

**BUILDING A GENDER-SENSITIVE CULTURE OF PEACE
THROUGH CRITICAL LITERACY AMONG
UNDERGRADUATES IN SELECT UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT: The Nigerian society, from time immemorial, is a patriarchal society. It is a structure of a set of social relations with material base which enables men to dominate women. Women are relegated to the background, subjugated, discriminated as the weaker sex such that not all jobs, positions and offices are given to them despite the level of education, intellectual ability, experience in life, physical strength and financial status. There is a limited participation of women in decision-making positions in most sectors; segregation into certain activities; restricted opportunities for training, capacity-building and networking; How many women are included in the political and electoral processes, in national governance and the security structure processes? In most cases, they are placed under men. The average Nigerian woman is seen as an available object for prostitution, forced marriage, street hawking, instrument of wide-range trafficking and a misfit in the society. Research has shown that even in the universities, conflicts and violence arise as a result of gender disparity. Course representatives, presidents of the Student Union Government (SUG), the different clubs and societies in the universities are usually and preferably headed by males rather than females. These conflicts and violence either inside or outside the classroom usually affect the quality of teaching and learning, mutual relationship and peaceful co-existence. This study aims to estimate the causes and effects of gender disparity in the universities and proposes building a gender-sensitive culture of peace as the way forward through critical literacy. The study was based on the analysis of 50 structured questionnaires distributed among students and teachers in the select universities through random sampling. Critical literacy is proposed as the strategic tool for building a gender-sensitive culture of peace. It also proposes how teachers and students in the universities can make significant contributions to the transformation of conflicts and violence stemming from divisions, hierarchy of differences and inequalities of the society into peace.

Keywords: Gender-Sensitivity, Culture, Peace, Critical Literacy

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts and violence have become common global issues which stem from historical divisions, hegemony and privilege, and day-to-day inequalities. Conflict occurs when an individual's needs, interests, wants or values are incompatible with someone else's, and this causes the individual to express an emotional reaction to the situation by showing disagreement and interfering with what someone else needs to get or to have (Mayer, 2000). Gender inequality is no longer a new or strange concept in Nigeria and in other African countries. It is discrimination on the basis of sex or gender causing one sex or gender to be routinely privileged or prioritized over another. In most Nigerian

universities, conflicts and violence arise as a result of gender disparity and this affects teaching and learning, mutual relationship and peaceful co-existence among teachers and teachers, teachers and students, students and students. Our concern here is gender inequality among undergraduate students. Course representatives, presidents of the Student Union Government (SUG), the different clubs, societies and especially decision-making or leadership positions in the universities are usually and preferably occupied by males rather than females. Despite notable progress in recent decades, women are still underrepresented and disregarded, particularly in these leadership positions. This, most often, triggers conflict and violence. Categorically speaking, the university has been viewed as a very important context where effective approaches can be used to advance world citizenship, to give students opportunities to understand and practice in participatory democracy, support social justice and to resolve conflicts peacefully. It has become instead a context where inaccurate, misleading and adverse beliefs or prejudices against each other are promoted. This is so because teaching and learning in Nigeria are repositories or what (Freire, 2007) terms "Banking Education." Learning is reception of knowledge, ideologies and beliefs deposited by the teacher. Within this context, the potential for students to learn and be creative is limited. The dominant ideologies and inequalities of the society are deposited upon them. The school teachers play a pivotal role in promoting gender disparity by their opinions, creating unequal educational environments and opportunities that are so unfair to a particular gender, stereotyping male or female, using gender-laced language and others. Consequently, the students lose self-dignity, logical reasoning and become catalysts of gender inequality. Freire believes that this is a form of oppression and is seen as a field for the reproduction of inequality (Crean & Lynch, 2011). A strong teacher should treat all the students fairly by creating an enabling environment where equal opportunities are given to all. In other words, an alternative way to resolve conflicts and build a culture of peace among undergraduates in our universities is by cultivating their minds with critical consciousness through critical literacy and that is the purpose of this study. According to Save the Children Organization (2022),

Gender discrimination robs children of their childhoods and limits their chances, disproportionately affecting the world's girls. Girls are denied their rights, kept from school, forced to marry, and subjected to violence—their voices undervalued, if they are heard at all. This assault on girls also deprives nations of the energy and talent they need to progress.

Anderson and Irvine (1993) submit that when girls are empowered to lead their lives, speak their minds and determine their futures, everyone benefits. History suggests that when we fight gender oppression, societies are more stable, safe and prosperous, with happier, better educated citizens. This study, therefore, proposes critical literacy as a powerful tool of enlightenment, nurturing the students' critical consciousness, education and a means of closing gender gap and ensuring peace, equity and gender equality. It also proposes how teachers and students in the universities can make significant contributions to the transformation of conflicts and violence stemming from divisions, hierarchy of differences and inequalities of the society into peace.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to estimate the causes and effects of gender disparity among undergraduates in universities and proposes critical literacy as the strategic tool for building a gender-sensitive culture of peace.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Literacy: An Overview

Critical Literacy is a combination of two simple words, 'critical' and 'literacy'. Literacy is one subject that cannot be easily defined because it means different things to different people and scholars. Traditionally, it is referred to as the ability to read, write, speak and listen, and use numeracy and technology, at a level that enables people to express and understand ideas and opinions, to make decisions and solve problems, to achieve their goals and to participate fully in their community and in a wider society. Hillerich (1978) defines it as the demonstration of competence in communication skills which enables the individual to function appropriately to his/her age, independently in his/her society and with potentials for progress in the society. In view of this study, Literacy goes beyond reading and writing as presented above. It is a social action through language use which develops us as agents inside a larger culture. The question is, how have we been shaped by what we hear and say? Burke(1966) argues, "if language is a social force constructing man, how can we use and teach oppositional discourses so as to remake ourselves and our culture?" And the researcher asks, "how can undergraduates in universities be helped to 'un-learn' what they have learned, discard from memory or lose track of all gender-discriminatory languages, opinions and situations they have been exposed to right from childhood and which is at its extreme in the universities".

On the other hand, the term, 'critical' has a distinctive etymology in Western philosophy and science. It is derived from the Greek adjective, 'kriticos', the ability to argue and judge. Critical literacy was borne out of a passionate desire to nurture the oppressed into self-consciousness, right judgment and ability to defend themselves from their proud oppressors. According to Anderson and Irvine (2009), critical literacy is "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" Essentially, then, critical literacy is language use that questions the social construction of the self. When we are critically literate, we examine our ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it. Simply put, critical literacy is literacy for equity.

In addition, Paulo Freire (1970) revolutionary educational philosophy defined critical literacy as the capacity to analyze, critique and transform social, cultural and political texts and contexts. Working in indigenous and peasant communities in Brazil, Freire's approach to critical literacy was grounded in dialectical materialist and phenomenological philosophies. He argued that literacy transmitted in conventional schooling was based on a "banking model" of education, where learners' lives, cultures, knowledge and aspirations were taken as irrelevant. He advocated a dialogical approach to literacy based on principles of reciprocal exchange. These would critique and transform binary relationship of the oppressed and oppressor, teacher and learner. The acquisition of literacy

entails the naming and renaming, narrating and analyzing of life worlds as part of a problem-posing and problem-solving pedagogy. Critical theory emphasizes the important role of individuals as an agent of social change with the ultimate goal of transforming society for the better (Kinchelow, & McLaren, 2005; Au, 2009). In other words, critical theorists are concerned with relieving human sufferings from social inequality and social injustice (Keller, 1993).

Gender

Gender is the socially and culturally constructed roles for men and women. For instance, gender roles of men as owners of property, decision makers and heads of household are socially, historically and culturally constructed and have nothing to do with biological differences. It is important to note the difference between sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological differences between male and female. For instance, the adult female has breast that can secrete milk to feed a baby but the adult male does not have. Gender roles differ from place to place and change with time. But sex roles are naturally fixed (Alamveabee, 2005). Gender as argued by Lorber (1994), is an institution that is embedded in all the social processes of everyday life and social organizations.

Gender Disparity

Gender disparity has found prominence in access to education in contemporary times. It is evident when there is a discrimination of a particular gender in terms of access to resources, opportunities, general welfare or power relations. Disparities are evident to a large extent in universities in Nigeria.

Gender Sensitivity

Gender sensitivity is the process or way individuals, service providers, institutions and the society at large treat and provide equal opportunities for male and female. This could be seen in the way they refrain from discriminating against or stereotyping people on the basis of sex or gender, treating everybody with equal respect, offering gender sensitivity training and providing adequate representation of female in different positions. Pearson (2000) posits that in all aspects of social activity, including access to resources for production, rewards or remuneration for work, distribution of consumption, income or goods, exercise of authority and power, and participation in cultural, political and religious activity, gender equality is important in establishing people's behaviour and the outcome of any social interaction. As well as institutions between individual men and women, gender relations describe the social meaning of being male and female, and thus what is considered appropriate behaviour or activity for men and women.

Culture of Peace

Culture is the way of life, beliefs, values, norms of a social group. Relevant to this study is Iwundu's definition (2005) which says that culture is whatever it is, one has to know or believe, in order to operate in a manner acceptable to the members of that particular society. They include: norms, language, social practices, etc.

Peace, on the other hand, is more than the absence of war. It is the promotion of values, attitudes, behaviour and institutional arrangements that promote mutual caring, well-being, appreciation of differences, access to justice and equitable sharing of earth's resources with all human beings.

According to Adam (2003), at its General conference in 1995, UNESCO introduced the concept of a culture of peace which it used to refer to values, attitudes and behaviour that reflect and inspire social interaction and sharing, based on the principles of freedom, justice and democracy, all human rights, tolerance and solidarity.

Gender-sensitive culture

Gender sensitivity is the awareness and insight into the state of the other sex, with reference to historical roots of sexist stereotyping, discrimination and violence (<https://www.un-redd.org>). It is gender equality made manifest through language, behaviour and relationship. Men and women are different in experiences, needs, issues and priorities. There are things each sex can do better but none should be considered better than the other. They are meant to complement each other.

Gender-sensitive culture is a culture of equal rights and opportunities in education, sharing of human resources, positions, treating with mutual respect, integrity and dignity all human beings irrespective of the gender. It is abolishing discriminatory laws, religious and cultural norms, removing gender stereotypes in our homes, workplaces, schools and different organizations, and providing respectful and empowering environment for women and men, using gender-sensitive language and making effort to remove sexist behaviour (sexist jokes). In Nigerian situation, for instance, leadership positions are conspicuously dominated by the males in the family and other sectors. Gender-sensitive culture proffers equal opportunities for all irrespective of gender. Consequently, freedom, mutual respect, stability, peace, progress, innovations and other positive outcomes will embrace a society where it is conscientiously and adequately practised.

Theoretical Framework

The model on which this work is anchored is Paulo Freire's (2005) "Critical Literacy Theory." Freire and Macedo (1987) and Freire (2007) proposed that resolving conflicts and building a peace culture require advancing citizens to be literate, to criticize oppression and exploitation. Learners need to be empowered to struggle for learning and for the possession of power and equal status (Kellner, 1989). Freire believes that looking beyond the literal meaning of a text to determine what is present and what is missing, in order to analyze and evaluate the text's complete meaning and the author's intention is the field of critical literacy theory. Critical literacy developed from Freire's philosophy and is a strategic instructional practice which aims at teaching a nation's citizens to be literate and critical, and raising their critical and social consciousness and hopes to create a more just society through problem posing, dialogue and critique of social and political problems (Shor, 1987; Anderson & Irvine, 1993; Morgan, 1997; Hagood, 2002; McLean, 2006). In addition, learners will be ready to listen to multiple viewpoints, exchange ideas, raise critical questions, be aware of social problems and social injustice and be ready to defend themselves in a peaceful means. In this research, we examine how the female gender who Freire refers to as the oppressed alongside their

male counterparts can be empowered to stand up against social injustice and oppression, and to promote a culture of peace and equity in an environment ripped with gender inequality.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample population

The sampled population for the study was fourth year students of English & Literary Studies of Imo State University, Owerri, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Tansian University, Umuaya and their teachers totalling fifty (50). The determining factors for the selection were number of years spent in the university, experience, observations and personal encounters.

Instrument and technique

The instrument for the research was a four-item question. The first item was concerned with finding out the causes of gender inequality among undergraduates on campus. The second item asked the different leadership positions on campus and the gender the students often prefer in those leadership positions. The third question requested the students' reasons for choosing each gender. The last question was concerned with finding out the effects of gender inequality on teaching and learning, and relationship among the students. After collecting and analyzing the data, the responses were converted into simple percentages for analysis and discussion.

Validity and reliability of the instrument

The questionnaire was developed and validated by the researcher using experts' advice and dialoging with colleagues. The questions were designed to provide answers to the research questions raised. In all, fifty questionnaire items were distributed in the Department of English & Literary Studies of the select universities. Out of fifty, forty-five were retrieved from the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Causes of Gender inequality among undergraduates in universities

Causes	No of respondents	Percentage of Respondents
1. Intellectual prowess	5	11.11%
2. Family background	5	11.11%
3. Socio-economic Status	5	11.11%
4. Dominance	20	44%
5. Competitive	15	33%
6. Confidence	40	89%
7. Assertiveness	20	44%
8. Cooperative	30	67%
9. Nurturing	30	67%

Table 1 above shows that the major cause of gender inequality among undergraduates in universities is confidence which the respondents affirmed is possessed by males rather than females. Males are confident in the face of challenges while females are not. Males are dominant, they exercise more power and influence than females. Males are also competitive, they are motivated and are great motivators while females are not. Males are assertive, that is, they voice out their opinions than females. However, females are more cooperative and nurturing than males. Females also demonstrate higher people-orientation and participative style of management while males rely on task-orientation. The result vividly depicts that students prefer males as leaders than females.

Table II: Leadership positions on campus, and the gender the students often prefer in the leadership positions.

Leadership positions	No of respondents		Percentage of respondents	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
President (SUG)	35	5	78%	11.11%
President (ELSA)	30	10	67%	22%
President (NASEL)	25	15	56%	33%
President (HUSA)	30	5	67%	11.11%
Course Representative	30	5	67%	11.11%
Financial Secretary	20	10	44%	22%
Treasurer	25	15	56%	33%

Table II shows that approximately 80% of the students and teachers prefer the male gender in almost all the salient leadership positions in the universities. This is in line with Matthew Biddle whose research on "Men are still more likely than women to be perceived as leaders" reveals that despite progress, gender gap in leadership persist. Result has it that in 2018, women hold just 26% of executive level positions in about 500 companies at Buffalo in America.

Table III: Students' reasons for selection into leadership positions by gender in universities

Reasons for selection into leadership positions	No of respondents		Percentage of respondents	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1. Sexual harassment	5	30	11.11%	67%
2. Low self-esteem	10	25	22%	33%
3. Lack of bodily support	10	30	22%	67%
4. Nature of decisions	30	5	67%	11.11%
5. Strong work relationship	20	25	44%	56%
6. Task in question	35	10	78%	22%
7. Management style	15	25	33%	56%

Table III shows the different reasons identifiable for students preference of one gender to another in leadership positions. One important reason behind the selection or appointment into leadership positions is the task at hand. 35% of the respondents are of the opinion that the tasks involved in those leadership positions can confidently be handled by males rather than females. 30% of the respondents affirmed that females, in order to attain and maintain top leadership positions, are usually exposed to sexual harassment. 25% of the respondents also affirmed that the patriarchal culture existing in most universities which see the female gender as the weak sex has made them develop low self esteem. Most often, females discourage fellow females and vote them out as far as leadership positions are concerned. Females suffer from unified bodily support from fellow females. 30% of the respondents are of the opinion that the male gender is usually astute and resilient in decision making than the female gender. About the strong work relationship and management style, 25% of the respondents opined that females are better of because they operate a participatory leadership style while the male gender is task-oriented in nature.

Effects of Gender inequality on teaching and learning and mutual relationship among undergraduates in the universities

1. **Higher exposure to sexual harassment:** research has shown that girls/women in the universities experience higher exposure to sexual harassment as a result of gender inequality. Boys/men are not easily assaulted like their female counterparts in the hands of male lecturers.
2. **Low self esteem:** gender inequality brings about low self esteem among the segregated and oppressed group who feels not qualified, not fit, unsuitable, unacceptable for a particular position. In some universities, it has become a culture that a female cannot attain a particular leadership position.
3. **Electing or appointing the wrong person into leadership position.** One of the consequences of gender inequality is the election or appointment of wrong persons in leadership positions. This has remained the problem of the Nigerian society which believes that the female gender despite outstanding capabilities cannot attain certain positions. One would ask why the female gender should not be elected into the presidency and other decision-making positions in the country since the male gender has failed us. Moreover, studies has shown that male course representatives, to a great extent, have failed and disappointed those who elected, selected or appointed them yet it is a prevailing culture that males are better than females as course representatives.
4. **Depression** is one of the psychological effects of gender inequality whereby an individual feels rejected. This, to a large extent, has led to high intake of hard drugs, prostitution and suicide among students.
5. **Conflict** is a common result of gender inequality where the oppressed expresses dissatisfaction and goes into a verbal or physical fight with the oppressor which sometimes tend to be violent and may affect teaching and learning and destruction of life and property.
6. **Dissociation** occurs when one feels disconnected from self and the surrounding environment. Gender inequality causes depersonalization and derealization, identity confusion and identity alteration. Studies has shown that students begin to dissociate as a result of oppression and injustice.

7. **Trauma** is an individual's response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event -oppression, rejection, abuse, denial or injustice which overwhelms the individual's ability to cope, causes feelings of helplessness and diminishes their sense of self.
8. **Insomnia** is a common sleep disorder which students may tend to develop as a result of gender inequality.
9. **Gender-based violence** is any interpersonal, organizational or politically-oriented violation perpetrated against people due to their gender identity, sexual orientation, or location in the hierarchy of male-dominated social systems such as family, military, organizations, or labour force (O'Toole and Schiffman, 1997).
10. **A lack of representation** is a situation usually experienced by the female gender in the universities as a result gender inequality whereby they are not represented in most decision-making positions.

Strategies for Building a Gender-Sensitive Culture of Peace in the University through Critical Literacy

1. Critical literacy is a promising approach to make our students, our seeds of democratic society, become critically informed, aware of social justice and committed to transform conflicts into peace in our society.
2. Integrating women, peace and security in the university curriculum will help ensure a culture of peace in the universities since it will become part of the studies made by all.
3. Education is a dichotomy, an instrument of domination and an instrument of liberation. According to UNESCO (1998) and Eisler & Miller (2004), Education has been proposed as the best approach to advance world citizenship and resolve conflicts peacefully. In view of the above, the researcher states that students should be well-informed through seminars, workshops and conferences on the dangers of gender inequality. They should become catalyst for the creation of a society free from oppression and injustice.
4. Teachers should be transformed in their mindset and also help connect literacy lessons to the lives of students and thus, help them connect to their community and to their world.
5. Students should be given opportunities to make use of language to critically question, discuss, debate and critique problems in the classrooms and society, and vigilantly challenge the taken-for-granted ideologies of injustice, marginalization and disenfranchisement in the universities, families and society.
6. Exposure to the right knowledge will make students challenge and resist the mainstreams that marginalize them and motivate them to take actions to make changes.
7. Having been exposed to critical literacy, teachers should encourage students to engage in praxis (Freire,2007). Students are expected to become conscious of issues and problems in their lives, classrooms and communities which are the origin of conflicts such as poverty, oppression, injustice, inequity, hegemony, marginalization and democracy. They should critically investigate the reality of the issues and become aware of their role as change agents as Freire rightly posits.

Conclusion

The study has revealed a lack of representation of the female gender in the leadership and decision-making positions in the universities. This is influenced by several factors which have been discussed in the study. Confidence has been identified as one of the reasons behind the preference of the male gender in leadership positions. With proper and adequate exposure to critical literacy, the female folk can gradually build confidence. Another point is sexual harassments of the female folk. This should be addressed practically by the school authority and the government.

There is no gainsaying the fact that critical literacy is the way forward as proposed by the researcher which according to Paulo Freire (2007) is an instrument of liberation. He believed that language and literacy are key mechanisms for social construction and social transformation. Critical literacy aims not only at helping people become literate but also at developing critical consciousness and making them become change agents for a better society.

There should be a well-developed Critical literacy scheme and adequate logistics and infrastructure put in place. The university authority and the government should put in place functional staff and student development centres in the universities where the deficiencies could be rectified.

Books, manuals, articles, newsletters and their e-equivalents are very important and should be encouraged and promoted in all the universities to ensure self consciousness and empowerment in order to build a gender-sensitive culture of peace.

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