

# Gender Balance in the Light of Culture and Scripture

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## ABSTRACT

*Considering the ever-changing nature of the word gender, descriptively and syntactically, care and caution should be the watchwords as we interrogate it and in the conclusions we arrive at. In the light of the above, this review employed the historical and biblical method of inquiry in the quest for arriving at something authentic and concrete concerning gender. It shall trace the historical usages of the word and juxtapose it with current concepts as well as examine especially if the 'genderless' status currently accorded some hitherto masculine and feminine nouns squares with scriptural declaration. This is very critical given the fact that while we may allow human appellative concepts to constantly change; God's declarations do not necessarily have to follow that pattern. This study revealed that in synopsis, all the ideas behind gender and sex points to the fact that gender is basically cultural while sex is biological. In the light of the findings of this study, it was concluded that men should learn to recognise the role of women in the society and thus manifest the critical balance which is found in culture and scripture.*

**Keywords:** *Gender balance, culture, scripture*

## INTRODUCTION

Gender discourse has suddenly and literally become a hot-potato issue in our contemporary word usage. The word itself has given birth to several complex connotations. David Glover and Cora Kaplan's insightful proposition suggests that the term "is now one of the busiest, most restless term in the English language, a word that crops up everywhere, yet whose uses seem to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new and often surprising inflections of meaning (Glover and Kaplan, 2010). According to Walsh (2001), gender has turned out to be an extraordinary intricate and multilayered phenomenon - unstable, contested, and intimately bound up with other social divisions. Thus, we raise some critical questions for reflection as we interact with this issue. For instance, does the current practice of appropriating plural pronouns to singular nouns in some quarters historically and scripturally accurate? That is, using "they" to stand for "he" or "she." The author's guidelines and style sheet for JTSA under the sub-heading "Other matters", specifies that an intending author should observe the following rules, namely:

1. "Gender-Specific Language should not be used. Instead of 'man' or 'mankind' please use 'humans', 'humanity' or 'people'. With pronouns, please use the plural as much as possible - eg "they" instead of "he".
2. We suggest you use a Bible that uses non gender specific language unless you are using a particular version of the Bible as part of your research.

3. If possible avoid gender specific language in regard to God too. Try to use the possessive "God's" rather than "His" (<http://sora.ukzn.ac.za/journals/JTSA.aspx>).

Historically, gender has always carried the concept of being either a man or woman, that is, someone who is masculine or feminine (Hornby, 2005). Sometimes, the word is also used to depict the sex of a person, whether the person is biologically male or female. However, in recent times, gender has been conceived as a social category imposed on a sexed body (Glover and Kaplan, 2010). Chant and McIlhiney (2009) opine that gender is a social construct that shapes the roles and identities of men and women, and the relations between them. The Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in their 1995 meeting in Beijing submit that gender refers to socially constructed roles of women and men ascribed to them on the basis of their sex, whereas the term 'sex' refers to the biological and physical characteristics. Gender roles depend on a particular socio-economic, political and cultural context, and are affected by other factors, including age, 'race', class and ethnicity. Gender roles are learned and vary wide within and between cultures ...and can change (Chant and McIlhiney, 2009). Further, the GLAAD makes a distinction between sex and gender thus: "sex is the classification of people as male or female" at birth, based on bodily characteristics such as chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs, and genitalia. To them, gender identity is one's internal, personal sense of being a man or woman (or a boy or a girl) ([www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org)).

A closer look at these definitions of gender shows a clear paradigm shift. For instance, to modern anthropologists, there is a difference between sex and gender in the sense that gender refers to the cultural elaborations and meanings assigned to the biological differentiation between the sexes (William and Harland, 2006). The synopsis of all these is that sex is biological but gender is cultural. That is, while gender deals with cultural or social issues, sex deals more with natural and biological features. Pointedly, the World Health Organization believes that gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviour, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women ([www.who.int/gender](http://www.who.int/gender)). Trying to clarify theoretically the difference between sex and gender, Robert J. Stoller, a psychoanalyst and anthropologist, agreed with Sigmund Freud that a person's physical sexual attributes, mental attitudes and objects of desire could vary independently of one another (Stoller, 1968).

Culture is the aggregate total of the primary influences in a person's life especially concerning his or her language pattern, choice of food and way of dressing. It is the social environment in which we were reared and in which we live (Blanco, 1994). Further, it is a shared, learned, symbolic system of values, beliefs and attitudes that shape and influence perception and behaviour (Umahi, 2010). Culture is that first and continuing influence in the life of a person.

### **Issues of Gender in Culture**

In most cultures, for instance in Nigeria, the concept of gender is not ambiguous as it clearly depicts the idea of being male or female, masculine or feminine, man or woman. This is often shown in the dressing pattern of a person and sometimes in profession or occupation. For instance, no one expects a palm wine tapper, in most African cultures, to

be a woman. One of the cultured issues of gender is gender roles. Most people groups in Africa today, especially those who have not become overly Westernized, know and respect the gender roles. Take for example, a typically cultured Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo woman knows that it is her duty to go to the market, purchase food items, and prepare food for her family. In some places, doing the laundry is also part of her roles. On the other hand, it is the duty of the man to go out and get the resources with which the food items are purchased. Again, such over-tasking jobs as splitting of firewood or repairing a leaking roof are clearly the role of the man. This role differentiation, while accepted by both parties, is not the law of the Medes and the Persians. In times of sickness or other situations which make it impossible for either party to discharge his or her role, the roles can be performed by any one. The faithful fulfillment of these roles, being culturally sacrosanct, reduces various levels of friction and brouhaha in the home. In modern times, while the structure is still adhered to, there are indicators of less compliance to these roles definitions. This is usually attributed to the mind blowing effects of westernization and modernization.

### **Biblical Conception of Gender**

The Bible has descriptive stories which show its thought about gender issues. We shall use some of them in the discussions that follow. The book of origins tells us that in the beginning, "He made them male and female (Genesis 2: 21-25). God made Adam the male and Eve the female. This first marital union sets the tone for every marriage that will follow the injunction and intention of God. Notice that God intelligibly and orderly made the man first, then the woman. He made Adam and Eve. Eve was to be Adam's helper (helpmeet) not his leader and none of them was confused as to his masculinity or her femininity.

Concerning the current attempt to confuse the sexes, technically called travesty, the Bible gives a grime warning to all who may want to dabble into it (Deut. 22:5). This was to show His displeasure for the various attempts at bending gender ([www.urbandictionary.com/define](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define)). Thus, when a man wears what is traditionally and culturally conceived and accepted as belonging to the woman and vice versa, and especially with a view to confusing the sex or 'gender' of the person, it is an abomination to him or her. This injunction is often misconstrued in some quarters. The text does not mention any kind of dress or clothing outfit but gives the principle - "the woman should not wear that which pertains to a man, neither should a man put on a woman's garment. . . ." In most part of Africa, wearing of trousers is for men (males) and not for women. In fact, the ordering in the text is instructive where the woman is mentioned first. It seems that the tendency towards gender bending is a plague raving both gender but may be more on women's side. This is especially injurious when it happens that the subversion of a role through parody or the deliberate cultivation of ambiguity (Glover and Kaplan, 2010) is what is sought by these ladies. Thus, what was once dutifully thought to be fixed becomes chameleon-like, a part to be played with style, a chance to mock and shock (Glover and Kaplan 2010) (emphasis mine). Commenting on Deut 22:5, Adeyemo (2006a) infers that the principle here may be that there is value in preserving some differences in dress between the sexes. The Creator made us different, and we should honour that difference.

Typically, the biblical understanding of gender includes the fact that, among other issues, the male 'man' and the female 'woman' are the two categories of gender. Anyone who "seeks to define gender expression outside of the binary terms of man and woman is conceived as a gender bender ([www.urbandictionary.com/define](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define)). Although it can be argued that the biblical eunuchs can constitute the third category but that is not God's will. It may rather be regarded as one of the fall outs of sin. These are people who are forcefully castrated by other men. Probably, a few of them may have willingly allowed themselves to be castrated. Either way, God is not responsible for that distortion or confusion. On the issue of marriage, all the First Testament marriages show consistently that they were male and female (Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Joseph and Mary, and Sapphira etc.). In the Second Testament, the same is true in lives of Joseph and Mary, Zachariah and Elizabeth, Ananias and Sapphira, Aquila and Priscilla etc.

### **Gender Issues in Contemporary World**

When we contrast the view of gender from the cultural and biblical angles with its concept today, we see a marked difference. While this contemporary understanding of gender receives approbation from some people, it has caused serious sorrow to others and has become injurious to the societal and religious moral fabrics. Many words have been created today around gender. These include *transgender*, *gender fluid*, *gender bending*, *gender blending*, *trigender*, *pangender*, *agender* and *bigender*. Transgender yields so many meanings. Notable among them is that it refers to a person "who feels that the body into which they were born doesn't represent their true gender". Such a person may dress and live the life of the opposite gender or a surgical operation is performed to change their sex organs. The pet name for such a person is 'tranny' and 'trannie' if the person is a transvestite. Gender fluid refers to a dynamic mix of boy and girl. In effect, the person can 'turn' to becoming a boy or a girl, hence the fluidity of gender. Gender blending is said to be "a new creative force" where fashion designers design dresses meant to obliterate the distinctions between the man and woman. In other words, these are forms seeking to break the normative behaviour of what it means to be 'woman' or 'man' ([www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)). The rest of the terms are understood from their prefixes. Thus, bigender denotes two, trigender, three, pangender all, and agender denotes none.

It is also important at this point to mention the LGBT community. For the fact that transgender people are grouped along lesbians, gays, bisexuals, already should send a red flag to everyone who is morally perceptive. While the West was busy campaigning that LGBT people should be accepted on the basis of human rights, against all odds, the Nigerian Senate ably adjudged same sex marriage (lesbian or gay) as ungodly and unacceptable (Vanguard, Nov. 8, 2011). When some of the Western powers, especially David Cameron of the United Kingdom, 'cleared their throats' regarding Nigeria's decision, Nigeria resolutely stood their ground. Pini Jason writing in Vanguard quoted Ata Mills of Ghana as saying (Vanguard, Nov. 8, 2011), "I as President of Ghana will never initiate or support any attempt to legalize homosexuality in Ghana". In that article, Jason wrote: If a man wants to have sex with a dog, let the Camerons of this world grant him that right, but they must not force to legalize it in our own societies; with all the beautiful women in the

world, if a man decides that the best thing for him is to marry a fellow man, something must be wrong with him (Vanguard, Nov. 8, 2011). Lending his voice, Eferovo Igbo opines that homosexuality and lesbianism is being less human; it is even being less than lower animals. Gayness does not only sift you from Homo sapiens and drop you to the level of beasts, it actually lowers you deeper (Vanguard, Nov. 8, 2011). His rationale for this assertion is the fact that "beasts of the same sex don't copulate or even pretend to.

### **Quest for Gender Balance**

A candid evaluation of the gamut of gender issues reveals that somehow, there have been extremes of insensitivity and over-sensitivity. Quite frankly, women, the major focus of gender studies but nonetheless the only one, have suffered so much insensitivity from the claims of the Gospel, African tradition, and that of modern man (Mathew Kokah, 1985 cited Adrian). Closely related to that, Aina (2004) opines that what is known today as gender inequality has both theological and cultural roots. Culturally, in most parts of India, a woman is still considered a burdensome appendage. She is an economic drain. She must be exploited or dispensed with as a non-person. In fact, her birth, in many parts of the country is greeted with silence, even sorrow. A boy arrives to the sound of joyous couch shells. Discrimination begins at birth (Venkaramani, 1992). One of the proverbs in India says that 'the luckless man loses a horse; the lucky man loses a wife. Women should be allowed to occupy their place in God's order and thus fulfill their reasons for existence. Describing the nineteenth century struggles for women liberation, Worley (1998) notes that politically, women were virtual nonentities. They could not secure employment in the occupation of their choice, and higher education was practically closed to them. Once married, a woman lost all claim to any property she had previously owned; it was transferred to her husband. She had legal claims neither to her own body nor to her children in the event of divorce (Worley, 1998).

In the words of Samora Machel, the emancipation of women is not an act of charity, a result of humanitarian or compassionate attitudes. The liberation of women is a fundamental necessity for change (Worley, 1998). So we ask, where are the men who could make women's life easier, where is the socio-economic support where it is not the woman exhausted with the daily stress who is waiting for her husband, partner in the home (Barat, 2005)? It has been argued that improving the relative position of women will reduce poverty when they are allowed to take charge of the farms. When they control household expenditures, it results in better nutrition and health for the family especially the children (Laughilin, 2008). One of my close friends tells how his wife is the minister of finance in the home and how the accounts have always balanced. This much sought free-hand for women is not even enough for egalitarian protagonists, what they want is equality not just concessions because "it increases output" (Laughilin, 2008).

For us to be sensitive enough, women should be given the opportunity to thrive in those things they excel in despite the effects of culture and Scripture. They have proved themselves in the past and still do. A friendlier environment will assist in no small measure in enhancing their current status. In this respect, Snyder and Tadesse (1985) talking about

African women, have argued that "historically, African women proved themselves to be astute managers of local economies, capable of playing important roles in war and peace. Further, they insisted that they were skilled in diplomacy and when necessary in public protest. They carried out their responsibilities with tenacity and determination (Snyder and Tadesse, 1985). An example of public protest is the Aba women's riot of November to December 1929 in which over 25,000 women protested against the high-handedness of the "warrant chiefs" from the British colonialists (<http://www.blackpast.org/?q=gah/aba-womens-riots-november-december-1929>). It should not also escape our notice that God designed women in unique ways that no man can equal.

Orbach and Eichenbaum (1990) have opined that women are reared to provide for the dependency needs of others, to respond emotionally to their children, husbands, work mates, etc. and that they develop emotional antennae that alert them to the needs of others (Orbach and Eichenbaum, 1990). Such deep emotion, which is for the good of humanity, must actuate us to rethink the place of women in our various societies and begin to accord them more respect and honor. You may have noticed that when they are not there, relationships become more frictional. On the other hand, there are people - men and women, who push the welfare of women (and men) rather beyond acceptable limits. While it is true that not everything about feminism is bad, the current egalitarian push by extreme feminists is not only illusionary but utopian.

The various gender manipulations and distortions is simply unacceptable because of its anti-God and anti-cultural posture. Why would girls and boys not be allowed to be who and what they are from the Creator's hand? According to Ibbetson (2012), today's gender war is not a biological conflict, but a battle between conflicting psychological and ideological forces. Modern liberals wish to destroy the structure of the traditional family, and to do so the pillars of the biblical patriarchal family unit are being ruthlessly attacked. Of the many tragedies that arise due to those that wish to reverse the intrinsic nature of gender formation, the worst is that innocent children are being offered up daily as test subjects in liberals' labs of low down lunacy.

Ibbetson (2012) gives an example of the liberals' determined effort at dismantling and obliterating the traditional and biblical values in the story of a family in Toronto, Canada. The parents of this child decided to raise this four months old 'genderless' child. Their hope for Storm (the name of the child) was to make the child "free from societal norms regarding gender". Unfortunately, it was not the parents but Storm who will suffer at last when the society expects compliance with its norms.

In other words, all the attempts to dismantle all gender demarcations only lead to confusion and apparent and real destruction, now or later. There are some things that can be viewed as being over sensitive in this gender matter. For instance, in the Woman Bible, the translators arguably used blasphemous and arrogant pronouns "she" or "her" to qualify God. This is simply going to the extreme. It is even more infuriating when we know the reason why she did that translation. Elizabeth Cady Stanton felt infuriated because of the exclusion of Julia Smith, a biblical scholar, from the committee who reviewed the 1611 King James Version and published it in 1888. This was the background and birth of the

"less scholarly Woman's Bible in 1895." Such works and translations exalt the devil, confuse humans and tend to depreciate the validity and sanctity of the Bible.

### CONCLUSION

Gender issues have continued to elicit various responses from different segments of the society. In this article, we looked at the different definitions of the term and how it plays out in the various cultures and in religious societies. In most cultures, gender is still understood as the differentiation of humanity into male or female, man or woman, masculine or feminine and boy or girl. This concept is also obtainable in most religions and is consistent with God's original action at creation. But in our contemporary times, there seems to be conceptual shifts for the word. Apart from the fact that gender is no more viewed as male or female only, the word has also accumulated new usages, namely transgender, gender fluid, gender bending, gender blending, pangender, agender and bigender. In all of this, we recommend balance in this simultaneous equation of gender studies. Thus, advocates and entrenched of insensitivity to women need to wake up and know that women were made by the same God who made men and thus need to be respected and honoured. Proponents of oversensitivity should also soft-pedal and stop confusing the society and demeaning the status of God's creations. We are therefore enjoined to be sensitive to the plight of women in order to guarantee the joy and prosperity of posterity. In this quest, we are only following the footsteps of Jesus. Helen K. Oswald reminds us that living in an age when women were treated with contempt, Jesus manifested the greatest respect and tenderness toward them and that no one has done as much in all history to elevate womanhood as did our kind and loving Saviour, Jesus Christ (Oswald, 1954).

Finally, in our attempt to balance this gender discussion properly, we are convinced that egalitarianism should not necessarily be the focus of our women. Women cannot do, or be everything that men are and vice versa. It is gladdening that the African woman is not necessarily fighting for equality with man. "What she wants is respect and recognition of her person as a complete human being" (Sotunsa, 2008). And "since many African women realize the need for the support of their men folk in realizing any true emancipation from all oppression, they seek and should continue to adopt a conciliatory position that does not whip up negative sentiments in the men. This 'conciliatory' position should be devoid of absolute egalitarianism and avoid even a relative subordination. In the light of all these, it is concluded that men should learn to recognize the role of women in the society and thus manifest the critical balance which we find in the culture and Scripture.

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