

INTERROGATING GENDER PREFERENCE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF WOMEN AND GIRL-CHILDREN IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Premium desire and attention is placed on male children in Nigeria; this being the patriarchal and socio-cultural inter-generational heritage. Through the growth and socialization process, the girl-child is treated inferiorly and made to believe less in her worth and abilities. From early childhood, it is ingrained in her that she always comes after the boy-child. The society also places loud demands on women to produce male children before they can be reckoned with in marriage hence, women risk health, personal growth and wellbeing to satisfy this societal craving. The girl-child inputs twice effort and work as the male child to produce the same or less result as her male counterpart whom society has naturally put on a higher pedestal. Adopting the doctrinal method, this paper examines the impact the pressure of these demands has produced in the mental well-being of women and girl-children. It found that over time, women and girl-children have developed anxiety, fear, frustration, and other harmful social behavior with resultant spiral negative effects including but not limited to depression, suicide and other mental health challenges. The paper contends that since the accomplishment of any individual stems from her/his mental well-being, this narrative must change. It concludes that gender should not be the bases for human value; life should reward everyone according to inputs and not gender; society should evolve to the extent that lineage continuity can be both matriarchal and patriarchal.

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1. Introduction

Directly, indirectly, or subtly, Nigerian society makes daily pronouncements that every home should have a son and that sons are preferred to daughters (Mordi, 2019). This can be seen in so many aspects of our lives individually and together as a nation based on the roles and functions that society has assigned to each gender. Often these roles and functions are predetermined even before the birth of the child (Makama, 2013, p. 117). These expectations have not only been entrenched in the home and family lives, but also in the political, career, social and industrial arena (Igbuzor, 2000, p. 17). A few years ago, one of the big players in the telecoms industry in Nigeria made an advertisement on the national TV station in which the herald of a son was given a town-wide jubilation and celebration (Egede, 2010). This drew the wrath of many Civil Societies and Non-governmental Organizations in Nigeria and subsequently, the content of the advert was substituted to heralding just the birth of an unspecified gender (Olaogun *et al* 2009, Pp. 193-197).

Daughters face discrimination and intimidation daily which cumulate into a lot of pressure, making her believe less in themselves, her worth, and abilities. The society places loud demands on women to have sons so as to fortify their positions in their marriages; and women will go to great lengths in achieving this regardless of the state of their health and mental wellbeing (). The girl-child inputs twice effort and work as the male-child to produce same or less result comparable to her male counterpart whom society has naturally put on a higher pedestal. Gender preference is a social inequality and social inequalities are major predisposing factors to developing mental health challenges. The entire pressure of gender preference has an overall effect on the mental health and wellness of women and girl-children in Nigeria.

To this end, this paper aims to unravel the forms of gender discrimination existing in Nigerian society and to discuss the implications of these several pressures on the mental health and wellbeing of women and girl-children. It shall start first, at discussing the concept of gender preferences, the several factors that instigate and contribute to gender preferences in Nigeria. It will also examine the various laws that bring about discriminatory practices that make gender preference pronounced in our society. After this, it will examine the effect of this on the mental health of women and girl-children in Nigeria. It concludes by making certain recommendations that will aid the resolution of this socio-cultural malady.

2. Gender Preferences and Its Predisposing Factors

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Gender refers to the social construction given to women, men, girls, and boys as well as their relationship with each other (WHO, 2022). Gender is used to describe how people express the two sexes, masculinity, and femininity (Hartman, (1997, p. 99). Preference is the act or principle of giving advantages or having a greater liking for one alternate over another or others. When the word preference is combined

with gender it simply means the liking of a particular sex of a child over and above the other. Generally, male children are preferred to female children in countries across Asia and Africa and Nigeria (Hesketh and Xing 2011, p. 1374-1377). Gender preference is a social malady that has been ongoing for a long time and has attracted a lot of research and attentions. Factors responsible for this are numerous and often embedded in sociocultural, religious and economic factors (Gnana *et al*, 2019). Sons are widely viewed as asset while daughters are perceived as liabilities, and are desired based on certain utilities and economic impetus. Underpinning male gender preference in Nigeria is what can be described as “male dominance and violence through the sociological aspects of patriarchal society” (Kavita, 2014, p. 96).

The result of research carried out in Delta State, Nigeria indicates that 62.9% of men preferred male children, 55.2% of the men’s choice is based on psychological satisfaction in marriage, 53.8% prefer male children because to them, sons are easier to train and have better initiative; 70.6% prefer male children for security of family inheritance; while 99.3% prefer sons for continuity of family name (Nwamaka, 2021, p. 6-14).

The trajectory of male preference goes to pre-history periods where sons have more economic values, fulfill religious roles and where lineage and ancestors are traced through sons; and this has been referred to as a culture against women (Barbara, 1981, p. 59). A lot of socio-cultural practices such as wife inheritance, harmful widowhood practices, female genital mutilation, daughters’ disinheritance, marginalization of women during the dissolution of customary law marriages, bride price regimes and many more of such, have all contributed to the perception of female as inferior to their male counterparts. This unfortunately has been translated into modernity and has continued thereafter. Gender preference is a product of societal macro-conditions family survival strategy, meaning the use of kin and children to satisfy personal interest (Nugent 1985, p. 93). Religion is also culpable in the relegations of women based on it several doctrines, teachings and roles. Interestingly, women are generally are not accorded leadership roles or headship in the scheme of worship; either traditional African religion, Christianity (although little liberal) or Islam.

According to Klaus, *et al*, (2007, Pp. 527-544) the factors underpinning gender preference is rooted in utilities; and they identified and enumerated them as: comfort; social esteem and affect. Under comfort, he states that the ability of parents to be able to obtain material benefits from their children serves as a kind of social insurance. Sons are breadwinners even when they leave home and therefore are able to extend this to the parents unlike the daughter who may be living at the mercy of the husband to whom she is married, therefore unable to provide for the old-age comfort of her parents, and as such, many parents prefer sons since their comfort in old age is seemingly secured with the existence of sons (Cain 1983, Pp. 688-702). In explaining social esteem, according to him, this is rooted in the patriarchal system wherein lineage is traced through male; the women finds her identity through the birth of sons who can perpetuate the family name unlike daughter who are unable to do same. Sons are means of reputational assets and also used to upgrade and secure the positions of mothers within the family set up. All

accolades, respects and appreciation a woman receives directly or indirectly is often tied to the existence of a male child. Women without sons in their marriages are often viewed and treated as second class within the social and family circle. ‘Affect’ is a third dimension stated by Lee in his postulation of utilities in child capital. He quoted Vlassoff that son preference are at times anchored on “emotional security and personal fulfillment (which are clearly related to co-residence with sons), are at least as important as economic security” (Vlassoff 1991, Pp. 529-535).

Male preference has unfortunately transited from ancient times to this modern age, and causes of same has equally increased maybe because some of the reasons conversed in ancient times are yet to be dissipated nor addressed. Take the issue of social security and welfare in old age as an example, a number of countries including Nigeria have no social security system or welfare support structure that caters for older members of its society, therefore parents seek all forms of methods to secure themselves in older age, including having sons whom they believe will take care of them when they are old and frail since the State has no such provision. In Nigeria, there is no functional national policy on the care and welfare of senior citizens, a country with the largest population in Africa and with a estimated elderly population growth rate of about 3.2%, a rate that has been projected will double by 2050 (Tanyi, André and Mbah 2018, Pp. 1-30). Besides, the government has failed in the seamless implementation of the existing pension scheme in the nation. The scheme is bedeviled with a number of problems ranging from delayed or nonpayment of pension entitlements, to the misappropriation of existing pension funds, too frequent verification of pensions which often lead to physical exhaustion and even death of pensioners, inadequate enforcement of pension regulation (Apere, 2015).

Gender preference is manifested in so many bias behavioural patterns; parents allocate scarce resources towards sons in education, healthcare, nutrition, and recreation. Sons get better opportunities and are given premium care since returns on them are presumed higher (Qadir, *et al* 2011). Daughters are given less and encapsulated into a stereotype in the areas of personality traits, domestic behavior, physical appearance and occupational choices.

3. Discriminatory Laws that Accentuate Male Preference in Nigeria

It is equally dismaying that a number of laws, government policies, and public rules create bias that upholds male superiority and supremacy; political attitude and poor implementation of laws keep the challenges unabated.¹ Society sees the relevance, importance and supremacy of the

¹ Nigeria operates a federal system of government wherein there are three tiers of government. The federal, State and Local Government. These tiers of governments have the powers to make laws and enforce them within their domain. The legislative power of the government of Nigeria is shared into two compartments but with a third as a fallout. Under the Second Schedule of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, there is the Exclusive Legislative List (ELL) and Concurrent Legislative List (CLL) and there is a third regarded as residual matters. The

male gender through the several discriminatory provisions which directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, creates the mindset of male preference.

Prior to 2009, the Nigerian Immigration Services (NIS) made it a requirement that married women must obtain written consent from their husbands before they can apply for and be issued an international passport. The turning point is the case of Dr Priye Iyalla-Amachi who challenged this position to the effect that it was discriminatory and unconstitutional and contrary to the fundamental human rights of married women as was held in *Dr Priye Iyalla-Amadi v. Comptroller- General, Nigerian Immigration Services and Another* (2008). It was argued that it was discrimination against the female gender since married men are not required to equally bring consent letters from their wives. The Federal High Court in its judgment on June 15, 2009, stated that the NIS policy was both archaic and unconstitutional; it equally violates the fundamental human rights of married women.

Another discriminatory law is section 55(1) of the Labour Act which debar women from being engaged on night work in a public or any agricultural undertaking except women in nursing profession and women in management positions engaged in manual labor (section 55(7). Eyongndi (2018, Pp. 1-25) has opined that the provision of the Labour Act above is patently discriminatory and should be amended considering the peculiarity of contemporary times. Section 56(1) of this Act prohibits women from engaging in any underground work in any mine. Also, by the draconic provision of section 34(1) thereof, women cannot also be accompanied by their spouses to their places of work whereas this provision is not applicable to men. This provision rightly limits women to only daytime work life, believing that women should be home at night and cannot pursue careers that will expose them to night work life. Similarly, in the same provision, certain forms of profession has been associated with the women, particularly nursing as the provision rightly singled it out.

The Police Regulation is another brazenly discriminatory legal framework against women and by extension, the girl child. Regulation 127 of the Nigeria Police Regulation made pursuant to the Police Establishment Act 2020 provides for the dismissal of any unmarried policewoman who gets pregnant. By this regulation, when an unmarried female police officer gets pregnant, she is liable to be dismissed from the force. Surprisingly, when an unmarried or married male police officers gets a woman other than his wife pregnant, he is not liable to be dismissed from

difference between them is that, the subject matter under the ELL can only be legislated upon by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) while those under the CLL could be legislated upon by the FGN and the various federating States however, the State government under the doctrine of covering the field, cannot legislate contrary to what the FGN has legislated touching any item under the CLL. Any subject matter not expressly mentioned in either the ELL or the CLL, is a residual matter which only the State Government and Local Government can legislate upon. The laws made by the FGN are known as Act, those by the State is Law and that of the Local Government is Edit. By hierarchy, an Act is superior to a Law and a Law is superior to an Edit.

the force. This is the towering effect of misogyny which characterized not just the security force in Nigeria but the general attitude towards females.

Further, there are various degrees of discrimination in some of the provisions in the criminal laws operational across the nation. The three variants of criminal laws operational in Nigeria are the Criminal Code which is operational in the Southern part, the Sharia Penal Code operating in about 12 Northern States and the Penal Code which is operational in the non-Muslim States of the North² (Eghosa 2015, Pp. 285-296). The first on is the different punishment attending indecent assault to an accused male and female. A male accused of indecent assault gets a lighter punishment of two years while an accused female gets three years. Section 353 of the Criminal Code makes indecent assault against a male guilty of a felony while section 360 makes the same crime a misdemeanor if committed against a woman (Ashiru 2010, Pp. 90-110). Another discriminatory provision under the criminal law is Section 55 of the Penal Code which encourages domestic violence by permitting a husband to physically chastise his wife insofar as grievous bodily harm is not inflicted. According to Section 55(10), “Nothing is an offence which does not amount to the infliction of grievous harm upon a person which is done by a husband for the purpose of correcting his wife.” Section 241 of the Penal Code trying to justify this same position describes what ‘grievous bodily harm’ is and it states that “grievous hurt includes emasculation, permanent loss of sight, ability to hear or speak, deprivation of any member or joint, destruction or permanent impairing of the powers of any member or joint, facial disfigurement, bone fracture or tooth dislocation”. Similar provisions exist in the Sharia law. Whereas, the (Okafor 2021) United Nations describes domestic violence as:

A pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behavior that frightens, intimidates, terrorize, manipulates, hurts, humiliates, blames, injures, or wounds someone.

The provisions of the Penal Code and the Sharia law clearly violate the standard description of what domestic violence is and put women at a disadvantaged position of risk and danger of being trampled upon by their respective husbands. These provisions also clearly contravene the provision of the 1999 Constitution which in Section 34 (1) protects the individual’s respect for dignity.

² In Nigeria, the substantive criminal laws are divided into two; that applicable in the South and Northern parts of Nigeria. The Criminal Code applies in the South while the Penal Code is applicable in the North and the Sharia Penal Code law is applicable in some States in the Northern part of Nigeria where sharia has been adopted such as Zamfara State. These penal systems applies in these areas. As for sharia, only persons who are Muslims are subject to sharia law and could be tried and punished in accordance with its dictates.

One other area that vividly portrays the discriminatory laws that place the male gender above the female is the issue of gaining Nigerian citizenship status for foreign husbands of Nigerian women. Section 26 of the 1999 Constitution empowers the President to confer Nigerian citizenship on foreign women married to Nigerian men, whereas this is not extended to foreign husbands married to Nigerian women. This is based on the patrilineal system of the society from which the law takes its root. The option available to such a foreign husband is by way of naturalization which is a longer route.

Some of the other labour and employment laws and policies clearly discriminate and place the male gender above the female. Section 127 of the Police Act prevents married women from enlisting into the Nigerian Police. Section 127 states that an unmarried policewoman who becomes pregnant shall be discharged from the police force, she can only be reabsorbed on the approval of Inspector General of the Police. Other discriminatory rules is Regulation 124, of the Police Act which states that a policewoman who wishes to get married must apply in writing to the Commissioner of Police for approval, she must give the name and details of her intended husband. However, this provision was successfully challenged in the court in *WELA v. Attorney-General of the Federation* (2010). The court held that this provision is unconstitutional and contradicts the provision of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (Eghosa 2013, Pp. 8-9).

The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) has a similar discriminatory provision is Article 5(1), which provides that all female applicants shall be unmarried at the point of entry, and shall upon enlistment remain unmarried for a period of not less than two years." Likewise, in its Article 5(2), the Act provides that "all female unmarried members of staff that wish to marry shall apply in writing to the Chairman/Chief Executive, asking for permission stating details of the intended husband. It is worthy to note that there is no such similar provision as regards men who wish to get married or who seek enlistment into both the Nigerian Police Force and the NDLEA.

There are so many other laws, rules and policies that clearly accentuate the male preference and dominance on women in Nigeria such as Rule 03303 of Kano and Kaduna State Civil Service Rule which state that any woman in the civil service who is about to undertake a course of training not more than six months shall be required to enter into an agreement to refund the whole or part of the course cost if such course is interrupted on the ground of pregnancy (Imasogie 2013, Pp. 11-18). Section 18 of the Marriage Act provides that any party to a marriage who is below the age of 21 shall be required to obtain the father's written consent unless the father is dead, of unsound mind or absent from Nigeria that the mother's consent can suffice. This makes the mother a second fiddle in the order of priority and preference (Falana, 2013).

Several other laws and practices are clearly discriminatory against woman and all these are factors that accentuate the dominance and preference of the male gender above the female.

Noteworthy is the fact that laws are generally made in males! Documentation and official processes perhaps have contributed largely to this son's preference because the wordings of laws and official documents are often in masculine and when feminine is included, it always comes in the second place – 'his and her, he and she, male and female.'

Other areas are laws that are not codified because they are customary laws and practices but are highly discriminatory against women and girls. In many Nigerian customs, women can only access land through male relations (Ikoni, 2009, p. 59). There are other harmful traditional practices and abuses such as harmful widowhood practices, and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) where Nigeria currently has the third highest number of women and girls who have been genitally mutilated. Annexed to this is child-bride practice whereby girls at early age are married off making them to miss out a lot in terms of education; in Africa, Nigeria has the largest number of Child brides. According to UNICEF, Nigeria accounts for more than one in five out-of-school children globally, though primary education has been declared officially free and compulsory, only about 7 percent of children attend primary schools.

4. Implications of Gender Preferences on Mental Health and its Nuances

Describing health, the World Health Organization (WHO) describes it as "a state of complete, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". It can therefore be inferred from this definition that mental health is an integral and essential component of health. WHO goes further to describe mental health it is "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make contribution to his or her community;" invariably, mental health is not just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities, it is also not the antithesis to mental disorder. Some severe forms of mental disorder include anxiety, alcohol, depression, drug dependency, and schizophrenia. A number of determinants give rise to mental health issues ranging from social to psychological, environmental and biological factors. Social factors comprise societal pressure and expectations, discrimination (particularly gender discrimination), social exclusion, human rights violations, unhealthy lifestyles, rapid social change. Some sets of groups within the society are equally at higher risk of mental un-wellness because of their vulnerability and exposure to adverse circumstances interrelated with gender. Studies have shown also that women are more vulnerable to mental health challenges than men; they are twice more likely to be affected by Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), their exposure to violence makes women three or four times more susceptible to depression; they may more likely experience post-traumatic stress (PTSD) and are most likely to be ten times affected by eating disorder.

The importance of good mental health and wellbeing cannot be overemphasized both for individuals and the entire society, particularly for the woman/girl child. The state of mental health

will translate into how an individual makes choices, conduct her or his affairs. Mental wellness is the springboard from which any individual can realize her or his potential and function appropriately. Mental health can either positively or negatively impact on the educational outcome of any individual, the ability to acquire skills, the performance and productivity at work (Kolappa, Henderson and Kishore 2013, Pp. 48). Further, mental health has a direct correlation with relational communication and relationship, and most importantly with crime rate. Positive mental health equally allows persons to cope with the stresses of life, and make meaningful contributions to both the family and the community. To thrive and achieve life's goals and vision, to have a meaningful and enhances life quality, then individual's mental wellbeing must be intact because psychological and emotional wellbeing cannot be separated from physical health (Ryff and Singer 1998, Pp. 1-28). The important role mental health plays is equally illustrated by its inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Gender preference through various societal overt conducts and/or omissions has over time and in different ways produced several mental outputs in women and girls resulting in various mental indications that are discussed hereunder.

4.1 Fear, insecurity, and anxiety manifesting in continuous birth until sons are born in spite of health risk

The desire for sons influences reproductive choices and fertility behavior of women even to the detriment of their physical health (Chaudhuri, 2012, Pp. 178-186). There is usually a very burning yearning by women to give birth to as many sons as possible and this is driven by fear and anxiety and a wish to 'secure their lots in their husbands' family' since it is a patriarchal society and the number of sons a woman has determines her status, esteem and power in her matrimony. The fear and insecurity of not having sons (or enough sons) influence continuous procreation (Clark 2000, Pp. 95-108). Usually, a certain quantum of fear, nervousness and anxiety are normal phenomena for every person, however, it becomes a mental health concern and becomes an anxiety disorder when fear and anxiety interfere with the ability to function appropriately or to control and respond to situations suitably. In circumstances where the reproductive health circumstances of a woman dictate that there should be a closure to childbearing, yet she is unable to take the rational decision to follow her physiological commands, she is willing and perhaps eager to put herself in grave physical (health) danger by continuing bearing children because of the fear and anxiety of not producing sons. When this occurs, it clearly has migrated from normal fears to mental un-wellness (Jensen and Oster 2009, Pp. 1057–1094). This fear and anxiety is nourished by pressure from the husbands, his extended family members and the society who place sons above daughters. It is clearly a mental un-wellness borne out of fear, anxiety and insecurity for a woman to continue having children so as to have sons in spite of her poor gynecological health that dictates that she should stop having children.

4.2 Lower productivity, confidence, and self-esteem

Daughters (women/girls) need to do more in order to achieve in equal measure what their male counterparts have achieved with lesser input and to do extraordinary to prove their worth. Society has impressed it upon women/girl-children right from childhood of their second placement within the social strata. Women face a lot of discriminations that limit their opportunities to develop their full potential' (Makama, 2013, Pp. 98), they do not enjoy equal rights in almost all spheres of life basically because of their lower level of education, poverty, domestic burdens etc. (Jackson, 1999, p. 69) Even when they have equal qualifications with their male counterparts, they are still discriminated upon just because of their female anatomy. The society keeps giving them the vibes that they are second fiddle right from girlhood; and having experienced prolonged discrimination they grow less confident and lack audaciousness (Mind. 2017). Anyone who has been subjected to prolonged abuse, intimidation, bullying, prolonged financial hardship and traumatic events can develop low confidence and low self-esteem. When anyone is subjected to prolonged mental un-wellness, there is a high tendency for such an individual to also develop suicidal behavior (Alejo 2014, P. 49).

4.3 Perinatal depression

Globally, depression is a recurring challenge for women of childbearing age and Nigeria is not excluded (Bennett, *et al* 2004, Pp. 45-67). Perinatal depression is a form of depression that occurs during and after pregnancy (postpartum) and it is a real medical illness that affects women regardless of age, culture, income or educational attainment. Causes of perinatal depression could be multiple and can include genetic and environmental factors. According to the study carried out by researchers, perinatal depression is 'both a state of psychobiological distress and the consequence of social suffering' (Adewuya, Ola, Aloba, and Dada, 2007, Pp. 15-21). Some of the symptoms include persistent sadness, feelings of anxiety, irritation, and/or guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness or helplessness, fatigue, restlessness, abnormal appetites, weight change, inability or trouble getting emotionally connected with the new baby. Other more severe ones are the thought of death, suicide or harming the new baby or oneself. Adeponle et al while reiterating several other research findings state further that one of the several causes of perinatal depression is linked to the culture of male children preference, which is, "having a female child while wanting a male child" (Adeponle, Groleau, and Kola, 2017, Pp. 11-27). A woman has been socialized to desire male children first and failure to have the first sets of children as male often triggers depression with fear, uncertainty and anxiety deeply seated in between.

4.4 Defeatist Mindset which Undermines Professional and Educational Attainments

Because society is highly masculine indexed, there exists a very strong delineation in the socialization of female and male children. Girls and women have over time internalized the low value accorded to them by society, irrespective of their ambitions or how they might have learned to be ambitious, the male has presented the opportunities to develop and achieve his aims and ambitions whereas the opportunities presented to the female are limited. Further, female are married off or are expected to get married at an earlier age to equally start the reproductive circle. Failure to adhere to societal expectations produces an irritation against such female who is perceived as a deviant or a social misfit. Any female who deviate from this societal expectation will have to live with the stigma attached to her perceived anti-societal norms (Wittkowski, Gardner, Bunton, and Edge, 2014, Pp. 115-124). These affect the women/girls' commitment to overall performance, academic excellence and professional attainments. Women refuse to take up challenging professions regardless of their mental abilities; they will rather confine to or migrate to less 'masculine' professions which aid the opportunities to fulfill their sacrosanct reproductive roles effectively.

4.5 Shame, disappointment and Failure

Having children irrespective of sex ought to be a joyful event for every mother or indeed every household; the birth of a newborn ordinarily should be heralded with a lot of delights and celebrations; however, when a woman has had several female children and the expectation of having a son is very high at the next birth, the coming of yet another girl-child becomes an anticlimax for the woman and the household. The feeling of failure and shame then set in and takes over in the subconsciousness of the woman. She has feelings of failure and shame because she has been unable to break the "chain of having only female children", she is unable to properly fortify herself and her stay in matrimony since male children are used to rate a successful "wife and mother." A lot of women in this category who have had multiple female children earlier are so nervous and fearful of having a scan test to forecast the sex of the unborn child they are carrying.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Preference for male children is a pronounced desire by families in Nigeria and this is based on the socio-cultural patriarchal nature of the society where male children are accorded the place of first options in most endeavors. The process of socialization has instilled in female children the fact that their male counterpart is preferred and of more importance than her. This male gender preference which manifests in the daily activities and choices of the society has actively translated into mental health issues for the women and female children. Women and

female children have developed a number of negative mentalities that have hindered and limited their progress and achievements. This social menace is unacceptable, particularly in this twenty-first century in which personal abilities, competence and potential should be the deciding factors for positions and appointments. There is a need for both individuals and society to move from this parochial mindset to a progressive one in which rights of all persons are respected and protected. Women and girl-children should be accorded equal opportunities, protection, and rights.

To achieve the above, there is a need for women to be empowered. The empowerment suggested herein is in two folds; the first is by way of information, education and enlightenment. Women need to be empowered with adequate information about their physiology and the reproduction process of how children's sex is achieved in pregnancy. The woman is not the determinant of sex in pregnancy, rather, the sex of a child is produced through the male's y or x chromosomes. Additionally, women need to realize the harmful effect of some of these practices to them and society and to equally appreciate their distinctiveness as persons, their function and their strength. This form of enlightenment and education allow for a shift in mindsets and behavior from the devaluation of women/girl children and broaden their attitudes from the exclusive focus of women to their reproductive roles. Secondly, there is need for economic empowerment which eliminates control and manipulations from the society. Economic empowerment is essential to realizing women's right and gender equality. Women and girl-children need to develop the ability to participate equally in existing markets, to have access and control over productive resources and decent work. Women need to be empowered to have a voice at all levels to make meaningful decisions and participate in economic decisions at all levels starting from the family to national and international level. When women are able to attain economic liberty, there is an inclusive growth which creates both financial strength and emotional stability (UN, 2019). Girl-children should be educated to the highest educational point that their abilities can propel them to.

Further, there is a very urgent need to make new laws, to bridge the gaps in some existing laws and policies that over the years have accentuated this harmful practice of preferring sons to daughters. The Nigerian government needs to eliminate a number of these provisions and create laws that are equal and equitable for all; this is the only way that women and female children can be adequately protected. Enforcement should also go along with legislative interventions.

Some of the factors making the utilities for sons crucial in society by parents can be addressed through an adequate social welfare system by the government. The government should create innovative programs specifically targeted at meeting the various needs and issues associated with old age and aging. When society is assured of adequate care at old age, less emphasis will be placed on having male children based on the perceived economic utilities that come with it. Alongside this is the need to speak out against the continuing operation of patriarchy in our culture. Patriarchy underpins structural violence against women and it is a vehicle used to enhance discrimination and limitation on women. Patriarchy is used as a societal method of

excluding women from accessing resources, it perpetuates and boosts continuing male dominance and imbalanced power ratio, it instigates power superiority against women. There is, therefore, a need to challenge this existing framework and find wholesome alternatives to the current power structure. There is a need to push for diverse communities, to appreciate and accommodate persons for who they are and not their gender; to equitably disburse and allot opportunities and tasks not based on gender but based on abilities, education, suitability and relevance. Everyone should be given the opportunity to make a choice as to the surname she or he intends to bear, the father's name or the father's family name should not be thrust on any person.

Creating a functional psychosocial and mental health support, counseling and interventions structure during the antenatal and postnatal period is also an effective approach in attending to this social menace. Currently in most health facilities in Nigeria, the antenatal and postnatal care for women consists mostly only physical care leaving behind the essential emotional and mental health care. There is, therefore, a need for the introduction of mental and psychosocial care for women during and after pregnancy. When there is a structured mental and psychosocial support and care system, women are able to find the needed strength to stand and uphold any decision that will aid their physical and mental health.

Finally, there should also be consistent and continuous affirmative actions that will mainstream women into programs and structures within society.

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