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GENDER INEQUALITY AND CONTRADICTIONS IN WEST AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT: THE NEED FOR CENTRIARCHY

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ABSTRACT

The convergence and almost absolute uniformity among communities in West Africa on the issue of gender inequity remains one of the central challenges of globalisation. The centrality of this phenomenon is given that women constitute almost 50% of the population in most of these societies. Hence, any policy or convention or culture that inflicts poverty on women, unwittingly overburdens their men counterparts to the extent society "crashes". The feminization of poverty in a patriarchal structure has led to over-arching consequences impinging negatively on the education of women, their access to credit facilities and other resources and their general involvement in the process of decision making in the family. In some communities women only achieve status and recognition through children, especially males, making some of them engage in child bearing even in conditions that threaten their lives. In addition, although the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is widely discouraged as harmful, some cultures in the sub-region still attach great significance to it. These translate into poverty, which in West Africa is conceived as gender-biased. This paper argues that interventions should focus on the role of policymakers and social policy in effecting necessary attitudinal and behavioral change. This study by not only suggesting how "commonization" of knowledge of the factors that heighten vulnerability of women to poverty can be achieved, but also how social policies within the diversity of these societies can succeed sets out to provoke meaningful dialogue among scholars towards ideological, theoretical and policy consensus to meet the immediate challenge of enthroning gender equality in the sub-region through centriarchy.

Background

Gender inequality remains one of the most facilitating factors of poverty which most people in most societies either pretentiously or genuinely ignorantly have failed to realize. The foundations of some communities are laid on the assumption that gender differences expressed in inequity are not only necessary but also inevitable for development to the extent they are conceived as sacrosanct. This notion has over the years shaped human relationships in various activities and groups.

While differences in gender relations as a global experience are affirmed, they however vary across settings and societies. In the process of social adjustment, individuals and groups react to the dictates of their particular physical and sociocultural milieu and invariably design the social structure to suite their peculiar needs. Thus humans in their characteristic quest for improvement relatively create and recreate their societies. Gender inequality as one of such creations is society-defined.

Stratification along sex lines has had (and still is having) implications for development of societies, impinging forcefully on family, education, religion and the political economy. In Nigeria particularly, where about 50 percent of the population are women, the impact is enormous (Akande, 2000; Nwokocho, 2003). In some communities, patriarchy as a defining system of relationship dictates standards that are accepted and followed as ways of life. For instance, in some areas, women's level of education, type of occupation and by implication income and the extent they are involved in household decisions including reproductive health are determined within the context of patriarchy.

In addition, female genital mutilation (FGM), notwithstanding its health and social consequences is still practiced in some societies in order, as asserted in some quarters, to prevent or reduce promiscuity among females. The extent to which this claim is valid has remained controversial. Among some Igbo communities, patriarchal ethos still guides attitudes and behaviour and women only achieve status and recognition through fertility. The *ewu-ukwu* festival among the Mbaise-Igbo for instance, is an avenue for a husband and his kinsmen to honor a mother of at least ten children with a lavish party and subsequent induction into the parity-ten group (Isiugo-Abanihe 1993). Male role and responsibility with regard to the latter ceremony are embedded in indifference. This is more so that men quickly remarry when their wives die trying to achieve high fertility necessary for their induction into the "privileged" group.

Similarly, in most patriarchal societies, male child preference is a recurring syndrome, which establishes the legitimacy of marriage. It is thus apparent that where such legitimacy is tied to fertility, women strive to give birth, even, in conditions that threaten their lives (Arkutu 1995). The implication

is that family planning programmes and the need for adequate birth-spacing (of at least two years) are undermined. All these translate into poverty.

Poverty as a concept is both relative and encompassing. It is therefore definable only within the context of a particular study as a means of conveying specific meaning to a given situation. Hence, poverty is viewed as when an individual/group is unable to realize inherent potentials or when those potentials are realized within the definition of the more powerful group leaving the less powerful to accept it as sacrosanct. It is contended here that poverty is Gender-biased. In Africa, for instance, where men have almost absolute power over women and the entire household, the links between gender and poverty cannot be overstated. In fact, in some situations, poverty is ascribed along sex lines with automatic definition, especially where cultural values impose restrictions on how far women can participate in certain activities. Patriarchy is therefore viewed in terms of male bias against women. To sustain inequality men in society devise different strategies to sensitize individuals to perceive their situation as normal. The present analysis conceives gender inequality as introduced and maintained in society through the psychosocial activities of individuals that interact at various points in the inequality processes.

The Processes

By the processes we mean the whole gamut of activities and interactions that shape the nature and degree of gender inequity in a particular society. As a corollary, gender differences evolve from organized activities – in the political, economic, social, religious and familial spheres – by individuals with common aspirations against others whose goals in the social network are neither clearly identified nor defined. However, given that both the establishment and sustenance of inequality entail sensitization and re-sensitization of individuals especially those in a relatively low position to accept their conditions as not necessarily human-designed, there is usually a gradual evolution to a point where the situation becomes generally accepted as normal, even by the marginalized.

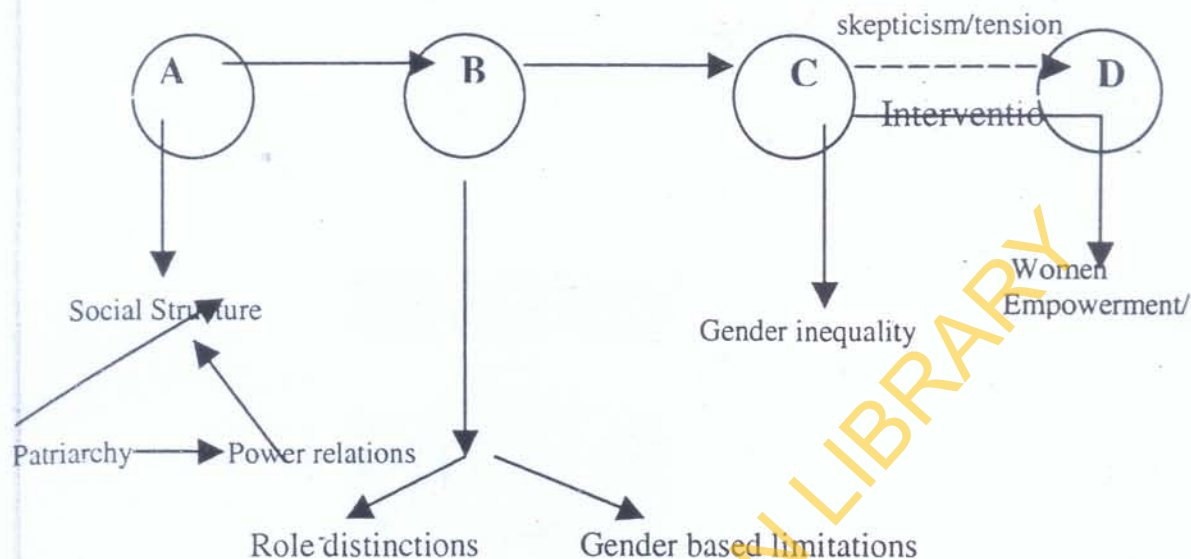


Fig 1: The Processes

Point **A** is the social structure within which social relationships are defined by the power relations that subsume in patriarchy. At that point, sexism is conceived as well as institutionalized through gender differences in power, with men at relatively higher position than women. Udegbe (2001) in line with the above view submitted that organized gender differences with particular reference to power leaves women in powerless positions relative to men.

For the social scientist, the interactions, tension and adjustments that occur between points **A** and **B** are significant in understanding of the social system and largely determine the extent to which the orientation at **B** impacts on the attitude and behaviour of the people. The latter point (**B**) is synonymous with socialization of individuals from childhood when role distinctions are emphasized along sex lines by parents according to norms and values of their cultures. It is thus important to ask the following questions: what form did social structure take before the introduction of patriarchy? What factors necessitated patriarchy? How was patriarchy finally introduced into most societies? How was (is) it perceived? What mechanism has been used in sustaining it? Answers to these questions will highlight the inseparability of social structure and attitude and behaviour of

individuals within a given environment. Feminist writers, however, argue that in most societies, gender based activities are designed to limit women from the outset (Sen, et al 1994; Moore and Helzner 1996)

Success of the orientation at point **B** unwittingly infuses gender inequality into the society. Point **C** is therefore the manifestation of gender differences/inequality as is presently evident in most societies. A careful observation of the above diagram reveals that between points **A** and **C**, skepticism and tension were not manifest and thus is indicative of relative order in the social system. This state of affairs can be attributed to inability of women to achieve the level of consciousness necessary to challenge their marginalization and the hitherto hoodwinking by their male counterparts in accepting the status quo as normal

The emphasis of this paper is to suggest for women "enablement" or "empowerment" and by extension gender equality as represented by point **D**. Closing up the gap (between men and women) would translate into calling for the ideal by challenging gender relationships as they presently exist. The obvious consequence of such proposed idealism is gender-propelled skepticism and tension within the system which until very recently have been latent. However, interventions to diffuse differences in opinion and ultimately promote and enthrone gender equality need to be widespread, forceful and sustained in order to fill the gaps in perception and attitudes as indicated between points **C** and **D**. Revolutionizing the social system will however not be effective until the patriarchal structure with its subsuming effects is redefined to the extent that elements of matriarchy are also embedded into the system. What then is patriarchy and how has it led to gender demarcation, differentiation and poverty?

Male-Domination and Gender Inequality

Patriarchy as a defining system of interactions and relationships is viewed as the most fundamental instrument of oppression that determines the trends and patterns of activities among individuals. Its influence is felt in virtually all aspects of human endeavor. In most societies men dominate, and in some cases, absolutely control the interactions and actions of members of their families in virtually all spheres of social relationships as of

rule. Max Weber similarly but specifically conceived patriarchy as a particular type of household organization in which the father dominated other members of an extended kinship network and controlled the economic production of the household (Barrett, 1988).

The implication of such control is that considering the imperativeness of the economic structure in coordinating various other activities of individuals, it then follows that whoever has an almost absolute control of the economy commands the society. "He pays the piper; he dictates the tone". Such tone going by an Igbo tale, *if the commanded would not stand up to dance, must at least nod to acknowledge his affirmation.*

Patriarchy seen in the light of such wholesome inequity has been perceived as an over-arching category of male dominance (Barrett, 1988), a situation carefully sustained by men through ages (Sen *et al*, 1994). While it has been claimed by some men that such gender relationship is responsible for peace at homes and the society generally, skepticism and suspicion about the genuineness of such claim among women and the consequent breakdown in spousal communication have indirect impact on individual and family wealth.

The pervasiveness of patriarchy as a system that does not discriminate against either patrilineal or matrilineal societies but conceived in terms of the difference in magnitude of its application to both societies has been highlighted. Gray (1982), while stating that men are always in control of the myth system noted that even in matrilineal societies where descent is traced through women, it is still men who control the myth system. Ottong (1993) corroborated this point thus:

The male plays a very dominant role in the social structure; he is, as of right, the head of the family, and is seen and regarded in certain circumstances by the wife (or wives) as the lord and master whose decision is always final. Even in the exceptionally few matrilineal societies, authority relations are still patriarchal, although patterns of descendancy and inheritance might be governed by the principles of matriliney (Ottong, 1993: 1).

Consciousness of the effects of patriarchy on women folk, for the past few decades, has been increasing and appears to be getting stronger by day. Mill and Mill (1970) argued that the principle, which regulates the existing social relations between males and females, is not only wrong in itself, but also one of the chief hindrances to human development. They consequently

noted that such principle should be replaced by an alternative, which will be embedded in perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, or disability on the other.

Consensus among feminist and liberal writers on the negative implications of patriarchy is evident. Viewed as an institutional mechanism that serve to limit women's economic autonomy relative to men's, patriarchy supposes that women unwittingly depend almost entirely on men, which has implication for the former's involvement in family decisions, including reproductive health, even when they are directly affected.

Scholars are, however, not agreed on the historical beginning of patriarchy. Lerner (1986) highlighted the reasoning of some scholars who claimed that if the system of patriarchal dominance had a historical origin, it could be ended under altered historical conditions. Historicism even though severely criticized by Karl Popper, as a poor approach to studying the society (Adesina, 2000), remains a tool for logical investigation of events (Nwokocha, 2004a). Beyond the fact that scholars are better able to understand the present, history equips individuals with adequate knowledge necessary to suggest remedies for a particular disturbing situation. Comprehending a phenomenon from its historical contexts can elicit meaningful insights on how best gender inequity could be minimized without evoking unnecessary antagonism between the sexes.

Lerner (op.cit.) thus observes that patriarchy is a historical creation formed by men and women in a process, which took nearly 2500 years to its completion. She further noted that patriarchy in its earliest form appeared as the archaic state with the basic unit of its organization as the family where rules and values were both generated and expressed. However, Gray (op.cit.) stated that patriarchy has been with us from the beginning but noted that the reason for its development is not certain. The author, however, disagreed with some feminists who assert that matriarchy existed and that it was displaced before recorded history. But Lerner (op.cit.) agreed with the latter position by observing that the sexuality of women including their reproductive capacities and services was "commodified" even at the earliest times. She noted for instance, that by the 2nd millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia societies, the daughters of the poor were sold into marriage or prostitution in order to advance the economic interests of their families.

Capitalism has also been viewed as facilitating patriarchy. According to Kate Millet, as highlighted by Barrett (op.cit), the domination of women by men is mediated by class differences, which are transitory and illusory. Important as these antecedents, related to patriarchy and the factors that bring them about, are in our understanding of sociocultural milieux, more important is the need for men to contribute in restructuring power relations in households and society at large, to the extent that they would be conceived as partners in progress by women generally.

Patriarchy as a phenomenon that encompasses every aspect of the people's lives is the basis of the culture of most societies. It therefore means that beliefs and practices in most societies are designed and directed by it. For instance, patriarchal structure has important indirect implications for fertility because it conditions the potential for change in women's educational attainment and work patterns, and the flexibility of age at marriage in response to the educational and work opportunities (Cain, 1984). Patriarchy thus constrains females from rapid improvement in educational attainment.

Equally, patriarchy is associated with women's sexuality. Since others controlled an aspect of their body, women are not only actually disadvantaged but mentally and emotionally restrained in a very special way (Lerner, op.cit.). In alleviating the condition, Cain (op.cit) cautioned that when considering the prospects for change in any one element of patriarchal structure, the weight of the entire structure must be considered, given that virtually every aspect of human interactions and activities are shaped by the phenomenon.

Studies have shown that socialization into sexuality and gender roles begins early in the family and community and are reinforced through the interplay of familial, social, economic and cultural forces (Moore and Helzner, 1996; Sen *et al*, 1994; Obura, 1991). Similarly, Isiugo-Abanihe (1993) noted that culture dictates shape behaviours; one's environment affects her reproductive attitudes, perceptions and motivations. Oke (1996) similarly observed that the use and non-use of health services are determined by one's socio-cultural environment; which milieu in most cases is shaped by its patriarchal structure. In addition, Erinoshio (1998) noted that many culture bound syndromes are effectively managed through an informed knowledge of their cultural contexts and the background of patients.

Tradition in addition, has been cited as the major reason why some cultural practices whether useful or harmful persist in Africa. For instance, female genital mutilation (FGM), which is commonly practiced in Africa and Middle East, has been implicated in maternal deaths (Odebiyi and Aina, 1998). It has been observed that infection and obstetric complications that arise as a result of such practise place considerable strain on already inadequate health facilities (Erinosho, 1978; Odebiyi and Aina, 1998). Records show that female genital mutilation is widely practiced in 26 African countries, revealing the wide nature of the practice in the continent (Mbugua, 1997).

The foregoing highlight the role of culture which is, largely, shaped by patriarchy in determining health conditions among individuals especially, in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, it has been revealed that since over 60 percent of our population are rural based, cultural norms and practices still exert a strong influence on the people's behaviour. Further insight suggests that most women are beginning to emphasize the limiting capacity of their motherhood activities in the society as it affects childbearing. Grimshaw (1986) for instance argued that motherhood has often been ideologically constructed in ways that have served to legitimize the dependence of women on men. Her position that motherhood annihilates women and should therefore for sometime be totally rejected re-echoes the position of most feminists that being a mother not only obliterate one's freedom but also a means to capitulate to patriarchy.

Notwithstanding the views that patriarchy limits the capacity of women generally, male role and responsibility in reproductive health are currently canvassed in the quest for positive maternal outcomes. Isiugo-Abanihe (2003) noted the implication of male exclusion from reproductive health matters:

Before the current concern for male involvement began, reproductive health issues and services had become synonymous with women's reproductive health, and men were assumed to have no special interest in such matters. However, the tacit exclusion of men from active involvement in these issues represents a lack of appreciation of the social reality of daily living in most developing societies, particularly in Africa. Indeed, the characteristic lack of male involvement in reproductive initiatives, including family planning, is a major obstacle to a speedy fertility decline in sub-Saharan Africa given the considerable authority and power vested on men as decision makers in the home and society (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003:8)

Current concerns need to go beyond campaign for male involvement in reproductive issues. There is need to de-emphasize authority and power ascribed to men as sole decision makers, in virtually all matters, in society. This paper argues that men have been involved in reproductive health right from the beginning of human relations by defining the content of interactions between the sexes through patriarchy. Involvement is used here both as irony and antithesis. Indifference by men to reproductive health matters accounts for negative maternal outcomes (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003). Meaningful contribution can, however, be made only when equality is institutionalized at both theoretical and practical levels.

Achieving Gender Equality: A Major Challenge

Achieving gender equality is one of the greatest challenges facing several societies, which has not been accorded the priority it deserves. Equality in that sense can only be realized when neither women nor men suffer from or limited by poverty in its several forms. It would also mean accepting that men and women have different aspirations and challenges, confront different limitations and can contribute to the growth of their societies in different ways. Equality is thus inseparably linked to female empowerment and elimination of gender-propelled poverty.

It has been argued that gender equality is essential to the elimination of poverty given that women constitute a very large proportion of the population of most societies in West Africa. Therefore, any practice that passively or manifestly inflicts women with poverty, or any other inadequacies for that matter, invariably puts significant pressure on the entire system and unwittingly sufficiently undermines the development of that society as a whole. Development is conceived in the instant analysis in comprehensive terms. The Department for International Development (DFID) following the above submission testifies:

There is a growing and compelling body of evidence which shows that women not only bear the brunt of poverty but that women's empowerment is a central precondition for its elimination. Poverty elimination can only be achieved by addressing the disproportionate burden of poverty, lack of access to education and health services, and lack of productive opportunities borne by women (DFID, 2002: 6)

The implication of the above statement is that poverty can only be effectively eliminated when there are concerted efforts among men and women to truly achieve that feat. It is contended here that gender equality needs to be consistently encouraged and strongly sustained through the empowerment of women in a gradual process but with significant impact. First, reorientation of the entire global community on the inevitability of gender equality should be prioritized and encouraged among nations without exceptions. Following the adoption of equality at that level should be national programmes that would translate into policies for individuals to embrace leading to change in both attitude and behaviour. Second, given that gender disparity took centuries to establish, there should be a bench-period when the proposed re-socialization would begin. The implication is that a generational gap would need to be created to allow for socialization based on equality *ab initio* beginning with a particular generation that would receive entirely new orientation that will emphasize gender equality. The concept of “women empowerment” exists because women were at some point de-empowered. Accordingly, citing DFID (2002) the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in defining women’s empowerment noted that:

women should be able to acquire understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations can be changed; develop a sense of self worth, a belief in one’s ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one’s own life; gain the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power and develop the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. (DFID, 2002: 7)

Encouraging women in this regard would mean recognition of their right to freedom of genuine contribution to the development objectives of society, devoid of mental manipulations and orientational deceptions consistent with patriarchy. Patriarchy by inflicting poverty on women is a spectre haunting the status of individuals as humans.

The position of this paper is that patriarchy and gender inequality are among the main retrogressive factors affecting development in West Africa, even though latently situated – we can neither see nor touch these. Suffice it to say that limiting women from political, economic, religious, educational and familial roles and activities impinges negatively on the development of relevant societies. In Nigeria, for instance, with about half of the

population as women, such constraints undermine their contributions to development. It implies that the society would depend only on just 50% of its potentials for development. The lopsidedness presented by such scenario becomes evident in view of the fact that some women have superior intelligence capacity to some men. Hence, side-lining a very large majority of women in social activities on account of gender discrimination is anti-developmental. It was contended earlier that striking a balance between patriarchy and matriarchy is the most effective strategy to reaching the goal of gender equality. The assertion following from this assertion is that there is need for a structure that will operate at the centre of both systems of relationships; a kind of centriarchy (Nwokocho, 2003).

The implication of this paradigm shift would be far-reaching to introduce progressive development. On one hand, it would eliminate gender disparity in relation to education of boys and girls. This will in the long run guarantee wage-employment for women in the formal sector and also their active participation in the political sphere of life. On the other hand, by contributing significantly in various activities in society, women would be free from the shackles of subjugation and alienation, from victimization, abuse, violence and intimidation. More importantly, they would be able to contribute meaningfully to household decisions, including on their reproductive health. The goal of individuals and societies in the global era should be genuine commitment to rational humanism indicated by enthronement of gender equality as a necessary signal.

As Campaigns for Gender Equality Continues

There are obvious campaigns by individuals and groups to overturn the system of relationship based on domination and subjugation of women. Most of these attempts failed to realize the needed objective either due to lack of adoption of feasible techniques or a disjuncture between goals and strategies for attainment. For instance, the failure of women to form a united and formidable force to challenge their domination has been central to the non-sustenance and unsuccessful campaigns against gender inequality. The implications of intra-gender dissensus for undermining realization of equality suffice in Omololu's (1997: 71) observation:

Undoubtedly, there are many women's groups, associations and organizations in Nigeria today. Not all of them have categorically or publicly declared their commitment to Women's development in general. In fairness to these groups, not all were established to promote the collective interests of women, some were formed for certain narrow, and often parochial interests. Similarly, not all are structured and operated to endure, or even survive from one generation to another. Some were established to achieve immediate goals or for self-gratification... not all of these groups emerged as a result of deeply mediated and consciously designed, goal-oriented programmes... the purpose of these groups may not be adequately articulated, the plan of action not well known, the leadership structure rather fluid, while individual roles may be transient

The inconsistency presented by the above situation suggests that organized critical thinking towards making women achieve consensus within their group is particularly difficult but necessary. Hence, an invitation is extended to scholars to review the situation in order to suggest appropriate interventions. Interestingly, both liberal and radical approaches have been differently suggested and applied at various times and societies, in some instances a combination of the two techniques without meaningful success. Each of these approaches, however, contains at least a modicum of relevance and their impacts have contributed in the current consciousness on the need for institutionalization of gender equality.

This paper observes that earlier attempts had emphasized re-orientation on a clinical and immediate basis. While that is the major justification for failure of those efforts, a gradual approach is rather suggested as a better option. Gradualism as proposed here becomes the most effective way of achieving genuine attitudinal and behavioural change, towards the thematic phenomenon, which cannot be realized by a kind of "fire brigade" approach. Such characteristic alteration takes years and in some instances, even, generations.

In taking that position, we are aware that there is a new awakening and consciousness towards women empowerment as a way of ushering in the proposed new era – gender equality. Without contradictions, it is submitted here that advocacy and lobbying should target reorientation activities that will gradually impact on the psyche of the people. A kind of de-briefing is therefore suggested. The ultimate essence will be to make

common knowledge of the factors that heighten vulnerability of women to poverty as a necessary step towards re-socialization.

To complement efforts at influencing change at individual level, advocacy in form of lobbying should be intensified at societal level. This can be done by persuading those in positions of power and authority to view gender equality as the key to eliminating poverty. Any attempt to undermine the significance of social policy with regard to women empowerment and gender equality would mean invitation to poverty as well as dislocation of the essence of the envisaged transition.

The task before scholars include reaching a consensus on how policy makers can be sensitized to appreciate the need for such change (from inequality to equality); identify the most appropriate time and place to begin the proposed lobbying and what other steps can be embraced in the event of failure of policy. The greater task, though, is to understand sociocultural milieu with regard to the issue under discourse in order to suggest context-specific interventions, given that orientations and perceptions are different among societies. Earlier attempts at analysis of the social structure, with regard to gender relations, were undertaken from disciplinary perspective which presented linear data. The incompleteness consistent with insights that emerged from such monolithic views explains the failure at comprehensive understanding and diagnosis of gender inequality.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the context and content of gender inequality to argue that it is inseparable with poverty in its several manifestations. The quest for a comprehensive understanding of the interface between these complementary factors – gender inequality and poverty – signals a need for interdisciplinary investigation and analysis of patriarchy as it impinges significantly on gender relations. Towards the end of the twentieth century, triangulation and convergence of research methods became an acceptable approach to understanding social phenomena. The inadequacy of linear analysis of a complex issue, like gender inequality, that thrived in disciplinary seclusion/insulation had become both evident and unrealistic in

achieving comprehensive understanding (Nwokocho, 2004a; 2004b).

As societies are getting rapidly interconnected into a global structure and human activities are becoming moderated by universal prescriptions as never before, interdisciplinary and transcultural researches are beginning to activate deeper insights and micro and macro-level analyses that suit the dynamics of current knowledge. Convergence at interdisciplinary level necessitates ideological, theoretical and practical insights necessary to propel a transition from gender inequality to equality. As the first step, it has been suggested that patriarchal structure be introduced as a way of eliminating apprehension, skepticism and tension between the sexes. Activities must be geared towards gaining the support of men to the extent they so genuinely perceive the need for change. In sum, a gradual but far-reaching approach to the transition, as the only effective, feasible and realistic strategy to facing the challenge of eliminating poverty resulting from gender inequality is strongly suggested. There is obvious contradiction in societies developing without first addressing the issue of gender inequality.

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