

EDUCATION: A POTENT INSTRUMENT FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN A SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to look at the roles which education plays in the life of women. The paper discusses the gains of education for women, while focussing on empowerment as it can be seen that education (formal and informal) are powerful tools which enable women's full and active participation in all spheres of life. It is the view of this paper that there is need to revive some of the traditional gender role systems women in Nigerian societies. With western education for Nigerian women, the recent involvement of Nigerian women in economic life of the nation and the role which the Family Support Programme (FSP) and Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) are playing. There is every hope that Nigerian women will once more become active participants in Nigerian socio-economic and political life. This paper is therefore out to examine how education of women should be taken seriously or improved in order to incorporate national unity among women from all walks of life and from different ethnic cultural and religious background to aspire better and attain greater heights.

INTRODUCTION

Erese (1983) maintained that education should be a privilege of every citizen of an' country; an effective instrument for development, a strategic tool for liberating the masses of people from ignorance, disease and poverty, a dynamic force for encouraging progress and overall betterment of people, and that equality of people, and equality of educational opportunity is the only guarantee for building up egalitarian society.

Education is believed to be an important tool for the achievement of social justice and equity (Phillips 1977, Afonja & Peace 1984).

Also education is a powerful tool which will enable the women to know their democratic rights and obligations to the nation.

Osokoya (1987) defined education as a continuous process, which the society establishes to assist its members to understand the heritage of the past and to participate in productivity in the future.

Ofunwa (1981) defined education as acquisition of experience. It is assumed that education improves the quality of lives of all individuals, the quality of human capital inputs of any nation as well as enhancing national development (Hauighust and Neugastan, 1977).

As for women, being a special group, education gives them a better chance to control their lives; to earn money; to be better mothers and to have improved relationship with their spouses (Graham Brown 1991).

At the Beijing Conference in Women (1995), women of all nations, races, colours, assembled with one thing in their minds, "The lots of women in the past, present and their hopes for the future". In accordance with the conference's overall objectives of bridging the gender gap and empowering women, the Nigeria delegation put education among others as the top priority because of the belief that education is the greatest equalizer of opportunities.

Since the time of Beijing Conference, it must be stated that Nigerian women have come a long way, yet there are problems of integrating women in all aspects of nation building: the provision of formal education.

Types of Education

- There are two types of education: 1. Informal education and 2. Formal education.
1. Informal education can be experienced or gained from parents or relations. Usually it starts from home. This is the first type of education in life.
 2. Formal Education: - this is given under the auspices of a school. The formal education begins at six years of age till when a child gets to tertiary institutions.

Women and Education

Education is a dynamic instrument of change and development in any society. For women, considering their enormous functions, it is very important to educate them.

Professor Bolanle Awe argued that Nigerian girls do not have access to education. This had led to the poor economic status of women, lack of confidence and self worth, lack of participation in decision making and this is also responsible for their early marriage. It then means that if girls would have access to education, some of the social ills and other problems would be reduced.

As custodian of socio-cultural and fundamental values of society, permanent change would be achieved in the society through children. Women are therefore, prime movers in the family. As such, they should be armed with appropriate skills. These skills come through proper education. An educated woman would be in a better position to raise a qualitative family with high values and so be alive to fulfil its civic responsibilities. Besides, a qualitative family will produce men, women and children who would equally meet up with family obligations: thereby easing the tension and stress of managing home by the women alone. The education of women would contribute to national and economic development.

It is in the home that a child learns some skills, norms, moral and societal values needed for living. Again, the home should serve as avenue to buttress the teaching in the formal sector of education.

Although Egbado (1980) observed that women are constrained by heavy domestic duty and reproductive role which sap their energy and time for learning through adult education programme, it is very difficult for the rural women because of what Imam (1988) described as double work load.

Ekpeyoung (1993) pointed out that the evolution of a special programme for women education need be given the desired attention in the interest of the nation.

Some programme had been designed and used in other countries and in Nigeria. In recent times, the programme developed for the mobilization of women to educate them was the "Better Life for Rural Women*". This programme made a remarkable impact. Mrs. Oval, the one time chairperson of Enugu State commissioner for Women described it as the only deep-rooted, meaningful and result-oriented agenda for women fold since independence. The programme has not only re-awakened the rural women from age-long slumber but also has made them self-reliant and improved their socio-economic status. The most recent programmes are the "Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP).

Education and Empowerment

The term empowerment is education surface in third world countries and also in some industrialized countries with disadvantaged and marginalized minorities. Empowerment raised the hope that access to education will deliver innumerable benefits for the individual and nation, i.e national unity and social integration; skilled work force; greater economic development, and wider participation in politics (Youngman. (991).

According to Graham - Brown (1991:2), for the individual empowerment through education "promised an escape from poverty, greater social prestige and mobility and the prospect of a good job preferably in town". However, among the underprivileged and minorities and women these hopes have been unfulfilled partly of the global economic recession.

Meaning of Women's empowerment

It is a concept that has its roots in women's struggles to improve their status the world over, and in third-world countries in particular.

The term as a derivature of the word 'power' has been defined by Batlwala 1994 as

"control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology" has defined the term as a derivative of the word 'power'. Such assets over which control can be exercised may be physical, human, or financial and have been identified to include land, water, forests, money and access to money, labour, people's bodies, knowledge, information and ideas, the ability to generate; propagate, sustain and institutionalize specific sets of values, attitudes and behaviours; thereby determining people's perception and functions within given socio-economic and political environments.

Sharma (1971) perceives empowerment as a process of challenging power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power as well as the consequences of that process which may take the form of individual self-assertion, collective resistance, protests, or mobilizations that challenge basic power relations.

It is recalled that in 1995, there was an Affirmative Action Proclamation at the United Nations Women Conference in Beijing, China where Nigeria sent the largest contingent of representatives at the instance of the then First Lady, Mrs. Maryam Abacha. The resolution of the conference was that every country should ensure at least a 30 percent representation for women in government.

Since then, there have been seminars, talk-shops and book launches on the issue with many Non-Government Organizations (NGO) set-up on women related issue.

Observers, however, believe women deserve to occupy more sensitive offices where they can prove their mettle.

According to Mrs Adeniran, women have demonstrated their abilities to man key government posts from experience so far. Her words; "Beyond the confines of the kitchen, women in government have proved their worth so well that government has no alternative than to demonstrate a favourable disposition towards their cause".

All these are hindered because women's inferior status are deeply rooted in history, religion, culture, the psychology of the self, laws and legal systems, and in political institutions and social attitudes, change cannot possibly happen just like that without external intervention. This is the reason why education has been identified as an instrument to be used in this direction, and since, education has been used by other societies to effect changes in social systems to favour women.

Areas of Empowerment through Education

It is true that improvement in economic structure and access to basic resources can alleviate some of the sufferings of poor women. Experience as well as research evidence have however, shown that they do not necessarily result in fundamental changes in women. For instance, Seymour (1992) wrote that Nigerian women have never really been economically marginalized, women contribute to and participate in the maintenance of the family and national development. But this contribution of women remains ignored, under-valued and unrecorded. Whether recognition of women's contribution will amount to their acceptance remains to be proved (Iweriebar, 1992).

Lack of recognition and acceptance notwithstanding, economic self sufficiency in the part women, affect traditional gender relations in the home and provided women with critical support mechanisms in crises, and enhance their capability to deal with threats. It is the belief of Bruce and Dowyer (1988) that independent earnings accord women a higher value in the home and improved their self-esteem. Education must provide women with skills for economic self-sufficiency.

Women must not continue to play dependent and silent roles that put them at a great disadvantage. Research has shown that women education is important to child health and survival. Educated mothers are (Caldwell, 1979) likely to adopt safe hygienic practices thereby educating children's exposure to diseases and timely medical treatment for their children.

Education delay marriage in women and increases husband-wife communication and knowledge, improves attitudes and access to birth control, all of which enhance the condition and

position of women and family in society. Education must provide women with quality sex education with gender perspectives to enable them control their sexuality and fertility. Any physical, emotional, **psychological**, or sexual abuse of women constitutes a violation of basic human rights.

National Unity among Women

Empowerment strategies must necessarily intervene at the level of women condition while at the same time working towards transforming the position. Also, empowerment through education will incorporate all **women** from all walks of life who are from different ethnic, cultural and religious background to come together and fight for their rights and also contribute their own quotas to the economic, social and political development of a nation. It must organize women into groups breaking **away** from traditional individual isolation, and creating a united forum through which their **collective** voice could be heard. There are instances that show how women co-operation **through education** has helped women to challenge their oppression. This has led to the **establishment of the** following associations; e.g. WICE (Women In Colleges of Education), WIN (**Women In** Nigeria), NAWOJ (Nigerian Association of Women Journalists), NAOWA (Nigerian **Army** Officers' Wives Association), NAWSTEM (Nigerian Association of Women in Science. Technology and Mathematics).

Goals of Empowerment In Nigeria

They are as follows:

1. It will enable women to gain access to, and control of material and informational resources.
2. To improve the condition of poor women by giving them access to basic resources.
3. To make women participate in policy making instead of being passive beneficiaries of these policies.
4. It will enable women make choice in their private and public lives without any external interference.
5. Enable women to be in control of their bodies and to make decisions with regards to their sexuality and fertility.

' The Role of Nigerian Women in Socio-Economic and Political Development of Nigeria

Women constitute half of the population. They are homemakers and centers of the family. They are also the main custodians of social, cultural and fundamental values of a society and permanent change is often best achieved through them. In fact, full community development is not possible without their understanding, co-operation and effective participation. (Adaralegbe, 1976: 130).

However, the National Concord of 18th September 1990, (Soji Adelokiki) stated that out of the 96. 2million illiterates in the world about two-third (600 million) were women and majority of them reside in the rural areas of the world. Egbado (1980) opined that women are over burdened with manual labour such as fanning in addition to domestic chores. Moreover, women also give birth frequently, often every two years.

This could be why Nwafor (1990) opined that education could improve the life style of rural women: physically, economically and socially.

The contribution of women to national development is most evident in the area of socio-economic development. This can be seen mostly in the family where she provides labour for food preparation, childcare and general domestic chores. If a woman is literate, she will be able to provide balanced diet for the family through her knowledge of nutrition and hygiene thereby improving the health of the family. (Berieria 1982:96).

The importance of women education is also seen in the negative attitudes of some women to family planning. Most women who reject the idea of family planning are from low-income societies and majority of them is illiterates. This category of women believe in having a large family in the hope that surviving children will provide security for them in their old age.

Education helps a woman to know the advantages of child spacing better and also the benefits of raising a small family. Therefore, the campaign for family planning in Nigeria will only make a headway as we strive to ensure that a large number of women become literate.

In fact, mortality can also be reduced through women education. Through education, a woman is exposed to better childcare methods.

The education of a woman does not only affect herself but also the generation yet unborn. This is because it is only when a woman is educated that she will be more interested in the education of her children, since she too would have understood the value and benefits of education. Erinosh (1994:42) remarks that "what a child learns and practices in later life originates from the very early lessons and exposure of his life with the mother playing dominant role. The mother, according to her, is the child's first teacher who answers all his questions and puzzles in his early years of development.

In Nigeria today, education has helped in making women to get involved in the political life of the country. Women are now coming out of their shells to prove their worth and to compete with their male counterparts in contesting for political posts. Even the Federal government of Nigeria is now encouraging the appointment of women to some political seats in all the three tiers of government. Through education also the Nigerian women have come to understand their civic rights especially the right to vote.

The women folk constitute an integral part of the nation's trained power. They have now become a major part of the labour force. Most of the companies and even banks have women as managers and directors. Women these days are being represented in professional, financial, technical, administrative and clerical jobs. In fact, it is being attested to that women have been doing better in the professional category, because of their roles as teachers and nurse and trader (Barthel 1991). They are also represented in high-ranking urban white-collar jobs, such as court judges, lawyers, doctors, ambassadors, senators and university teachers. This is possible because education has helped to inculcate in women some leadership skills.

In some homes and families today, women are the breadwinners. This may be as a result of the fact that such women have been able to secure more lucrative jobs than their husbands or because they possess higher educational qualifications which make them earn more than their husbands.

However, despite the fact that women play important roles in our national development, a number of factors still militate against them thereby making it difficult for them to perform these roles effectively.

Factors That Militate Against Women Education in Nigeria

There are a lot of problems facing women education in Nigeria today; this paper will highlight some of the major ones.

Some of these problems arise as a result of the society's view about women. The first on the list is preference of male children. One of the first things a mother wants to know about her of new born baby is its sex. In an "all girls" family where a male child is desperately wanted, if the next baby happens to be a girl, such a child is even treated as an unwanted child and this attitude may go a long way to affect the development of the parent-child relationship and consequently the child's education. In some homes, a daughter's prospect would even be cheerfully sacrificed to pay for an expensive education for the sons.

Another factor that affects women education is early marriage. This practice is very common in the northern part of the country. A girl may be withdrawn from the school and be forced to get married to a man as old as her father at the age of twelve or thirteen. In some parts of

the country, parents see the marriage of their daughter as a means of enriching themselves. Such parents give priority to marriage rather than the education of their daughters.

One other factor that effects women education is closely linked with the religion or cultural belief of the people. The situation in the northern part of the country is still the focus, where children are brought up right from beginning with negative feelings against western education. Women are made to live in purdah. They are secluded from taking part in the social well being of the country.

Suggestions and Recommendations

In view of the fact that women make vital contributions to national development, efforts must be made to enhance their education in Nigeria so as to enable them contribute their own quota to the national development of the country. Those problems highlighted above need to be sorted out. Therefore this paper present the following suggestions and recommendations as a part of the solution to the problems.

1. Religions must be encouraged to do away with some of their backward outlook towards women.
2. Parents who educate their sons instead of both their daughters and sons have to be made to jettison such negative attitudes and made to give their sons and daughter equal opportunities in education and the development of life careers.
3. Girls like boys should be encouraged by their parents and teachers to choose their future professions.
4. Fathers must be made not to force their daughters in early marriages, because it is important for girls to have the full opportunity to be educated and trained so that they can contribute actively to the development of the society.
5. Women should not be discriminated against in employment. Social life and public activities and men must learn to accept women in leadership positions.
6. Women should not only work to achieve equal rights with men, they should also strengthen national independence and support the democratic rights of their groups and peoples.
7. The Federal Government should make efforts to implement those laudable policies on women education like the national awareness campaign on women's education.
8. Women should be encouraged to contest elections in the political parities as well as in various government positions.
9. Increasing consideration should be given to the appointment of women of demonstrated ability to policy making positions.
10. In the present development plan termed Vision 2010, priorities should be given to women education in form of adequate planning and implementation.

CONCLUSION

Women can arguably be regarded as the life-wise of a nation because without them, the labour force would grind to a halt. As the adage goes, that if you educate a women you educate a whole nation cannot be faulted because the woman is the heartbeat of the family and the survival of the family is the survival of the nation.

Thus, the empowerment and the autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is a highly important end in itself. So. in this paper, we have attempted to look at "education: a potent instrument for women's empowerment in a sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

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