



MILL'S FEMINISM AND THE POLITICAL ADVANCEMENT OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper entitled: "Mill's Feminism and the Political Advancement of Nigeria" is an attempt to analyze and use John Stuart Mill's concept of feminism for the advancement of politics in Nigeria. This study, therefore, proceeds from the understanding that for many decades now, studies on feminism and gender mainstreaming, have been conducted and significant progress has been made. However, certain issues surrounding dimensions of gender equality are still hazy. It is the intention of this paper to examine issues concerning women in relation to political developments which are very problematic in Nigeria. This work interrogates the unhealthy discrepancies between the locations of men and women in society in every facet of life. These issues seem to place particular emphasis on the oppression and marginalization of women at all levels. Utilising on Mill's feminism as it's theoretical framework, this paper explores the subsisting marginalization of women within the context of Nigeria's political space that previous researchers focused on. The paper aims at showing the possible linkage between gender identity, gender representation, gender mainstreaming and political developments in Nigeria, from the perspective of Mill. Hence, it employs the analytic method in investigating the significance of Mill's feminism within the ambience of the Nigerian political developments. This study reveals that women in Nigeria are not only marginalized, but highly subdued and oppressed from all fronts. Thus, this paper concludes that Mill's notion of feminism will certainly engender equality, effective mainstreaming, social cohesion among the sexes, and also serve as instrument for social and political engineering in an attempt to reinvent a new Nigeria.

Keywords: Feminism, Development, Political Advancement, Mill's Feminism, Nigeria.

Introduction

Feminism, as a socio-political movement and ideology, seeks to address and rectify the historical and ongoing inequalities between genders, advocating for the rights, opportunities, and equality of the sexes. This diverse movement has evolved over centuries, covering various waves and schools of thought, each contributing to a broader understanding of gender dynamics and

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oppression. All over the world, today, the quest by most stakeholders, governments, policymakers, women organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) etc has been for gender mainstreaming in sensitive policies such that would guarantee equal representation of men and women in government and administration in society. Nigeria, like many other countries, faces persistent gender inequalities and struggles with establishing an inclusive political space. Despite notable progress, women in Nigeria are underrepresented in political leadership positions, and the value of a gender-sensitive perspective on political issues cannot be over-emphasized. The problem extends from local government councils to the national level, where the percentage of women in decision-making roles remains significantly lower than that of their male counterparts.

While there have been policy initiatives and legal frameworks designed to promote gender equality in Nigeria, the effective implementation of these policies remains a challenge. The gap between policy formulation and actual implementation hampers progress in achieving tangible advancements for women in politics and broader society. To this end, most countries including Nigeria have become signatories to many international agreements which are intended to boost the status of women and empower them in all spheres of life just like their male counterparts. Traditionally, gender roles and expectations often limit women's participation in political processes and reinforce a patriarchal structure that may be at odds with the principles of gender equality. It is the subsisting marginalization of women in Nigerian politics that this paper undertakes to investigate at the instance of John Stuart Mill's arguments for feminism and gender inclusion. Addressing these issues is a *conditio sine qua non* for fostering a more inclusive and equitable political environment that aligns with the principles of gender equality advocated by Mill.

Conceptual Clarification

Feminism: There is no consensus on the definition of what feminism is, but it is widely known to be the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of equality of the sexes. Hooks argues that there are negative implications of the lack of a unified definition. He states that "A central problem within feminist discourse has been our inability to either arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is or accept definitions that could serve as a point of unification. It indicates a growing disinterest in feminism as a radical political movement" (Hooks, 1984: pxi). At its core, feminism is the belief in full social, economic and political equality for women. Feminism largely arose in response to Western traditions that restricted the rights of women, but feminist thought has global manifestations and variations.

Political Advancement: This refers to the developments in the institutions, attitude, and value that form the political power system of a society. Development as a word is all embracing; it affects the totality of life. Farzana sees it as "an extremely vague and all-encompassing term, which appeals to various groups who often see it in various ways" (Farzana, 2000: p65). However, political development enhances a nation's capacity to mobilize and allocate resources, to process policy inputs into implementable output.

J. S. Mill on Feminism

John Stuart Mill, a prominent 19th-century philosopher, political economist, and advocate of individual liberties, played a pivotal role in shaping political thought during his time. While he is renowned for his contributions to political philosophy, Mill's significance in feminist discourse became particularly pronounced with the publication of *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. In this seminal work, Mill fervently argues for the political, social, and economic equality of women.

He holds that the subjugation of women was a hindrance to societal progress, and the emancipation of women was not only a moral imperative but also essential for the betterment of society as a whole.

In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill considers the principle of equality to be a moral imperative. Thus, Mill submits: "The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes, the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other" (Mill, 1869: p112).

The salient points to note in Mill's equality of men and women does not involve the legal aspects of society, which he unambiguously describes as that the law which compels women to undertake domestic roles and be excluded from decision making parts of society, such as politics and business. Mill's understanding is that the central reason for the oppression of women comes from the male's physical strength. Men are physically stronger than women, and it was common to think at that time that the man's brain was larger than that of a woman. Charles Sowerwine made the observation when he declares that "Since women are generally smaller than men, their brains are also smaller" (Sowerwine, 2003: p295).

Sowerwine's position on women's brain was subsequently debunked by Mill as a myth. Accordingly, Mill maintains: "Any of the mental differences supposed to exist between women and men are but the natural effect of the differences in their education and circumstances and indicate no radical difference, far less radical inferiority, of nature" (Mill, 1869: p94). Mill conveniently assumes that the more influence reason has in society, the less importance physical strength will have. For Szapuová, Mill declares: "In this state, women will no longer be disadvantaged, as physical strength becomes less important as civilisation advances" (Szapuová, 2006: p182). By declaring that the subordination of women is one of the "chief hindrances to human improvement", Mill goes ahead to state that the oppression of women poses negative consequences not only on the lives of women, but of men as well. Hence, it prevents society from progressing.

Mill also critically examines the status of women in society, delving into what he terms "The Gender Question." This is rooted in the assertion that women's rights are human rights. He rejects the notion that women should be confined to a domestic sphere and argues for the recognition of women as individuals with inherent rights to autonomy and self-determination. Mill contends that the denial of women's rights is not only unjust but also detrimental to the flourishing of a just and progressive society. He says that we simply don't know what women are capable of, because we don't let them try, one cannot make an authoritative statement without evidence. We can't stop women from trying things because they might not be able to do them (Mill, 1869: p133). An argument based on speculative physiology is just that, speculation. The anxiety of mankind to intervene on behalf of nature is an altogether unnecessary solitude. What women by nature cannot do, it is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing.

From the above, Mill suggests that men are admitting that women are capable of doing a thing, but that men do not want them to do so. Whether women can do these things or not must be found out in practice. Mill extends his analysis to the realm of politics, advocating for women's political rights and representation. He argues for women's suffrage as a fundamental right, stating that political representation is necessary for the protection of women's interests and the advancement of society as a whole. In book three, Mill turns to the bias exhibited against women in terms of entry into specific vocations. According to him, the

reasons given for barring women from certain professions was 'interest of society' which for him simply meant the interest of men (Mill, 1869: p524).

However, many women have proved that they are capable of performing certain functions hitherto reserved for men. The number of such women is relatively small compared to men in those fields but this can also be explained by the historical subjection which has put hindrances in the advancement of women's cause. However, Mill makes a very curious claim that "the things which women are not allowed to do are the very ones for which they are peculiarly qualified" (Mill, 1869: p529). Throughout his discussion of "The Gender Question", Mill often employs utilitarian principles. He argues that the subjection of women is not only morally wrong but also economically and socially inefficient. Emancipating women, according to Mill, would contribute to the overall happiness and prosperity of society.

Mill also scrutinizes the legal inequalities that defined the status of women in the 19th century. He considered the principle of equality to be a moral imperative. He opens the essay with: "The principles which regulate the existing social relations between the two sexes the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement" (Mill, 1869: p2). Here, he bases the inequality of men and women on the legal aspects of society, maintaining that societal norms confine women to undertake domestic roles and exclude them from decision making parts of society, such as politics (Mill, 1869: p77). Mill understands that the central reason for this oppression comes from the male's physical strength. Men are physically bigger and stronger than women, and it was common to think at the time that the man's brain was larger than that of the woman. A central aspect of the status of women, as per Mill's analysis, is the limited access to education. He argues that the denial of educational opportunities to women not only hampers their intellectual development but also reinforces their subordinate status. Mill advocates for equal educational opportunities, believing that education is crucial for the empowerment of women and their full participation in society.

As regards women and marriage, Mill begins by critiquing the legal inequalities embedded in marriage laws during his time. He highlights how marriage often places women in a position of legal subordination to their husbands. Laws concerning property ownership, inheritance, and the custody of children favour men, leaving women with limited legal rights within the marriage. He emphasized the need for the end of marital slavery and to establish a friendship within marriage, and states: "The equality of married persons before the law, is not only the sole mode in which that particular relation can be made consistent with justice to both sides, and made conducive to the happiness of both, but it is the only means of rendering the daily life of mankind, in any high sense, a school or moral cultivation" (Mill, 1869: p70). Through his relationship with his wife Harriet, Mill explores the situations in which intelligent women were confined by patriarchal institutions and customs that deny their individuality. He describes the way in which the woman is a slave within marriage by saying a wife is "the actual bondservant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called" (Mill, 1869: p76). He observes that the intrinsic reason why women are treated as slaves in marriage is systemic discrimination in society. He states that women are not free to marry and are not free within marriage.

Mill therefore outlines a vision of marital friendship of cooperation which would seep into public life. He understands that the equality of a marital relationship would change views on equality on society as a whole. He ultimately states that equality before the law will lead to justice in all spheres of social and political life. He goes on to say that since humans are equal, the fact that someone is born a woman should not determine her position in society and customs should not "ordain that to be born a girl instead of a boy, any more to be born Black

instead of White, or a commoner instead of a nobleman, shall decide the person's position through all life" (Mill, 1869: p79).

Mill emphasizes the importance of preserving individuality within the marital relationship. He argues that women, like men, should have the freedom to pursue their own interests, aspirations, and personal development. Marriage should not suppress individuality but provide a supportive environment for both partners to flourish. Societal expectations surrounding marriage, according to Mill, impose rigid roles on women. These expectations often hinder women's ability to exercise their free will and pursue their own paths. Mill advocates for the dismantling of societal norms that restrict women to predefined roles within the marital relationship.

Implications for Nigeria

While Mill's feminism, as articulated in *The Subjection of Women*, has a large role in defining the nature of marital relationships, offering valuable insights into the struggle for gender equality, its application to the context of political advancement in Nigeria poses several challenges. However, it is difficult to quantify the impact of Mill's feminism in society. One measure to be considered is the number of domestic abuses and homicides in Nigeria, United States of America, etc. From 1885-1970, it is seen that 50% of all gender based violence, homicides and abuses were domestically related; and they include: a husband killing a wife, and from that less than 2% were committed by women. From 1972-1982, 25% of homicides were domestically related, and of that 25%, less than 4% were committed by women (HO, 1989:94).

The plight of Nigerian women, like those of their counterparts in other parts of developed countries, have been characterized by lack of adequate representation, lack of access to well-developed education and training systems for women's leadership in general, undue dominance of men in the socio-political scheme of things, poverty or lack of money or resources, lopsided political appointments and the general imbalances associated with very unjust treatment of the female citizens in its entirety. Generally speaking, we can agree that there is need to harness women's potentials towards achieving a sustainable political development in Nigeria. One of the major issues that stand out is that of emancipation and empowerment of the female gender. One contribution to the empowerment debated that can serve as a useful tool of reference is the model provided by Mullender and Ward (1991). These scholars' mode of empowerment is based "explicitly on an anti-oppressive perspective and suggests three simple questions to be addressed by those concerned that participatory approaches achieve their empowerment potential" (Crawley, 1998: p30).

The questions are as follow: What are the problems to be tackled? Why do the problems exist? How can we bring about change? These questions are vital, and those concerned with policies to redress the present imbalance in the status of women in Nigeria do not seem to be guided by them given the little achievement in this regard. Highlights of women's problems in Nigeria which have been fairly identified by government and non-government agencies are age, education, occupation, caste, economics, religion, cultural beliefs, virility deficiency syndrome, non-implementation of Affirmative Action, and lack of finance and other resources.

Occasionally it has been argued that women have accepted their position in society voluntarily, a position that is dismissed by Mill. He argues that a great number of women do not accept it as shown by their protests, writings and admissions into professions hitherto the preserve of men. Conventions and agitations for women's rights for purposes of getting political franchise also show women's discontent with their situation. There could be many women who

cherish such emancipatory ideals silently but are encouraged to shelve them as not being proper for their sex. He notes that no enslaved class ever asked for complete liberty at once and so is the case with women. Their emancipation shall come albeit gradually. This seems true if we consider the amount of resistance faced by women in their struggle. This claim is valid if we consider that in history, women have been trained not to voice their thought openly or even show any defiance to men. The few that have attempted have often found great resistance.

Mill raises the question why it is apparently difficult for women to launch a collective rebellion. For him, social and natural factors account for this. In the first place, men not only want women's obedience, they want also their sentiments. Secondly, a woman is not a forced slave but a willing one and finally she is not just a slave but a favourite one (Mill, 1869: p490). Therefore, men try everything to enslave the minds of women and use avenues such as education to make this possible. Women are taught that their ideal character is the very opposite of men and that they must learn submission in order to fit as given the natural attraction between the sexes, a wife's dependence on the husband and the fact that all aims or social ambitions can only be got through men, women have to be taught to be attractive to men. The aspect of women being willing slaves is debatable given that elsewhere Mill has argued that society leaves the woman no option but marriage. However, the willingness may be construed to mean the consent the women give when they say 'I do' at the marriage vows. The issue of wives being favourite slaves seems to make sense if the kind of protection (physical and otherwise) that they get from their husbands is anything to go by. Scholars have continued to lament about the dismal result attained by the various efforts at gender inclusion in Nigeria. Mill has since provided an explanation that "custom; grounded either in a prejudice, or in the present constitution of society, which, making almost every woman, socially speaking, an appendage of some man, enables men to take systematically the lion's share of what belongs to both" (Mill, 1869: p500). Re-echoing the view of Mill, Gardiner (1997) notes that the "legal subordination of women with marriage was the basis of women's subjection in the political and economic spheres" (Gardiner, 1997: p30).

Addressing the problems squarely will no doubt amount to liberating women from their relegation to the background and mainstreaming them into key decision-making spheres of society. Lenin (1972) cited in Madunagu (2007) notes that the task of liberating women from their oppressed status is an arduous one which cannot be accomplished by mere exhortation. Commenting further on this, Lenin observes that the struggle to uplift the status of women through their liberation will be a long one, and it demands radical reconstruction both of the social technique and of morals. The traditional perspective of women's subjugation to domestic's activities, while men occupy super ordinate status because they earn a living working outside the home, has been used by functionalist theories to explain women's low status in society and persistence of gender-role socialization. Thus, rather than serving to uplift the status of women in the contemporary times, the increasing globalization and advancement in technology and information have continued to widen the yawning gap of inequality between men and women as the men control key economic and social resources while the women continue to be hemmed and chained at home by patriarchy. Commenting on this negative attitude of male-dominance against women, Montagu observes: "Contemporary men are, for the most part, still living in a Victorian world of their own. That world is out of harmony with that in which women live and most men have not yet awakened to that fact. To live by the nineteenth-century standards in a twentieth- century world is an anachronism" (Montagu, 1982: p72).

Men who institute the oppression of women in society will want to perpetuate it as long as it functions in their favour. Thus, efforts at improving women's status to that of equality with men will have not yielded any meaningful result. Concerning this issue, Mill observes "I believe that their disabilities elsewhere are only clung to in order to maintain their subordination in domestic life, because the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal" (Mill, 1970: p300). Hence, the traditional and functionalist perspectives make it clear that while the problems of women are obvious, the forces of patriarchal society which perpetuate them, make it difficult, if not impossible, to empower women to the tune of elevating their social status to that of equality with men. Mill's arguments for feminism and gender inclusion substantiate and make a case for equality of the sexes.

Despite all this, Mill argues that there is hope for the women with the changing circumstances of the modern world. Human beings are no longer born into their places in life for example social class, country, wealth or poverty. People are now free to follow their pursuits or desires. We are left to our own discretions except when there is need to protect the right of others. It is wrong to fix beforehand that on some general presumption certain persons are not fit to do certain things. Where unfitness is real, ordinary motives of human conduct are enough to prevent the incompetent person from persisting. The bottom line here is that for Mill, opportunities should be left equally open to all and let those who fail do so genuinely. To be born a boy or a girl does not ordain what we shall be. The social subordination of women stands out an isolated fact, a relic of an old world (Mill, 1970: p493). The implications are that if these arguments are practicalized, they will in no small measure contribute to the political advancement of Nigeria.

At present, the impact of Mill's notion of feminism is clearly felt by most women. His impact on changing the legal status of women is significant as it has restructured society in a way that would not just benefit men, but society as a whole. Women do not proportionately make up the decision making parts of society – to which Mill argues for it aggressively. For example, he holds that 51% of the European and African population are women and only 29% of them take part in policy making decision. This may account for the reason some women opt for a domestic career, or more likely, some women not being able to have the same opportunities as men due to discrimination. So, does Mill actually go far enough in moving away from a patriarchal society?

It can be argued, however, that Mill has profoundly affected the revolution of changing the concept of marriage which in turn can revolutionise society and establish equality in today's society. He has succeeded in changing the way husbands think of their wives in marriage – they have the potential to be equal. Mill's influence has changed the way husbands think about their wives, from slaves to equals. It defines a new way of affection towards one's spouse. He has ultimately shaped the relationships of today and through that, created a more equal society. Although Mill has a limited role in shaping the legal aspects of society which hinder and cage women to inequality his influence cannot be discounted. Thus, Mill ultimately endorses the debate of equality within the political sphere and has commenced a campaign which can lead to universal suffrage and gender equality. He has a much larger role in creating a 'new' relationship in marriage by creating 'marital friendships'. He transforms the way men think about women and from that understands that Mill is a revolutionary in bringing about gender equality.

Evaluation

The right of women in the socio-political space of Nigeria concerning her democratic agenda has been a matter of the public debate and hence attracts serious concerns by individuals and the

wider international community as a whole. The plight of Nigerian women, like their counterparts in other parts of developed countries has been characterized by lack of adequate representation, lack of access to well-developed education and training systems for women's political participation, undue dominance of men in the socio-political scheme of things, poverty or lack of money and resources, lopsided political appointments and the general imbalances associated with very just treatment of the female folk in its entirety. There is no doubt that this trend negates the collective interest of human fundamental rights and the right of equality, freedom and personal dignity of women in society. This tradition also poses very serious threats on Nigeria's part to democratic consolidation and sustainable development in the country.

It is interesting to note that the principle and the practice of the Affirmative Action is a universal phenomenon. Several countries of the world have history, one way or the other, showing that the right of women is to be respected and sustained. It is therefore of crucial importance for Nigerian to take a cue from best international practices in order to allow a pride of place for women. From the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing, China in 1995, women in other parts of the world have reached a considerable height in political positions in their respective countries, either as Presidents, Heads of State or Heads of Governments. Examples of such countries are Chile; Brazil, Germany, Liberia, Bangladesh, Finland, New Zealand and so on. Also in many countries judicial arm, national and regional parliaments, women have achieved and have even surpassed the 35% Affirmative Action's plan for women in Government (Hordosch, 2-4).

Nigeria has similar or even better political environment as compared to some of these countries, but perhaps the government and people of these countries are more gender sensitive than Nigeria, because they have identified the potential in women, thus giving them the opportunity to hold one political office or the other and the results are excellent. No doubt, Nigeria has abundance of women. What is needed is a change of mindset and attitude towards the issue of gender and politics. The earlier Nigeria adopts an all-inclusive complementary approach in politics, the better for it, as it will help it to navigate the process of development in all segments of the country.

Conclusion

In order to address gender inequality in all sincerity, there is a need to challenge patriarchy in all its manifestations. This research work is of the view that any programme(s) introduced or any actions taken to transform gender relations, should be carefully conceptualized in an innovative, creative and radical manner aimed at eliminating all forms of patriarchy. If this is done, then Nigeria will be on the right path to overcoming the subordination and oppression of women and bring about human centered development which can contribute to the political advancement of Nigeria.

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