

# Gender-role Socialization and Academic Performance of Female Naval Personnel during Continuing Professional Education

## Implications for Security Challenges in Nigeria

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### Abstract

This paper reports on a recent study that investigated gender issues in the continuing professional education (CPE) of the Nigerian Navy. Successful participation in CPE determines professional advancement, and only top-ranking personnel take part in decision making about issues of security. That study assumed that women personnel are burdened more by gender roles than their male counterparts, which has potential impact on their academic performance. This assumption justified the investigation of women's performance during the CPE of the Nigerian Navy. Analysis of data obtained through interviews held with eleven female and eleven male personnel showed that despite their gender roles, women personnel performed well academically because they were self-motivated, planned properly, and sought to prove their worth as well as counter hegemonic discourse. The paper recommends that the burden of gender roles, which female personnel described as "tiring," be lessened by the Navy by implementing security sector reforms that focus on "family-friendly" policies and work environments that could enhance women's participation in Naval CPE towards progression to decision-making positions.

**N**igeria is faced with a myriad of security challenges—violent insurgent attacks, herdsmen marauding, kidnapping, abductions, ethnic skirmishes, militancy, and armed robbery.<sup>1</sup> It is commonplace in Nigeria to think that

women are softer targets because the majority of security attacks occur at market-places (which are often dominated by women in developing economies), farming and fishing areas (which are common sites of attacks by herdsmen and Niger Delta militants respectively, and also dominated by women), and schools (as in the case of the Chibok girls abducted by the Boko Haram insurgents in April 2014—many of whom are still in the custody of the insurgents). This view constitutes a significant part of Nigeria's security challenges.<sup>2</sup> Resolving these challenges and addressing their root causes will not succeed unless the women who suffer most are empowered.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that women bear most of the brunt of security lapses in Nigeria justifies the need for proper representation of female security personnel in decision making on issues concerning the nation's security, as this could advance issues that are important to women.<sup>4</sup> Men are more represented in decision-making processes about security because they have better access to career advancement opportunities and are more supported by cultural and institutional factors, yet women are more affected by security challenges.<sup>5</sup> Women should not be merely victims, but also agents of security.<sup>6</sup> Women play integral roles in forces (armed and non-armed) that help combat security challenges. This includes women's roles as military personnel and their roles as ordinary members of their respective local communities.<sup>7</sup> Women's inclusion in security sector agencies is therefore critical in addressing security and rights issues, abating hostility between communities and security actors, and ensuring a standard for security provision or service which is accountable and reliable.<sup>8</sup>

In most security institutions, women constitute a small minority, and the unfriendly working environments discourage their recruitment and retention. It is therefore not surprising that women are underrepresented in the more influential senior echelons of the military. This structure is largely a function of the internal selection and development systems that have a substantially masculine, mainstream social and cultural weighting which, in turn, is reflected in both recruitment and retention rates among nonmainstream groups, to include women.<sup>9</sup> The Nigerian military has a low representation of women in leadership positions with only about 1 percent reportedly in senior ranks; women account for 3–10 percent of total personnel.<sup>10</sup> As a result, this underrepresentation of women in security-related leadership and decision-making positions can adversely impact the delivery of security to all, especially women.<sup>11</sup>

Continuing professional education (CPE) allows professionals to stay current and useful; promotion and advancement are contingent on CPE.<sup>12</sup> Through CPE, militaries

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keep personnel up-to-date on matters of security and stability and prepare them to deal with novel situations.<sup>13</sup> Participation and high academic performance in military CPE enhances women's chances of attaining higher ranks and leadership positions. Since it is suspected that gender roles might affect participation in and academic performance during CPE, this study explores how gender roles affect women's successful participation and academic performance in the CPE of the Nigerian Navy.

### **Theoretical Perspectives: Gender Schema and Role Congruent Theories**

Gender schema theory accounts for how people learn stereotypical ideals of masculine and feminine traits, how these shape their thought processes and self-concept, and how they conform to fit within gender roles which are taught through social experiences (from the home, school, mosque, and church).<sup>14</sup> Gender schema theory explains that gender roles are social constructs. They are usually roles individuals perform in informal, religious, community, and natural settings, which are oftentimes different from the work roles they perform in the public sphere.<sup>15</sup>

Role congruity theory explains that social roles have positive or negative values relative to the group to which an individual belongs. It explains how perceptions of roles account for gender bias in perceived leadership abilities of group members.<sup>16</sup> The theory further explains that characteristics attributed to males and females determine the leadership roles they can play in public spheres.

In male-dominated institutions, such as corporate, political, and military institutions, male norms are served; women are often underrepresented in those spaces and leadership has been a predominantly male prerogative.<sup>17</sup> Workplaces are gendered because of the norms and values associated with those spaces.<sup>18</sup> Although the proportion of women in the workplace has increased remarkably within the past few decades, women remain vastly underrepresented at the highest organizational levels.<sup>19</sup>

Women's underrepresentation at the highest organizational levels in male-dominated professions such as the military is connected with the burden of social roles that women bear as well as the paternalistic nature of these workplaces.<sup>20</sup> Given these, how is gender-role socialization impacting naval women's academic performance during CPE in the Nigerian Navy? What does this mean for their roles in decision-making processes about the security challenges in Nigeria? These are the questions addressed in this paper.

### **Research Method**

This study adopted a descriptive case study design because the researcher wanted to explore the influence of gender roles on the academic performance of female



naval personnel during CPE in a detailed, real-life context. The sample consisted of twenty-two naval personnel. Ten female and ten male naval personnel were purposively selected for interviews at the Nigerian Navy School in Apapa, Lagos, Nigeria, based on their enlistment in CPE. Two trainers involved in the administration of the school, a male and a female, were also interviewed. The decision to interview both women and men was informed by the presence of both genders in the Navy. As it is the case in social relationships, the construction of roles and attributes of women and men is undertaken not solely by one gender but by both.

When women enter an androcentric space such as the Navy, they enter as gendered women, not as the equals of the gendered male personnel.<sup>21</sup> The ability of women to access and participate in CPE in order to progress to decision-making positions could depend on several factors: men and women's perception of women's roles in the private sphere and at work, the reality of women's roles in the private sphere, and how this interfaces with their academic performance during CPE. It was therefore deemed appropriate that the researcher should sample and interview female and male personnel. Data were collected through an interview guide. The instrument focused on the question of women's CPE experience in the Navy in relation to that of men. The interviews were tape-recorded with each lasting an average of twenty-five minutes. Participants in the study were coded according to gender: male personnel as M1 to M10, female personnel as F1 to F10, female trainer as FT, and male trainer as MT.

## Data Presentation and Discussion

In this section, the author seeks to answer the questions that were raised about the impact of gender-role socialization on naval women's academic performance during CPE and the implications for their participation in decision-making processes about security challenges confronting the country.

**Gender roles and naval women's education and learning.** Female personnel gave insights into how gender roles pose potential challenges to naval women's continuing professional education and learning. A female participant avowed that it is tiring and puts women under a lot of pressure when a couple return from the same work and the husband sits down while the wife goes into the kitchen to cook and also attend to other domestic chores. The participants pointed out that caregiving and nursing roles pose challenges to women's activeness in learning and other public roles, which are usually not the same for men. Two female personnel shared their thoughts:

Immediately you get married, you won't be as active as before. No way will I be very happy carrying a baby and transferring to another location. Most women don't like coming for courses because of these challenges. But, because courses are attached to promotion, they have no choice. (F2)



Being a woman, family should be first; that's the way we were created. You are supposed to be a support to your husband and mother to your children. The only problem I had during my courses is where to leave my children; who to leave my family with. I don't think the male personnel have much problem; they have their wives of course. (F3)

Another female participant (F4) pointed out that “being a mother, you have to take care of the family, and the Navy too is expecting something from you.” Participant F5 affirmed that combining gender roles with CPE is stressful for women and noted that sometimes “you might have a test the next day and your child is sick.” Participant F6 revealed that some female personnel married to civilians have lost their marriages or their jobs because of these challenges.

The male participants in the research also noted that gender roles make it difficult for female personnel to participate actively in the CPE of the Navy. A male participant (M1) cited an instance where a female member serving in Port Harcourt (a city in the south of Nigeria) is sent to Lagos (another city in the west of the country) to undergo a professional course. He noted that leaving her husband and perhaps underage children will affect her concentration. Another male participant (M2) was of the view that family responsibilities and natural roles such as pregnancy affect women's access to successful participation in CPE, especially if they are not told of their participation in the course ahead of time. Two male participants mentioned some key roles women play in the private sphere that could possibly affect their concentration in academic work:

Family problems and distress of the work cause psychological problems for women. This can affect their participation in courses. Learning requires the brain; you need concentration to learn. For instance, you're coming for course, and your child is not feeling fine. How will you have full concentration as a mother? (M3)

Majority are mothers; they wake up very early, make food for the kids and husband before coming for the day's activity (M4).

These data reveal that women personnel who undergo the CPE of the Nigerian Navy are burdened by gender roles in the private sphere (the home); in turn, this may negatively impact their academic performance. Data presented in the following section reveals whether female naval personnel allow gender roles to affect their performance.

**Performance of women personnel during naval continuing professional education.** Female and male participants gave their views about women's academic performance during CPE. Both categories of participants averred that women perform well during courses. A majority of them affirmed that sometimes female personnel perform better than their male counterparts. The FT noted that “women



are showing their worth in the military. They go on courses and even surpass their male counterparts.” She also noted that the only female rear admiral in the Navy topped her class in many of her CPE courses. A female participant (F3) revealed that because she was one of the best students during her Command Appointment Promotion Examination, the Navy asked her to teach personnel who were drafted for that same course the following year. Another participant gave the statistics of female performance during one of her CPE courses:

We perform very well. In my class we were fifty-nine, and at least ten people had first class. Four of them were women, and we had nine women in the class. The school was so impressed. Nothing any male personnel will do that I cannot do (F6).

A male participant (M5) opened up that some of the female personnel challenge him. Like the FT, the MT opined that women do better during CPE because they are more restricted (with respect to socializing) and focused than their male counterparts. The responses of female and male personnel indicate that women personnel perform very well academically during CPE, despite their gender roles in the private sphere. If female personnel are burdened by gender roles in the home and yet perform exceptionally well during CPE, what and how then are they sorting out for themselves in order to be recognized and remain relevant to the Navy? The reasons the naval personnel proffered are presented in the next section.

**How and why women achieve academic success during naval continuing professional education.** Some female personnel averred that they engaged in proper planning and preparation when they have been scheduled to attend a CPE. One female participant (F2) indicated that she took her babies to the day care center when they were two months old in preparation for her resumption of duty after the third month of child birth. Another female participant (F7) avowed, “If you are up for a course maybe for six months or a year, you let your family be prepared. It will take a whole lot of planning, managing, and juggling to be able to achieve all these.” Yet another shared, “I had to contract someone to come home to do the homework for them and take care of the school part while my mother will take care of the domestic duties” (F3). Also, a female participant (F5) noted that women in the Navy motivate themselves to perform well during CPE. She noted, “As female personnel, you are not looking for who will motivate you because you are already determined to do it, so, you have to take the bull by the horn.”

These responses clearly highlight how women personnel manage their gender roles in the private sphere in order to fully participate and perform well during CPE. The responses show that, in many cases, women are self-motivated, and engage in proper planning ahead of their participation.

The key reasons that female and male personnel advanced for women’s good academic performance in spite of their gender roles is that women personnel are very



often determined and focused, and they have a need to prove their worth and resist hegemonic discourse. They said: “It’s not about brawn; it’s about brain—being female has nothing to do with that. We are trying and fighting hard so that we’ll be recognized for our brainpower” (F7); “I feel I should compete with them and make them know that what they know, I know better. It’s a form of showing that you have the intellectual capacity to surpass them” (F8); “I think it can be established that this attitude of academic diligence is a way of also engaging in power play. It is even one of the things that propel them to be focused because the general impression people have is that women are of weaker sex” (MT).

A female participant (F7) mentioned that women in the Navy want to be recognized for their brainpower and for what they can bring to the table. The MT had mentioned that the only female rear admiral of the Nigerian Navy was overall best in her class. He mentioned here again that academic diligence is a way by which women personnel engage in power play. Women have generally been branded as the weaker sex—this is a hegemonic discourse that women personnel who perform very well in the Navy are determined to resist.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out initially to examine whether the burden of gender roles could have a negative effect on the academic performance of female military personnel during their continuing professional education and whether this, in turn, could affect their progress to leadership and decision-making positions within the Nigerian military hierarchy, especially with regard to the country’s security challenges. Surprisingly, the analysis of data revealed a more positive tone than expected, showing that women in the Nigerian Navy generally perform well academically, and sometimes, outperform their male counterparts in CPE courses. However, the analysis also highlights that women’s success in CPE does not come without a price; they frequently described the whole process as “tiring” and the work environment as “unfriendly” owing to the masculine nature of the Nigerian military.

This study showed that, although female naval personnel are burdened by gender roles in the private sphere, they perform well in CPE through appropriate planning and management of their gender roles. They successfully juggle household and childcare work with continuing professional education because they are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. These results are in consonance with results of studies that have shown that successful academic performance is one of the pathways women have sought to gain power and assert their personhood.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of the positive tone of the results of this study, the burden female naval personnel bear as a result of their gender roles should not be ignored. The Navy could reduce these burdens by implementing security sector reforms that focus on “family



friendly” policies and work environments, such as having crèches at CPE and training bases for nursing mothers who are drafted for courses, adjusting the time of resumption, and consideration of maternity leave for personnel (which the Nigerian Navy currently does not grant).<sup>23</sup> In the proposed work environment, female naval personnel would be able to progress fast to decision-making positions with limited stress, enhancing the possibility that they would provide a gendered lens on the security challenges the nation is facing and the security measures the military would take in dealing with these security challenges.

The study also highlighted the view that women suffer most from security challenges in Nigeria, as indicated in the literature. Although men are not immune to these attacks, women and girls tend to suffer most from such attacks, including during post-attack situations, because they are more likely to be targets of attacks that occur at marketplaces, farming and fishing areas, and schools (as in the case of the Chibok girls abducted by the Boko Haram insurgents).<sup>24</sup> This paper argued that if more female personnel advance easily to leadership and decision-making positions in the military, their presence would provide more gender perspectives on tackling the nation’s security challenges. The study also contributes to the body of literature in this regard.

This paper was based on a study that focused only on the Nigerian Navy. Further studies focusing on Nigeria’s Army and Air Force could be conducted to ascertain the impact of gender roles on the academic performance of women personnel in other armed forces and whether their leadership and decision-making opportunities suffer with regard to security challenges in Nigeria. Finally, further study could also be conducted to explore additional gender-sensitive strategies that the military in Nigeria and beyond could employ in tackling security challenges. ❧

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## Notes

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