

# Comparative Studies of Gender Discrimination in Ancient Israel (Numbers Chapters 1-11) and Contemporary Nigeria

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## Abstract

*A study of the book of Numbers (chapters one to eleven) revealed that only males who are twenty years and above are reckoned with in Ancient Israel. The demographic population of Israel in 2020 reveals that the male to female ratio in Israel was 99.1 males per 100 females. Not making the voice of majority of any economy count is a colossal waste that needs immediate intervention. The study thus is a comparative study of gender discrimination of women in ancient Israel and contemporary Nigeria respectively. The research design was descriptive. 120 questionnaires were administered to the leaders, workers and worshippers of the Redeemed Christian Church of God Ebute-Meta and Christ Redeemer Fellowship University of Lagos, Nigeria. 84 copies were retrieved back and subjected to analysis, representing a return rate of 70%. The research engages production/property relations theories. The study revealed that Ancient Israel and Nigeria have similar cultural attitudes to women. Both are patriarchal societies where women are denied access to decision-making and agenda-setting processes and, beyond that, opportunities for leading these processes. This results in the invisibility of women as public actors and violates their rights to equal participation. The church must be dedicated to unapologetic interpretation of the several ambiguities surrounding previous interpretations made on gender issues and be bold to declare the correct and culturally unbiased Biblical ethical stance on gender issues. Likewise, governments must properly and productively engage their constitutionally endowed legislative power to remedy any form of gender discrimination enshrined in laws. Government must put in place policy and laws that will stop child marriage and forbid sexual harassment. All genders should be given a level playing field for equal protection under the law.*

**Keywords,** *gender discrimination, gender inequality, national development, women's advancement*

## 1. Introduction

In Nigeria women are more or less seen as a second-class citizens, hence, there is the popular belief that, the best place for women is in the 'kitchen.' This inclination is a gross distortion of the true picture of what should be the right position of women in the family and in society at large. Nigerian society is male-dominated, which is a foremost feature of a traditional society (Stacey, 1993; Kramarae, 1992; Aina, 1998). Women are, therefore, differentiated upon in most cases and are prevented from acquiring formal education, mistreated and perpetually kept as house-help; the average Nigerian woman is seen as an available object for prostitution, may be forced into marriage or engage in street-hawking as means of raising money for the training of their siblings who are male, an instrument of wide-range trafficking and a misfit in society generally (Makama, 2013). Thus, women's voices are absent in decision-making processes that affect their lives; this is a problem for women and a sign of unjust power relations.

A study of Numbers (chapters one to eleven revealed) that only males who are aged twenty years and above are reckoned with when it comes to taking the census in Ancient Israel. This is done because it is a way of measuring their military competence (Numbers 1:1-3) Although this intent may be justified in measuring the military competence of Israel, the same parameter is not suitable for measuring educational, political and social strength. The excluded people, when the population is taken in ancient Israel, are the women and children and these actually constitute the largest section of any society, all over

the world. The prophet Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 4:1 quoted below indeed implies that there shall be more women than men.

“And in that day seven women shall take hold of one man, saying, we will eat our own bread, and wear our own apparel: only let us be called by thy name, to take away our reproach.”<sup>1</sup>”

Also, in Numbers 3:11-12, in Egypt when God destroyed all the firstborn of both the Egyptians and their animals, God spared the Israelites firstborn and their animals, they were to be set apart and separated for the work of the Tabernacle. The spared male animals are to be used as sacrifices in the Tabernacle. However, in Numbers 3:11-12, God later on reiterated his choice of the Levites among the children of Israel instead of the entire first born that opened the womb: “Every male Levite is to be dedicated to do the service of the Tabernacle. They are set apart and separated unto God as people who are to help Aaron and his sons in the service of the Tabernacle.” In Numbers 3:2, while taking the census of the generations of leaders, women are not included. Also, when the Levites were given to Aaron as helpers, only the male Levites were mentioned in Numbers 3:3-10. Even before God chooses the Levites, God had earlier on chosen the first-born males of the Israelites.

The census of the males Levites is to include boys from a month old, according to Numbers 3:3-15. It was only when the issue of defilement was talked about in Numbers 5:11 that women were mentioned. The law is hostile to women alone. There is gross gender inequality in the law against the women, for example in Numbers 5:12-16, where it is only the husband that seems to have right to be jealous over his wife's sexual misconduct. It is only on one condition that the Hebrew Law advocated gender equality.

In reference to the issue of men and women voluntarily offering to make a vow that they will both pass through the process of purification in case of defilement, it is inferred that God seems to be taking the spirituality of male and female to be equal in Numbers 6:1-7.

The United Nations Millennium Summit of the year 2000 with 189 member states made a pledge in their Millennium Declaration to achieve eight goals, tagged the Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs). One of those eight goals, specifically goal 3, is to promote gender equality and to empower women. That goal in itself would be of benefit to national infrastructure and growth. The dedication for this goal was to be reached by 2015. It is important to know that there is conversation around the need to empower women.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

In Mesopotamia and in some other parts of the world, including Nigeria, women are highly discriminated against and sometimes they are perceived as inferior beings when compared to their male counterparts. This might be because they are seen as inferior beings and thus have nothing to offer towards national and economic development. The researchers are of the opinion that for any society to advance, the role played by women must not be trivialized if there is to be development or serious advancement. This is because women constitute half or more of the entire population of any society. Consequently, to disregard the contributions and inputs of women in any society is a colossal waste of resources that are needed or necessary to foster development. Thus, for proper advancement to take place, women must be given opportunity to make their inputs in all sectors of the economy. The study will thus investigate how the Church and the government can be used as instruments towards ameliorating the age-old challenge of gender discrimination and fostering national development.

This paper will answer the following questions:

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical references are taken from the King James version, which is widely available online.

1. Clarify the modes of discrimination against women in ancient Israel and Nigeria
2. What are the consequences of discrimination against women?

### **1.2. Definition of Terms**

**Women's advancement:** this is machinery put in place to promote and support women or strategies to retain women from all backgrounds, including women with disability, in all the profession over the course of their careers, and encourage and promote their career progression into the highest possible leadership cadre.

**Gender discrimination:** the situation where a person is denied an opportunity or misjudged solely on the basis of their gender. It is any unequal treatment based on gender and may also be referred to as sexism.

### **1.3. Theoretical Framework: Production and Property Relations Theory**

Theories having to do with women's status originated within socialist thought. Socialism blames the existing material inequality in society for most or all of its ills. Socialists assume the feasibility of the elimination or great reduction of this material inequality and with it, the elimination of almost all social inequalities as well as status hierarchies. Property relations, in which women may also be considered to be a form of property, is the source of the emergence of inequality in society, which has been observed in various contexts (Nugent, 1993).

## **2. Literature Review**

No human society can be exempted from having consequences of gender issues for as long as men and women interrelate. Hence, the interactions between males and females within the family, economy, politics, religion and education is often tainted with dominance, marginalization, intolerance and ill-treatment. The prevalence of gender domination is a peculiar attribute that tilts to patriarchy in Nigeria (Makama, 2013; Okpe, 2005). Science and technology have taken gender discrimination to higher levels as it makes it possible to predict the sex of a fetus before it becomes a baby. Consequently, a fetus predicted to be female can be destroyed and the male fetus left to continue to develop. Gender selection (also called sex selection) is a medical technique used by prospective parents who wish to choose the sex of their offspring. Gender selection is performed through sperm separation or genetic testing. The embryos with the desired sex are then implanted into the woman's uterus (Schenker, 2002).

Even though there is a set of time-bound targeted goals towards ensuring gender equality and advancing opportunities in diverse sectors of the global economy, the gap between the MDG for promoting gender equality and its actualization in Nigeria is almost an impossible order to the Nigerian government, for the following reasons: the Nigerian government is known for bad governance, lacking political will, the existing patriarchal way of life, false public investment and the absence of adequate productive capacity that will create the opportunities for women empowerment and development (Ejumodo, 2008).

In Nigeria, gender issues affect all facets of human life. They impact on personality traits, gender role behaviour, social status, acquisition of property, inheritance, occupation and responsibility in the family and society. Since traditional Nigerian society is patriarchal, it is assumed that the women are subjugated and relegated to the background. This situation has created tension and unhealthy relationships between males and females in Nigerian societies because of the seeming undue advantage the men have over the women. The Nigerian population census of 1999 reveals the country's population stands at 140 million, out of which 80.2 of them are women and girls (Nigerian CEDAW-NGO Coalition, 2012). Enabling equal access to public and economic opportunities for both men and women is critical to achieving sustainable economy and improving national well-being of the citizens and failure will result to losing the human capital of the citizens, compromising countries' full potential for growth and national development

(Cuberer & Teignier, 2013).

Men are often valued and respected more than women in society, independent of the achievements of the latter. This discrimination is often characterized by emotional, physical and spiritual stigmatization of women that often leads them to feelings of misery, shame and even death. This ugly practice of sexual discrimination is also prevalent in the church, taking into consideration that the Church is acclaimed as the arbiter of justice and fairness, the refuge for oppressed people and victims of injustice. Yet, it accommodates gender domination and discrimination (Ali, 2011).

Gennrich (2014) opined that many senior church leaders will no longer accept the arguments that some churches advanced that women are emotionally unsuited to be ordained, as a result the insistence of some churches that women should focus on the home affairs because of their natural roles as caregivers, since they give birth. She noted that many of these points of view and attitudes about women still continue today. Often this may not necessarily be a deliberate attempt to undermine women but the result of non-critical acceptance of social misunderstanding about women and men. She posited that there are still ways in which these narrow interpretations of Scripture undermine the equality and dignity of both men and women in churches. She argued that this happens with any of the following occurrences:

1. Exclusion of women from leadership position, just because they are women;
2. Use of language in the church liturgy and official pronouncements that refers to God's people as male;
3. Defining God entirely as male, despites other ways of describing God that are evidenced in the Bible;
4. When women are paid less for the work they do and when they are expected to take on service and nurturing roles just because they are women and
5. Sexually violation of women by men of the clergy or when the church is not frowning at sexual abuse of women among their members or in society (Gennrich, 2014).

Collins (1972) argues that in the Ten Commandments "... the wife is clearly regarded as equivalent to a piece of property," as she is listed along with her husband's other belongings (Exodus 20:17). Women were seen as an inferior species to be owned like cattle (Olusola, 2018). In Old Testament scriptures, women are mostly described as being inferior in relationship to men: only a few women have names, and most women are named according to their husband, son or father, Women are often described as victims: courageous survivors' stories are omitted.

Collins (1972) further argued in connection with Exodus 22:16-17, that when a man violates a virgin, it is regarded as a property offence against the woman's father. Israelite laws of inheritance (Numbers 27:8-11) similarly reveal the patriarchal nature of that society. It is stated that if a man dies, his son inherits the estate; his daughter inherits only if there is no son. If there are no children, the consideration is for male relatives, not the female ones (Kirk-Duggan, 2012). The Deuteronomy account reveals that only the husband has the right to initiate divorce (24:1). In Judaism, there were firmly established customs to the effect that women by themselves could not conduct an official worship service, but could only come together for prayer, whereas a service in the synagogue required the presence of at least ten men. A girl of the non-elite classes was educated primarily in household duties by her mother and other female kin. She was expected to marry a man of her parents' choice in her late teen years. The marriage arrangements included a dowry, probably consisting of the household items she would need, like linen and kitchenware, prepared by the young woman and her female kin.

The unfavorable treatment to anyone as a result of their sex, race and so on is what is called discrimination. This poses an obstacle towards the accomplishment of the targets of equality, growth and peace. Nigeria has a large population of about 140 million, out of which a huge proportion are women.

Women in Nigeria are also burdened with certain customary duties and procreation efforts. They have the requirement to nurture sick members of the family, as well as contributing at the local, state or national levels through their mostly unrewarded economic strength, organizational skills and single-minded focus to surmount obstacles posed by the environment, culture and partners (Akosile, 2010). Women, especially mothers, plan, organize, direct and coordinate resources at home to the benefit of all members of the family (Awe, 1990). Half of the population of the world consists of women, who to a large extent are still discriminated in different phase of life directly or indirectly, though there are some differences in each country, religion, society or ethnicity (Pokharel, 2008).

The ancient Jews prayed every morning saying “Thank you lord that I was not born a woman.” Christian boys are taken to the special room of the church but the girls are not during the name giving ceremony; women are not supposed to be priests or fathers of the temples and churches (Waltke, 1995). The situation of gender discrimination has been worsened with the development of science and technology as it predicts the sex of a fetus before it turns to a baby. In 1978 and 1983 alone, seventy-eight thousand fetuses were aborted in Mumbai, as they were known as female fetuses (Bastola, 2007).

### **3. Methodology**

The study was carried out among the Pentecostal Churches (PC), Mainline Churches (MC), Evangelical Churches (EC) and African Independent Churches (AIC) in the three Senatorial Districts of Lagos State.

Lagos state was specifically chosen because of the presence of a multicultural city where people from diverse cultures in Nigeria are domiciled. The choice of Lagos State brings to reality the problems of cultural diversity on gender discrimination against women. It is made up of three senatorial districts which cover twenty local government areas. The senatorial districts are: Lagos Central Senatorial District, Lagos East Senatorial District and Lagos West Senatorial District. Lagos Central Senatorial District is made up of six local government areas: Eti-Osa, Apapa, Lagos-Island, Lagos Mainland, Surulere and Somolu. Lagos East Senatorial Districts is made up of four local government areas: Ibeju-Lekki, Epe, Ikorodu, and Kosofe. Lagos West Senatorial Districts is made up of ten local government areas: Ikeja, Amuwo-Odofin, Agege, Ajeromi-Ifelodun, Alimosho, Mushin, Oshodi-Isolo, Ifako-Ijaye, Ojo and Badagry.

In terms of demographic characteristic, most respondents were male (51%) with the remainder female. Most respondents were aged 20-30 years old (35.7%), followed by 31-40 years (26.2%), under 20 years (21.4%), 41-50 (9.5%) and 50 years and above (7.1%). Most respondents were single (54.8%), followed by married (39.3%), single parent (3.6%) or widowed (2.4%). In terms of occupation, the largest group was students (45.2%), then civil servants (31.0%), business owners (20.3%) and apprentices (3.6%).

### **4. Findings: Nature of Discrimination against Women in Ancient Israel**

Nine statements were created based on the literature review above and respondents invited to state whether they agree or disagreed with them. The results are shown in Table 1 below.

Research Question 1 probes the natures of discrimination against women in ancient Israel.

**Item No. 1:** stated that only male above twenty years get counted officially, Women were not. The above was supported by majority of the respondent (70.2%). Guarneri and Poston (2008) alluded to the prevalence of the patriarchal form of family existence in the Old Testament that assumes that women are meant to live in the shadow rather than in the light of life. The subordination of all aspects of a woman are found in several scriptures such as Numbers 1:1-3, 3:11-12 and 5:12-16).

Table 1: Respondents Responses to Various Statements; source: Original Research

No.	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Only males above twenty years get counted officially, women were not.	15 (17.9%)	10 (11.9%)	20 (23.8%)	39 (46.4%)
2	Only firstborn sons of man and beast that opened the womb are sanctified unto God.	10 (11.9%)	15 (17.8%)	39 (46.4%)	20 (23.8%)
3	Only human males that opened the womb were consecrated to take parts in the work of the Tabernacle.	21 (25.0%)	10 (11.9%)	23 (27.4%)	30 (35.7%)
4	Only husbands have right to be jealous over their wives' sexual misconduct.	18 (21.4%)	20 (23.8%)	26 (31.0%)	20 (23.8%)
5	Only males get circumcised and females do not as circumcision is a sign of the covenant.	13 (15.5%)	13 (15.5%)	40 (47.6%)	18 (21.4%)
6	A woman's essence is linked with her function as a companion to man.	6 (7.1%)	25 (29.8%)	33 (39.3%)	20 (23.8%)
7	Only Levite's male lineage is dedicated to perform service of the Tabernacle.	8 (9.5%)	6 (7.1%)	40 (47.6%)	30 (35.7%)
8	Women were not reckoned as generations of leaders.	10 (11.9%)	29 (34.5%)	40 (47.6%)	5 (6.0%)
9	Women were rated the property of their father or their husband and thus have no right to inheritance.	10 (11.9%)	17 (20.2%)	47 (56.0%)	10 (11.9%)

**Item No. 2:** affirmed that only firstborn sons of man and beast that opened the womb are sanctified unto God. First born daughters were excluded. 70.2% percent of the respondents agreed or strongly with this assertion in agreement with Exodus 13:1-2.

**Item No. 3:** A majority (63.1%) of the respondents agreed with the fact that only human males that opened the womb were consecrated to take parts in the work of the Tabernacle while first daughters that open the womb were excluded. God also latter reiterated His choice of the Levites among the children of Israel instead of the entire first born that opened the womb. Despite of the choice of the Levites, God was particular as to the choice of every male Levite as those to be dedicated to do the service of the Tabernacle (Numbers 3:11-12).

**Item No 4:** 57.8% of the respondents agreed that only husbands have the right to be jealous over their wives' sexual misconduct, while a minority of 45.2% of the respondents disagreed with the assertion. This decision of the majority of the respondents agreed that there was gross gender inequality in the law against the women folks (Numbers 5:12-16), Jesus subtly challenged this tradition of gender inequality in the way he handled the case of a woman that was brought to Him whom they accused of having been caught in the act of adultery and they expected that Jesus will rubber-stamp their stoning her according to their tradition. However, Jesus refused to rubber-stamp the stoning because He knew that it took two people to commit adultery, and that their law was not fair on the woman because the man with whom she was accused of having committed adultery was not apprehended by their law.

**Item No. 5:** stated that only males get circumcised and females do not, since circumcision is a sign of the covenant. 69.1% of the respondents agreed that though a woman does not possess any sign of the covenant, as did the males in circumcision, a minority of the respondents (30.9%) disagreed with the assertion. Nakhai (2019) agreed with majority of the respondents by affirming that a study of the history of Israelite religion had ignored the existence of women in Iron Age Israel (1200–587 BCE).

**Item No. 6:** a majority of 57.1% agreed that a woman's essence is linked with her function as a companion to man. Meanwhile, a minority of 31 respondents representing 36.9% disagreed with the assertion. The decision of the majority was confirmed by Jehovah himself in the book of Genesis 2:18 & 20.

**Item No. 7:** 83.3% of the respondents agreed that only Levites' male lineages are dedicated to perform service of the Tabernacle. A minority of 16.7% respondents disagreed with the assertion. The decision of the majority was confirmed by Numbers 3:3-10.

**Item No. 8:** most (53.7%) of the respondents agreed that women were not reckoned as generations of leaders. The decision of the majority was confirmed by Numbers 3:2.

**Item No. 9:** a majority of 67.9% respondents agreed that women were considered the property of their fathers or husbands and thus have no right to inheritance. A minority of 32.1% respondents disagreed with the assertion. The decision of the majority confirmed the subordination of all aspects of women's lives. This was somewhat symbolized by the fact that though she was a member of the covenant community, she possessed:

1. No sign of it as did the male in circumcision.

2 This stance of woman under man meant that her "essence as a human being is linked with her function as a companion" to him (Beer & Tubingen, 1919).

## **5. Conclusion**

Women are said to make up half the world's population but it is unfortunate that they generate only 37% of global GDP, which is far below what they are capable of generating when we reflect on the fact that women do not have equal access to labour markets, opportunities and rights. Therefore, gender inequality is not only a pressing moral and social issue but also a critical economic challenge. When it is also considered that there are 655 million fewer women in the labour force than men, women spend three times the amount of time as men on unpaid care work in the home, 195 million fewer women than men are literate, 190 million fewer women than men have a bank account, and there are only 22 women in ministerial and parliamentary positions for every 100 men. McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) research in 2015 found that fully closing gender gaps could add as much as \$28 trillion to annual GDP in 2025 (Woetzel *et al.*, 2015). Even in a more attainable scenario in which each country matches the progress toward gender parity of the best performer in their region, an additional \$12 trillion could be added to GDP in this time frame. Every region studied has the potential to increase its GDP by 8 to 16% between 2015 and 2025.

The untapped - and unmeasured - contribution of women is enormous. 75% of the world's total unpaid care is undertaken by women, including the vital tasks that keep households functioning such as childcare, caring for the elderly, cooking, and cleaning. MGI estimates that unpaid work being undertaken by women today amounts to as much as \$10 trillion of output per year, roughly equivalent to 13% of global GDP (Woetzel *et al.*, 2015).

## **6. Recommendations**

1. To prevent gender discrimination, the church must be committed and dedicated to unapologetically interpret and clarify the several ambiguities surrounding previous interpretations made on gender issues and be bold to declare the correct and culturally unbiased Biblical ethical stance on gender issues.

2. The church should not in any way directly or indirectly accommodate any form of gender domination and discrimination as the arbiter of justice and fairness, the refuge for oppressed people and victims of injustice
3. The church should play the lead in modelling gender in-discrimination to the world by ensuring they give all genders equal access and platforms to serve in the church knowing fully well that Holy Spirit at work in a woman is not inferior to the one at work in a man.
4. The leadership of the Church should maximally use their position to help eradicate the mindset of their members' male superiority syndrome. Thus, it will encourage and grant equal opportunity of empowerment to all genders. All genders can be judged on merit and not on sentiment.
5. Government must put in place policy and laws that will stop child marriage and forbid sexual harassment.
6. Government must be seen to have educated and empowered women to make right choices in their lives and to ensure they come out of schools as citizens who can shape a more equal society.
7. Government must launch various schemes proven useful in the removal of gender gap in the society.

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