Gender Equality and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper discusses the roles of women and the different factors affecting their contributions to sustainable development. The paper submits that the concept of gender within African development context aligns with discrimination, derogation and violence against women. It draws attention to Nigerians undevelopmental epistemology via gender epistemology. It looks at the efforts made so far to redress the imbalance from national and global perspective and posits that these efforts are inadequate because women are still grossly underrepresented in the national development. Therefore the paper recommends the education of the girl-child in order to liberate women from poverty and become more involved in political, social, and economy of the nation. In short there should be a down-to-earth application of gender equality to all stages of the life cycle of developmental projects in Nigeria.

There are several definitions of the term sustainable development, but the one adopted for this study is that from the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) where it is defined as “meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generation” (Nosike, 1996). This definition given by the Brundtland commission, in its 1987 reports
published by the United Nations, as “our common future” is the most commonly accepted definition (Paul, 2008). The concept of sustainable development is intended to embrace the idea of ensuring that the future generation inherits the earth, which supports their livelihood in such a way that they are not worse off, than generations today.

In order to promote sustainable development, there is the need for citizens (Male and female) to participate in the economy, policy, and social development of the society. Unfortunately, although women constitute over 50 percent of the population of the world, they are neglected to the background in every sphere of life (Igbuzor 2008). In fact, whenever there is the mention of gender discrimination, what is normally meant is discrimination against women. In Nigeria for instance, although the 2006 national population census reveals that women make up 48.78% (about half) of the total population, only a small number of exceptional women have achieved prominence on modern political and government sphere. Several reasons have been adduced for the present imbalance position of women in Nigeria society today. The reasons include colonization, history dominated by military rule, patrilineal system through male, literacy on the part of women which relegates women to the background (Agee, 1996, Oganwu 1999). This indicates that gender disparity is affecting women’s role in sustainable development since most of their roles are domestic in nature (Agbola, 1996, Oguiguwe, 1996).

Global awareness of the role of the women in sustainable development has made nations, individuals and groups of persons to think of strategies that enhance women’s role in sustainable development. In gender 21, chapter 24, governments are urged to consider developing and issuing (by the year 2000) a strategy of changes necessary to crinate constitutional, legal, administrative, cultural, behavioural, social, and economic obstacles to women full participation in sustainable development and in public life (united nations, 2004). To achieve this, the United Nations gave active steps to implement gender equity in sustainable development; some of which are mentioned in this study.

The overall goal, in terms of gender mainstreaming of all policies – incorporating a gender perspective in all planning and decision making processes. The main purpose of this paper is to encourage better participation of women in the achievement of the goal of sustainable development which includes lasting improvement on the quality of life.

Conceptual Framework

This paper is based on the liberal feminist framework. This framework advocates that the female gender, like their male counterparts, should be entitled to full human rights and therefore should be free to choose their role in life and explore their full potentials in equal competition with men. In other words, there should not be any man-made obstacles or barrier preventing women from engaging in any legitimate enterprises they deem necessary. The theory goes further to postulate that there should
not be any undue favoritism for any set on the basis of gender: men and women should enjoy the same nights and have equal opportunities.

According to Ako-Ajai (2005), feminism is characterized with looking at the rare woman relationship, in which women are usually at a disadvantageous position in relation to societal cultural norms, religion and political beliefs. The inequality created is the bedrock of the feminist ideology which attempts to liberate women from the institution that have kept them down.

In line with this theory, and in consonance with the ideals of the feminist which has been thrown up to champion the cause of the female gender, this study advocates active women participation in sustainable development and the removal of the obstacles that stand in the way of women towards achieving parity with men in all spheres of life.

**Discrimination Against Women**

From antiquity the history of man has been characterized by discrimination: racial class, and of course, gender or sex discrimination. When it is racial, the discrimination is against someone, or a group of people who is/are of a different race or colour. The race being discriminated against is an inferior one. When it has to do with class, the social status the person or group is occupying in the society comes into play. It is between the haves and have-nots. Finally, if it is gender or sex discrimination, it has to do with the two sets male or female discrimination. However, whenever there is the mention of gender discrimination, what is normally meant is discrimination against women.

Throughout the ages, there has always been bias and prejudice against women in all societies and in all epochs. Discrimination against women is manifested in all spheres of human relations. It has also come in different forms – socio-cultural, economic, religious, and most importantly, political. Socio-culturally, there have always been several norms and traditions in different societies which prevent women from realizing their full potentials. These are cultures that make them second class citizens and inferior to men.

In the traditional society, it was the belief that women’s original position was in the kitchen. Education was not considered important to them, their training was directed towards their natural destiny in marriage, housekeeping and motherhood. There was practically little opportunity for freedom of expression and choice. The husband’s or father’s opinion was supreme on every issue, including when it was time for the girl-child to get married.

In the economic realm, the same applies. Women in the traditional society were also marginalized. They were supposed to stay back at home to take care of the house while men went out to work in order to provide for the family. When women contributed, it was in minor areas. This exists to some extent today. According to
Adeyemi and Adeyemi (2003), from statistics released few years ago by the Ministry of Women Affairs, and Youth Developments Abuja, out of every 100 Nigerian, men paid labour, there are 25 women. This means that the ratio of women to men in paid labour is one to four.

In religious matters, where we were meant to believe that God created everybody (man and woman) in his own image and likeness, women are also discriminated against. Infact, gender discrimination in the house of God was institutionalized right from the early days of christianity.

Despite the constitutional and international provisions, local and international declarations of gender equality, and the attempts by government and the political structures to solve the problem of gender imbalance in politics, series of injustice are still always meted out to the womenfolk (sadly by the people, agencies and structures that claim to have interest in redressing it). These injustices are perfected by the government and the political structures mostly occupied by them.

**Factors Affecting Role of Women in Sustainable Development**

Nigeria, like some other Africa countries, has made efforts to promote gender equity by acceding to several commitments at global, continental, sub-regional and national levels. For instance, the federal government of Nigeria formed a national policy on women in the year 2000 and this was realized in 2006 as the problem of imbalance of the roles of men and women in sustainable development continued. The new policy adopted is national gender policy. According to Iguzor (2008), this policy is aligned with relevant international and national instrument such as Beijing Platform for Action, New Partnership for Africa Development (NEPAD), All Solemn Declaration for Gender Equity, Africa Protocol on People’s Right and Right of Women, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), amongst others. In spite of these efforts, it is observed that there are challenges in translating the policy into action in terms of concrete programmes of equality in the development approach of the country (Igbuzor, 2008).

Studies show that the status of women is one factor that has effects on maintaining women in development (Oppong and Abu, 1927). Generally, women receive high regard because of their domestic role than their economic, political and social positions. Yet they are primary and invisible food producers. According to Idis (1996) “among the Urhobo people of Delta state, for instance, an on-going study shows that while men own all land, less than 20% of them are engaged in diverse non-rural economic and socio-political activities”. Over 90% of the women are involved in direct food and agro-economic production and petty trading. Literature also shows that politically, women do not play much role. Although it is well known that despite the impressive contributions of women to the society, prior to independence, it is only from 1976 that federal government began to appoint women in policy –making functions (Agee, 1996). In the current democratic era, there is a slight overall in the percentage of
female political office holders at both appointive and elective levels. This increase is however, still very far from the 30% recommended by policy framework such as the platform for action and the national gender policy (Akosile 2008).

Very few women are economically empowered because of their occupation and lack of formal education. In some parts of Delta and Edo states of Nigeria, over 70% of the farmers are rural women and girls. They engage in a variety of farming activities ranging from clearing to marketing and storage of food products (Ikeoji, 2000). The knowledge and skills, used by the females are mainly their traditional indigenous skills as majority of them are uneducated. This yields little economic reward and keep the women poor. As observed by UNICEF (1994), gender disparity works to the benefits of men who have political control. At the domestic level male control over the household works to the detriment of mothers relative to fathers and the detriment of girls relative to boys. Hence, women despite their multiple roles of domestic work, food production, family occupation, child bearing and care, generally experience the worst severities of extreme poverty.

For instance, records show that Nigeria, the most populated African Nation is one of the poorest nation in Africa – 75 million Nigerians live in poverty, 7 million die each year before the age of five and at least, three million people are living with HIV/AIDS. (DFID, 2006). These are evidence of reproductive health problems on the part of women and children. Records show that Nigeria mortality rate is the second highest in the world, after India. About 1,100 maternal deaths occur per 100,000 live births (Raphael, 2000). Women in poor health cannot participate effectively in sustainable development. In fact, it is assumed that all these problems enumerated and other could be solved if women are educated. Literacy is another factor affecting the role of women in sustainable development.

It is believed that although in many countries, including Nigeria, school dropout rate is steadily falling, they continue to be higher among girls than among boys. This is because parents do not see the benefits of girls education as girls are given away in marriage to serve the husband’s family; so boys are given priority (fact sheet No 23). As a result of factors affecting the role of women in sustainable development discussed above, there is a call for women liberation as awareness is the key to sustainable development (Agee, 1996, Ogbugwe 1996).

**Struggle for Emancipation: An International Dimension**

Over the ages and in different societies, the world over, women have taken stands contrary to the thinking of their male oppressors. Apart from involving themselves in the roles assigned to them by nature, they have ventured into areas previously dominated by men. They are no longer standing by and watching while the commonwealth is appropriated by a particular sex. In fact, they are encroaching upon what used to be solely a man’s world.
The struggle to achieve equal rights for women, especially in national development is not a recent phenomenon. The strategy started in the English-speaking world as far back as 1792, with the publication in that year of a book titled “vindication of the rights of women” written by Mary Wollstonecraft (academic America encyclopedia vol 326).

According to the encyclopedia, as male suffrage was gradually extended in many countries, women became increasingly active in the quest for their own suffrages. In the United States for instance, the women suffragists, under the Aegis of different women suffrage associations, struggled to overcome traditional values and prejudices against them. It was not until August 1920 that the 19th amendments granted the ballot to America women. In Great Britain too, the same approach was adopted by the women to achieve equal rights with men. Equal rights for men and women were achieved there in 1928.

In Africa countries, men and women have generally received the vote at the same time. Nigeria, for instance achieved this in 1960 after independence with the exception of the special case of northern Nigeria where women under Purdah were denied franchise/suffrages until 1976. As earlier stated in the introduction, the problem is not that there is a legal or constitutional denial of this right but other hurdles are placed on the path of women. It is these hurdles they are struggling to overcome.
A number of conference, local and international have been convened to this effect. There are equally resolutions by national parliaments and international organizations, all directed towards eradicating the discrimination of women in all spheres of life. In 1975, the First World Conference on women was held in Mexico. Other series of conferences followed, but the most notable seems to be the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, china, in 1995. The conference popularly known as the Beijing conference had about 40,000 women from 189 countries in attendance (Adeyemi and Adeyemi 2003). Nigeria participated actively in this conference. The conference gave birth to the Beijing platform for action comprising twelve critical issues, which among other things included gender inequality and the need to empower women economically and increase their level of participation in sustainable development.

There are other attempts by international bodies to redress the issue of gender discrimination. The United Nations General Assembly in 1979, adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It came into force as an International Treaty in 1981 and Nigeria ratified it in 1985. In the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1984), article 21, among other things, stated that everyone has the rights to take part in the government of his country. Back home in Africa international concern for gender inequality manifested in such agreements and charters such as the Africa platform for action, taken in Darker and the protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of
How to Achieve Gender Equality

Any nation that does not take the education of women seriously cannot develop as women constitute more than half of the population. Also, poverty reduction cannot be attained without social and economic equalities, sustainable development cannot be achieved without paying careful attention to gender-based disparities and differences. An important element of sustainable development is the need to manage the natural resources base on which human activities depend. Due to gender division of labour in society women and men have different needs and uses for natural resources.

The role of men and women in sustainable development is very evident in many sectors such as agriculture, education, water, domestic energy in urban and rural settings and even in forest management. Therefore, ways and manners of tackling and achieving gender equality in sustainable development include:

- Creating the condition for equal participation and empowerment for men, women and youths.
- Provision of gender sensitive education to encourage women and men to respect diversity in work and leadership styles.
- Members of the public must change their uncompromising attitude towards women.
- Government should encourage higher enrollment rate for girls in school.
- Removal of cultural impediment hindering gender equality
- Most importantly, to recognized equality as a major characteristics and success factor for sustainable development.

These recommendations are in line with third active step to implementation of sustainable development given by the United Nations (2004) in agenda 24, chapter 28. The steps request government to take measures to eliminate illiteracy among females and to expand the enrollment of women and girls in educational institutions. Although there is evidence that the federal government has established the Universal Basic Education for primary and junior secondary for both sexes, the policy has been fraught with problems hence the federal government has been enjoined to establish and strengthened gender units or gender focal points, at all level in all ministries to ensure that the gender concerns are mainstreamed into policy making and budgetary processes (Akosile, 2008). These recommendations and others recommended by a coalition of non-governmental organization which focuses on gender issues in Nigeria reveal that the suggested activities for effective implementation of the roles of women in sustainable development to some extent have not been fully implemented. There is need therefore to encourage more women in the role of sustainable development at the grass root.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have been able to highlight and discuss the different forms of discrimination against women especially in the traditional society, and
National development. But women play a big role in contributing to development like their male counterparts. They are responsible for meeting majority of the family needs. Therefore their efforts need to be recognized. Also given the sustainable contribution women make to agriculture and to other areas of economy, it is important that attention be given to their concern. It is necessary to look into the need and problems of women in order to tap their full potentials and productivity for national development.

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