GENDER ISSUES IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT; A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Gender issues are issues that have drawn the attention of scholars all over the world. This has made scholars to propound theories that help explain the socio-political and economic issues relating to gender inequality or equality. This work sets out to examine gender issues in human development from a political perspective. After a careful selection of data from secondary sources and a proper analysis carried out, the work discovered that cultural inhibitions play a significant role in curtailing women political participation. Despite these cultural inhibitions women have found themselves in positions of decision-making and have done excellently well. To this end, the paper recommends among other things that, cultural practices that turn to hinder women from participating in politics should be removed.

Gender issues relate to equality between females and males in education, health, employment, and politics and so on and so forth. Gender equality in all countries of the world must be integrated into all plans and programmes of the development process. On this note, the goal of governance initiative should be to develop capacities that are needed to realize development that give priority to the poor, advances women, sustains the environment and creates needed opportunities for employment and other livelihoods.

Inspite of the fact that gender related issues are many, they have been given scholarly attention at different fora. This work will however be focused on the political angle of gender issues in human development. What this simply means is that the analysis will be focused on women in politics in Nigeria. While women constitute half of the population it is commonly acknowledged worldwide that they are grossly under represented within decision making bodies. The paucity of women in decision making bodies has been attributed to a number of factors. Such factors include but not restricted to the prevailing unequal division of labour in household and child care duties, negative attitudes towards women’s participation in public life, the lack of confidence on the part of the electorate, Cultural inhibitions, women’s personal dislike for involvement in activities that they find distasteful especially those which the mass media and other organizations have stereotyped and inaccessibility of women to political knowledge and education.

All these issues have systematically kept women away from the human development radar which is a process of expanding the real freedoms that people
enjoy; the promotion and expansion of valuable capabilities and the expanding of their choices to live the lives they value. Today women are educationally backward and this has constituted inhibition on their political participation.

For an effective analysis of the subject matter, the attention of this work will first be turned to the clarification of concepts such as gender, politics and human development after which we will examine issues relating to the topic.

**Gender: A Clarification of Issues.**

Gender refers to the socially constructed and culturally variable roles that men and women play in their daily lives. The social relations of gender seeks to define the parameters which exist in male/female relations in terms of sex roles, power sharing, decision making, division of labour and reforms on labour within the domestic economy and wider society (Meena, 1991). It is common knowledge that human beings are differentiated by female and male physiological characteristics and biological needs. However, the meaning of these needs is not given, and can be explained in socially and historically derived circumstances. This construct is more often than not, a structured relationship of inequality between men and women. It is often reinforced by customs, law and specific development policies. As Mblinyi (1991: 49) puts it: ‘Gender relations are historical, changeable, subject to abolition and transformation through every day happenings as well as periodic moments of crisis and transformation’.

Interestingly, the concept of gender is fairly recent. It gained prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s as social scientists (mostly female) sought ways of conceptualizing the social construction of masculinity and femininity at individual and collective levels. Radical feminism as the proconsuls of gender studies were called, argued that gender blindness and male bias in social sciences and history left out half the world population in their analysis, (Mblinyi 1991). Such an omission they rightly observed deliberately distorts true knowledge about the world. While this deficiency was generally accepted and regretted, radical feminism could not agree theoretically and conceptually on how to pursue its subject. It is in these circumstances that three major tendencies on gender studies have emerged.

The first which represents the earliest scholars to rid themselves of gender blindness, proceeded to glorify women and saw them as victims of an unbridled male chauvinism in a universal system of oppression. (Foucault, 1978). Commentators like firestone (1971) and Boserup (1970) have argued that throughout history, gender relations had always been exploitative and oppressive. For firestone, the biological family is an inherent representation of sex/class system mediated through power psychology.

The second major school of thought that attempts to explain gender relations is socio-biology. The theoretical construct of this school rests on the assumption that
suggests a correlation between human social organization and innate human needs that are primarily biological. Thus, innate male aggressions explain war, territoriality and domination over women. Man’s dominant position in society and women’s submission is hence a natural expression of male/female biological capacities programme by a gene. As such, it is neither oppressive to women nor changeable.

A marxist oriented theory of gender which is the third in this discussion takes root from Engles work on the bourgeois family. In his origins of the family, Engles (1983) noted that;

The division of labour was a pure and simple out -growth of nature, men went to war and provided raw materials for food and tools. While women cared for the house and prepared food and clothing. Each sex was a master of his or her own field of activity. Following the emergence of class societies and private property, this simple biological division of labour was transformed into a society subordinate relationship between husband and wife, the latter providing legitimate heirs for the transmission of property in return for board and lodging.

The classical Marxist position, it has been pointed out, is hardly dissimilar to the socio-biology thesis in its primary emphasis on the natural. Although Engels argued that this natural state was transformed by capital, the evidence suggests that historically, gender preceded class relations.

Politics: A Clarification of Issues

The concept of politics has generated a lot of interest among scholars to the extent that many assumptions have been made as to what politics is. In Africa and especially Nigeria, many people have looked at politics as a substitute word for craft behavior, bargaining, maneuvering or manipulation and hence, the expressions like “politics is a dirty game”. But whatever the controversy over its meaning and usage, politics seems to concern itself with how decisions take place in an organized society based on law and order. As an activity, it involves formulating and executing public policy which requires taking rational and sometimes irrational actions. The process of decision making needs also to be authoritative at both levels of institutions and practice. This requires the examination of the operation of such institutions as the legislature, political parties, interest groups, mass media, or observing such practices as voting, campaigning, propaganda, terrorism, rigging, gerrymandering and guerrilla warfare. The state therefore, exists to control the institutions and regulate these practices. (Okpaga 2007).

Thus, these have informed many theories to proffer varying definitions of politics. Easton (1953) sees politics as “the authoritative allocation of values and the political system as the system of interaction in any society through which binding or
authoritative allocation is made”. On his part Lasswell (1958) views politics as “competition for the control of the state or its apparatuses with the ultimate aim of participating in decisions as to who gets what, when and how?”. In a democratic process, this control is usually, attained by individuals or groups, irrespective of gender through a process of participation.

Generally therefore, politics can be understood as the process of making binding authoritative decisions from the allocation of scare resources with the aim of reconciling interest and disputes in society.

**Human Development: A Clarification of Issues.**

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 1996, human development can be seen as expanding the choices for all people in the society. This means that men and women (particularly the poor and vulnerable) are at the centre of the development process. It also means “protection of the life opportunities of future generations and the natural systems on which all life depends”. This makes the central purpose of development the creation of an enabling environment in which all can enjoy long, healthy and creative lives.

There are five aspects to sustainable human development all affecting the lives of the poor and vulnerable:

1. **Empowerment:** The expansion of men and women’s capabilities and choices increase their ability to exercise those choices free of hunger, want and deprivation. It also increases their opportunity to participate in, or endorse decision making affecting their lives.

2. **Cooperation:** With a sense of belonging important for personal fulfillment, well-being and a sense of purpose and meaning, human development is concerned with the ways in which people work together and interact.

3. **Equity:** The expansion of capabilities and opportunities means more than income- it also means equity, such as an educational system to which everybody should have access.

4. **Sustainability:** The needs of this generation must be met without compromising the right of future generations to be free of poverty and deprivation and to exercise their basic capabilities.

5. **Security:** Particularly the security of livelihood. People need to be freed from threats, such as diseases or repression and form sudden harmful disruptions in their lives.

Interestingly, the UNDP focuses on four critical elements of sustainable human development which are: eliminating poverty, creating jobs and sustaining
livelihoods, protecting and regenerating the environment and promoting the advancement of women. Having clarified the major concepts involved in this work, a proper analysis of the subject matter will now follow.

The Role of Nigerian Women in Nigerian Politics

It is argued that women find it difficult to play significant roles and participate to their full capacity in Nigerian politics due to limited time available to them because of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres of the society. Besides, Nigerian cultural values and attitudes affect the political participation of women in their mode of speech, beliefs, taboos, religion, norms, values, attitudes, thinking and perception. It is still a general belief among men and women that once a woman is active in politics, that woman is more or less not responsible. This is because of the erroneous belief created by culture that women are to be seen nor heard. To this end, Okafor (2001) argued that “Nigerian culture contributes towards the low participation of women in politics”. According to him, women are expected to keep the home front, bear children, serve as care givers and anything outside that is not acceptable and is described as un-dignifying for a woman. In addition, women who venture into politics are viewed as being strong headed, rebellious, disobedient and semi-prostitutes.

The above view is however, not the true character of a responsible Nigerian woman. This wrong impression of women politicians in Nigeria has spurred Otoga (2010) to advance some reasons for this unfair perception of women participation in politics. According to her, the Nigerian society is male dominated as such, patriarchy, structural inequality and deep-rooted prejudice continue to entrench themselves in Nigeria. Come to think of it, the social discrimination, economic deprivation, political marginalization and cultural annihilation suffered by women have no intellectual justification at work places, class rooms and family settings.

Consequently, women play active roles in politics and national development both in the formal and informal sectors of the Nigerian nation. Regrettably, women’s role in the informal sector is usually ignored, unrecognized and sometimes taken for granted when economists are analyzing the economy. There is no gainsaying that the economy and politics are two sides of the same coin that can hardly be divorced. Taking this into cognizance, the role women play in the informal sector of the economy falls essentially in the area of agriculture production. Women cultivate crops, harvest and store the crops and prepare food for decision makers and the entire family and sometimes sell crops to earn income.

In the formal sector, the women in Nigeria have played significant roles too. No doubt, the formal sector is mostly in the urban areas where education is the key for entry into paid employment and politics. It is on this platform that women like; Dora Akunyili, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Senator Florence Ita Giwa, Margaret Icheen,
just to mention but a few have proven their mettle in their chosen field of human endeavour. For Dora Akunyili, Ketim (2008) praising avers that;

Professors (Mrs.) Dora Akunyili, a spectacular woman of virtue, a solo volcano spewing forth good things in her duty post as the Director - General of National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). She has shown that women could be different in terms of excellence.

During Akunyili’s rein at NAFDAC, she made the women folk proud by taking the right decisions and showing that one needs not be corrupt by the so called influence of the society before one can do a thorough job. She won several awards and honours both nationally and internationally as a result of honesty, dedication and hard work. More importantly, a lot of lives that would have been wasted because of fake, expired, adulterated and sub-standard drugs were saved as a result of her dogged fight and attack on the perpetrators of fake drugs.

On her part, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala forcefully argued for debt forgiveness for Nigeria in 2005. As at the time, Nigeria owed the rest of the world about $35 billion dollars. She believed that if Nigeria was relieved of her debt burden Nigeria could concentrate on developmental projects. To this belief, international development minister Hillary Benn said;

This deal will help to change the lives of millions of people in Nigeria. Today’s deal is a major step in bringing a better future for the people of Nigeria in a country in which seven million children received no schooling at all and one in five die before their fifth birthday.

Another woman that has defied all odds and has played active roles in politics and national development in Nigeria is Senator Florence Ita-Giwa. She represented Cross River state in the Senate from 1999-2003 and her performance on the floor of the Senate was not in dispute. She was nicknamed “Mama Bakassi” in reference to her involvement in the efforts to resolve the border crisis between Nigeria and Cameroon over the oil rich Bakassi Peninsula, an area within her senatorial district.

No doubt the miseries of war are better imagined then experienced. Mama Bakassi fought tooth and nail to ensure that Nigeria did not go to war with Cameroon over the disputed territory of Bakassi.

Though the few examples cited in this work regarding the role women have played in Nigerian politics might not be enough, it suffice to say that women have played immeasurable and significant roles in Nigerian politics in spite of the closed political space. What is demanded of the patriarchal Nigerian society is to
unconditionally open the political space and allow women full socio-economic and political participation.

The Impact of Gender Inequality On The Nigeria Society

In spite of the committed role played by women both in the formal and informal sectors of the Nigerian national life, gender inequality has consistently continued to be an albatross on women participation in politics. The Nigerian society like other African societies emphasizes gender inequality which is a social problem that amounts to the discrimination of a particular sex and in this case the female sex. Against this background Agule (2006) submits that:

Gender inequality is another platform on which gross social injustice is perpetrated in our society against women. Till date, women are still denied equal privileges given to their male counterparts in the areas of education, employment, housing and most of all politics.

To Agule, gender issues should be used positively and not negatively. A woman should be encouraged to perform in her area of specialization and competence.

Unfortunately, in Nigeria, men still believe that the only role for women is to perform household chores and child bearing. This kind of thinking has led to gender inequality which has impacted negatively on the Nigerian society. This negative impact has found expression in economic exploitation and impoverishment, discriminatory laws and customs, religious discrimination and exclusion of women from public life.

Granted that most women have been denied good education, that they command very limited economic resources and that the prevailing cultural norms see their place as being in the home, it is not surprising that women are grossly under-represented in public life and decision-making positions in Nigeria. According to Anifowose and Enemou (2005):

The representation of women in positions of leadership in the three tiers of government in Nigeria in the last three decades has been low, hovering around 2%. The appointment of women into political offices has been characterized and motivated by Tokenism and that women in position of authority find themselves working in groups that are in essence predominantly male, thereby aggravating their feeling of marginality.

The table below further shows the low level of women representation in Nigerian politics.
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<td>Senators</td>
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<td>House of Reps.</td>
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<td>Governors</td>
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<td>Deputy Gov.</td>
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Source: National Assembly and Executive Compendium.

On the whole, deliberate and systematic exclusion of women from leadership positions has robbed Nigeria of women’s unique potential for governance. It has led to gender insensitivity in the design and implementation of public policy and help to perpetuate gender inequality in different aspects of social life. As a fall out, the Nigerian society has remained unprecedentedly underdeveloped.

The Impact of Women Participation in Nigerian Politics

It has been regrettably noted that of all the barriers to Nigerian women participation in politics, cultures is the most prominent. It is the totality of the way in which the people of a country or an ethnic group articulate their values and skills. Some of the variables used in the articulation are of the material nature such as arts and crafts, tools and equipment, clothing, food, different types of consumables etc. others are of non-material type such as language, religion, education, theories and practice of government etc.

According to Okafor (2008), Nigerian culture contributes towards the low participation of women in politics. Women are expected to keep the home front. Bear children, serve as care gives and anything outside that is not acceptable and is described as undignifying for a woman. Inspite of all these cultural encumbrances
which have curtailed women political participation in Nigeria, the Nigeria woman has impacted positively in Nigerian politics. Her participation in politics has had an overflowing dividend in the areas of education, economy, employment, social activities and governance this work will only be stating to obvious that Dora Akunyili fought drug barons when she was the DG of (NAFDAC). Her impact was greatly felt in the health sectors as Nigerians were free from fake and adulterated drugs.

What else can one say about Abike Dabiri, a House of Representative member. Her dogged fight for transparency and accountability on the floor of the House has culminated to the passage into law, the Freedom of Information bill (FOI).

Many other women have contributed positively in decision-making in Nigeria. Such women have been able to be part of the decision making body because they have acquired education. This is true because, education is that which is geared towards developing the abilities, skills, knowledge and other forms of behaviour. With quality education, women have been able to impact the society positively by discharging their duties effectively as mothers, teachers, administrators and decision makers. Women have suddenly realized that without a sound education, their political participation would always be relegated to the background.

Conclusion
This work has come to the irresistible conclusion that women participation in politics is capable of bringing about development in Nigeria. This participation has however not been possible without hitches.

All the same, the issue of women political participation has not been a peculiar problem to Nigeria but a problem that has drawn international attention and has also pricked the minds of intellectuals across the globe. For the avoidance of doubt, the Nigerian male dominated political class need to open the political space for the women to exhibit their political astuteness. For this to be achieved, certain cultural barriers must be removed so as to give women unhindered access to whatever level of governance.

Recommendations

1. Implementation and Enforcement of Statutory Laws: Although, the Nigerian nation is now aware of the importance of women in national development, the implementation of the affirmative action and the enforcement of other international and national policies as a means of addressing gender inequality in power sharing and decision – making at all levels must be intensified to ensure proportionate ratio of women representation in decision making at all levels.

2. Eradication of Harmful Traditional Practices: There is the need to critically review and replace those traditional and cultural practices and
values that put women in subordinate positions. Child bearing and rearing and other traditional practices should be directed toward making women aware of their potentials and abilities and not to subordinate them.

3. **Education of Girl-Child and Women:** There is an urgent need to encourage education of girl child and women in order to create consciousness and to assist women to discover and develop new orientations. Apart from acquiring formal education, women should be politically educated in order to shun apathy and parochialism and be ready to take part in decision-making processes.

4. **Emergence of Effective Enlightenment/ Awareness Programme:** Women should organize themselves and embark on effective enlightenment programmes, by letting their fellow women know the importance of inclusion of women in political and decision making processes. This can be achieved through women non-governmental organizations (NGO) campaigns and programmes. Also the media must be ready to create awareness in both men and women and gradually changed the attitudes especially, those of men towards women’s political participation and inclusion in decision making processes.

**References**

Agule, C.T (2006). *Social injustice, the challenge to religion in Nigeria*. Makurd: Treaces Nig. Ltd.


