with extensive research, project reports, newsletters, and life histories. They focus on the marginalization of the female gender and how to empower women. The bandwagon has been to pedagogically construct the typical girl or woman as a hapless victim, and boys and men as mindless or brutal victimizers. To be fair, some studies adopt the broad notion of gender, with objectives for the fair treatment of men, women, children, the aged, and the physically challenged, at the beginning, but soon get overtaken by the bandwagon of the perceived marginalization of women and how to check the excesses of men. A few studies have attempted to focus broadly on women and men.

For example, Kassea (2006) retraces gender patterns from the pre-colonial to the postcolonial era in Sub-Saharan Africa, and notes that while gender complementarity exists in the indigenous context, it is progressively lost to male prevalence privileged by education, the church, the law, employment, the economy and politics in the public sphere. It notes that the co-existence of customary and statutory laws, and the corrupt political system and fraudulent practices contribute to the marginalization of women and men who are interested in politics. The study further explains how the Nordic countries have institutionalized gender equality in their legislation, policies and practices; how France has improved on women's political inclusion with the parity laws; and how Rwanda has improved women's representation, thanks to its post-conflict constitution.

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (2013) reviews a growing body of literature on the important role men can play in ensuring improvements in the condition of women and the different ways by which women are marginalized and excluded. In addition, it discusses selected instances where women have worked with key development stakeholders to overcome the obstacles that stand between them and their inclusion. It notes, moreover, that very few studies identifying barriers working against women’s participation in customary governance have provided conclusive lessons, while even fewer studies have identified and described positive examples of women succeeding in moving from decision-making exclusion to inclusion in either customary or non-customary political systems. To render the gender discourse more inclusive and credible, the IDEA (2013) recommends the following:

- Firstly, placing the gender discourse around the family and community; the principles of power-sharing and human rights and the context of local culture should be encouraged. Solutions to gender problems are more acceptable when considered home-brewed than when perceived as externally induced or alien.
• Secondly, under normal circumstances, men are more likely to adopt a supportive role to women in gender balance reform efforts, when there are clear opportunities for mutual gain and the solutions are connected to building strong family values.

• Thirdly, investing in wholesome education for boys and girls will secure future attitudinal changes towards women’s and girls’ empowerment. Additionally, empowering women is not just about giving them life skills and making them more productive, but more seriously, in the longer term, it is about changing the attitude of boys and girls towards gender relations.

• Fourthly, all vulnerable persons (men, women, the aged, children, and the disabled) should be protected from discrimination and abuse. However, there should be sufficient scope for the different gender groups to negotiate and evolve progressively towards social harmony. This is important because for a number of societies today, domestic violence against women, for instance, is yet to be seen, even by the women folk, as a serious issue that calls for community-level or criminal system adjudication. Equally, reporting cases of rape is still seen more in terms of damaging the victim’s reputation, potential marriage prospects and dowry implications than a protection of basic human rights. Where such cultural complexes are the case, a steady course of cultural reorientation will make the people conscious of the need to treat gender issues far more seriously.

Furthermore, the IDEA (2013) emphasizes that reforms of the formal legal system should be accompanied by deliberate efforts to modernize traditional systems by discontinuing harmful practices, norms, and rituals and strengthening useful ones. The beginning point is to ensure that the people selected as traditional heads, religious leaders and others whose oversight roles are critical for the modernization process, are genuinely concerned with moving the community members through a steady process of cultural change around sound family values and moderation. It is important to note, also, that gender equality cannot be achieved by relying exclusively on either the imported Western notions of gender equality or the traditional African patriarchal institution. The solution, as Kimathi (2005) rightly notes, involves neither formalizing informal institutions nor de-formalizing formal institutions. It rather has to do with reconciling and encouraging convergence between adapted formal institutions and renovated informal indigenous institutions.

IV. Reconstructing gender-specific roles
The first step to making the gender discourse wholesome and inclusive is reconstructing the warped gender-specific roles embedded in the received knowledge, attitude, behavior and practices of many traditional African societies. The division of domestic chores to boys and girls generally promotes unhealthy masculinity and femininity. Most commonly, girls cook with their mothers, sweep the rooms, wash dishes and do basic laundry, and care for their younger siblings at the same time, while boys sweep the frontage, cut the grass, fetch fodder for the livestock and carry out other functions that generally take them out of the house. When cooking is in progress, boys can be watching television, playing outside or washing only their clothes. Generally too, the girl-child is monitored more in terms of her posture in public, her dressing, personal hygiene and relationships especially with the opposite sex. Meanwhile, it is
often believed that boys should have more freedom. Even while boys and girls are sent to school, many parents prefer to send girls to more exclusive and protective schools and generally spend more on them than on boys. Here again, the perception is that boys have fewer problems growing up than girls. Moreover, in constructing family houses the outward rooms are often assigned to the boy, while the girl may share an inner room with the younger siblings, have no specific room or sleep with the mother. This makes it much easier for the boy to sneak out at night for nocturnal activities that expose him to sundry misdemeanors. In several cases, it is the more outward oriented boy that draws the home oriented girl out for unwholesome nocturnal pastimes.

Quite logically, the domestic-oriented girl is potentially more concentrative, effective in learning, better comported, and ready for early marriage or home making compared to the outward oriented boy. Typically, for twins composed of a boy and a girl at the age of 18 years, assuming that the girl is inward-oriented and the boy outward-oriented, the girl would most probably have had adequate home training and maturity for marriage than the boy, who indeed may not have received any direct husbanding training. Since from an early age the girl is culturally more prepared for marriage than the boy, it has almost become the norm that girls are ready to marry earlier than boys. Thus, this set of learnable competencies that most men never have the opportunity to learn while growing up make them neither mature nor ready for husbanding.

With only a few exceptions, boys and girls carry on the childhood culturing and nurturing into adulthood as men and women respectively. The outward-oriented man, by virtue of being head of the family, assumes a ‘fatherly’ role over a well nurtured inward-oriented woman. Without timely readjustments on both sides there are bound to be problems. The situation would certainly have been different if boys and girls grew up in a cultural atmosphere and family setting that offered early home training that optimally balances inward and outward orientation and nurturing, where family values, versatility, and team spirit are inculcated at home and all through the education system. This will ensure that boys and girls are prepared to carry out similar activities and social roles with comparable dexterity, mental energy, and equal chances of success.

With the gender-specific roles successfully reconstructed, the social construct of the African woman as a victim and passive recipient of support will be progressively dismantled. Empowering boys and girls should be in the context of the family. The aim should be to make them leaders and partners in the development of their families, communities, and nation, both during their youth and when they grow into adulthood. Gender empowerment should exit the narrow path of acquiring life skills and creating viable women-owned businesses, to focus more on providing equal education to boys and girls, caring for the aged and the disabled, and having family sizes that are sustainable, where all the members are active and inspiring agents of positive change. For women who are already in troubled relationships, the gender discourse should focus on how to create the opportunity for negotiated settlement, with the legal option operationalized as the last resort; when it is obvious that dialogue has failed.
Accordingly, in the reconstructed gender discourse, gender equity or equality should be conceptualized and operationalized as a social construct describing the state where all gender groups have adequate and appropriate training, opportunities, incentives, and the atmosphere to be productive and happy. Gender imbalances have persisted largely because the received paradigms pay lip service to putting the family, not just women, at the center stage; the consequence is that for most women, economic empowerment has become the cause of further violence, breakdown of family values, divorce and abandonment of the children.

V. Balancing gender equity and the right to education
Education is vital for empowerment, and qualitative education for girls and women can improve the well-being of their families. Among other things, it has been proven that the educated woman can take better control over fertility, care for children, and participate in public life (Malhotra, Pande, and Grown 2003). Specifically, Subbarao and Rainey (1995) note that women with at most secondary education have a lesser number of children and a lower number of stillbirths. Meanwhile, Schultz (1993) observes also that across the developing world, the higher the level of female education, the lower the desired family size and the greater the success in achieving it. Additionally, educating girls and women grows the knowledge coefficient from one generation to the next, because a mother’s level of education can positively affect the school enrolment of her children (Kambhapati and Pal 2001; Parker and Pederzini 2000; Bhalla, Saigal, and Basu 2003).

Based on the foregone, therefore, girls and women should not be excluded from schooling due to household chores, child care, pregnancy, and child birth. Firstly, household chores can be handled more productively when gender-specific roles are reconstructed. Moreover, the growing use of household machines and devices can significantly render household chores simpler and easier. Secondly, time spent on child care can be minimized with an increasing number of day-care centers and preschools for younger siblings and students’ children. Thirdly, education policy reforms of African countries can provide incentives to married and pregnant girls and women who attend school. Although no specific incentives are provided, pregnant girls and women are already attending schools in Botswana, Guinea, Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia (UNESCO 2004). A key incentive is to introduce flexible school schedules that enable married women and pregnant girls and women to select convenient schooling hours. Flexible school hours have been introduced in Bangladesh, China, India, Morocco, and Pakistan.

As important as education is to individual and family well-being, and the society, the right of the girl and the woman to have children should be respected. In the typical African context, except for religious celibates, having a child is the crown of womanhood. Also, children are the primary reason for marriage. Non-celibate women who do not have children may be considered accursed or accused of eating up their children through witchcraft. People need children for emotional, economic and other social reasons, and not having children can make a family feel unsuccessful or incomplete. This applies equally to highly educated and uneducated men and women. Therefore, it is needful to allow girls and women to have children as early as it is healthy and possible. A girl or woman, who bears children early, even when her schooling was disrupted in the process, should have second chance schooling opportunities in her post-child
delivery age. However, a woman who delays bearing children for the pursuit of an educational career may find it more difficult to deliver the number of children she/her spouse desires to have. This can cause serious psychological problems for the woman and her partner.

It is expedient, therefore, to separate bearing children from marrying. While having children in wedlock may be a culturally preferred option, it is discriminatory to tie getting pregnant and having children (both age-bound biological functions), which the girl or woman can control, to marriage, a socially constructed ritual, whose timing and outcomes are totally outside the control of the girl or the woman. In other words, there are chances that a woman who is determined to have all her children in wedlock may never be married in the first place, and can remain childless. Good morals, in this case, may be illogical and inexpedient. Accordingly, girls and women should not be discriminated against if they choose to get pregnant out of wedlock. Indeed, for many men today, it is believed that having a child out of wedlock is a measure of the woman’s fertility and increasingly a basis for seeking her hand in marriage. This should not be misconstrued as giving support to or encouraging early sex by school boys and girls. The dangers of early sex – risks of contracting diseases, distraction from effective studies, and so on – should be explained to boys and girls at home, in school and faith based organizations, and by the media. Notwithstanding, it is rational to expect that the passion between boys and girls will continue to grow in today’s new society overwhelmed by obscene profanities; younger girls will continue to get pregnant, and when it happens, society must not discriminate against the boy, pregnant girl, and unborn child.

A school girl should have the right to quality healthcare from the moment it is discovered that she is pregnant. Legalized abortion can be allowed if it is determined that the health and life of the girl will be threatened, either because she is too young to have a child or she has other physical or emotional incapacities that may adversely affect her and/or the unborn baby. If abortion is the preferred option, it should be carried out professionally and the girl rehabilitated and made to return to school as soon as possible. Where it is safe for her to keep the pregnancy, the public healthcare system should have an entire department for managing such cases until safe delivery is achieved. It is discriminatory to label such pregnancies “unwanted pregnancies” or call the children born out-of-wedlock “bastards”.

Furthermore, progressive training on gender equity, gender mainstreaming, political and economic inclusion, marriage competencies, and the benefits of gender balanced families should be mainstreamed into the school curriculum at all levels. Government policy should particularly compel faith based organizations to inculcate sound family values in their doctrines as a matter of state priority.

Freedom of religion should not be used to perpetuate gender imbalances and undue subjugation of women. Doctrines that overtly or covertly encourage treatment of the woman as a property of the man should be reconstructed where feasible or outlawed altogether. The freedom of a woman or man to opt out of an unsatisfactory relationship is important because the parties will more likely treat each other better when there is mutual knowledge that an unsatisfied party can opt out.
VI. Demystifying Marriage

It is widely argued, that most perennial cases of men’s violence against women occur in the context of marriage and other sex related relationships. This puts enormous responsibilities on parents, religious leaders, professional marriage counselors, and others whose advice and counseling shape how girls select their partners and, for those already in relationships, how conflicts and other challenges are managed. Each woman’s or couple’s case should be treated as a distinct phenomenon having its internal logic that needs to be fully understood before advice is offered. This has to be so because in Africa, marriage and the family will remain the vital essence of life for a long time. A successful marriage gives emotional, economic and social support and defense to the family. Women particularly are more respected by their siblings, friends, colleagues and other associates when they remain in marriage. This partly explains why only a few women will easily give full information on the violation they experience in their marital relationships.

It follows from the above, also, that getting full information about each prospective couple prior to marriage and carrying out compatibility tests should be critical pre-marriage activities. These compatibility tests should cover health status, sexual preferences and behaviors, criminal history, religious inclination, complexes and dispositions, and so on. Potential couples should have adequate information on the strengths and deformities of the would-be partners/spouses and decide to live with them, without the illusions that the deformities will change overnight. A trial period referred to as ‘courtship’ by many persons can assist the prospective couple to understand themselves beyond the fantasies of infatuation. Courtship should be the period where the prospective couple simulates marriage life in its totality before deciding either to disengage or advance to wedlock.

In addition, sustaining stable family ties should be a key consideration underlying gender empowerment programs. The target has to be the family, and not just the woman. Empowering the woman outside the context of family businesses can alienate the financially empowered wife and mother from her husband and children. Family businesses can promote the sharing of responsibilities by the husband, wife, children and other members of the household, and the accumulation of true family property. Financial institutions can support gender inclusion by making lending conditions easier for businesses having accounts with husband and wife as cosignatories. The media has a critical role to play in promoting gender inclusion. Programs and news that support sound family values should be encouraged. At the same time news bordering on gender violations should be well investigated and reported alongside those that project successful gender balanced families. The bandwagon reportage and films showing only women’s rights violations should be minimized as much as it is possible.

Policy makers should constantly reflect on traditions and conventions to identify the ones that are contradictory to achieving gender equity and freedom of choice in marriage, for the man and the woman. Statements like ‘marriage is for life’, ‘a woman (man) cannot remarry when the first husband is still alive’, a ‘man has the right to marry as many women as he pleases’ or ‘a
man has the right to discipline his wife through beating’ should be antiquated. Such statements and the mindset that generate them are clearly gender-biased.

**VII. Conclusion**

This paper discussed how to achieve gender equity and women’s inclusion by focusing more on the family, and not just girls and women. Shifting the focus to the family is necessary because the received gender discourse has overemphasized girls’ and women’s marginalization by boys. It is also unfair to equate the fate of all women to those of truly vulnerable children, the physically challenged, and the aged. There is no doubt that the patriarchal orientation of most traditional African cultures places an enormous burden on girls and women, but it is a fact that the same cultures also shower girls and women with favors, protection, and preferential treatment. Therefore, a more holistic gender discourse, which focuses on improving the lot of a growing number of disadvantaged persons, should be the basis of the current gender discourse. Hence, the urgent need for a paradigm shift towards making the family the epicenter of gender discourse in Africa. Achieving balanced families will, however, require supportive communities, a favorable policy environment, and social systems that are fair and progressive. It is also broadly accepted that the “one-size-fits-all” approach should be avoided. Each country should adapt and tailor gender inclusion policies and programs to suit its cultural realities and peculiarities.

Furthermore, the paper agrees that the potential return on investment in women’s economic empowerment can be very high, but argues also that living in balanced families will make the typical African woman healthier, happier, and fulfilled and more secure. It notes as well, that getting boys/men involved in promoting gender equity and inclusion will enhance the reconstruction of gender-specific roles. Additionally, a reform of the formal legal system should be accompanied by deliberate efforts to modernize the traditional systems by discontinuing harmful practices, norms, and rituals and strengthening the useful ones.

Lastly, the paper proposes three steps to achieving the required paradigm shift towards a more wholesome gender discourse. Firstly is reconstructing the warped distribution of gender-specific roles of many traditional African societies, which generally promotes unhealthy masculinity and femininity. Secondly, balancing the reproductive and production needs of women, particularly ensuring that pregnant girls and women have access to education, and thirdly, taking deliberate steps to promoting healthy marriages, without denying the man or woman the right and freedom to remain or opt out.

**References**


3) European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), (2013) Mainstreaming gender into the policies and the programmes of the institutions of the European Union and EU Member States: Good practices in gender mainstreaming. Luxemburg.
9) International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) 2013 Journeys from Exclusion to Inclusion: Marginalized women’s successes in overcoming political exclusion.
14) United Nations (2010), Achieving Gender Equality, Women’s Empowerment and Strengthening Development Cooperation, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Office.