



Breaking Gender Barrier Stereotypes in Nigerian Parenting: Raising Children Without Bias

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Abstract

This paper explores the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes in Nigerian parenting and the implications these biases have on children's development, identity, and future opportunities. Rooted in socio-cultural and religious traditions, gendered parenting practices often define rigid roles for boys and girls from early childhood, limiting personal growth and reinforcing systemic inequality. Drawing on recent Nigerian scholarship and real-life case examples, the paper examines how such stereotypes manifest in the home through domestic responsibilities, emotional conditioning, and educational expectations. It also highlights the cognitive, emotional, and socio-economic effects of gender-biased parenting on children. Through the lenses of Social Learning Theory and Gender Schema Theory, the paper advocates for gender-neutral parenting as a transformative tool for nation-building. Key stakeholders including parents, educators, religious leaders, and policymakers are identified as essential actors in promoting inclusive parenting practices. Despite cultural resistance and economic constraints, local interventions and media advocacy are gradually reshaping narratives. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations for fostering equitable parenting, positioning it as a strategic imperative for achieving gender equality and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, parenting, child development, gender-neutral, Nigeria

I. Introduction

In contemporary Nigerian society, parenting remains one of the most culturally entrenched spaces where gender roles are both demonstrated and transmitted. Despite evolving global conversations around gender equality, Nigerian homes continue to reflect deep-rooted stereotypes that assign roles, behaviors, and responsibilities to children based on their sex. From infancy, boys are often socialized to be assertive, dominant, and emotionally reserved, while girls are taught to be nurturing, obedient, and domestically inclined. These early differences in socialization do not occur in a vacuum; they are consciously or unconsciously

reinforced by parents, caregivers, extended family, and religious teachings.

The impact of such biased parenting practices extends beyond the household. It influences children's sense of identity, shapes their academic and career aspirations, and conditions their interpersonal relationships. As noted by Akinrinade and Olanrewaju (2022), the early exposure to rigid gender norms directly affects how children perceive their abilities, limiting the full realization of their potential. This has far-reaching implications for national development, as it constrains talent and perpetuates socio-economic inequality along gender lines.

Nigeria's demographic profile, marked by a high youth population and diverse ethnic composition, makes it particularly important to critically examine how cultural norms influence parenting. While various policies such as the National Gender Policy (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2021) acknowledge the importance of gender equity, implementation often neglects the domestic space where these attitudes are first formed. As such, efforts aimed at promoting gender equality must begin at the root: the family.

Gender stereotypes are oversimplified beliefs and expectations about the attributes, behaviors, and roles of males and females. These beliefs are socially constructed rather than biologically determined, and they are often reinforced through cultural norms, media, religious teachings, and most critically, parenting practices. In the Nigerian context, gender stereotypes are visible in everyday decisions such as assigning domestic chores, dictating dress codes, and even selecting school subjects based on whether a child is male or female (Nwankwo & Adebayo, 2021).

Parenting refers to the activities, practices, and responsibilities involved in raising and nurturing children. It includes the transmission of values, beliefs, and social expectations. Nigerian parenting is typically shaped by cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors. These influences often place emphasis on discipline, respect for authority, and clearly defined roles based on gender (Olojede & Oyediran, 2022). When parenting is



guided by rigid gender expectations, it reinforces systemic inequality and limits a child's personal growth and societal participation.

Gender-neutral parenting is an approach that seeks to raise children without imposing traditional gender roles. Instead of directing children toward behaviors or activities based on their sex, gender-neutral parenting focuses on nurturing individual interests, talents, and emotional intelligence. It challenges normative expectations and allows children to grow into their authentic selves, free from limiting social constructs.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on two interrelated theories that provide a lens through which the perpetuation and deconstruction of gender stereotypes in parenting can be understood.

1. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977): Social Learning Theory posits that individuals, especially children, learn behaviors, attitudes, and values through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Within the home, children learn what is considered "masculine" or "feminine" by observing how their parents behave, how siblings are treated, and which roles are rewarded or discouraged. A boy who sees his father consistently making financial decisions and avoiding housework, for instance, is likely to internalize leadership as a male trait and domestic tasks as beneath his gender. Similarly, a girl constantly praised for modesty and silence may learn to devalue assertiveness.

2. Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981): Gender Schema Theory explains how children develop mental frameworks that shape their understanding of gender and influence their behavior accordingly. These schemas are formed from cultural messages absorbed during early childhood, particularly from parents and caregivers. Nigerian parenting practices that designate "appropriate" toys, activities, and future aspirations based on a child's sex contribute to the formation of rigid gender schemas. Such schemas not only guide present behavior but also influence future decisions regarding education, career, and family life (Arowolo&Ogunyemi, 2023). These theoretical perspectives underscore the central role of parents as both agents and potential reformers of gender norms.

Manifestations of Gender Bias in Nigerian Parenting

Parenting practices in Nigeria are often steeped in long-standing cultural traditions that draw a sharp line between what is considered appropriate behavior for boys and for girls. These stereotypes are not only sustained through verbal messages but

also through daily routines, household responsibilities, emotional regulation, and the shaping of life expectations. The gendered division of roles in the home becomes a microcosm of the broader social stratification that persists into adulthood.

Division of Domestic Labour: One of the earliest and most visible ways in which gender stereotypes are reinforced in Nigerian homes is through the unequal assignment of household chores. Girls are more likely to be tasked with cooking, sweeping, washing clothes, and caring for younger siblings. Boys, in contrast, are often exempted from such duties or assigned less routine tasks such as running errands or assisting with outdoor work. This disparity subtly communicates the expectation that caregiving and domestic responsibilities are inherently female obligations. According to Okon and Adeboye (2022), this kind of chore distribution not only limits girls' study time but also frames boys as future "leaders" and girls as future "helpers."

Emotional Conditioning and Expression: Parents in Nigeria also play a key role in determining how children manage and express their emotions. Boys are typically discouraged from crying or expressing vulnerability, under the assumption that showing emotion is a sign of weakness. Phrases like "be a man" or "boys don't cry" are commonly used by both fathers and mothers to condition emotional restraint. On the other hand, girls are often socialized to be passive, polite, and emotionally sensitive, which may limit their ability to assert themselves in professional or social settings later in life. A study by Musa and Oduola (2021) revealed that such emotional dichotomies contribute to poor mental health outcomes and diminished self-awareness in young adults.

Language and Labeling: Everyday language used by parents often reinforces harmful gender stereotypes. Boys are praised for being "strong," "brave," or "independent," while girls are praised for being "beautiful," "quiet," or "obedient." These distinctions are not trivial; they shape the core identity and self-esteem of children. When language consistently upholds physicality and autonomy for boys, and aesthetics and submissiveness for girls, it becomes a powerful tool of social control. As highlighted by Nwachukwu and Onah (2023), gendered praise creates subconscious boundaries on what children believe they can achieve.

Educational and Career Expectations: In many Nigerian families, educational and career choices are subtly influenced by gendered expectations. Boys are often encouraged to pursue courses in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics



(STEM), while girls are steered toward nursing, teaching, or secretarial studies. Some parents even discourage girls from pursuing higher education entirely, particularly in rural or low-income communities, viewing marriage and homemaking as their ultimate goals. Such preferences are informed by deeply rooted beliefs about the “ideal” roles of men and women. As noted by Ibrahim and Salisu (2022), this trend contributes to the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership, business, and STEM careers in Nigeria.

Use of Religion and Culture: Finally, religion and traditional norms are often invoked by parents to justify unequal treatment of boys and girls. Interpretations of sacred texts and proverbs such as “a woman’s place is in the kitchen” or “boys inherit the land” become instruments of gendered parenting. These messages, passed down from one generation to another, normalize inequality and discourage critical reflection. Cultural practices such as early marriage, bride price, or male primogeniture further validate the notion that male children are inherently more valuable or worthy of investment (Adebayo & Olagunju, 2020).

Effects of Gender-Biased Parenting on Children’s Development

The influence of gendered parenting practices on children’s development is multi-dimensional, extending across psychological, academic, social, and economic domains. These practices shape children’s sense of self, their perceptions of gender roles, and their long-term engagement with society. In Nigeria, where cultural and religious expectations heavily influence family life, the implications of gender-biased parenting are particularly profound.

Cognitive and Academic Development: Children’s early learning environments are critical to developing their problem-solving abilities, creativity, and academic confidence. When girls are subtly discouraged from exploring science or mathematics, and boys are steered away from language and caregiving activities, these biases hinder their cognitive flexibility and learning potential. According to Yusuf and Adekeye (2021), this early channeling affects classroom participation and later academic choices. Furthermore, gendered educational support from parents—such as investing in tutorials for boys but not girls—creates uneven academic outcomes. Over time, this contributes to unequal representation in high-paying and high-impact professions.

Self-Esteem, Identity Formation, and Confidence: Children internalize beliefs about their value based on how they are treated at home. When girls are consistently praised for their appearance or

silence, and boys for dominance and independence, they begin to equate worth with conformity to these standards. Chinyere and Balogun (2022) found that girls raised in restrictive environments often struggle with assertiveness and public engagement. Boys, meanwhile, may become overly dependent on external validation tied to power or success. This skewed identity formation limits children’s ability to form balanced self-concepts and to develop the resilience needed for challenges later in life.

Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Well-being: A major, though often overlooked, consequence of gender-stereotyped parenting is its toll on emotional health. Boys who are taught that emotions signify weakness may grow up emotionally disconnected, suppressing fear, sadness, or empathy—traits essential for healthy relationships. Girls, on the other hand, may be overly socialized to tolerate discomfort, leading to poor boundary setting. Okoro and Suleiman (2023) emphasized that such emotional repression often manifests in adulthood as anxiety, depression, or difficulty managing interpersonal conflict. The inability to process and express emotions constructively affects not only individual well-being but also social cohesion.

Social Skills and Gender Relations: Children who are raised within rigid gender expectations often replicate such dynamics in their social relationships. Boys may struggle to work collaboratively with women or show empathy in leadership positions, while girls may shy away from roles that require assertiveness. Udo and Abayomi (2021) noted that young adults raised under strict patriarchal values tend to perpetuate these ideals in their peer and romantic relationships, accepting male dominance and female submissiveness as the norm. This ultimately perpetuates cycles of gender inequality, including domestic violence and poor representation of women in leadership.

Occupational Aspirations and Economic Outcomes: The reinforcement of gendered roles in childhood narrows children’s future career options. Girls raised to prioritize marriage or caregiving over ambition are less likely to pursue competitive or high-income professions. Boys may also avoid careers in education, healthcare, or caregiving due to stigma, leading to an imbalance in Nigeria’s workforce. These dynamics contribute to the broader national challenges of economic inequality and underutilization of human capital. According to data from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022), women remain underrepresented in technology, manufacturing, and political leadership, outcomes directly linked to early-life socialization.



Civic Participation and Leadership Capacity:

Children who grow up in environments where gender defines access to voice and power may either replicate or resist those models. Girls who are silenced or undervalued in the home may not see themselves as capable leaders. Boys who are raised with unchallenged authority may fail to embrace collaborative leadership. This has a ripple effect on civic engagement, governance, and the inclusivity of democratic processes. As Ogunlaja and Ismail (2022) assert, early exposure to equitable parenting practices can cultivate leaders who are empathetic, inclusive, and progressive in their outlook.

Gender-biased parenting shapes a child's worldview and life chances. These effects span emotional health, academic engagement, career development, and societal participation. The urgency to address these issues lies not only in correcting injustice but in unlocking the full developmental potential of all Nigerian children, regardless of gender.

Case Examples and Local Interventions Challenging Gender Stereotypes

While gender-biased parenting remains prevalent across many Nigerian households, several individuals, organizations, and state-led initiatives are beginning to challenge traditional norms and promote inclusive parenting practices. These efforts, though still emerging, reflect a growing awareness of the need to raise children in environments free from rigid gender roles.

Community-Based Campaigns and Advocacy:

One of the most notable local efforts is the work of Roseline Adewuyi, a gender advocate and founder of the *ENGENDERS Project*. Her organization focuses on dismantling stereotypes that limit girls' access to opportunities by engaging schools, parents, and religious groups in dialogue around gender-equal parenting. Through community storytelling and youth mentorship, Adewuyi encourages parents to allow girls to dream beyond traditional roles and boys to embrace emotional openness and responsibility in domestic tasks (ENGENDERS Project Report, 2023).

Similarly, grassroots organizations such as Girl Pride Circle in Lagos have launched initiatives like *Parenting for Equality*, where fathers are trained to participate more actively in caregiving and encouraged to reject toxic masculinity. Their workshops emphasize co-parenting, emotional intelligence for boys, and career support for girls, directly addressing the societal roots of inequality.

Media and Digital Campaigns: In recent years, social media has become a powerful tool for reshaping parenting norms in Nigeria. Campaigns

such as #BoysTooCry and #MyChildMyResponsibility often led by youth influencers and educators—challenge toxic masculinity and promote balanced emotional expression. These movements encourage Nigerian parents to avoid phrases like “you're acting like a girl” and instead create emotionally safe environments for all children.

Platforms like Parenting Nigeria, a digital hub founded in 2020, now feature articles and webinars highlighting the dangers of gendered expectations and offering practical parenting advice rooted in local realities. Their collaboration with the Lagos State Ministry of Youth and Social Development has made gender-neutral parenting resources more accessible, particularly to urban families.

Educational Institution Interventions: Several schools across Nigeria have adopted programs that promote inclusive classroom environments, encouraging both boys and girls to explore leadership, STEM activities, and household management skills. In particular, Queens' College Lagos and Federal Government Boys' College Abuja have piloted projects that rotate classroom chores and leadership roles without regard to gender, aiming to dismantle subconscious biases before they crystallize.

Moreover, parenting seminars organized by PTAs now increasingly include sessions on gender equality, particularly in private and faith-based schools. These seminars, often led by psychologists and social workers, engage parents in reflecting on their own upbringing and the unintended messages they may be passing on.

Religious and Cultural Institutions as Agents of Change:

Recognizing the deep influence of faith on parenting, some religious organizations are reinterpreting scriptural teachings to align with the principles of dignity and equality. For instance, a 2022 program by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Kaduna State chapter emphasized mutual respect and partnership within the family structure, urging parents to value each child equally regardless of gender.

In some Yoruba and Igbo communities, traditional leaders are collaborating with youth advocacy groups to promote updated cultural narratives. For example, the Ooni of Ife's Royal Academy for Children and Culture recently hosted forums promoting the role of boys as nurturers and girls as leaders within the family and community context.



Stakeholders' Role in Promoting Gender-Neutral Parenting

Addressing gender stereotypes in parenting requires the collective effort of key stakeholders who influence family life, education, cultural values, and national policy. While the family unit remains the immediate environment where children internalize gender roles, broader societal institutions are critical in shaping parental attitudes and ensuring lasting transformation.

Parents and caregivers are at the forefront of this conversation. As primary role models, their actions and words create the foundation upon which children form their understanding of gender. A conscious effort by both mothers and fathers to equally assign household responsibilities, encourage emotional literacy, and validate the interests of their children irrespective of sex can dismantle long-held stereotypes. The active involvement of fathers in caregiving—once viewed as unconventional—is gradually gaining social acceptance, especially in urban settings. Studies by Akinade and Folaranmi (2022) affirm that when both parents are equally involved in child-rearing, children are more likely to exhibit confidence and egalitarian attitudes.

Educational institutions are equally crucial. Schools are not only spaces for academic learning but also sites where gender norms are either challenged or reinforced. When teachers model equality, offer non-gendered subject choices, and create safe spaces for all students to lead and express themselves, they contribute meaningfully to disrupting bias. The inclusion of gender studies in teacher training curricula, as implemented in some state colleges of education since 2021, is a promising step towards equipping educators to influence parental and student behavior positively (Okafor and Danladi, 2023).

Faith-based and traditional institutions hold significant sway in Nigerian society. Religious teachings often serve as guiding principles for parenting, and as such, religious leaders can play a transformative role by advocating interpretations of sacred texts that emphasize equity, dignity, and mutual respect. In various churches and mosques, sermons are now beginning to address issues such as shared responsibility in the home and the importance of educating both male and female children. Cultural custodians also have a role to play in reshaping indigenous proverbs, ceremonies, and practices that uphold male dominance and female subservience.

Civil society organizations and non-governmental actors have been instrumental in conducting awareness campaigns and community

dialogues. Their grassroots reach allows them to engage marginalized populations, challenge harmful norms, and provide parenting resources tailored to local contexts. Initiatives such as the Girls Voices Movement and the She Learns Project are leading efforts in this regard, especially in Northern Nigeria, where patriarchal norms are more deeply entrenched.

Lastly, government institutions have a legislative and policy-oriented responsibility. Ministries of Women Affairs, Youth and Social Development, and Education must collaborate to integrate gender sensitivity into family support programs, social welfare interventions, and early childhood education policies. The adoption of the revised National Gender Policy in 2021 provides a policy framework, but it must be backed by consistent implementation, funding, and monitoring at the local government level. Parental education programs supported by state governments can further ensure that inclusive parenting is not a middle-class ideal but a national priority.

In sum, raising children without gender bias is not solely a private undertaking; it is a collective societal obligation. The convergence of family, education, religion, civil society, and state policies is necessary to create an environment where children are empowered to grow without limitations defined by their gender.

Challenges to Changing Parental Norms

Despite growing advocacy and progressive interventions, several challenges continue to impede the widespread adoption of gender-neutral parenting in Nigeria. These barriers are both structural and cultural, reflecting deeply embedded social norms.

1. Cultural Resistance: In many Nigerian communities, parenting is guided by long-standing traditions that prescribe distinct roles for boys and girls. Attempts to redefine these roles are often perceived as foreign or disruptive to cultural heritage. Ibrahim and Ejiofor (2022) observed that in several rural communities, parents who model gender-equitable behaviors face criticism or social isolation. This resistance slows the acceptance of non-stereotypical parenting methods.

2. Religious Interpretations: While some religious leaders have embraced more inclusive family teachings, others reinforce patriarchal messages that uphold male dominance and female submission. These beliefs shape parenting ideologies and practices, especially in faith-driven households. The perceived divine backing of gender roles often makes reform appear sacrilegious or morally wrong, thereby inhibiting progress.



3. Limited Access to Information and Education:

Many parents lack exposure to contemporary parenting resources that emphasize gender equity. In particular, families in underserved regions often rely solely on inherited practices. According to Oyeniran and Bakare (2023), there is a significant gap in parental education programs that provide alternatives to traditional norms. Without critical awareness, parents are unlikely to adopt new perspectives.

4. Economic Constraints: Socio-economic realities significantly influence parenting decisions. In households where financial resources are limited, investment in male children is often prioritized due to the belief that sons will eventually provide economic returns. Girls, by contrast, may be viewed as temporary family members who will marry out. This financial prioritization reinforces unequal value systems and educational access.

5. Media Influence: Mass media in Nigeria frequently reinforces traditional gender roles. Television programs, advertisements, and movies commonly depict mothers as homemakers and fathers as providers. Such portrayals normalize gendered behavior and subtly discourage deviation. Without diverse representations of parenting roles, media remains a powerful force in maintaining the status quo.

6. Policy Gaps and Implementation Challenges: Although Nigeria has adopted national policies supporting gender equity, such as the National Gender Policy (2021), their implementation at the grassroots level remains weak. Many programs are inadequately funded, poorly coordinated, or lack clear metrics for impact. The absence of localized, parent-focused interventions makes policy initiatives difficult to translate into household practice.

II. Recommendations

To effectively dismantle gender stereotypes in Nigerian parenting, a multi-pronged and culturally sensitive approach is required. The following recommendations offer actionable strategies for parents, policymakers, educators, and civil society actors:

1. Promote Parental Education and Sensitization:

Government agencies, NGOs, and faith-based institutions should collaborate to organize regular parenting workshops that address the impact of gender bias on child development. These programs should be integrated into existing maternal and child health services, community development forums, and school-based parent-teacher associations. When parents are exposed to the developmental costs of

gender-stereotyped socialization, they are more likely to embrace change.

2. Revise Educational Curricula and Teacher Training:

Gender sensitivity should be embedded in the curriculum of teacher education colleges and professional development programs. Teachers are often role models for both students and parents; equipping them with the skills to promote inclusive classroom practices will help challenge stereotypes at school and reinforce positive behaviors at home. Coeducational tasks, mixed-gender leadership roles, and unbiased career guidance should be standard practice in schools.

3. Encourage Inclusive Media Content:

Media regulatory bodies such as the National Broadcasting Commission should incentivize content producers to promote non-traditional representations of gender roles in family settings. Children's programs, advertisements, and talk shows should be intentional about showcasing fathers who cook, mothers who lead businesses, and children who pursue interests regardless of gender. Changing the visual and narrative environment can reshape perceptions at scale.

4. Engage Religious and Cultural Leaders as Change Agents:

Given their influence in shaping values, religious and traditional leaders should be trained and mobilized as advocates for equitable parenting. Scriptural and cultural interpretations that promote partnership, mutual respect, and dignity should be emphasized in sermons and community gatherings. Such localized interventions are more likely to resonate with grassroots populations than externally imposed reforms.

5. Strengthen Legal and Policy Implementation Frameworks:

While Nigeria's National Gender Policy (2021) provides a supportive backdrop, stronger enforcement mechanisms are needed. Federal and state governments should allocate specific funds for community-based gender equity initiatives, especially those focusing on parenting education. In addition, monitoring and evaluation frameworks should include measurable indicators related to parenting norms and household decision-making practices.

6. Support Economic Empowerment of Families:

Poverty often forces families to prioritize male children in terms of education and investment. Supporting economic resilience through skills training, access to microloans, and social welfare programs for vulnerable households can reduce the reliance on gender-based decision-making. When families are economically secure, they are more willing to invest in both male and female children equally.



7. Foster Youth-Led Advocacy: Young parents, particularly those in urban areas and digital communities, are more open to questioning inherited norms. Youth-led campaigns and peer learning platforms should be supported to share success stories and build momentum around equitable parenting. These movements can be scaled through digital storytelling, podcasting, and partnerships with tertiary institutions.

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