

**Gender and Environmental Preservation**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The paper titled gender and environmental preservation explores the nature of gender in relationship with the environment using the Yakur society in Cross River State, Nigeria as a case study, African societies generally see the world to a greater extent as a man's world in the sense that the land and everything within the environment is owned and controlled by men. However the research discovered that women give greater priority to protection of and improving the capacity of nature by maintaining the economic/agricultural environment, political environment, spiritual environment, domestic environment and the social environment respectively. Women play critical roles in managing natural resources and the family. Secondly the paper discussed the nature of gender inequality in Yakurr societies and its impact on women. The paper adopted the historical and phenomenological methods of data collection. The qualitative method was used to analyze the data collected. The paper calls for an equal distribution of resources irrespective of gender or sex.*

**Keywords:** *Environment; Preservation Gender; Nature; Relationship; Spiritual; Domestic; economic/agricultural*

**INTRODUCTION**

Human beings are ecological species divinely ordained to rule over and dominate the environment. "Then God blessed them, and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28). This scripture has greatly encouraged ruthless and selfish exploitation of the natural environment which results to inequitable distribution of the resources and management of the economic systems in Nigeria and Yakurr society in particular. The environment composes of plants, animal and humans, the plants draw their nutrient from the earth, animals feed on the plant, and these in turn serve man's use (Ushie & Imbua, 2006). The masculine and feminine genders are driven by the quest to dominate, manipulate and exploit the environment especially in the advancement of science and technology.

Geographically, Yakurr people are known to be the largest ethnic group situated between Calabar, at the Atlantic coast and Ogoja at the Northern limit of cross River State, Nigeria (Andah, 1990). Farming is the major occupation of the people. Ownership of land and all economically useful properties are commonly or evenly distributed among the families and villages that make up Yakurr with specific boundaries at strategic areas (Forde 1964). Thus, the importance of land in Yakurr society cannot be overemphasized. The environment is viewed both spiritually and physically. According to Aloku and Mpigi (2018). The Land houses the dead beneath the surface, and houses the living on the surface, as well provide food for the living. Therefore land is fundamentally important to the social, political and economic life of Yakurr people. In Yakurr traditional land ownership is the key

factor that determines the socio-economic status of an individual man. For people to create wealth and be economically empowered they need land. The concern of this chapter is focused on the harsh experience of women who give greater priority to the preservation of the environment and yet are marginalized, exploited and excluded from the ownership of land and its resources. The chapter will explore how the masculine and feminine genders utilize the environment to their benefit which gender contribute most towards the preservation of the environment? The Women are therefore poor because they have been structurally and institutionally denied access to landownership.

The paper will do a survey of Yakurr society and focus on how women or the feminine gender preserve the environment, what specific roles they play to preserve the environment, and lastly what are the negative experiences of women in the society and conclude with some recommendations.

### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

To understand gender and environmental preservation the paper anchors on the discussion on the relational feminist theory propounded by Carol Gilligan. This theory states that men and women are not functionally the same as both undergo a different moral development from birth to adulthood. In the first three years of life, the interpersonal dynamics of gender identity formation are different for boys and girls. Secondly, boys and girls arrive at puberty with a different interpersonal orientation and a different range of social experiences. Thirdly during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, Gilligan (1982) states that there is a conflict between integrity and care. The two different moral ideologies are justified by an ethic of right or justice for men, and ethics of care for the women. Justice is predicated on equality and centers on the understanding of fairness and personal integrity, which relies on the concept of equality, relationship, responsibility, while the ethics of care deals with concern for others and avoidance of hurting others. According to Gilligan, men have been heard in the theories of development and their experiences informed, while the silence of women have been noticed, and even when they speak their voices are not heard. She therefore opines that in the different voices lies the truth of an ethic of care and justice the tie between relationship and responsibility. To understand how the tension between responsibilities and rights sustains the dialectic of human development is to see the integrity of two disparate modes of experience that are in the end connected.

By way of application, Gilligan's theory of the ethics of justice for men agrees with their quest to dominate, exploit and manipulate the environment through the scientific and technological advancement not minding whether the environment is preserved or destroyed. On the other hand, the ethics of care gives women the opportunity or motivation to sustain and preserve the environment, the care and nurture given to the children is applied in the nurturing of the environment.

### **GENDER AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

The environment encompasses physical, social, spiritual and biological systems in which human beings interact. Mojekwu-Chikezie (2012) notes that women have a close affinity with the environment, they are the primary environment managers, extractors and users of environmental resources and must therefore participate in its protection and management. When the environment is destroyed women suffer most. Therefore, effective integration of women in the management, preservation and protection of the environment is inevitable. This session will consider women's roles in the preservation of domestic environment, the economic/agricultural environment, and the spiritual environment.

The domestic environment is composed of the home (family) which may be nuclear or extended in nature. Women perform domestic task daily through cooking, child-bearing and rearing, washing of dishes or clothes. All these help to preserve the environment. The family can collapse without these important duties of nurturing and caring. According to Eakin (1988) "If wives decide to go on strike, there will be chaos in the society. The little children would wonder the streets unattended to, babies would be cold, hungry, crying to be fed, and piles of unwashed clothes would accumulate, mountains of unwashed plates and food would not be cooked. Women play important roles of the reproduction and upkeep of their families. Eteng(2014) notes that the physiology of a woman makes crucial the biological process of procreating human life. Women do not only conceive and bear children, they nurse, wean, socialize and transmit the society values to their children. This is why women take blame more than men when children turn out to be irresponsible. Women have major responsibilities to the proper grooming of children because the processes of breast feeding creates a strong attachment of children towards their mothers, which agrees with Gilligan's theory of ethics of care for women. On the other hand, the major role of men towards the preservation of the domestic environment is that of discipline, which has to do with the ethics of justice.

Women and men relate differently in the economic/ agricultural environment and the changes affect them differently. Agriculture can best contribute to overall economic growth of a given society. Tawo (2019) notes that Agriculture involves the cultivation of the land for the purpose of producing food for man, feeds for animals and fibre or raw materials for other industry. In the traditional rural African society like Yakurr in Cross River State, farming is the major occupation of the people. Economic activities revolves around farming system. The land is exploited and manipulated for subsistence and commercial purposes. Iloanya (2018) notes that rural people have accumulated knowledge and skills concerning the ecosystems local crop varieties, animal breeds, agricultural systems and nutritional values of various underused plants. According to Eteng(2005) the importance of farming and land among the Yakurr people cannot be overemphasized, as a result any man who ties four hundred stacks of yams at harvest is awarded the traditional title known as "Ladol", while a woman who ties two hundred stacks of yams are awarded the title known as "Ogbunji". The first species of yams matured for consumption are only eaten after the celebration of the "Liboku" new yam festival after sacrifices have been offered to thank the gods for fertility. However, women perform major roles of maintaining the farms through; weeding, cultivating secondary crops and carrying of the yams harvested. Women in Yakurr societies are married for agricultural gains, a man takes an additional wife when he is in need of more labourers (Forde, 1964). Chief Okoi Obeten in an interview supported the views of Forde and stated that he had to marry four wives for Agricultural purposes. Women contribute to the preservation of the environment, they plant gardens to produce domestic crops to sustain the family daily (Ruether 2005). While men on the other hand exploit and manipulate the environment.

According to Afigbo (1981) land is a gift to man for use and it acts as a sacred heritage transmitted by the fore-fathers as a bond between the living and the dead, to be held in trust from generations to generations. Religion permeates the lives of Africans and Yakurr society in particular. God is worshipped through different deities who act as intermediaries between the spirit world and the physical world (Odey, 2008). Both men and women play significant roles in the preservation of this relationship through communications by the priest and priestesses respectively. For instance the divinity for fertility in Yakurr society is known as "Ejofi Del". The priest ensures that sacrifices are offered to appease the god of fertility and call for bountiful harvest during the "Liboku" festival of first fruits (Obeten Okoi

Interviewed August 12, 2021). “Mgbeke” is a feminine deity responsible for the preservation of peace and unity of the people. According to Ibiang Basse (2021) in an interview stated that there was a strained Intra-Yakurr relations which resulted to an establishment of a treaty and an oath taking at the “Mgbeke” shrine in order to end all the misunderstanding that existed among the communities. The Mgbeke deity is preserved through sacrifices and appeasements by the people through the leadership of the priest.

The Ekau is a feminine deity responsible for the fertility of women, for maintenance of peace, preservation of ethical order and the stability of the society. According to Edet, Sunday (2021). Ekau cult started as an organization of women coming together to proffer solution to moral decadence in Yakurr consequence on the fact that a good mother is delighted to see her house in peace and harmony. Secondly, to fight against hostility and inhumanity against the female folks in the society. A woman is spiritually chosen by the gods to serve as a priestess (Ojiekue) who ensures the link between the spiritual and the physical world is /preserved. The roles women play towards the preservation of the economic and spiritual environment contributes towards the preservation of the social environment. Women have been naturally endowed to play their roles as daughters with loyalty and piety, as sister with grace and patience as wives with love and sacrifices, as mothers with care and affection, as wage-earners with financial thrift and domestic wisdom (Jaja Afisa 2015). However in spite of the fact that women play critical roles in sustaining the environment and managing the natural resources, their contributions are often undervalued and neglected, they are exposed to poverty and vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Women’s experiences are that of inequality of access to and control over natural resources. For instance the lands, the palm trees, pea trees, coconut tree etc which are of economic advantage are owned by the men. Gender inequality manifest in every areas of the society such as religious, economic, politics, education, management and inheritance.

Inheritance is one of the major areas women are marginalized in Yakurr society. Women are denied every right if inheritance in their fathers’ houses as tradition holds that the share of the woman is in her husband’s house, yet in her husband’s she does not really have anything apart from what is given to her by her husband. And in most cases when her husband dies and she becomes a widow the relatives of her husband will take everything that belongs to the man including the land leaving the woman with nothing. (Iloanya 2018). Patriarchy system as a practice is very common in Yakurr society, a system in which men own everything, they dominate, oppress and exploit women. This leads to the concept of masculinization of property. It is a term whose root stems from the word masculinity, which means male. According to Eteng (2018) the concept of masculinization of property refers to the ownership of property of various types to the men as their exclusive rights. It is the men that own landed property, they are owners of businesses and captains of industries at the expense of the women, in this case women experience injustice in the society thus Alokwo and Mkpigi (2018) argue that the denial of access to land and its resources to many less-privilege members of the earth community in a way perpetuates the cycles of injustice. It is also a distortion of humanity’s affinity to the earth.

The question one is forced to ask is, if the earth belongs to God and God wants every member of the community to have a sense of belonging, why are some people excluded from the resources of the earth? Women contribute so much towards the preservation of the environment especially the earth, yet they are excluded from the common wealth of the earth. The society is influenced by cultural constructed practices, most women especially the widows suffer from the deprivation of land to cultivate their crop. Women are therefore poor in the Yakurr society. Feminization of poverty seeks to describe a phenomenon in which women represent a higher percentage of the society’s poorest group, this affect their

economic and political powers, men control dominate and distribute the earth's resources according to their fancies, while women who make up fifty percent of the Yakurr population receive only ten percent of the land resources and thereby continue to live in lack and abject poverty (Eteng, 2014).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this work we have discussed extensively the role of gender towards the preservation of the different environments. It is discovered that women play or give greater priority to the protection and preservation of the environment. Yet they are excluded from ownership of land in which they contribute so much towards preservation. Mojeku-Chukezie (2012) opines that women work more hours than men and most of their work remain unpaid, unrecognized and undervalued. The world economic crises, which has affected Nigeria has further worsened the condition of the women. Ekpenyong Obo (2021) posits that, human activities have constantly exerted tremendous influence on the environment, resulting in the deletion of both biological species and climate change, thus the environment of today is very different from what it was fifteen or twenty five years ago. Most species both of animals and plants have gone into extinction, e.g vegetables, mushrooms and other medicated plants used by women are no longer available. Onah Gregory (2021) agrees with Ekpeyong's position and notes that, damage to the environment today ranges from environmental pollutions which has resulted in the depletion of the ozone layers, deletion effects on aquatic inhabitants and soil productivity, climate change, forests and fields being transformed into buildings. The use of chemicals in clearing of grasses and bushes, harvesting of fishes and honey all contribute to environmental damage. While these changes in the environment affect everyone, they affect men and women differently. Women's and girls' traditional responsibilities as food growers, water and fuel gatherers and caregivers connects them intimately to available natural resources and the climate, making them more vulnerable to environmental hardships. Therefore, the plight of women is of most concern of this paper, thus the following recommendations are made.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS.**

1. Environmental policies, programs and finance should incorporate and benefit women to face the unprecedented environmental challenges of today.
2. Women should be encouraged to participate in decision making of the family and society at large.
3. Women should not be denied access to the ownership of the land, especially farm lands
4. Government needs to carry out awareness campaigns on the need for environment protecting and involve women in appropriate machineries for relieving and or resettling victims of environmental disasters and communal conflicts.
5. Relevant government agencies should ensure that women are adequately represented in all activities designed to improve on the environment particularly in reforestation programmes.
6. Gender inequality should be strongly discouraged.
7. The society should be reformed or restructured to eradicate patriarchy, masculinization of property and feminization of poverty.

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