

WOMEN EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL GROWTH AND PRODUCTIVITY: THE WAY FORWARD IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Gender disparity in education has given rise to the low level of women empowerment in Nigeria. However, Education is an installment for developing human-beings which in turn develop a nation state. It is evidence in Nigeria that women are not adequately educated, yet it is recognized the world over that the education of women is central to national and global development. This paper however, discusses certain issues in women education namely: Need for women education, women education and national development and societal altitude towards women. The paper also discusses some problems militating against the attainment of education/empowerment of women in Nigeria and also proffers some suggestions for the way forward for sustainable women education.

Introduction

Education, the world over is the right of every person irrespective of sex, religion, state of health, socio-economic background, e.t.c. This is because education helps for national development. It trains the required manpower on which other development depend to the extent that any group that is less educated will be correspondingly less developed (Enoh, 1996, Undiyaundeye and Ashipu, 1999). The assumption is that, through education, an individual's potentials are realized and actualized for personal and national development.

Nevertheless, gender disparity in education has become a global phenomenon, especially in developing. Such disparity has been amplified or magnified by Dupont (1981). "Women do not enjoy all the educational opportunities they should have and often do not have any at all. . . . over vast areas of the globe, the majority of illiterates are women". Women can be described as an indispensable group in the development of any nation like our country Nigeria. They have great potentials necessary to evolve a new economic order, to accelerate social and political development and consequently transform the society into a better one.

Awe (1990) and Yahaya (1999) perceived the importance of women from their roles as managers of homes. They noted that the peace and stability at homes depend largely on the managerial abilities of women folk. They further opined that women, especially the mothers, plan, organize, direct and co-ordinate all the resources of the home - both human and materials to the benefits of all the members of the family including their husbands. Effective management of the homes promotes national development but whenever this is lacking the contrary is usually the case. Nigerian women have been contributing their quota to the development of the nation; however, their potentials have not been fully tapped due to some constraints. Nigeria women are still relegated to the background as they lack the educational, economic and political power necessary to actualize their innate potentials.

Ezeigbo (1996) in Yahaya (1999:133) noted that most Nigerian women labour live under stress because they are overwhelmed by the responsibilities of the women lives, those created by the society and themselves. According to them, Nigerian women are expected to perform their traditional roles efficiently, run their homes, be good wives and step - mothers. They are also expected to contribute to the family income, cater for the extended family members and perform efficiently in their jobs or businesses. Considering the number of women in Nigeria, a conscious or an unconscious under representation of Nigerian women in educational, economic, social and political programmes could lead to a serious set-back and thus the need for women empowerment cannot be over emphasized.

The importance of education in the enhancement of political, social and economic empowerment of the Nigerian women cannot be swept under the carpet. Education broadens the horizon of the beneficiary and creates the enabling circumstances under which such beneficiaries could take advantage of the numerous opportunities life offers. It is no wonder then that there is explosion of interest in women education everywhere in the world. It is instructive to note that despite all efforts at integrating Nigerian women into the wheel of national development, only very few are opportuned to participate. This is as a result of the fact that a good number of women are not educated

which disempowered them from taking up their rightful place in national development.

Need for Women Education

Despite the increase in number of women organizations and activities all of which are aimed at integrating the Nigerian women into the helms of national development, only a handful of women who are mainly the educated and privileged class actively participate in these programmes.

The writers' contention of this paper therefore, is that for a more effective participation of women in nation building, there is greater need to emancipate and empower women in developing countries generally and Nigeria in particular. This goal is achievable mainly through the instrument of education. In other words, instead of directing much of their financial resources to organizing rallies for women and calling upon them to identify with liberation initiatives., much of the resources should be devoted to making education available to women and girls at all levels of the education system.

However, the writers' have gone into the above exposition not only to work government and non-governmental organizations in the struggle to remove man-made obstacles to women's education, but also to emphasize the ramifications of this struggle in order to show that women are capable of acquiring and have indeed acquired every type and level of education in most societies. This brings us to the central theme of this paper, namely, what is the role of women education in the general scheme of national growth, development and productivity? In a nut shell, how does acquisition of education by women affect national growth/development and productivity?

Women Education and National Development

Women play constructive, complementary and fundamental roles in the society. A woman is an important member of the family and plays the roles of a prime mover of the wheel of progress in the family. Historical and circumstantial evidence abound to prove the contributions of Nigerian women to national development. In the political arena, Nigerian women have displayed leadership power. (For example Queen Amina of Zaria, Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome - Kuti, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Senator Francisca Afegbua, Mrs. Grace Ekpiwhre, Mrs. S.H. Sulaiman, Prof. Dora Akunyili, Mrs. Deziani Allison-Madueke, Mrs. Babatunde Omotoba, Prof. Grace Alele-Williams, Mrs. Clara Onwuli, and a host of others) are women who have contributed to Nigerian national development and productivity. -

Abe, (1987) cited in Kalusi and Ozano, 2002:165) pointed out that there has been a generally or with respect to women in western education since colonial era. According to him, western education had a "good prospect" for women at the beginning and could be safely described as education for girls considering the enrolment figures. The reason for this disparity then was because boys took to farming for both game and livelihood

Abe, (1987), Kalusi, and Ozano, (2002) attribute this disparity in educational development to traditional and cultural norms, conservative religious beliefs and practices, poverty, pre-marital pregnancy, early marriages and of course, the assumption that boys remain behind to the bearing of family names. While girls leave the family and get married to someone else to bear her husband's name.

By the nature of the exposure that educated women have received, she has some information on current trends in the society and possibly enough knowledge or information about how best to improve on current trends in the society as well as the quality of life of her family. Women education exposes them to the available information that could aid them for responsible behaviours for effective and efficient motherhood. Women are designed by God to help man to live. Therefore, the society that neglects to equip them for this task through education is hampering the development and progress of the nation.

Nigeria is aiming at healthier nation, a richer nation, a nation that will eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. She also aims to achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women. She also aims at reducing child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. In addition to the above, she ensures environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development and a host of others. Campaigns are on now at all governmental levels to educate women the more which is a surer way of national development to achieving the MDGs in the nearest future.

However, women are expected to stay more at home with the children who are potential leaders of the nation; and as such, they should be able to impart to these children the values, culture, and norms of the society, which they have acquired through education. They are in better position to encourage young ones especially girls to have sound education. Even when they fall out because of unwanted pregnancy, they should be persuaded to continue with their studies and finish up properly. The woman naturally gives the

first intellectual, emotional and moral contacts the children receive. The woman plays highly specialized roles with the result that her personality affects the lives of the family members.

Education should be a birthright and not a privilege of citizens of any country. It is an effective instrument for development, a strategic tool for liberating the masses from ignorance, disease and poverty. It is also a dynamic force for ensuring progress and overall betterment of people. The equality of educational opportunity is the only guarantee for building up an egalitarian society like Nigeria. For all round development, women should be properly and fully educated. "Educate a man, you educate an individual but educate a woman, you educate the nation" (Adiotornre, 2002). Unfortunately, one wonders why women should be deprived of contributing positively to nation building through proper education. Though this notion is now changing for the better.

Societal Attitude towards Women

The societal attitude towards women worldwide is almost that of biased. The world is looked upon as men's world; they are the heroes who conquered and would conquer the world and dictate woman's position and level of the participation. The concept of "feminism" or women liberation in developed world like USA is an indication of the global nature of the bias against women, (Ischei, 1996, Kalusi and Ozano, 2002).

The Nigerian society is not isolated in this perception of women. No doubt the societal attitudes towards women are not only bias but in most cases oppressive and apprehensive. Based on this stereotyping, there was no need to educate the girl-child since her duty is to maintain her house, and obey her husband (Abe, 1987 in Kalusi and Ozano, 2002:164). In the Nigerian context, her place was perceived to be in the kitchen and her major role is that of childbearing. Educating the girl-child therefore has become unnecessary and a waste of scarce resources. Little wonder up till now, at the levels of education, the ratio of females to males is still less than 1:10 (Aziza, 1996 in Kalusi and Ozano, 2002:164).

Problems Militating against the Attainment of Women Education/Empowerment in Nigeria

Education suppose to be a "Right for all", is the basic philosophy of National Policy on Education (1981 and 2004). But this has remained a dream yet to be realized. The release of the policy document on education 1977 marked the long awaited desire of the government for having a clear cut policy guidelines, for educational services in Nigeria. Women education was also considered in the policy guidelines, but even then, it has been nothing more than lips services. No wonder a popular belief that says "when you educate a woman you educate a nation" and this is why very little attention has so far been paid to serious studies on women education with a view to improving the quality of their education and living standard generally in order to enhance their contributions to the development of our changing society.

Women empowerment can be described as the provision of adequate opportunities to women to develop their potentials and contribute to the development of the nation in particular and to the world in general. It can also be described as the provision of conducive environment or opportunities to women to contribute their quota to the social, political and economic development of the nation. The disparities between Nigerian women and men in terms of political, social, educational and economic achievements cannot be divorced from some problems which hinder parity between the male and female groups. These problems include:

i) **Illiteracy:** Cultures and sub-cultures in Nigeria give preference to male children as they are usually regarded as the heirs or the pillars of the family. Female children are usually less privileged and consequently not given adequate opportunity to acquire education and formal training. The girl-child is valued not for who she is, her potentials or achievements but for her services, submissiveness and at best good looks. The place of the girl-child and subsequently women is in the kitchen or at home. In most parts of Nigeria, particularly the rural setting, the education of the girl-child does not go beyond what she needs to bear children and keep the home.

ii) **Sex - Stereotype:** During the period of socialization females are usually trained to believe that there are different roles for males and females as well as the superiority of males over the females. The females are encouraged to be obedient, caring, kind and appreciative while males are rewarded when they display aggression, decisiveness and detachment. Some vocations or jobs are regarded as men's jobs (e.g. engineering, carpentry and bricklaying) while some others are designated as feminine (e.g. music, nursing, teaching and trading) but recent events have overtaken this perception.

iii) **Rivalry among Women;** The Nigerian society seems to encourage women to compete with one another in a subtle way. This prevents women from being team players and from supporting one another

during the periods of need. Consequently, most women perceive men's domination as acceptable and preferable to female domination.

iv) Insufficient need for power: Nigerian women are generally not "aggressive or assertive" enough to seize leadership mantle from their male counterparts. People who lack power derive will find it difficult to assume leadership position. This impediment may be attributed to low self-concept on the part of Nigerian women most of whom believe that the males are better (than them) in human endeavours. (Yahaya, 1999:133 & 134).

v) Religious Beliefs: Some religious leaders and their adherents strongly believe that women should only be seen but not heard. Some view men as superior to women while few others see them as equals. The difference in beliefs adversely affect the way women are treated and the opportunities provided to them.

vi) Discriminatory attitudes of Males: The Nigerian men have been in control of political, economic as well as social spheres of life for many years. They have been able to utilize the opportunity to their advantage and this does not give women equal opportunities. For instance, some provisions in the federal constitution do not favour women. They experience series of violence in the hands of men some of which are manifested in the form of wife battering, assault, acid - attack, sexual harassment, including rape, genital mutilation, girl-child abuse, ritual murder and unfavourable widowhood practices.

vii) Low Participation of Women in Politics: The level of women's participation in politics is still very low in Nigeria. Most women in Nigeria do not usually contest elective positions but limit their activities to voting during elections. Although, this attitude may be related to their level of education and poor economic base, it has adverse effects on women's struggle for emancipation.

viii) Poor Economic Base: Most Nigerian women are poor. This situation is related to their low level of educational attainment. Poverty is reflected in almost all aspects of an average Nigeria woman's life.

ix) Inaccessibility Impediment: Many parents do not allow their daughters to go far away to school for fear that something bad can happen to them. Inaccessibility of some settlements such as riverine areas could make the parents of the girl-child not to send them to school (Yakubu and Mogbo, 1999:189). Having discussed some of the problems militating against the attainment of women education/empowerment in Nigeria, the writers' would like to proffer some suggestions or recommendations for the way forward in preparing women for national development

The Way Forward: Preparing Women for National Development

Already, there have been some positive signs towards enabling women contribute to national development, but at the moment, this is not enough. The battle is far from won. Statistically, women constitute a greater percentage of the Nigerian population according to the 1991 and 2006 census figures. If any meaningful results must be achieved in the area of sustainable development and the relevance of women cannot be swept under the carpet. Women and their resources have to be mobilized and properly channelled in order to achieve the desired goals. With the introduction of women organization like National Council of Women Societies (NCWS), National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), Women in Nigeria (WIN), Family Support Programme (FSP), Women in Science (WIS) and Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) have been working round the clock to make sure that Nigerian women make giant strides in different areas including politics, to discount the traditional and religious roles of women as inferior beings to men (Adiotomre, 2002:183).

Education-related discrimination based on gender should be dealt with as part of the advancement of the status of women as a whole. Discrimination against women in education is violence against them. This is because education helps them overcome social prejudices, take control over their lives, assume a status, and identify beyond childbearing. It is also the single most important weapon to combat sexual stereotyping and discriminatory attitude against women.

However, in the closing days of the twentieth century, the link between education and national development of this nation was noticed. It is therefore necessary that seminars, workshops and lectures that will enhance the professional growth of women should not be neglected. Women commission should take care of women's welfare making sure that they are on the rightful footing, for example illiterate

women must be encouraged to participate in adult literacy programmes. Women must create political awareness among themselves and identify with the charisma and potentials, encourage and support the women. The government should adopt a strategy that is aimed at raising the educational levels of mothers. The already Adult Education Programmes and mass literacy campaigns already in place should be made more functional (Oganwu, 2002:191).

In addition, the state governments in the North should be made to legislate against teenage marriage that is practiced in the region to allow girls acquire education. Cultural practices like early marriage, confining women to purdan which may tend to entrench gender imbalance in access to education should be discouraged.

Further to the above, priorities in financial assistance in various forms like loans, scholarship, bursaries should be given to women in pursuance of their education. This will help in no small way in bridging the gap between males and females in educational access (Oganwu, 2002:192). Unless government moves quickly to grant women access to education, development in the real sense of the word will continue to be a mirage.

The government should approve a reasonable percentage of appointments for women at all levels for decision-making bodies and governance. Politically, there is need to strengthen the women's action framework. Currently, women are few in the highest decision making bodies of the country. As a result, they have little or no say in what affects the womenfolk. The stability of any nation rests on the political awareness and knowledge of her citizens. When women become politically sensitized and acquire political power they will chart collectively the course of lives of women (Adiotomre, 2002:184).

The key to sustainable development and participation is nothing but awareness. For effective awareness, the women need mobilization. Existing women organization in the rural and urban areas can easily be used as scaffold to educate women on the concept of sustainable development and national participation.

Conclusion

The struggle for women in Nigeria participating in national and global development has of recent been buttressed by government and non-governmental bodies. Prior to this struggle, women,

for long, have been embedded in socio-economic development of their families and the society at large. Such involvement has been desperately ignored by the male folks for various reasons. In national development, the role of women is immeasurable.

Although they have been given disadvantaged placement by the male folk in many spheres of national life, they nevertheless continue to play active roles in the society as producers, processors and marketers, educators, home managers, producers and rearers of children, civil servants, mothers and wivesany development programme without a serious consideration for the integration of women through effective policy intervention will hardly fulfill its objectives (Omoraka and Eregha, 2002:202).

All hands should be on deck. No one should be left out. It is obvious that we have more women in our country than men and this is enough reason to compel people to utilize (their numerical superiority, potentials and their known resourcefulness to our national advantage. The contribution of women to national development can no longer be overlooked. Consequently, women need to be supported and encouraged to improve their efficiency, effectiveness and output in their various fields of endeavours.

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