
Gender Equality: A Panacea for Good Governance and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examines gender equality as a sine qua non in promoting good governance and socio-economic development in Nigeria. It argues that gender equality in all spheres should be enhanced in order to ensure that women, men, girls and boys participate and benefit equitably from governance and development process. Since women comprise about 50% of Nigeria's population, Nigeria cannot claim to be exercising good governance if a large segment of the population is excluded from the governance and development process. The paper however reveals that despite the efforts by governments to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women in Nigeria, gender inequalities continue to persist as women are continually marginalised in all aspects of our development. The resultant effect is poverty affecting many people especially women. The paper concludes that Nigeria must strive to anchor its governance and socio-economic development on gender equality, if it must take its place among the developed countries in the world.

Introduction

In recent times, the relationship between gender and good governance remains a focal point of discussion in development debates. This no doubt, is due to the central role of gender equality in the attainment of sustainable socio-economic and political development. Gender equality needs to be promoted and understood from the context of good governance since it is a cause and effect of good governance.

It needs to be observed that most African countries including Nigeria, have ratified global and regional protocols aimed at promoting gender equality in all spheres to ensure that women, men, girls and boys participate and benefit equitably from development process. Nigeria for example, has acceded to many regional and international treaties on women's equality and development. Some of these, according to Isiramen{1997}, include "The International Bill of Human Rights" which stipulates in Articles 1 and 2 equal rights of men and women. Nigeria also participated and ratified the Convention on Political Rights of Women in 1980. There is also the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1971 which was ratified by Nigeria on 15th of July, 1985. Article 2 of this

convention condemned any form of discrimination and demanded state parties to employ the principle of equality of men and women in the National Constitutions.

To this end, section 42 of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria provides that “no citizen of Nigeria shall be discriminated against on the basis of his ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or circumstances of his birth”. This section, which is a broad-based non-discriminatory clause, promotes equality of men and women in Nigeria.

However, the practical situation in Nigeria today portrays that governments still enforce policies that do not promote gender equality. In Nigeria, there still exists unequal treatment and inferior status for women which can be tantamount to dehumanisation. It is against this background that this paper highlights the central role of gender equality in the promotion of good governance and socio-economic development in Nigeria.

Concepts of Gender and Good Governance

Gender as a concept and usage among policy makers, planners and the generality of people of Nigeria, has been appreciably misconstrued. Most times, when the word gender is used, people immediately suppose that reference is being made to women and their affairs and vice versa. The term gender is not synonymous with women, nor is it shorthand for women and men. Awopegba{2004}, defined gender as a concept, a condition, a category, an adjective and a component. It is a system of roles and relationships between women and men that are not determined by nature but by sound economic and political constructs. To Oakley{1996}, “gender refers to socially constructed roles and socially learned behaviours and expectations associated with males and females”. According to Maduewesi{2005}, “women and men are biologically different, but all cultures interpret and elaborate these inherent biological differences into a set of social expectations about what behaviours and activities are appropriate for them, and what rights, resources and even power they possess”.

To Onwioduokit{1999}, governance on the other hand, connotes “the manner in which government governs the territory and the people it jurisdictionally controls”. Saint{1992}, is of the view that governance should also be understood as the mechanisms whereby an institution/organisation (be it the family, the nation-state or elements of it) incorporates the participation of relevant interest groups in defining the scope and content of its work – including the capacity to mediate among these interests when they enter into conflict and the means whereby it demonstrates accountability to those who support it through its mission mandate and the application of its resources in pursuit of its goals.

Good governance in this context therefore involves a normative judgement which indicates a preferred relation that should ideally govern relations between state and society and between a government and a people. Good governance is normally used in the literature to refer to one or all of the following attributes of governance: accountability based on notion of popular sovereignty and public choice; a legal framework that guarantees the rule of law and due process; popular participation in decision making processes based on political and social pluralism; and on freedom of association and expression; and bureaucratic accountability based on impersonality of

office, uniform application of rules, and rationality of organisational structure{Bello-Imam,1997:3}. Good governance should be participatory, transparent, accountable, protective of the rule of law and in short, a basket of many practices which can provide the key to economic development.

Gender Issues

There is no doubt that gender issues emanate from discrimination which remains pervasive in many aspects of life worldwide. Gender construction is flexible and differs from place to place. According to Stratton cited in Maduewesi{2005}, “while all contemporary societies can be classified as patriarchal, in that each of them operates a social system characterised by male dominance, they are differently patriarchal, for each constructs gender differently. The World Bank Report stated that “in no region of the developing world are women equal to men in legal, social and economic rights{Maduewesi,2005:177}. There are obviously gender disparities in access to and control of resources in economic opportunities, in power and politics. In many countries of the world, women still do not have rights to own land, manage property, conduct family business or even travel without their husband’s consent. In many sub-Saharan African countries, Nigeria inclusive, women obtain land rights mainly through their husbands as long as the marriage lasts, and often they lose these rights at the demise of their husbands or when they are divorced, except of course in the South-West of Nigeria, where women have rights to own land whether married or single.

Arising therefore from the above graphic situation, advocacy over the years, has been that of women empowerment and the redirection of development policy, programmes and project to benefit the people for whom development has been planned. Since women constitute the majority of the poor and very poor, the global advocacy has been that of gender equality as the final goal and this is the focus of this paper.

Consequences of Gender Disparities

It must be said that despite efforts by Nigerian governments to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women, gender inequalities continue to persist. Women and girls continue to be marginalised and disadvantaged in all aspects of our national development. Added to this is poverty that has affected many people especially women. Poverty is not only the lack of income but is also linked to lack of access to political, economic, social and cultural resources. Thus, gender inequality causes and exacerbates the impact of poverty on women{The Punch,Friday,December,2006:16}.

Gender disparities in rights, limit the chances available to women in many spheres of life – often profoundly limiting the chances they have in the economy and in the society. Women and girls appear to have poorer access than the opposite sex to a number of resources. This reduces their chances and as with rights, limit their ability to participate in and enjoy the fruits of development. Lack of equal access to human resources has many facets involving social, physical and financial capital; employment and earnings. Such disparities, no doubt, reduce women’s ability to contribute to higher living standards for their families and to participate in development.

The point must be made here that education for instance, is basic to a person's ability to maximize any opportunity that may arise from development. To Ikpenwa{2005}, "education aims at the elimination of ignorance, poverty, disease and the provision of requisite knowledge for the empowerment needed for the true actualization of human potential. Education, whether formal or informal constitutes a vital instrument for the socio-economic development of any society as well as the upliftment of the individual concerned. Education remains the basic constraint to women development in Nigeria. This can be observed from the preference for male education and anti-women education, traces of which are still visible in some parts of Nigeria, particularly the far north. The consequent mental underdevelopment of women population according to Egonmwan {2000}, expresses

Itself in a double negative outcomes, namely, a few number of educated women and low educational quality or content of women education as most women shun courses in sciences, accounting and other fields that would equip them for work in modern sector.

There is no doubt that equal opportunity in all forms and levels of education is essential to enable women of all ages to make useful contributions to the society, thereby eliminating incidents of gender disparities. Discriminatory practices against women have denied them of contributions to nation-building in Nigeria. It is on this basis that Nigeria needs to promote gender equality in all spheres of our national life and strive to anchor its socio-economic development on gender equality.

Gender Equality and National Development

Gender equality in this context, means granting of equal opportunities to men and women to contribute towards the attainment of sustainable socio-economic and political development. It needs to be said that the public sector, civil society and the private sector constitute the main governance structure of any nation. In Nigeria, the public sector still remains the largest governance structure responsible for spearheading and facilitating socio-economic development. Therefore, how good is governance if almost half a segment of the population in Nigeria is negligibly involved in or excluded from governance and development process on the basis of sex? Gender equality must be deliberately promoted in order to attain good governance.

In the words of Maduwesi(2005), studies have shown that more equal participation in public life by men and women and greater women's rights are associated with cleaner business ethics and better governance, and that where the influence of women in public life is greater, the level of corruption is lower. She argued further that this should be a *raison detre* for more women to be in positions of authority in the labour force and in politics, since women can be an effective force for rule of law and good governance. Because women have higher standards of ethical behaviour or are averse to risks, even women in business are less likely to pay bribe to government officials. Therefore, active policies, programmes and legislation are required to redress long standing disparities between women and men in the areas of rights, resources, voice and governance.

According to Awopegba{2005:472}, a study by Howard Samuel, centred on the issue of gender in community development has revealed that when women were in

leadership positions and comprised a broad majority, development efforts were made comprehensive than in male-led groups. Women are generally involved in playing many roles in the community. Some of these roles are housing, economic development activities, organising, activism and advocating; and humanitarian work. Women have functioned and still do in groups and as individuals to revitalize and stabilize neighbourhoods and the society at large with the understanding that poverty is what kills and not hard work. Therefore, with deliberate government policy aimed at empowering women, Nigerian government and the entire society will be able to benefit from the untapped potentials in this usually marginalised segment of the national population.

Recent data according to Azuwike cited in Ainabor and Ovbiiagele{2006:9}, shows that women around the world are starting new businesses at increasing rates. Even in public institutions, especially in contemporary Nigeria where far-reaching reforms are taking the centre stage, women have proven to be reliable managers. Prominent examples are, Professor Dora Akunyili, former Director-General of NAFDAC, now Minister of Information, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, former Minister of Finance, now Managing Director of World Bank, Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili former Minister of Education, now Vice President, World Bank, Mrs Esther Nenedi Usman former Minister of Finance, Professor Leslye A Obiora formerly of Mines and Steel Development Ministry, Dame Virginia Etiaba, Deputy Governor of Anambra State, Mrs Cecelia Ibru, the former Managing Director of Oceanic Bank plc and a host of others. The rate at which they craft and implement development and growth strategies simply remain astounding. This has buttressed the enormous role that the few educated women in public and private positions have played and will continue to play in the development of Nigeria. Therefore, Nigeria will certainly be great politically, socially and economically if equal men and women are involved in governance.

According to Natsios{2003}, USAID Administrator, it is the contributions that women make to the economic, social and political lives of their nation, communities, and families and the next generation that constitute the key factors in effective development. More than 800 million women, according to him are economically active worldwide in agriculture, small and micro enterprise and increasingly, in the export processing industries that drive mobilization. Furthermore, women's unemployment rates were considered to be much higher than those of men and when employed, earn less than men for same work, hence women constitute 60 per cent of the rural poor. However, evidence abound in Nigeria that women are still not accorded equal opportunities to contribute towards development since political leadership positions are still largely occupied by men.

Women according UNDP Report{2003}, also remain vastly underrepresented in the executive branch of government. In no developing region did women make up more than 8% of the cabinet ministers in 1998. This is detrimental to the overall growth and development of the country as a nation. However, with increasing awareness of gender issues, and their effect on sustainable economic development, many economies are beginning to pay closer attention to issues of gender equity and equality.

It must be said that in spite of the contributions of women to national development, there still exists large gender disparities. Gender issues impose large

costs on the health and well-being of men, women and children and thus hinder development. Studies have shown that societies with large, and persistent gender disparities pay the price of more poverty, malnutrition, illness and other deprivations { Maduewesi,2005:185 }.

Gender inequality causes and increases impact of poverty on women. In terms of women's representation in parliament, countries such as Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania and Seychelles have achieved and some have exceeded the 30 per cent target of women's representation in parliament. Even in recent past, South Africa appointed a female Vice-President thereby achieving 43 per cent women's representation in the Cabinet. The situation in Nigeria has improved but very slowly with women still occupying less than stipulated 30 per cent of seats said to be reserved for women in the legislature by the current administration and in line with Affirmative Action of United States.

To Opeke cited in Awopegba {2004: 479}, women constitute about 37 per cent of the total labour force in Nigeria. As the nation develops, more women are contributing to economic activities in various areas (including activities previously exclusively reserved for men), and the contributions of women to economic development are becoming more publicly acknowledged.

On the whole, gender issues which emanate from gender inequalities exact very high human cost and affect countries' development prospects, thus compelling a case for action to improve the situation. The government has an important role to play in improving the well-being of both women and men and in doing so, will be able to capture the enormous social benefit associated with bettering the absolute and relative status of the female sex.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to critically analyse the place of gender equality in promoting good governance and socio-economic development in Nigeria. The paper revealed that more equal participation in public life by men and women, and greater women's rights can promote cleaner business ethics and better governance. However, in spite of the contributions of women to the national development, there still exists large gender disparities in Nigeria. In terms of women's representation in parliament, while countries like Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania and Seychelles have achieved and or have exceeded the 30 per cent target, Nigeria, the acclaimed 'giant' of Africa has continued to trail behind with women still occupying less than the stipulated 30 per cent of seats reserved for women in the legislature by the current administration.

Since independence, governance in Nigeria has been dominated by males with no regard to gender equality and yet, not much has been achieved in terms of good governance and socio-economic development. It is therefore the position of this paper that politically, women's quota of seats in the legislature and other positions should be determined and implemented by the Nigerian government as a matter of deliberate policy and legislation. Nigeria can only attain good governance and national development if both men and women alike can aspire to any political position on equal terms.

Also, development planners and policy makers must endeavour to involve males and females of proven integrity who are gender sensitive in the process of policy formulation and implementation. This, no doubt, will help to bridge gender gaps in Nigeria.

Finally, in order to promote gender equality, advocacy by government and non-governmental organizations should include sensitizing the people to understand that both men and women are partners in the development process. To achieve this purpose, government should integrate the media in mass enlightenment campaigns and constructive propaganda.

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