POLITICS OF GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

DINAH SUNDAY OSAAT, Ph.D
Department of Educational Management,
University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt,
Rivers State.

Abstract

The paper titled 'Politics of Gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria' is a position paper aimed at reviewing the politics of gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria, being one of the Millennium Development Goals. The paper first reviewed the state of gender equity and women empowerment and observed that imbalances in gender ratio have reduced considerably over the years and only at the tertiary level that existing inequality seems to have been pronounced while economic empowerment of women has been improved through the employment of women with certificates in various works; and that wives of Presidents of Nigeria and Governors at different points have been identified with women's programmes and have directed their activities towards women empowerment. However the number of women in rural areas living in absolute poverty is still on the high side since already executed programmes and projects for women empowerment appear to be functional only in urban areas. Politically, women only succeeded in making up just a small percentage. Political factors such as non-continuity of policies, and other factors such as, parents' negative attitude, social and cultural bias, poor and negative self impression, lack of access to financial resources etc. were also identified as hindrances against gender equality and women empowerment. Thus to achieve gender equity and women empowerment, the paper recommended among others, the language of the constitution should be gender sensitive. Rather than 30: 70, affirmative action of 50: 50 should be enshrined in the constitution and education which is the key for unlocking the potentials of all individuals hence; achieving national development should be free for girls.

Key words: Politics, Gender equality, women empowerment

For any nation to achieve sustainable development which is an improvement in standards of living that can be sustained or maintained for a very long period, it is imperative that there should be gender equality and women empowerment emphasized and achieved in the society. Gender equality and women empowerment presently

constitute part of global concerns. The resultant effect of gender inequality and poor women empowerment had led to series of international conferences such as the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 which according to Otunu-Ogbisi (2011) was a pace setter and ground breaking event, highlighted and promoted the agenda for gender equality; the fourth International Women Conference held in Beijing, China in 1995 which advocated an affirmative action of 30% for women in all political structures and the United Nations Millennium summit held in September, 2000. The millennium summit was a gathering of about 189 Heads of States and governments who met to affirm their commitment to fulfill a collective responsibility for a sustainable development and poverty eradication by the year 2015. They adopted the millennium declaration with a set of eight development goals which include;

- Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieving universal primary education
- Promoting gender equality and empowering women
- Reducing child mortality
- Improving maternal health
- Combating HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases
- Ensuring environmental sustainability
- Developing a global partnership for world development.

According to Odekunle (2008) the third goal of the eight millennium development was included due to the push at the International Women Conference which has the aim of promoting gender equality and to empower women. The United Nations (2000) affirmed that no nation or individual must be denied the opportunity to benefit from development and that equal rights and opportunities of women and men must be assured. Thus, the Heads of State agreed at the summit on the importance of promoting gender equality and empowerment of women as effective ways of combating poverty, hunger and diseases for sustainable development.

The extent to which the third millennium goal which is the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment has been achieved especially in Nigeria is the issue of this paper. This paper therefore aims at examining the extent to which gender equity and women empowerment have been achieved. Thus, this paper was organized under the following headings: gender and gender equality, women empowerment, types of women empowerment, factors that hinder gender equality and women empowerment.

The Concept of Politics

Politics is the art or science of government. It is the art or the science that is concerned with guiding or influencing governmental policies, winning and holding control over a government. Politics is the exercise of control within society through the making and enforcement of collective decisions. Politics can also be defined as the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which

they live. Ranny in Aruna (2011) defined politics as the ruling of men. It is the relationship between those who govern and those who are to be governed. Politics is who get what, when, how and why in fundamental terms.

Gender equality
Gender equality does not imply that women and men are the same in every aspect of life. It does not mean that men and women must do things, act, and behave the same way. In fact, Otunu-Ogbisi (2011) submitted that gender equality means having equal access to social, cultural, economic and political opportunities as their male counterparts. It also means that the similarities and differences between both sexes are streamlined and equally valued.

Empowerment
Empowerment seems difficult to define. According to Strongist in Hadjia and Rakiya (2008) empowerment entails a process to change the distribution of power both in interpersonal relations and institutions throughout the society. Empowerment is a process of acquiring, providing and bestowing the resources and the means or enabling the access to a control over such means and resources.
Sharman in Hadjia & Rakiya (2008) in his own view noted that empowerment means a degree to which or a process in which the disadvantage groups define their own needs and determine the response that is made to them. It is the intentional ongoing process which involves mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people lacking in a proportional share of the resources gain greater access to and control over those resources.
Empowerment can be perceived as the ability to direct and control one's own life. Thus women empowerment is the process in which women gain control over their lives by knowing and claiming their rights at different levels of the society. Aina in Olaleye (2008) posited that women empowerment is a process by which women acquire real authority from personal power and with a deepening feminist consciousness. Such personal power should imply a full control of material resources and a recognized institutional political power. Women empowerment is the ability of women to freely take control over their own lives in all ramifications.
Women empowerment is a process of helping women to enhance their capacity and potentials and making them to be self reliant and highly productive. In fact, women empowerment involves getting the woman to understand, recognize and further the power within them for the improvement of their life and situation.

Types of Women Empowerment
The following are identified types of women empowerment;
•   Knowledge empowerment: This has to do with empowering women through education. This can also be called education empowerment. It has to do with giving the

woman equal opportunity to be educated, to receive formal education from primary to tertiary levels of education.

- Economic or financial empowerment: Financial empowerment means securing gainful employment or doing business in a more civilized manner. This however can be achieved when the women are empowered educationally.

- Political empowerment: This has to do with the ability to be involved in the development of a country. When one is empowered politically it also means that one is recognized in contesting elections to various elective positions and therefore able to participate actively in the development of the various arms of government.

- Social empowerment: Social empowerment implies that one has equal right with one another. There is no form of discrimination and violence against the other irrespective of class, race, or religion. No one is intimidated. Everyone has the right to inherit landed property, involve in decision making etc.

State of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Nigeria
Gender equality and women empowerment, as the third goal of the Millennium Development Goals has the purpose of eliminating all forms of gender disparity especially in primary and secondary education by the year 2005 and to all levels of education not later than 2015. According to Odenkunle (2008) to measure the current status in relation to the stated goal a number of indicators were set which include;

- Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education.
- Ratio of literate females to males of 15-24 years old.
- Share of women in wage employment and in the non-agricultural sector.
- Proportion of seats held by women and men in national parliaments.

On the issue of the ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education, evidence has proven that imbalances in gender ratio have reduced considerably over the years. Odenkunle (2008) revealed that between 2000 and 2002 the percentage increased by 92% which implies that gender inequality at the primary and secondary school level is no longer a serious problem in Nigeria. At the tertiary level existing inequality seems to have been pronounced. On the ratio of literate females to males of 15-24 years, the ratio increased by 96% between 2000 and 2004.

As a result of access to education it is a fact that economic empowerment of women has been improved. Available data according to Odenkunle (2008) indicated that women with certificates have become increasingly favored even in the wage employment. Women who do not possess certificates are disadvantaged.

Apart from all that, empowerment programmes have always been put in place by wives of presidents of Nigeria at different points in time directing their activities towards women empowerment. Among these programmes were; Better life for Rural Women (BLRW) by the then first lady, Maryam Babangida, the Family Support Programme (FSP) and later Family Economic Advancement programme (FEAP) which was

initiated by Mrs Marian Abacha. All these programmes died naturally due to policy discontinuity (Asodike, 2005).

Many state governors have also been identified with one programme or the other to empower women in Nigeria. In Rivers state particularly, the then wife of the Governor, Justice Mary Odili established the adolescent project (TAP) which was initiated to ethnically rehabilitate and economically empower the adolescent including the female. This also died naturally though; according to Ezekiel-Hart (2005) the female beneficiaries enjoy a new status in society. Another was the empowerment support initiative founded by Dame Judith Amaechi the wife of the immediate past Governor of Rivers State in 2008. According to Amadi and Ugwu (2011:162) the organization included some programmes such as;

- *Skill acquisition project: this has trained about 2500 women on production of detergents.*
- *Lady cabby project: procurement of about 115 vehicles for poor women to use as a means of livelihood.*
- *The enterprise business initiative project: provision of initial capitals for setting up a business enterprise by successful applicant and established an entrepreneurial center at Eneka, Port Harcourt.*

The fact is that the initiative has far reaching impact, but so far, already executed programmes and projects appear to be functional only in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers state thus appearing to be an urban-based scheme (Amadi and Ugwu, 2011).

In spite of the few progress made in gender mainstreaming as reviewed above, Nigeria still contends with some challenges. Statistics in Nigeria according to Asodike (2009) show that 58% of teenage girls are still not educated. Female education has been seen as a secondary factor compared to men. She also observed that the incidence of income poverty among women is increasingly compared to that of men. In fact the number of women in rural areas living in absolute poverty has risen by 50% as opposed to 30% for men (The United Nations, 2001). Women in Nigeria are still excluded in many developmental strategies. Men are granted access to land, credit and farm machinery while women still lack the right to inherit landed property. A woman is still not considered during the sharing of land or landed property belonging to her parents or husband's family.

In the field of politics, the share of parliamentary seats held by women is still too small compared to men. Though there were few Nigeria women who were holding some key administrative and elective posts such as Mrs Fidelia Njeze, Mrs Dezaini Allison Madueke, Prof. Raqayattu Ahmed Rufai, Dr Ngozi Iweala etc. These not withstanding women are still marginalized politically. There is still a wide gap between men and women representation in political leadership. In fact, according to Asodike (2009) women only succeed in making up just 14% of the total number of government ministers even when there is the clamor for 30% affirmative action. The table below

shows the distribution of political officers to men and women in Nigeria from 1992 to 2017.

Table 1: Distribution of Political Officers to Men and Women from 1998-2007

Year	Sex	Ministers	Senators	Reps	Governors	Deputy Gov
1998-2002	Male female	45 06	106 03	348 12	36 Nil	36 Nil
Total		51	109	360	36	36
2003-2006	Male female	28 05	105 04	339 21	36 Nil	34 02
Total		33	109	360	36	36
2007-2010	Male female	31 08	100 09	333 27	36 Nil	31 05
Total		39	109	360	36	36
2011- 2015	Male female	24 13	101 08	341 19	36 Nil	31 05
Total		37	109	360	36	36
2015-2017	Male female	18 06	102 07	346 14	36 Nil	30 06
Total		24	109	360	36	36

Source: Federal Ministry of Information (in Ejikeme, 2008) & Ndubuisi (n.d)

The table shows that in 2011 only thirteen (13) females' ministers and eight (8) female senators as against 24 male ministers and 101 senators respectively were appointed and elected. Though there were improvements when compared to previous years yet it dropped in 2015 instead of improvement. This indeed shows the extent of how women are relegated.

Political Barriers to Achieving Gender Equality and Women Empowerment
        In spite of the fact that, the fourth International Women Conference held in Beijing, China in 1995 advocated an affirmative action of 30% for women in all political structures, review have shown that Nigeria has not reached that level. There is still that wide gap between men and women representation in political leadership as already observed. The women as already mentioned only succeed in making up just 14% of the total number of government ministers even when there is the clamour for 30% affirmative action. Why can't it be 50-50 affirmative and to be kept to it. If women continue to be marginalized politically how can this third millennium development goal be achieved?
        Another great political challenge that seems to hinder gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria is the issue of political instability. From the review it has been established how each of the first ladies at one point or the other tried to empower women and each of their efforts were thwarted due to change of government. The more government is changed the more women are far away from the empowerment

strategies by the various first ladies. The need therefore for programme continuity in any government cannot be overemphasized.

Other factors which hinder gender equality and women empowerment include;

Parents' negative attitude: Parents' attitudes have always been negative towards gender equality and women empowerment. Some parents and community leaders are still regarding girls' education as a waste of time and resources since the girls will eventually end in somebody's house (Robert- Okah 2011).

Social and cultural bias: In Nigerian society it is generally believed that women are to be seen and not heard. It is believed that when women are empowered either through education they will be difficult to control or they are likely to challenge traditional submission expected of them. In fact the men are always seen as stronger being endowed with better natural capabilities and potentials. On the other hand the women are seen as people without any decision and no value or substance of their own.

Poor and negative self impression: Women are still enemies of themselves by having poor self concept. They always have negative impression that they cannot make it. Women regard themselves as incapable of coping with demands of modern learning. In fact, as Robert-okah (2011) rightly says women become serious obstacle to their own development even in educational pursuit.

Poverty: Poverty is one of the greatest barriers to women empowerment. Most homes have not been able to empower their women through education due to poverty. As a result the girl children are often victims. They are often used as source of sustenance to their families. Rather than being sent to school, they are made to hawk or contracted as house helps in order to make ends meet. In fact in the language of Robert-Okah (2011:75)

The problem of women especially that of the girls-children are not often related to cultural or religious taboos as with poverty related factors. In a period of economic depression, the girl children are the first to be withdrawn from school, because it is judged to be more beneficial to train the boy-child than girl.

Lack of access to financial resources: In spite of the fact that reviews have shown that women engage in agricultural production of food consumed in the country as subsistent farmers their labours are not recognized or rewarded in most cases. They do not have access to resources. They do not have access to government loans to help their financial situations.

Conclusion

The paper was aimed at reviewing the politics of gender equality and women empowerment since it became the concerns of the global community and thereby

enshrined as one of the Millennium Development Goals. The paper reviewed the state of gender equality and women empowerment and established that the imbalances in gender ratio have reduced considerably over the years only at the tertiary level where existing inequality seems to have been pronounced. The economic empowerment of women has improved through the employment of women with certificates in various works. However the number of women in rural areas living in absolute poverty is still on the high side. Politically the women only succeed in making up just a small percentage in the political structure of the state. Political barriers such as political instability and other factors were observed as hindrances to achieving gender equality and women empowerment. To achieve gender equity and women empowerment therefore, the following recommendations are made.

Recommendations

The following are some of the ways to achieve gender equity and women empowerment.

1.   Women empowerment requires constitutional amendment. In doing that the language of the constitution should be gender sensitive. Rather than 30: 70, affirmative action of 50: 50 should be enshrined in the constitution and be strictly followed.

2.   There should always be continuity in any empowerment programme by any government in power that takes over from the former government so that such programmes will not die but will continue to serve and empower more generations of women.

3.   Achieving gender equity and women empowerment according to Osaat (2011) requires education which is the key for unlocking the potentials of all individuals. Education for girls should be made compulsory and free especially at the tertiary level.

4.   The government, stakeholders, traditional and religious leaders should dismantle all traditional structures that encourage gender inequality which is a strong tower against women empowerment in Nigeria.

5.   Women should rise to condemn all forms of negative self concept they have about themselves. Women in Non Governmental Organization and women in various professions should rise to the challenges of the millennium and help to empower their fellow women through their activities. Various conferences held by these groups of women should be extended to the rural and sub urban areas so that the rural women will benefit.

6.   To empower women also requires access to credit facilities. According to Tanimu (2009) women in Nigeria face the problems of access to credit facilities. Lack of access poses difficulties to women because they cannot have capital to hire labour or buy input needed for enhancement of their production. This hampers empowerment to contribute to sustainable development. Women should therefore be given equal access to credit facility so as to enhance their output and income generation.

7.	Support from men is another strategy to empower women. Men's cooperation is significantly related to women empowerment. In fact according to Durojaiye (2000) men's cooperation is the most important factor in the empowerment of women. When men support the women they will be able to participate actively in all spheres of the economy.

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