



Critical Analysis of Culture, and Contemporary Realities in Itam Clan, Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

Gender remains one of the most contested and analytically rich concepts in the social sciences, and humanities. This paper critically examined gender as a social construct, distinguishing it from biological sex while exploring its embeddedness in cultural, religious, and socio-political systems. Drawing on key theoretical perspectives such as functionalism, feminism, and social constructionism, the study examined how gender roles are produced, maintained, and transformed across societies in the Itam Clan of Itu Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State. Particular attention was given to an African context, where indigenous traditions, colonial legacies, and religious influences intersect to shape gender norms. This paper argued further that gender is neither static, nor universal but continuously negotiated through power relations and institutional frameworks. It concluded by emphasizing the need for inclusive, context-sensitive approaches to gender discourse that promote equity and social justice in Itam Society.

Keywords: Gender, Social Construct, Feminist Theory, Patriarchy, African Gender Systems, Gender Inequality, Gender-Based Violence.

Introduction

Gender models are shaped by the different expectations that individuals, groups and societies assigns to persons based on their sex as well as cultural values and beliefs about gender (Blackstone, p335). For one to have a proper understanding of gender model one must first of all have a clear clarification of what gender is. Gender is a term used to denote the different and unequal perceptions, views, roles, relevance, or rewards that a society assigns to the two sex categories (Anyalebechi, p63).

From this definition, it is clearly shown that every human person in existence has his or her own gender; and every single gender has its own peculiar significant role. It is also shown from the definition that every characteristic attached to a particular gender is socially constructed. That is to say that every norm, characteristics and behaviours associated with a particular gender are projected by society. It can also be deduced from the definition that gender varies from society to society and can change over time. The word gender was used for the first time in the 1940s by John Money in a discourse meant to legitimize sex change; and hence it was employed in the social sciences from the late 1960s onward (Nidham and Aseel, p2). According to them, the concept of gender has a distinction from sex. It refers to the biological differences between a man and a woman, while gender refers to the differences and traits that society associates with each sex. Gender being something that is being projected by the society makes it liable to change. Sex is a biological categorization based primarily on productive potential, while gender is the societal elaboration of biological sexes. From the above definition, gender is not a natural characteristic; it is a trait and artificial characteristics, designed by society for sexes (Eckert and Mc-Connell, p37).

Sex is a permanent phenomenon that can't be changed, but gender is subject to change as society keeps evolving and developing. It is inevitable that gender models or perspectives have an effect on people's opportunities, social relationships, and interaction. Gender is seen as a social structure. It is an institution that is embedded in all the social processes of everyday life and social organization (Risman, p430). This means that gender is a core component of the society which affects all spheres of the society both the social, economic, family and even the society at large. The variance in gender models and perspectives has led to complexities in cross-gender relationships. Traditional gender models create and perpetuate gender inequality, as the roles assigned to women are associated with less power and resources (p336). Husbands are seen as priority in the African Traditional gender model (Mensah, p220). The gender model has also affected the marital union of some families. In the traditional Akwa Ibom society, women are perceived as subordinates, and men as bosses. The male child preference is deeply rooted in Akwa Ibom State (Ukpong and Essien, p286). Also, in traditional African society, family survival and the future of

the marriage depend significantly on the woman, instead of both parties. Women have been given these care-giving roles, putting them in a vantage position for procreation and life sustainability, but despite the various positions, activities, responsibilities, and roles saddled with women, in traditional African societies, men still occupy the leadership position, as many African societies are patriarchal in nature (Oyibode and Olanlekan p98).

Women's roles as wives and mothers have typically had an impact on their participation in the paid labour market (Chandler, p63). Very often, gender determines the pupil's academic performance. As a rule, boys perform better than girls in mathematics, physics, Informatics, and engineering, while girls are better at literature, languages, history, and art. Later, these factors serve as a basis for selecting the further course of education. Boys continue their studies mostly in natural and technical sciences, and girls choose to study humanities in many African societies (p70). Thus, the gender model could be said to be one of the prominent factors that has led to the collapse of many cross-gender relationships due to different societal model orientation. With recourse from the foregoing, the work is pursued within the following objectives which are to: critically examines how gender is modeled in Itam society, and analyse how the Itam gender model affects cross-gender relationships in society. In order to pursue these objectives and arrive at a reliable conclusion and offer useful recommendations, the study adopted a qualitative approach, using unstructured interviews to gather primary data from respondents in Itam Clan, and also engaged, with empirical works of scholars on gender-related issues for analysis.

Different Paradigms of Gender

According to Wharton, gender is viewed as a system of social practices; this system creates and maintains gender distinctions and organized relations of inequality on the basis of these distinctions. In this view, gender involves the creation of both differences and inequalities (p7). Based on the social grip in defining and evaluating gender perceptions, relations, and roles, different theories or paradigms on how gender is or should be modeled have arisen in scholarship. From the interactional perspective theory, gender is more about the social construct within which individuals interact. Then, it is about the individuals themselves that gender is not inherent in people, but that it is something that is created and maintained in interactions (Nyberg, p18).

The interactional views on gender mean that people's reactions and behaviours vary in response to social contexts. This means that both men and women have a probable way in Gender as an interactional event, enact gender relations in diverse contexts, they confirm or undermine gender beliefs. Thus, interaction plays an important role in sustaining or modifying the gender system (Gussak, p64). There is also the institutional gender theory, where the use of the term institution is abstract

and almost all-encompassing. The institutional perspective theory on gender focuses on how gender is created and maintained in organizations and cultures, it also aims to examine the practices and policies of cultures, societies, and organizations (Nyberg, p13). Also, in institutional theory, Institutions affects the society and influence organizations behaviour (Amend, p1). As a social situation, gender creates distinguishing social statuses for the assignments of rights and institutions (Lorber, p122). As a social institution, it also determines how and the ways human beings behave (Lorber, p123). The sociologist theory also defines gender as an organised pattern. organised pattern (Wharton, p65). The social learning theory in sociology describes the process.

It emphasizes several key mechanisms in development, including reinforcement, punishment, imitation, and observational learning. These three mechanisms-reinforcement, imitation, and observational learning are thought to underlie the process of gender typing. That is the acquisition of gender-type behaviour and learning of gender roles, according to social learning theory (Sayers, p30). In the individualistic theory, proponents view gender as an attribute or characteristic of people. Also, the functionalist perspective typifies human society as a biological organism with various parts that are harmoniously known for its smooth functioning (Lorber, p133). The functionalist theory views the society as a multifaceted structure with different elements that work in harmony to ensure the entire system sustainability and survival. The functionalist theory examines society from a broader perspective and generally pays attention to the social systems of society (p135).

Gender has been conceptualized through various theoretical frameworks. Wharton defines gender as a system of social practices that creates distinctions and organizes inequality (Wharton, p7). From the interactionism perspective, gender is produced through everyday social interactions rather than being inherent in individuals (Nyberg, p18). Individuals “do gender” through behavior, thereby reinforcing or challenging societal expectations. The institutional perspective views gender as embedded in organizational structures, cultural norms, and policies (Nyberg, p13). Institutions shape and reproduce gender inequalities by assigning roles, rights, and expectations. While Social learning theory, explains gender acquisition through processes such as; imitation, reinforcement, and observation (Sayers, p30). Individuals internalize gender roles through socialization. The functionalist perspective sees gender roles as complementary parts of a broader social system necessary for societal stability (Lorber, p133). However, this perspective has been criticized for legitimizing inequality. Together, these paradigms demonstrate that gender is multifaceted, socially produced, and sustained through interaction, institutions, and cultural norms.

Gender as a Socio-cultural Construct

According to Nyberg, gender is a social construct that impacts attitudes, roles, responsibilities and behaviour patterns of boys and girls, men and women in the societies (p18). Also, gender is said to be a cultural-based complex of norms, values, and behaviours that a particular culture assigns to one biological sex. The sex and gender are lodged largely in the matrix of a culture's norms, values, and beliefs (pSegal 4). The social construction of gender is demonstrated by the fact that individuals, groups and societies ascribe particular traits, statuses or values to individuals purely because of the sex, yet these ascriptions differ across societies and cultures (Blackstone, p336). When it has to do with gender, society is a very important factor. Whatever gender entails is what society has constructed. Gender is an ever-changing and evolving social construct. The roles associated with gender are often defined by society's expectations, attitudes, and portrayals. These affect personal attitudes, career choices, and behaviours (Wilson, p67). Gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it's bred into our genes. Mate out of human interaction, out of social life, and it is the texture and order of that social life (Judith, p13). Judith also added that everyone does gender even without thinking about it. Every society uses gender and grade. Every society classifies people as boys and girls; hence, that makes gender a social institution (p15), one of the major ways that human beings organise their lives (Judith, p18).

The social construction of gender determines attitudes about what men and women are capable of, how they should behave what kinds of roles and images are presented for women and men, and who will occupy positions of power (Hasanul, p68). According to Marvgan, gender is socially constructed and is a result of socio-cultural influences throughout an individual's life. Hence gender identity can be affected by and is different from one society to another depending on the way members of society evaluate the roles of males and females.

Gender is fundamentally a socio-cultural construct that shapes behavior, roles, and expectations (Nyberg, p18). It is rooted in cultural norms, values, and belief systems (Segal, p4). The variability of gender across societies demonstrates the constructed nature of gender. Which differ significantly across cultures, indicating that gender is not biologically fixed but socially defined (Blackstone, p334). Judith Lorber emphasizes that gender is continually produced and reproduced through social interaction. Individuals unconsciously 'perform' gender roles, thereby reinforcing societal structures (Lorbar, p13). Thus gender influences perceptions of capability, authority, and social positioning. It determines access to power and shapes life opportunities.

Contemporary Gender Issues in Society

One of the paramount issues brought about by gender in our society is the issue of inequality. According to Rastique, gender norms and stereotypes reinforce gendered identities and constrain in behaviours of women and men in ways that leads to inequality (p610), and in our society gender inequality is seen as an attack on the traditional and cultural ethos (p611). Also, for the educational, family, economic, governance, and all other social institutions, statistic reveals severe gender tension in Nigeria (Olawale, p4). There is an imbalance in education among the genders, such that few women are empowered and very few are part of the labour force (p5). Also, women's participation in the national economy is about 11 percent compared with 30 percent for men (p8).

Lorber explained gender roles to be based on the disparities in gender expectations of individuals based on their sex and based on each society's values and benefits about the gender (p335). Gender roles are closely related to gender stereotypes or generalisation about how an individual is or should be based on the individual's gender (kraine and Kim, p6). Gender norms and stereotypes constrain behavior and reinforce unequal power relations (Ranique, p610). On, employment, and governance, Women remain under represented in economic and political spheres (Olawale, p4). Cultural resistance often frames gender equality efforts as threats to tradition. Gender roles and stereotypes further entrench inequality by prescribing rigid expectations for behavior (Kaine and Kim, p6).

Effects of Cross Gendered Construct on Cross Gender Relationship

Traditionally, especially for the African setting, the role of the man is to rule over his family with a firm hand. He is the bread winner; he provides for the household, he defends the honour of the family. An African man is therefore considered to be the ideal father and mother who nurture his children according to the rules of the patriarchal family (Okolo, p200). Among the Africans, women are expected to be quiet when men speak. Women are being seen as respectable by being respectful to men. In Africa, it is believed that good mothers do not challenge authority in general. African women politicians have to be quiet, and not challenge authority. She's expected to accept marriage and have children because marriage is assumed to be the goal for most African women (p206). In traditional marriages perception, men earn money and support the house, while women assume the duty of being a mother and responsible for house work (Ercaan and Ucar, p300).

Also, it is highlighted by Essen and Ukpong that traditional women are seen as properties; hence a man is free to marry as many wives as he can but a woman is expected not to have a real friend other than the husband authority in the society. According to Marshall, women lesser access to power and resources may also constrain the development of friendships in human relations. As a result of gender

and gender role in the society, men and women relationship has become power relation (Udo, p82). It also promotes and reinforces gender stereotypes which results in skewed gender conscience (p83).

Traditional African gender systems emphasize male dominance and female subordination. Men are positioned as providers and authority figures, while women are assigned domestic roles (Okolo, 200). These norms shape interpersonal relationships, often creating power imbalances. Women have limited access to resources and authority constrains their agency (Udo, p82). In many contexts, double standards such as tolerance of male infidelity but strict sanctions against women reflect deeply embedded patriarchal values. These dynamics reinforce inequality and hinder equitable relationship.

Critical Appraisal of the Literature and Research Gap

From the reviewed literatures, it has been established that gender is a social construct and it is societal based. Gender isn't something that is inherent, it is what is being invented and established by each society. These gender and gender roles vary in each society. There are many theories which could be used in addressing and understanding the issue of gender in each society this includes interactional perspective theory, institutional gender theory, social learning theory, individualistic theory etc. Also every gender in the society has its role. The male genders are seen as the rulers while the female genders are seen as the meek and feeble ones. This gender role has its effects on cross gender relation. It leads to androcentrism, role oriented society, and power oriented society.

Nevertheless, there are still research gaps in this finding. The literature reviewed hasn't dealt with gender from the Itam perspective. Most of the literature text and articles from scholars addresses the general gender issues in Africa but not specifically on the Itam society. The literatures also haven't dealt with the effect of gender and gender role of the Itam people on the society specifically. Gaps are critically addressed. Existing literature establishes that gender is socially constructed and context rather than specific communities. There is limited scholarship on gender constructions, within Itam society, particularly regarding their impact on interpersonal relationships.

Research Methodology

The area of the study focused on Itam Clan, comprising 46 villages. A non-probability sampling technique was used to select 20 respondents from three villages. Allowing participants to provide in-depth perspectives based on lived experience. The data were transcribed and thematically analysed. The primary data for the study were obtained via unstructured interviews from the sample discussed above. The interviews were transcribed and analysed to arrive at the study's findings. Interview

with Mr. Usenata Udo of Atai Ibiaku Itam aged sixty five, a retired head teacher, and the current chairman Atai Ibiaku Itam Council He specifically, explained the Itam gendered model. According to him, there are certain things women are not expected to do in society and even at home. He said the leadership role both at home and in society is basically for men. He said women in Itam society are not expected to claim palm tree as it is the role of the man to do so. He said that even on the farm, the staking is basically for the man, while the woman is just to plant. According to him, the women are the ones assigned with domestic duties at home. He went further to say that prior to this time, much importance was placed on women's fattening and marital training than on women's education. Mr Usenata went further to say that the Itam society is patriarchal, and man-based. Such that even when the male happens to be the youngest, he assumes role of the head of that family, it is still the young boy regardless of his age or status, that rules because no decision in the family can be made without the approval of the young boy, *Akpan Iwod ufok*; family head. Our sources further remarked that the patriarchal state of the Itam society is beneficial to the women as they will be protected by the men. He gave an example that the women can't protect themselves in terms of fights or other violence situation. It is the men that protect the women if such case arises.

He further adduced that Itam has never considered the male and female to be of the same status and that the equality of both gender will never happen in the Itam community. According to him, gender equality is just a statement that is not grounded. Mr. Usenata added that in the Itam society, women are not to own a property in the fathers compound and if at all she is given, It was never equally with the man even though the woman might be the eldest.

In the second interview with Mr. Akaninyene Tom, from Ikot Ekang Itam, the issue of fidelity in the Itam society was discussed. According to him, it is a taboo for a married woman in Itam community to engage in the act of infidelity. The man is never to take the woman back and no other man is expected to take her as a wife. He said a man can be forgiven of infidelity in marriage but a woman can't be forgiven as a married woman is seen as a sacred being whose nakedness is to be seen by the husband alone. Mr. Akaniyene in addition said that the men are expected to be the providers at home. According to him the men are expected to be the providers at home to ensure that the wife and children are protected while the woman is to care and obey the husband.

From the above data gotten, it is observed that most of the Information given by the indigenes of Itam society corresponds with African setting as derived from the reviewed literatures written by scholars. Mr. Usenata, further said that women are only assigned with the domestic roles at home. They are expected to be under the influence of the man and are not expected to disobey or say no to whatever the man says as he is the head of the home. This shows the low state and position of the

women in Itam society. Available data from this study showed that subjugation and intimidation of women in society still exist. The women being deprived of leadership role in the society is an indication to a state of gender imbalance in Itam society. It showed that women are property to men, over whom they can do and decide for them as it pleases. This was clearly pointed out by Essen and Ukpong. When they averse that a woman is assigned only to the kitchen, it deprives her of the opportunity to explore her potentials and other abilities that she possesses. It places a limitation on women, which makes them subjects and the men bosses in the society. From the data gotten, it is vividly clear that the issue of stereotyping is prevalence in the Itam society. The men are the most acknowledged.

On the other hand, they women are seen as being weak, and incapable of leading and making decisions. This is most likely to bring about inferiority and low self-esteem among women and in their relationships in society. The Itam gender model shows the superiority of the male in the society. Much superiority is ascribed to the men and this shows the patriarchal state of the Itam society. Following Mr. Usenata's assertion, the Itam society is patriarchal and will continue to be patriarchal. This shows how neglected they women are in Itam society. Mr. Usenata also made it clear that women are exempted from leadership roles in the society and in the family. The neglect of women in the leadership roles in the society and the assigning of ultimate leadership roles, to the men is crystal clear, the influence of the male gender on the female gender in Itam society. Even in the marriage institution, women are minor. Men are to give instructions and order in Itam society while the women are to quietly obey. This shows the domination of men in every aspect of life and the conditioning of women to be mere subjects in society. The exemption of the male in infidelity shows the situation of inequality in the Itam societal gender construct.

Inequality in the Itam society is what can never be changed, according to Mr. Usenata. This shows the low status quo of placed on women in the Itam society. The findings in this work have revealed that Itam society is strongly patriarchal. Even in cases where a male child is younger, he is accorded authority over older female siblings. Cultural norms enforce strict expectations of female obedience and male dominance. Double standards in moral conduct, particularly regarding infidelity, further highlight gender inequality. These findings align with broader African patriarchal structures but also reveal specific cultural nuances unique to Itam society. The system perpetuates inequalities. These findings align with broader African patriarchal structures but also reveal specific cultural nuances unique to Itam society. Deeply institutionalized system shaped by cultural parochial norms. The dominance of men and the subordinate Gender in Itam society is a socially constructed and deeply institutionalized system shaped by cultural parochial norms. The dominance of men and the subordination of women define social relations and limit equitable interaction.

Since gender is a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon that is shaped by cultural, religious, and institutional forces. And this work shows clearly that the Itam gender model is equivalent to the African traditional gender model. Itam gender model is patriarchal in nature. Men dominate and rule while women are subjugated and intimidated by society. In Itam gender model the female are seen as weak and meek and are assigned with roles which is only within the family care and the kitchen. Vital decisions are made by men, and leadership roles are solely for men. With this patriarchal state of society, the subjugation of women in relationships is inevitable. The cross-gendered relationship in the Itam society will be that of the superior and inferior. It will be impossible to have a balanced relationship between the two genders in the society. Except traditional norms, globalization and education continue to influence gender roles, driving change. To address the imbalance gender model in Itam society, strategic and concrete plans and actions must be taken through Cultural transformation in Itam Societies and everywhere such dysfunctional upgrade exist. There is need for critical engagement with traditional norms to encourage more equitable gender relations.

1. Education: Expand access to education for women to enhance empowerment and participation.
2. Policy Intervention: Implement gender sensitive policies that protect rights while respecting cultural contexts.
3. Community Dialogue: Encourage inclusive discussions involving both men and women to reshape norms.
4. Economic Empowerment: Support women's access to economic resources and leadership opportunities.

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