

FUNCTIONAL WOMEN EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT ADVOCACY FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

For any nation to develop in all ramifications, it must reckon with presumed necessities which education is one. This makes the need for effective planning of functional women education and empowerment imperative. The un-abetted illiteracy and poverty level among women in Nigeria is alarming which led to the search for effective strategies to address this situation to improve their well being. The paper has explored the need for qualitative and functional women education and empowerment, discusses basic concepts, challenges/harmful practices against women education, and efforts by NGOs, government and agencies to mitigate the identified problems. The paper argued that women are created and endowed with similar potentials as men, hence their potentials should be explored for the advancement of the country. Suitable recommendations were made. That, there should be prohibition of all forms of counter – productive discrimination, violence, harassment against female gender through the use of gender sensitivity mechanism such as conferences, seminars, campaigns, mass media etc.

For a nation to have a sustainable future, it must continually protect its today and plan for tomorrow by according priority to women education and empowerment. The adage that says “you educate a woman, you educate a nation but educate a man, you educate an individual” is apt. When you build a woman you build a nation economically, politically and educationally for peace, security, stability and progress. This is informed by the indisputable role of women in nation building. But, much of these roles in Nigeria are often not recognized

and appreciated. In most aspects of human endeavours, women constitute an oppressed, exploited, under – privileged and silence group especially in developing countries like Nigeria. These factors continue to manifest inspite of their being unacknowledged for providing about 70% of the food required in these countries, looking after the home and children, women suffer untold discrimination and marginalization.

Anifowose and Enemu (2005) stated that the women globally, as well as in Nigeria, have always played five key roles – mother, producer, home manager, community organizer and socio – cultural and political activism. But inspite of their much felt importance, one major problem suffered by Nigerian women is their exclusion from socio – economic and political life. This explains that this nation is predicated on the poor attitude of many parents towards giving good and qualitative education to their female children (Emorsho and Oshungboye, 2008).

It is time to re – think quantitative and functional education for women to ensure greater future. Sustainable human capital development is a development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably, that re – generates the environment rather than destroying it, that empowers people rather than marginising them. It is development that gives priority to the poor enlarging their choices and opportunities and providing for their participation in decisions that affect their lives.

In Nigeria, various governments in the past had attempted several programmes to improve women education as well as empowering them. These include Better Life for Rural Women, Family support programme, National Directorate of Employment, Family Economic Advancement Programme, National Poverty Alleviation programme, FADAMA project and recently SURE – P (Subsidy Reinvestment Programme). These laudable programmes are still limited in scope and task performance with regards to women. Hence, the need to re – strategize new approach for sustainable future. This will take the form of transformational change. Efevbokha (2013) said that this will involve introducing new philosophies, new goals, new methods and doing away with the old ways. Doing this new ways, women can be more prepared to take the challenges now and ahead.

Conceptual Framework Women Education

Education in human society is a fundamental right and an important tool for national development. Dopemu (2011) stated education is a process of providing information to an inexperienced person to help him/her develop physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, spiritually, politically and economically. This is the position the Nigerian women ought to be because of the critical roles they perform both in the family and larger society. Also, education can be seen as the process through which individuals are made functional members of their society (Ocho, 2005). The process involves the young acquiring knowledge, to realize full potentialities and use them for self – actualization and to be useful to others by replicating same knowledge and skills.

Women education is therefore, the process of inculcating the necessary skills, knowledge, values and attitudes on the female gender either in a formal or informal system. Okeke (2000)

saw women education as a type of education required by women, which would make them become aware of themselves and their capacity to exploit their environment. Women education is the entire body of organized educational programmes, be they formal or informal, full or part – time for female either in their early or their adult – life stages to provide knowledge, skill and competence necessary to be effective in the society. This assertion makes women education imperative to human capital and national development. Women as the life vein of the traditional and modern societies and the custodian of norms, values and morality are naturally endowed with peculiar characteristics to manage human and material resources placed in their care. As such giving them equal opportunity and access to functional and qualitative education will further enhance their capabilities to deliver and contribute to sustainable development.

The Blue print on women education in Nigeria considers it necessary to emphasize it as a specific undertaking based on the following objectives:

- i. to orientate the attitude of all females irrespective of age towards education;
- ii. to awaken the awareness of all citizens to the fact that equal educational opportunity is the right of all citizens, irrespective of gender, age, locality, creed or social status and should be made available to all; and
- iii. to awaken consciousness of all women to the need for the development of a positive self- image.

These laudable objectives can be achieved through education. The Nigerian woman needs to be functionally literate and numerate as well as get the full benefits of formal education barring constraints (Nwagbara, 1998).

Functional Education

Brown and Okedara (1981) viewed functional education as a means of literacy linked with occupation. It is an education that is

designed to give knowledge, develop skills and attitudes to make the learner become practically useful and self-reliant. If this type of education is given to the Nigerian women, it means they can become more resourceful and enterprising to help themselves, the family and the nation. This type of education revolves around trade, art, craft, and professional pursuit in vocation to be fully employed.

Functional education according to Muhammed (1998), relates with the concept of life long education/learning which includes knowledge and skills gained in formal education and training and learning in formal volunteer activities, un-remunerated work and traditional knowledge. This view can be translated as a pre-requisite for sustainable future Nigeria.

Women Empowerment

Nothing reasonable can be achieved without cost implication. Women empowerment in this perspective means incentives to women to enable them cope with the economic demand of basic needs without becoming liabilities or dependant adult. It was on this premise the Beijing platform for action in 1990 recognized that the process of women empowerment requires the cooperation and participation of government, individuals, international organisations and society at large in making sure that women particularly in Nigeria are relevant in various programmes. The essence of the platform is to annul those harmful practices and values that hinder women's economic empowerment.

Women empowerment means a discernable effort to stop all kinds of marginalization against women and to give them equal access to education, financial control, autonomy and political participation amongst others. It is an approach of equipping the womenfolk with the necessary armoury to take

charge of their livelihood to bring about greater wellbeing of the family and the nation.

However, as lofty as policies and programmes initiated to enhance women empowerment were, they have not actually impacted much on their lives due to some identified hindrances.

Sustainable Future

Sustainability is the tendency or the ability and capacity to sacrifice the blossom today for a greater tomorrow. The advocacy proposes a greater future for Nigeria and Africa in general with a view to re-thinking women education and empowerment.

In Nigeria women who had qualitative education and tested with positions of authority had really proved worthy and performed satisfactorily. A few of these women include Professors Grace Alele William, Laraba Gambo Abdullahi (former Vice Chancellors), Bolanle Awe, Ruquyyat Ahmed Rufai (serving minister), Dora Akuyili, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Justice Aloma Mukhtar, First female Chief Judge of Nigeria etc all Nigerians. Their contributions to national development show there is hope for greater and better Nigeria through women.

In the world political scene, leaders of repute like Margaret Thatcher, (Britain), Indira Ghandi (India) (late), incumbent president Hellen Seliff Johnson (Liberia) are all women of substance, icons and models to emulate to project the future of women. Ojo (2003) quoted UNICEF (1991) that today's girl – child is tomorrow's woman. If tomorrow's woman is to become an equal partner in development, social change and corruption free society, it is time to accord the girl – child or woman her rightful share of woman dignity and education. This guarantees safe and sustainable future for Nigeria.

The Need for Women Education and Empowerment

There is need for sustainable policy framework, pro-activeness and expression of political will towards girl-child and women education in Nigeria by government, individuals, and private sector partners. Everyone born of a woman should see this clarion call wisely, act wisely and support wisely the advocacy for gender sensitivity in all human endeavours. Nwagbara (1998) stated that it is an accepted fact that education is the surest means of women empowerment because it gives them access to the chances and choices, available in society.

Women empowerment makes them take part in development process of a nation. It is a fact that education is one of the vital tools in the quest for the actualization of sustainable future world-wide, hence, Nigeria can not be an exception. Education is one of the instruments by which individuals are equipped to participate in the socio – economic and political life of a community.

Moreso, education empowers people to participate in decision making and the transformation of their lives and societies. A well educated woman trains her children to be industrious and virtuous. Since children are future leaders of this nation, they need to be trained while at their tender ages, so that as they grow they do not depart from it. Educated mother can help reduce incidence of social vices and moral decadence culminating into serious insecurity of life and property of citizenry.

An educated woman, who engages in the process, participates and takes decisions that will bring development to the country, represents her country and performs her responsibilities toward actualizing national goals. An educated woman knows the value of education, impacts other lives, appreciate self – reliance and never a liability to the family, usually meaningfully

employed to compliment the effort of her husband. Igube (2010) asserted that, work, income and financial security were expected to free women from the economic dependence on their husbands.

A sound and functional educated woman educate other women through enlightenment on family related issues and programmes for example, family life and population education, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD), Vessicle Vagina Festula (VVF), immunization, polio and other health challenges. Akinsanya and Akinsanya (2008) noted that women education is important to the economic growth of a nation by improving Gross National Product (GNP) through female participation in the labour force. This is because education of women is a tool for family preservation, processing, nurturing and utilization. Therefore, access to functional education by women prepares them for social challenges in the effective management and allocation of scarce national resources, freedom of choice, and opportunity for self – development and employment activities.

Essentially, women education facilitates women empowerment economically, socially, politically with a far reaching positive contribution to national economic growth and development. Naturally women have weak heart portion to stand the public shame and embarrassment and so to do the contrary was always difficult due to family considerations. Women can be entrusted with the national treasury and it is considered safe.

Challenges to Women Education and Empowerment

These are inhibiting factors to women education and empowerment which assume a universal phenomenon. Blackemore and Cooksey (1981) opined that females are victims of inequalities throughout the world. Adetoro (2007) reported that women and girls suffer a lot of deprivation all over the world. Their views

testify to the fact that women have been victims of education, economic empowerment and social inequalities for a long time. Also, Wolfowitz (2006) observed that out of the 6 million girls that are likely to miss school by 2015, 3.8 million are likely to be from sub – Saharan Africa which is the geo – political domain of Nigeria.

The challenges or hindrances to women education and empowerment include the following:

Socio – cultural practices: Common patterns in role and status of women emerge across countries. They reflect the socio – cultural norms and traditions by which the subservient status of women is maintained. In some societies these create almost obstacles to women’s participation in education. In other countries Ijere (1991) remarked that socio – cultural and economic conditions conspire to encourage early termination of the education of girls. Customary practices subjugate women to men not to determine their self – esteem. In Nigeria they allow girls go for early marriage hawk, trade at the expense of their education. It is believed educated women make bad wives, are unruly, bossy, are corrupt and promiscuous. Abdulazeez (2004) stated that, some beliefs said once a woman receives western education, she cannot be controlled by her husband.

Gender stereo – typing: Folayin (1999) reported that gender stereo – typing in occupational choice is another factor inhibiting female education. It shows that female students portray less positive attitude toward mathematics, science and technology professional courses due to bias against women performance in such more challenging courses believed to be exclusively masculine in nature.

Preference for boy – child: In the typical African indigenous society boy – child is given preference than girl – child because of the belief

of generational continuity. The United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) (2002) remarked that the number of girls attending schools in some Northern states of the country remains abysmally low despite the Federal government’s Universal Basic Education launched some years ago. This attributed to age – long religious and cultural beliefs. This has spill over effect to education. Gender differential in education shows that at all levels of education, there are more boys enrolled than girls even with the decline in boys’ enrollment for trade apprenticeship in certain parts of the country (Ogundipe, 2002). In fact, women are not sent to school in preference to boys and where they are women constitute the bulk of dropouts due to poverty, unwanted pregnancy, forced and early marriages, child labour, limited occupational choices, traditions and myths. This idiosyncrasy seemingly affects also our religious beliefs whereas if prayers are said you may hear “may God bless you with children – boys and girls”. In Islamic faith women are not allowed to lead prayer or say it aloud irrespective of her knowledge in Islamic education. They are to be seen and not heard.

Purdah system: The religious inclination in Northern Nigeria where the Islamic faith predominates, the concept of Purdah is practised. Purdah is a system whereby the woman is restricted movement without objection to her husband decision. This puts the Northern women in a more precarious situation compared to her counterparts in other parts of the country.

Discrimination in political participation: In Politics which is one way of bringing development closer to the people, women are usually alienated purporting it to be male gender career. To some extent, some men confront resourceful women to discourage them from participation. This is one of the reasons for introducing violence, thuggery, intimidation, victimization and assassination into the Nigerian

politics. Again, lack of financial strength has made educated women in capacitated to fully participate in the political process and development. Politics largely remains male dominated career with women severely under – represented especially in the Northern, and Eastern parts of the country as presented later.

Vulnerable to crises and armed conflict: Girls do not have adequate access to education in Africa (Nigeria inclusive) for the fact, that many have to stay at home to nurse war victims or cater for HIV/AIDS infected relations. In countries in armed conflict, peace keepers and rebels’ rape, kidnap, assault young girls and women as war victims depriving them from continued schooling.

Sexism: When a woman rises through rank and file to the top, she is suspected to have gotten there by her “Woman Power” (sleeping with men), but if it’s a man he is hardworking. This is discrimination, agonizing, de-humanizing and unfair treatment to women who aspire for educational attainment and economic empowerment.

Sexual harassment: This is common in public places or offices, institutions and private life daily contact. In view of the natural endowment of women as potential sex satisfier, some men with superior status exploit women’s desperation for job, promotion, training slot, favour, job placement, transfer and other benefits or assistance. The reasons for the demand pressure, self – confidence, aptitude, qualifications etc of the female gender notwithstanding but her feminism contract and contact.

Other Inhibiting Factors Against Women Education in Parts of Africa

In Ethiopia, girls are sometimes abducted for marriage when they are not more than eight years, hence no priority to education.

In South Africa, a report by Human Right Watch observed that sexual violence and abuse are hampering girls access to education. In Uganda, Birungi (2008) discovered rampant fire in schools as examples of the gaps in implementation of the girl education. She added that in the previous years flood in Eastern Uganda, left many schools in disrepair and these were seen as forms of exclusion from schooling.

In Kenya, girl – child education is elusive. Mwangi (2004) reported that combination of poverty, disease and backward cultural practices continued to deny the girl – child her right to education. In Southern Sudan, the civil war in decades makes its education system a pathetic one. UNICEF (2003) noted that in the area, as few as 15 percent of primary school – age children were in school and girls represented only one quarter of the number.

Advocacy Efforts to Mitigate Challenges

Adetoro (2007) remarked that strategies were fully adopted by the Nigerian government to such an extent that the government had taken practical steps to increase the participation of women at all levels of decision making and implementation for sustainable development. Between 1999 till date Nigerian women have had more representation in governance at all levels than ever before due to gender sensitivity advocacy. Women in politics and position of authority had provided effective leadership and good governance free from corruption.

The result of persistent advocacy is shown in the election of Women Deputy – Governors in Nigeria since 1999. Some Nigerian women politicians who had assumed office as Deputy Governors are as follows:

Name	State	Geo-political zone	Period
Buknor Akerele	Lagos	South – West	1999 – 2003
Sinaju Ojikutu	Lagos	South – West	2003 – 2005
Sarah Adebisi Sosan	Lagos	South – West	2007 – 2011
Adejoke Orellope	Lagos	South – West	2011 – till date
Erelu Obada Osun	South – West		2003 – 2007
Titilayo Tomore	Osun	South – West	2011 – till date
Biodun Olujimi	Ekiti	South – West	999 – 2003

Funmilayo Olayinka Ekiti	South – West	2011 - April 2013
Prof. Modupe Adelabu	Ekiti South – West	May 2013 ----
Virgin Etiaba	Anambra South – East	(Ag. Governor)
Pauline Talin	Plateau North – central	1999 – 2003

From the above it could be deduced that the South West embraces the concept of gender sensitivity paradigm than other geo-political zones in the country. This made variation between the South – West, East and North due to socio - cultural and religious practices where women are seen as weak and should not to assume leadership position where men are available.

Dare (2013) reported in the Nigerian Tribune that president Goodluck Jonathan is the most women friendly president in the political history of the country in view of the number of women appointed in his cabinet – 13 women ministers, first female Chief Judge of Nigeria, Justice Aloma Mukhtar and had been religious in the allocation of 35 percent appointive positions to women. The height was attained as an offshoot of the 1995 Beijing conference that put educational opportunities of women and girls at the forefront which made the various Federal Unity Colleges to adopt lower cut – off marks for girls seeking admission and establishment of more female gender schools and colleges across the country.

Initiatives by Ngos/Agencies and International Organisations

Since 1990 the initiative of late Maryam Babangida, Better Life for rural women became a platform for agitation and advocacy for creation of women separate commission and Ministry of Women Affairs to boost the level of women education in Nigeria (Adetoro, 2007).

In every state of the Federation, State Governors Wives have pet projects as Non – governmental organisations to enhance women education and economic empowerment. In Kogi State, there is the KOWEN – Kogi Women Empowerment Network. The National Economic

Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) is about the peoples welfare, health, employment, education, political power, physical security and empowerment which are paramount to realizing sustainable future Nigeria. NEEDS gives priority to women micro-credit finances in crafts, petty trading and skilled works (NEEDS, 2005).

The 3rd agenda of the 8th Millennium development goals (MDGs) is for promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women. That is to eliminate all gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 at all levels of education by 2015. To supplement this effort, the Education For All (EFA) its strategy for 2006, was to train specialists who would provide training in functional literacy and vocational and life skills to 1000 rural women. UNESCO (2005) had implemented Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) in 35 countries (Nigeria inclusive) with literacy competencies staggered into three phases between 2006 – 2015. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in collaboration with the various Ministries of Women Affairs at the Federal and State levels were said to be assisting cooperative organisations in generating micro – projects for women in national development. For example, the FADAMA World Bank project financial assistance to women than men at the ratio of 70% for women and 30% for men. Recently, the SURE-P was introduced to empower women to cushion the effect of the removal of petroleum subsidy.

Countryside Initiative

In Mali since 1989, media campaign had been the crux of a social engineering effort to promote the education of girls as an investment for future. In Morocco in 1989, its launch of the programme was done using extension workers to visit rural communities to encourage local participation in building and maintaining schools

and distributing materials that illustrate the benefit of educating daughters. A project in Ghana, offering a mid – day meal and take home rations, found significant increases in enrollment and attendance rates for girls in schools.

In Guatemala in 1987, small scholarship and free textbooks were given to primary school girls. Throughout Europe, North – America, Latin America and the Caribbean countries, millions of women attend night classes or enroll in correspondence courses after child bearing years as a second chance initiative for dropouts.

Conclusion

From the discussion, the paper argues that advocacy is fundamental and a potent tool for gender sensitivity and to overcome most of the inhibiting factors /practices against women education and empowerment for sustainable future in Nigeria. It cited series of challenges facing this concept and effort made and attained by individuals, NGOs, agencies and governments of various countries in Africa and (Nigeria inclusive) and some parts of the world towards mitigating these challenges. These have proved that a continuous and concerted advocacy can result to greater tolerance, acceptance and re-positioning of women education and empowerment.

In a similar vein, advocacy had recorded substantial achievement mainly in the South – West geo – political zone of Nigeria where women were elected into different political positions especially the Deputy – Governor’s office. While limited numbers were recorded in the South East and North – Central. In the far North it was a zero outreach (no effect) due to discriminatory practices.

It was the view of the paper that, grassroots sensitization, second chance opportunity, realistic policy framework toward 35% affirmation in all sectors amongst other

strategies will guarantee sustainable future in Nigeria and the world in general through women education.

Recommendations

In view of the assertions and opinions reviewed on the concept of women education and empowerment, the following recommendations could be considered:-

That, low income countries such as China and Uganda have made special efforts through affirmative action to increase women’s representation in parliament (Igube, 2010). Nigeria can improve the present status quo in all ramifications in accordance with 35% Beijing (1990) action plan.

Gender sensitivity agenda by men. In her study (Igube, 2003) reports indicated a revolutionary change of attitude among men in Uganda. This change in attitude is necessary among male gender in Nigeria.

Women and gender studies in tertiary institutions in Nigeria as obtained in University of Abuja, University of Jos, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife and University of Ibadan. This is a strategic mechanism to network advocacy through male and female gender of younger generation.

There should be a national policy on gender issues in the development process of the country while efforts intensified through the mass media campaign as obtained in Mali and Morocco.

In order to encourage the girl child, the school day meal incentive should be restored in UBE classes similar to scholarship for primary school girls in Ghana and Guatemala.

Government should provide financial support and technical assistance in form of training and equipment to vulnerable women groups for self – reliance.

Urgent action to harmonize area of conflict in the legal framework which infringe on women's right to education, empowerment, movement etc. The elimination of such harmful practices will certainly re-position and stabilize functional women education and empowerment as a step toward sustainable future in Nigeria.

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