

# WOMAN EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT: INVESTING IN WOMEN IS A SMART CHOICE

By

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## Abstract

*This paper examined the avenues of women education and empowerment with emphasis on encouraging girls and women going to school. Women's efforts in subsistence agriculture and commerce and industries were noted. A review of land tenure system, provision of micro and macro credits etc were considered incentives in the process of women towards empowerment. Other measures like empowering women to participate in industrial management, transportation and macro business enterprise were considered to be ways of responding to the empowerment positively. If one wants to develop Africa, the person must focus on educating the African women and improving the health conditions. The empowerment of women begins from there. Ekwuru (2010).*

Education refers to a means of acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and competences through formal, informal and non-formal methods. In recent times, there has been a gradual but mounting awareness that women are relegated to the background in the stride for global and national development. One of the compelling reasons for this is the emerging body of empirical evidence which shows that women account for roughly half of the world's population (kingdom, 1997). For meaningful development, women must be empowered since the economy cannot grow without them.

The topic of this study or write up has to do with the empowerment of women for faster economic growth of the country; how to ignite, develop and utilize women potentialities, capabilities and endowments to reverse the economic depression in the family and society today. This paper addresses issues under the following sub headings;

### **The Concept of Education**

Education is the foundation of human development. Fafunwa (1974) declares that “Education is the aggregate of all the processes by which a child or adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of positive values to the society in which he lives”. In addition, Ekwuru (2010) opined that education is the only way to sustain development without which development is unrealizable.

Anukam (2006) in her paper “Education for life” opined that Education is a “source of knowledge, a vehicle of socio-economic advancement, a transformer of attitudes and a weapon whose effect depends on who holds it in his hand”. Education in the National Policy on Education has been identified as instrument par excellence for national development. It became critical that women should be educated for development.

Education is very important to women because it is the key factor in the modern society that determines the status of women and the extent to which they can participate in politics, agriculture and other spheres of human endeavour. With proper education, the popular notion of “what a man can do, a woman can do better” can be justified.

### **Who is a Woman?**

A woman is that female sex human being who typically is a girl, a wife, a mother, a sister, a niece, a cousin, a daughter, a sister –in-law, and a daughter in-law etc. Generally, a woman is that being so often endowed with innate capabilities, beauty, charm, spiritually alert with extra insight and intuition, highly vulnerable to situations and above all a co-partner with the men in building the family and the society. In her multiple roles, her endowment though of very high value is little recognized, quantified or acclaimed. She is exerted in home as skilled worker and farmer, in offices as professionals, intellectuals and nurses. They are the beings whose rights and privileges though enshrined in the national constitution and protected by international laws have suffered marginalization, oppression and suppression by patriarchy system, culture and religion. Women are the beings, who are denied their human and equal rights with men to land and property, mobility, education, employment, and control over their lives. However, the United Nation’s Women Decade (1976-1985) have succeeded in raising the consciousness of legitimacy for women’s need and concern on the global development agenda.

According to Ugwulebo and Anele (2001), women are the most developed female *homo sapiens* imbued with the natural equipment for child bearing and rearing. A woman is the so called weaker sex who manipulates and controls the so called stronger sex.

### **Women and Education**

In the early history of formal education in Nigeria, females were grossly disadvantaged and denied access as they were seen to be created for housekeeping and child bearing roles. Factors of poverty, ignorance and culture dealt with women. Even though the trend is changing gradually, yet the drop-out rate due to poverty, early marriage, female seclusion which give males preferential access to education especially

in homes with limited financial empowerment is still significant. An average Nigeria woman is actually becoming more and more educated even though they still receive certain level of suppression, oppression and relegation especially in the political system. Since Nigeria signed up for the Millennium Development Summit in 2000, much effort has been put into achieving the goal. Women have been allowed to take up post due for them once they are qualified.

The number of women in the National Assembly, House of Representatives, State Executive Cabinet, Head of Parastatals etc, have increased, although not yet adequate. This is evidence by the following examples; Chief Dr. (Mrs) Ada Okwunufor former Deputy Governor of Imo state, Hon. Justice Mary Odili (JCA), Prof. Dora Akunyili- former Minister of Information and former Director General of National Agencies for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), Prof. H. O. Anukam- former Head of Department, Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology, Imo State University, Owerri, Dr. Mrs. Oby Ezekwesili- former Minister of Education, Dr. Mrs. Ngozi Okonji- Iweala, former Minister of Finance and later Foreign Affairs Minister, Prof. Grace A. Williams, former Vice Chancellor, University of Benin, and a lot of other women who are at managerial and leadership positions in various governmental and non- governmental agencies. All these go to show that the doors are now open, what is remaining is for the women to live up to the challenges and take up the opportunities.

Today, women with their counterparts in the world over have come a long way in the economic assignment of their individual communities. They have come from a time of mere kitchen graduates to a time when they are known as “behind every successful man, there is a woman”, and also to a time when they can really stand on their own even surpassing the men. Today, women are gradually being integrated into the main stream of socio- economic and political development of various states and nations. Even today, there are many families which the women are the breadwinners.

Many women have contributed immensely towards educational development in the world and through various women organizations. On the other hand, Dr. Mrs. Ada Okwuonu, the former Deputy Governor of Imo state, through the Heartland Child Care Foundation contributed immensely towards educating an average child by providing learning facilities and equipment for pre-primary and primary schools and so many others.

The 1999 United Nations Education Report agree that education is the greatest factor in the development of a nation and its human resources. The level of literacy of any nation is generally used as an index for measuring the level of socio-economic development of the society. Women constitute almost 50% of the entire population of the nation (Achunine 2005). Sustained efforts therefore targeted at providing functional education to the women of this nation will fast-track the economic recovery of Nigeria.

Conversely, neglect of women education will continue to make economic survival of this nation a mountain climb.

### **Women Empowerment**

This simple means “harnessing and developing the woman capabilities and innate potentialities to fully utilize and take control of their environment, be capable to take decisions, make choices that can contribute to the development of self, family, community and the nation at large (Achunine 2005). This process of empowerment would involve acquisition of the necessary knowledge and skills, attitudinal change, courage and acquisition of needed value all of which will come through education and training. It involves taking necessary actions to change the traditional subjugate positions imposed on women by the patriarchal world.

Empowerment as a concept is the process whereby the powerless or less powerful members of the society gain greater access and control over material resources, knowledge, challenges. Women are usually subdued, degraded and under rated by the men folk, who still hold on the notion that women are the weaker sex. In the time past, people have held to the slogan that “a woman education ends in the kitchen”, but with recent developments, it has imperative to relinquish this ideology and stop segregation, discrimination and gender inequality, to face the reality that all persons are equal.

Empowerment has to do with empowering women for faster economic growth of the country; how to ignite, develop and utilize women potentials, capabilities and endowments to reverse the economic depression in the family and society today. It is of great importance for women to be allowed to harness, develop their capabilities and innate potentials. This enables them fully utilize and take control of their environment, be capable to take decisions and also make choices that can contribute to the development of self, family, community, community and the nation at large. To emphasize more on the need to educate women is to state the obvious and indispensable, it is not a mere adage but a fact of life to say that, “if you educate a man you only educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation”. The proper and basic education of any individual child beings at home where mothers are the “first teachers” and we understand that “no teacher, no nation”. Indeed, the oppression of women especially in less developed regions of the world has been a major global issue and a source of concern to many international bodies, governmental and non-government organization, which are fighting tooth and nail to eradicate this ugly trend.

The concept of empowerment based on assuaging the operation of the women has lead to the establishment of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNDFW) whose primary role is to promote the active participation of women at all levels of development, planning and implementation by the government of their individual countries.

It must be understood that any attempt to reverse the present and future economic downturn which fails to focus on women in terms of giving them adequate education, improving and maintaining their health, addressing the challenges women in agriculture face, providing them with the where withal to participate in and including increasing their political participation is bound to produce little dividend.

### **Implications of not Empowering Women**

In recent times, there has been a gradual but mounting awareness that women empowerment and development as a whole cannot reach its full potential if women are relegated to the background in the stride for global and national development. One of the compelling reasons for this is the emerging body of empirical evidence which shows that women account for roughly half of the world's population, and performing two-thirds of the hours worked and receiving one-tenth of the world's income (kingdom, 1997). For meaningful development, women must be empowered since the economy cannot grow without them.

### **The Way Forward for Women to be Empowered**

It is not enough to talk about women empowerment; one must believe in it. It is not enough to believe in it, one must work for it. For us to advocate and achieve this women empowerment, we must support and work hand in hand with different organization formed towards achieving it like Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM), which is an online guide for conducting gender evaluations of initiatives that use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for social change and equality.

It is essential for government to design, implement and monitor the participation of women in politics for effective, efficient and mutually reinforcing gender-sensitive policies and programmes at all levels that will foster the empowerment and advancement of women.

The government should be able to promote, protect and support these organizations which have channeled their interest in promoting women empowerment like Economics of West African States (ECOWAS), United Nations (UN) and African Unity (AU).

To achieve the aim of promoting women empowerment, segregation and discrimination should be eradicated for equal and authentic co-existence between males and females worldwide.

Adult and mass literacy programme that emphasize functional education, skills acquisition like dress making, weaving, arts and crafts must be addressed and pursued vigorously.

Efforts must be made towards encouraging girl's access not only to basic education but to higher education for higher economic and social returns.

Girls who become pregnant while at school should be given a second chance and encouraged to complete their educational career. They should not be allowed to drop out and waste themselves and national resources.

The compulsory free education policy of governments for primary and junior secondary schools must be fully implemented.

Since the development of human resources through education is key to economic progress and women constitute half the population of this nation, the observed present trend for more girls moving towards the “feminine” courses like social sciences, humanities and education while they shy away from scientific and technological fields (Ajayi 1989, Olaleye 2006) must be reversed.

Girls should be given equal opportunities even in the house to take risk, manipulate mechanical equipment and engage in practical activities like the boys.

Since science and technology set the pace for economic development, more female participation in science and technology should be encouraged through removing all prejudices and biases detrimental to holistic participation in science and technology based courses.

Award of scholarships by governments, multinational companies e.g. oil industries, banks etc should be made to girls who opt for science based courses as that will encourage them greatly.

It must be emphasized that increased participation of girls and women in worthwhile education, training and wage employment will bring tremendous improvement in the quality of life of the society. This will help to reduce the tide of economic melt down at the family, community and national levels. A popular adage says “train a woman, you train a nation”.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper looked at the avenues of women education and women empowerment. This is by providing functional education from the universal basic education to tertiary levels with emphasis on girls and women moving to science and technological courses. It also x rayed how women’s efforts in education could make for development and social restructuring if they are empowered.

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