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Communication, Gender Roles and Male Children's Participation in Domestic Work

***¹Okeh, A., & ²Babantah, A.D.**

¹Department of Mass Communication, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Rivers State

²Centre for Communication and Adolescents Research, Port Harcourt, Rivers State

***Corresponding author email:** baikyzed@yahoo.com

Abstract

In human social world, effective communication is critical to building a healthy, wholesome and peaceful family where roles are shared and implemented equally to bring about optimal attainment of goals within the home front. Healthy communication among family members is a viable way of fostering stronger bonds which are necessary to enable families navigate challenges, and support one another socially and emotionally. It is pertinent for families to develop good communication patterns in role sharing, no matter how time-consuming and painstaking the process may be. All over the world, there exists seemingly worrisome stereotyping in the distribution of gender roles, that is, certain tasks and responsibilities are assigned primarily to women, especially roles that deal with domestic work. Over time however, the need for men and boys to play roles in domestic work in the interest of family growth and balance has become more intense. There have also been growing concerns on the need to deconstruct the ideologies supporting gender role imbalances in domestic work and support the inclusion of male children in household chores and caregiving. Gender activists believe that this will not only support family development and promote gender equality but foster a culture of respect, promote teamwork and retain the self-worth of the female gender. Even with the growing argument against the opinion that certain household duties as feminine, a good number of male children still do not believe in taking up roles that fall within the domain of female gender roles. This study therefore seeks to establish the importance of communication in promoting shared roles among family members in the attainment of growth, equality, unity, peace and harmony.

Keywords: Communication, Gender Roles, Domestic Work, Equality, Traditional

Introduction

Communication has remained a veritable tool for both social and behavioural change. The discourse on domestic chores and how labour is divided in the home front remains a deeply ingrained topic where gender norms, found in our social world often manifest as stark inequalities. It is common practice in many homes not to assign certain domestic roles to male children because such roles are traditionally the exclusive preserve of the female children. Mac and Gail (1994) cited in Egbue (2009), hold a similar view by asserting that gender differences in the society are rarely neutral, and tend to significantly favour the male gender because societal realities have continued to view the male gender with greater superiority. Felman (2011) also reasoned similarly saying that despite increasing awareness of gender equality in public spheres, the distribution of domestic work frequently falls disproportionately on one gender, typically the females. This imbalance not only encourages traditional stereotypes but also carries substantial consequences for the wellbeing of individuals as well as their career progression and overall household harmony which has been an issue leading to it being captured in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) as its fifth goal which is to achieve equality and empower all women and girls.

This study is aimed at critically appraising the persistent issue of gender inequality in the distribution of domestic chores, exploring its multifaceted causes and broad implications. By analyzing existing research and societal trends, the researchers aimed to underscore the importance of a more equitable sharing of household responsibilities and to propose pathways towards dismantling these ingrained gender biases. Ultimately, this work will contribute to the broader discourse by highlighting effective communication channels as a crucial element in addressing the issues of gender inequality and gender biases in the distribution of domestic works, not just as an issue within households but in the society at large.

Theoretical Thrust

The theoretical thrust of this paper is the Critical Feminist and Family Systems Theory.

Critical Feminist Theory

The Critical Feminist Theory is an aspect of feminist thought that analyzes and critiques social structures, power dynamics, and systems of oppression, particularly those based on gender. According to Dodd (2011), the theory is an exploration of a system that constitutes the reality of social relations which aims to liberate, emancipate and empower the oppressed. Katsiampoura (2024) holds a similar view by adding that Critical Feminist Theory can be used to understand and challenge the ways gender inequality shapes lives and work towards a more equitable and just world. The theory, was propounded by a compendium of activists of feminism such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Bell Hooks, Nancy Fraser, Audre Lorde, Gale de Saxe and Carol Gilligan who share similar ethos which was the questioning of status quo with regards to how the patriarchal nature of our society has given rise to gender inequality and the conscious move to deconstruct these ingrained gender biases. In line with the study, deductions drawn from the theory show that gender roles are not natural from birth but are informed by the social and cultural constructs found in our society. These constructs play a huge role in the allocation of domestic works thereby limiting women and reinforcing inequalities. It is therefore pertinent to challenge these social and cultural constructs by allocating domestic works based on competence and choice not based on gender. It is also important to slough off the mentality of gender disparity, preference or dominance when children are born so as not to add to the issues of patriarchy in homes as well as our social world.

Family Systems Theory

The central idea behind Family Systems Theory which was propounded by Murray Bowen in 1966 is that the family unit is a complex yet interrelated system and as such, behavioural patterns displayed by family members have an influence on other family members and vice-versa. It also stressed the importance of emotional connections which the proponent argues emanates from interactions between family members and is said to play a huge role in shaping their ideological assumptions as well as their wellbeing. The area of convergence of this theory and the study is with regards to socialisation that occurs in the family unit through communicative patterns. In line with the discourse on male children participation in domestic works, family members play a huge role on how domestic works are perceived by verbal and non - verbal cues used. These interactions would also influence the reception to domestic works or rejection especially by male children.

Methodology

The study adopted the library research design which is purely theoretical and literature-based. It leveraged conceptual and theoretical positions in seeking communication solutions to the issues of gender roles and male children participation in domestic works. This design enabled the researchers to situate the views of other scholars and observed challenges in gender stereotyping and male children's non-participation in domestic work within an existing body of knowledge. Seminal views concerning the research topic were reduced to specific meaning units and used to make conclusions. Kowalsky (2019) described library research as a scholarly inquiry that involves using both physical and digital library resources to find information to fulfill a specific need or answer a question

Gender Roles and Stereotype Traditional Beliefs in Africa

In many parts of the world, especially Africa, some roles are traditionally stereotyped as either feminine or masculine. In such societies, male children are not likely to be allowed to undertake tasks that are tagged feminine and vice versa. Traditional gender roles and stereotypes are mostly the belief or expectation of the society regarding how people should behave based on their gender. These roles often spell out specific behaviours, occupations, and personality traits for men and women. Elderly and Wood (2015) stated that in some societies, women are seen as inherently not very strong while men are viewed to be strong and energetic. According to them, this belief is a perpetuation of inequality, and has the tendency to limit individual potential. Njuki (2023) described gender roles as a social construct not determined by biology but are rather learned and shaped by cultural, social, and historical factors. This is because these roles define expected behaviours, characteristics, and relationships associated with being male, female, or other gender identities.

Also writing about gender roles, Murack (2018) held that traditional beliefs about gender roles could be harmful because they did not represent the truth energy, sentiment and orientation of the genders. According to her, it is wrong to hold that women are better caregivers, while men are better leaders. She wrote that the world had witnessed men who demonstrated excellent care-giving character and women who exuded great leadership prowess. In lending a voice to the issue of gender roles and stereotype beliefs, Grosser (2021) writes that rigid adherence to gender roles can limit individuals' career choices, personal interests, and overall potential in life. Kaleta-Mae (2016) opined that the stereotyping associated with traditional gender roles can lead to discrimination in the workplace, home and other areas of life. And that conformity to narrow gender expectations can contribute to anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. Gilles (2020) corroborated the above reasoning by saying that the

world is increasingly recognising the harmful effects of traditional gender roles and stereotypes, leading to the current debate to deconstruct the belief and move toward gender equality and inclusivity, where individuals, irrespective of gender are encouraged to pursue their own interests, talents and ambition.

Traditional Gender Roles and Stereotype Belief: A Deconstruction

As stated earlier, there have been numerous debates questioning the validity of the long held belief about gender roles. The proponents of these debates are of the opinion that irrespective of gender, children are equipped to undertake in any kind of task that their physical or mental energy can withstand. A major voice in one of these debates, Butler Judith, in her Gender Performist Theory, wrote that gender is not an inherent identity but a social construction enacted through behaviours and expressions. Her perspective in this debate perfectly challenges the notion of fixed biological genders.

Supporting Butler's view, Kaleta-Mae (2017), writes that deconstructing traditional gender roles within families should involve open communication that critically challenges stereotypes, and promote equality in both expectations and responsibilities. She insists that dismantling this belief stereotype belief is achievable by having an environment that supports family communication where children and their parents can express themselves freely, explore diverse interests, and be seen as individuals rather than being cocooned within biologically prescribed gender roles.

Hooks (1984) prescribed useful tips on how family communication can deconstruct traditional gender roles, beliefs and practices. She urged families to open communication channels that will challenge stereotypes and question assumptions. Hooks (1984) challenges parents to question the traditional roles assigned to men and women within the family, and demonstrate how both men and women can engage in various activities, including household chores, childcare, and professional pursuits, regardless of gender.

Reasoning from the above, Mark (2007) urges families to deploy the use of inclusive language in their conversations by avoiding linguistic tools that reinforces gender stereotypes, such as using "He" or "Man" to represent both genders. Some of the views being expressed by Butler, Hooks and Mark had already found expression in the writings of French Feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who spoke vehemently against stereotyping of gender roles and urged families to encourage open communication by creating a safe space for family members to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and preferences without fear of judgment or ridicule.

Beauvoir (1949) further encouraged active listening, and tasked parents and family members to actively listen to each other's perspectives and demonstrate enormous willingness to consider different viewpoints. Beauvoir said that honest and open conversation with family members about gender roles and the impact they have on individuals and the family as a whole is a very strong way of winning the war against the oppression perpetrated by the age-long traditional belief.

Family Development and Male Children Participation in Domestic Works

Family development is a by-product of parenting; it primarily deals with how parenting practices shape family interaction, growth and evolution overtime. Bavolek (2023) holds that family development includes the numerous stages families go through as they grow and evolve including the influences that determine the way they function and relate with each other. The family as a unit is the first place where a child is socialised into gender norms, stereotypes and values systems and this is majorly why the family cannot be overlooked with regards to discourses on male children participation in domestic works. It is often said that the treatment meted on children from birth within the home front end up becoming a construct of their gender whether male or female. This is perhaps the reason Bavolek further argued that an individual's sense of being either male or female is pre- dominantly determined by the way they are treated by others. Studies have shown that children learn very quickly, and that from as early as nine months of age, boys and girls are different. This behavioural stereotypes further goes to modify their social behaviour and conduct.

Buitenbos (2025) opines that the most significant influence on gender roles occurs within the family setting, and that it is pertinent for parents to model the right ideologies with regards to the domestic work and deconstruct patriarchal ideologies of gender preference by continuously insisting on equity from the time children are born, to their formative years, up until they are old enough to make decisions for themselves despite what is being disseminated by other units of socialisation within the society. According to Schmenk (2004), families where domestic works are not assigned based on traditional gender beliefs, develop more quickly than those that see domestic works as gender roles. In the family type mentioned earlier, domestic chores are likely to be handled more effectively irrespective of who is available at home, and such children are sure to grow into men and women equipped adequately to support their families from all flanks.

Conclusion

Based on the theoretical anchorage of the study, and the scholarly views espoused in the literature review, it is evident that the discourse on gender bias is still entrenched in human society. Irrespective of the increment in the number of women who take up leadership positions in professional spheres, the issue of inequality in the allocation of domestic works still persists in many African homes. The above position is in line with views expressed by Grosser (2021) that gender stereotyping by assigning domestic roles is still a part of human society especially in Africa where women are believed to be home keepers. This issue of inequality leaves the female gender, both professional and unprofessional, greatly inundated by domestic work causing mental and physical fatigue which can be detrimental to their health as well as the output they make in their undertakings. This can further create disunity and disillusionment which are precursors to sibling rivalry, separation, divorce or even death. The study also revealed that the constructs of inequality are not natural but rather emanate from social and cultural systems that are imbibed in households.

Also, the data generated from the library sources that supported this study showed that communication remains a seminal tool to deconstruct the stereotype belief and practice about domestic works being the roles of the female gender. According to Butler (2024) communication plays a vital role in addressing and mitigating the negative impacts of traditional gender roles through open dialogue, challenging stereotypes, and promoting gender-sensitive language. The study concludes that communication can enliven the consciousness of male children to take up domestic work in order to equip themselves with skills to support family growth. The researchers therefore established that strategic communication tools which fall within the purview of verbal and non-verbal cues should be utilized in addressing the issues of marginalisation of the female gender vis-a-vis the allocation of domestic work and the stereotyping of genders which is a dominant fixture in our social world.

Recommendations

This study recommends as follows:

1. Families should explore various forms of communication most especially, the use of Social media platforms such as WhatsApp Checklist to organise chores transparently. Google calendar can also be integrated into family chatrooms to assign chores, do reminders and rotate tasks in a fair and equitable manner.
2. Regular physical family meetings should be encouraged to discuss the need for members to see domestic duties as non-gender roles.
3. Picture evidences on completed tasks should be uploaded on family chatrooms to foster encouragement and reinforcement of positivity within the home front.
4. Fathers should be role models to their children by partaking in domestic works within the home front so that their children can learn from them.
5. The discourse of equity in sharing domestic work should be inculcated in the curriculum of schools right from the kindergarten.
6. The media should design family education programmes where the need for male children participation in domestic works will be given attention.

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