

# WOMEN EMPOWERMENT, FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL ECONOMY IN NIGERIA: THE PRACTICAL REALITY.

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## **Abstract**

*In Nigeria, as it's in many other parts of the world, the traditional patriarchal tendencies and attributes form the bedrock of the low status of women and the devaluation of their contribution to the development of the national economies. This paper will examine the factors militating against women socio-economic development roles, identify practical ways of empowering women for effective participation in the development of the national economy and recommend ways of removing the constraints for a sustained participation and national development.*

**Key words:** Empowerment, Development Economy and Reality

Ecoli (2013) and Ofedi (2008) are of the view that women constitute the nerve centre of the family, community and the nation. They are the main custodians of socio-cultural and fundamental values of the society. They are the main vehicle that drives the economy and the paramount agents that bring about any form of change and development. They require equipping and empowerment for a solid foundation for the future generation of sustainable civilization and socio-economic transformation of families and national economic development.

“Women are uniquely created; their femininity, tenacity, mental agility, organizational skills, power of womanhood and influence they exert in the world are such that homes, communities and nations that neglect the necessary development of women are incoherent and at variance with the divine principle and purpose of creation; therefore lag behind in matters of development. In such homes, communities and nations economic development is either slow or haphazard” (Roomi, 2008). For a sustained, effective and coherent development of the economic, socio-political and religio-cultural governance of the nation, there is urgent and indispensable need for women’s trained, informed and efficient participation in every sphere of the national economy.

However, several factors have over the years constrained women effective role in Nigeria's economic development. This paper is set to clarify the key concepts, identify the constraints to women participation in the national economic development and suggest practical ways of removing the constraints for a realistic inclusivity.

### **Empowerment**

According to Okpaga (2007), empowerment is the process of giving power and authority to a person or group of people in order to gain a position for exercising the power. He sees empowerment as deriving from the concept of power, implies that the individual or group being empowered has hither to no power or authority by circumstances, denial or default. Okeke (1995) see empowerment as having general and specific contexts to several areas of life such as career choice, education and even the number of children to have.

For Halfani (1993) empowerment is a multi-dimensional process involving the transformation of the economic, social, psychological, political and legal circumstance of the powerless. With reference to women therefore empowerment according to Okpaga (2007) entails not only the positive changes in the various ways of life (socio-economic, political, religious, etc), but also the dismantling of the cultural norms and traditional practices that are said to devalue, disempowering and dispossess them. For me, empowerment as it relates to women is the need to equip women at all levels to effectively participate in political, economic, socio-cultural and religious decision making process that affect their lives, families and socio-economic participation.

### **National Economy**

This is a historically shaped complex of production sectors in a given country or society, in this case Nigeria; interrelated through the division of labour. The national economy includes the sectors of the material social production and non-material services production. The socio-economic nature of any national economy, as well as its structure and rate of development is determined by the character of the dominant production relationships in the society. In Nigeria, the work place and production process is dominated by men, creating a gender disequilibrium that causes the national economy to drag at a snail speed. This production process could take the form of capitalism or socialism. Under capitalism, it is based on private ownership of the means of production and or the exploitation of hired labour and women (Sminov and Donskoi 2010).

Under this system, primary wealth is owned by a relatively small portion of the society- the 'elite-men', the 'capitalists-men'. Or it could be under socialism, where the national economy is based on public ownership of the means of production, on true realization of the right to work and on the universality of labour. The economy takes

place in a planned manner and on the basis of economic laws with the purpose of ensuring full wellbeing and all round development of all the members of the society, including women. A most important characteristic of socialist national economy is the combination of centralised administration with active participation by productive collective, local bodies, and all working people in such an administration. This makes it possible for the efficient use of available material and labour resources in the interests of members of the society (Smirnov and Donskoi, 2010).

### **Socio-Economic Development**

This connotes policy action for a continuous improvement in the wellbeing and standard of living of the people (in this case, women and men), by meeting their basic needs that are essential for a life of dignity. This requires creating structures that will address poverty, by increasing women's access to social services, reduce their drudgery and enabling them to generate income of their own in order to liberate them from vicious circle of poverty, squalor, diseases and ignorance. Socio-economic development is the relationship between economic activity and social life, which requires strengthening policies, delivery mechanism, rule of law, promoting environmental wellbeing, market, health, education, socio-cultural and political participation of all genders (Denen 2012).

### **Constraints to Women's Economic Development Roles**

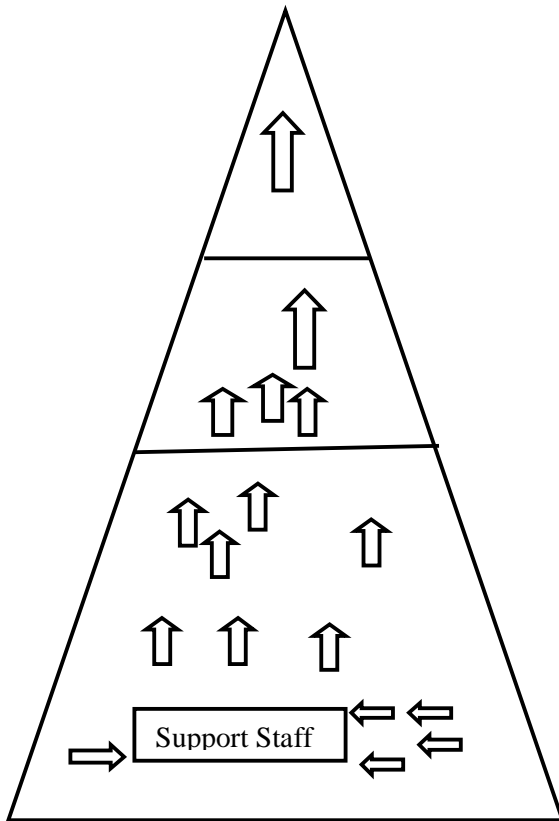
Women empowerment and economic development are closely related (Duflo 2012). However, there are many women who fail to get education, a job, a management responsibility, a political-position of authority due to their gender. Women need to be empowered to improve their ability to access the constituents of development in health, earning, rights, participation in politics and decision making. Continuing discrimination against women has hindered development (Sen 2011, World Bank development report 2012: Gender equality and development). This discrimination manifest in several ways among which include:

**Social-Cultural Constraints:** Women in Africa and even in some parts of the developed world are perceived as inferior beings. They are socialized to accept men as the heads of families, communities and in the world of work. Such societal values are often reinforced by religious beliefs that women were created to be helpers and should therefore be obedient, submissive and serviceable to men. In effect girls grow up to accept early and arranged marriages, being affected by such notions as “a woman's education ends in the kitchen”, “a woman cannot lead when men are present” etc. These heighten the boy-child preference and investment that result to various factors that weigh against the girl-child and later women.

The low educational investment made on women reflects the nature of economic activity they end up engaging in. For the most part, women in Africa are considered as bearers of children, home-keepers and in the productive sphere mere retailers and subsistence farmers, these aggravate the incidence of poverty and over-dependence among women (Amankwaa 2011, Sossou 2006).

**The Glass Ceiling Syndrome** occurs in work places, politics, and religious institutions as a reflection of socio-political and economic gender inequality. Even with the progress made in the area of education parity, the prevalence of male executives tends to perpetuate the glass ceiling. The “glass ceiling” also illustrates the point that when there are no objective reasons for women not to rise to the top echelon of institutions and organizations, there exists inherent discrimination in the structures and processes of both organizations and the society in general.

**Figure 1: Men in Top Echelons**



### **Women Majority as Support Staff**

In spite of the strides made by women in management, the labour market still remains highly segregated both horizontally and vertically i.e., in terms of occupations and hierarchical developments. Some of the reasons advanced by respondents include:

- Women are often cut off from both informal and formal networks that are necessary for advancement within organizations.
- Many decision making structures are composed of men, thus gender blind.
- The female respondents feel that men are simply afraid of losing power and relevance.
- Women are often overloaded with domestic and occupational work and cannot muster courage to fight for what they perceive as additional responsibility.
- The organization of work is rooted with obstacles that weigh against women e.g starting early and closing late etc. Women are encumbered by reconciling work and family. Although women have made significant strides in the work place, their socio-cultural role of motherhood, home keepers, encumber the women and reduce their efficiency, which often time lead to the devaluation of their contributions in the growth of organizations. This socio-cultural idea of motherhood has given birth to a new ideal of a “supermom” ideology which requires working mothers to maintain wonderful career as well as flawlessly manage family and domestic duties. Due to this ideal, working mothers are often criticised as being selfish and not spending enough time with their families, therefore blamed for character decay and indiscipline which abound in the society. This is unfair as its overburdens working women and often led to disorientation and break down in women’s health status (Kendall 2008, Okpe and Pam-Sha 2007).
- Gender inequality. Women experience unequal treatment right from inception, discriminatory practices based on assumptions of which jobs are appropriate for women. Women suffer sexual harassment at work when they are to benefit from any promotional and other official benefits. There are also indirect and subtle forms of inequality that women experience in political, economic and other spheres of life like organising training sessions, political meetings outside working hours which limit participation of women, etc. There are also issues related to unequal pay, e.g. in USA as recently as 1995 according to Kendall (2008), male doctors make \$165,000, female \$145,000 per-annum, male house keeper, \$19,000, female \$15,000, air traffic controllers male \$67,000, female \$56,000, football male \$20,000, female \$8,000 etc.

- Inability of women to know and assert their rights. Women neither tend to accept frustration and failure without determination to be liberated, nor possess a good understanding of their rights nor assert themselves regarding organization or group policies and laws.

**The Practical Reality** of women empowerment for the development of the national economy lies in taking steps to remove the constraints militating against their advancement and devaluation of their efforts and contribution to the development of the society, through:

- Functional/appropriate education: women/girls need to be encouraged to acquire functional education and acquire practical skills in their chosen disciplines, by given them special scholarship aimed at paying fees, required books, study materials, personal effects and immediate employment after graduation. They may be aided to set up personal business ventures that will enable them take control of their lives.
- Policy makers should utilize research findings, especially those that give insight into the development of women and girls.
- Policy actions should be taken by appropriate stakeholders to remove the glass ceiling barring women from ascending to apex positions in organisations, by identifying the key competences needed within the organization, building networks; find mentors that would not harass them sexually; know and assert their rights.
- Enlightenment should aggressively be carried out to raise awareness and change of attitudes towards women governance. Family members and non profit organizations should provide care and assistance to indigent women in the communities in order to empower them to raise income of their own, to reduce poverty and over dependence on male largesse.
- Women need to change the world view of themselves and their role in the society. They should not be imposed with inferior status as an inescapable way of life. They need to build their capacities to allow for effective participation in the decision making structures when opportunity arises.

## **Conclusion**

Attempt has been made to clarify some concepts as they relate to the development of women generally, and regarding their contribution to national economy. This paper also identified the constraints to women participation and contribution to the development of national economy and how to remove the constraints. Practical suggestions are made in order to remove the constraints for the development of women and their effective participation in the transformation process of the national economy.

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