

EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

It has been the practice in Nigeria and other developing countries of the world that women are being marginalized especially in the social, political and cultural spheres of life, including attaining equal educational opportunity with men. This practice has hindered the women from contributing meaningfully towards the sustainable economic development of the nation. Women empowerment through education is seen as an encouragement to achieving greater economic development. It is within this scenario that this paper identifies education as a potent tool for achieving women empowerment for a sustainable national development. Based on this, it recommended. That women should be efficiently empowered through direct access to education and information, participating in politics, governance and decision making, cooperation and encouragement from men, eliminating cultural and traditional practices meted out against women, given equal opportunities to both sexes in all spheres of life and promoting gender sensitization at all levels in the society.

Keywords: Education, Women, Empowerment and Development

Introduction

Education can be seen as a means of gaining knowledge and ability by which one can transform the world and maximize individual's liberation. This suggests that knowledge gained in the process of education should be a means of understanding and critically analyzing social, political and economic forces thereby raising the level of individuals' consciousness. It is a process which can empower men and women alike to see things in the right perspective. According to the National Policy on Education (2012) education is an instrument for national development.

It is against such background that this study is arguing that any process of education whether formal or non-formal should be able to make individuals better adjusted to the changes in the society. In this connection therefore no government-oriented development can afford to helplessly watch women being drowned in total or partial darkness of ignorance. They need to be empowered and encouraged to participate fully in the national development. They need to be seen and heard concerning national issues also affecting their lives. Since majority of women live in the rural areas throughout the country, it is through the process of education that empowerment of women in economics, politics, education, social and cultural activities could be achieved or made possible.

UNESCO has submitted that the most exploited section of the poor in any country is women. The causes for gender imbalances in development are the in-built biases in the conceptualization of development strategies and the poor data bases on which such plans are created. It is important to note also that empowerment of women is largely dependent on how the flow of power is negotiated in favour of women. This in turn is dependent upon the political muscles that women have in demanding for their empowerment in all aspects of life in the country. This is why the celebration of 1975 as International Women's year and 1975-1985 as the United Nation's Decade for women generated a high level of interest in all aspects of the conditions of women including in politics, social economic and academic arenas. Thus, the need for total emancipation of our women through education and the search for knowledge on crucial national issues.

Additionally, grassroots enlightenment campaign to educate our fellow women who are wallowing in poverty, disease and ignorance is imperative. This is because one's educational background is a vital determinant of the quality of labour and living. Hence this chapter is set out to address the following questions: what is empowerment of women? Empowerment of women for what? And what is the relationship between women empowerment and education?

What is Women Empowerment?

Empowerment according to China and Macaulay (2009) refers to increase in the political, social and economic strength of an individual and communities. It can also be referred to as a process of opening up something that has absolutely unlimited potentials. Empowerment according to Weidemann (1989) reduces vulnerability, decreased dependency, implies action not passivity, and it means being at the centre, not on the periphery of affairs. This suggests that individuals so empowered will be involved in the crucial issues of the nation. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who was elected to the Liberian Senate in 1985, defined empowerment as the broadening of choices, the expansion of options and alternatives available to women in determining the course of events which will shape their own lives and determine their own destinies. This implies that women should take part in decision making especially on issues that affect their lives in the country.

The idea of empowerment of women (Everett, 1991) was re-choked when 730 women from 40 different countries around the world met in Washington DC in 1989 for the fourth International Conference of Association for Women in Development. According to Everett (1991)

Empowerment of Women is a means of mainstreaming women in development. It involves the power and authority women have in participating and contributing meaningfully to national development. Empowerment of women therefore calls for greater integration of women in development. It is important to note that in the past, women empowerment was limited to economic sphere with a narrow set of options aimed at increasing women income. With a greater awareness of the importance of women's contribution to national development, there is need to shift the past focus to political, educational, health and legal empowerment as well.

Educational Empowerment

Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process.

Education is important for everyone but it is especially significant for women. This is true not only because education is an entry point to other opportunities but also because education empowerment of women can have multiple effects within the family and the society at large. Investing in girl's education is one of the most effective ways to eradicate poverty.

Educational empowerment goes beyond the acquisition of literacy. Educational empowerment means here that women would go ahead to acquire as much education as men are encouraged to acquire. In order to achieve this

equal opportunity for access to education would need to be vigorously worked for by those women who are already schooled.

Political Empowerment

For too long a period, women have been left out of political discussion and arrangement in the country. The reasons for this situation range from women's inability to organize themselves on the issue of high illiteracy among women.

The way to bring about a rapid political empowerment of women is first to appoint literate women into positions of responsibility and secondly to have literate women themselves improve the lot of the illiterate women through raising their literacy level and equipping them with vocational skill.

Health Empowerment

Naturally, the women folk is the more disadvantaged in terms of health matters. To empower women in the area of health, information relating to their health would need to be made available to them through education. They would equally need to be taught effective techniques for applying the health information they may have gathered.

Legal Empowerment

The ability to know one's rights and to be able to enforce the protection of those rights brings about legal empowerment. Through the process of education, women must improve on knowledge of their rights and must devise all means to protect them.

Empowerment of Women for What?

There are many reasons why women need to be empowered in order to participate actively in issues of national concern. Empowerment of women for political, educational and economic emancipation; empowerment of women for organizing and creating awareness that has great impact on economic empowerment of women. Hence empowerment of women for full integration in development at all levels (Esu, 1996).

It has been observed that in many rural areas in Nigeria, women contribute a substantial portion of the labour required for infrastructural development (Esu, Essang 1992). It is against such background that economic empowerment of women is imperative and necessary to enhance potentials at the grassroots level. Economic empowerment therefore must be backed up by sound education. The woman needs to be free from all the stereotypes, prejudices and misconceptions of womanhood and come to know why she was created.

In addition to what has earlier been said, educational empowerment refers to the ability and power of women to use the knowledge and skills acquired in the process of education to adapt to social and cultural changes and participate in political economic activities within the society. Women Reeducation to broaden their ideaƑ knowledge, attitudes, values and perceptions on which they can build a better life.

For any empowerment of women to be meaningful, there must be women leaders who can also be involved in making decision in the highest circle of the government. It is through such process that women's voices can be heard and actions taken.

Furthermore, when you have women in power as national leaders, more emphasis is placed on development programmes that empower women economically, educationally and politically. Typical example of this is when Mrs. Maryam Babangida was in the corridor of power. It was through her effort that women education decree was promulgated and better life programme for rural women introduced. Additionally, the National Commission for Women was established to champion the cause of women in Nigeria. Equally important is the fact of the establishment of Ministry of Women Affairs headed by a woman. It is interesting to note that despite the institutional and attitudinal barriers, the percentage of women in key positions in government at this time has increased by more than 30%.

The provision of non formal or adult education can go a long way to educate them politically. It has also been observed that women are not participating in making decision on sensitive areas of our political system. This is why these authors call for political empowerment of women in sensitive areas. Indeed, women should also be making decisions about resource allocation and shaping an agenda based on social services as well as on human capacity building. An examination of women's political participation reveals that women are still a small percentage of national legislators. Women often constitute about 50% of the electorate yet they amounted only to less than 20% of national legislators.

Furthermore, there is still a gap between elite women and grassroots. It is the view of the author that the uniting force that can narrow such gap is through education of adult women on the need and importance of empowerment of women development. If such gap is narrowed and such education provided, then women will now see why they can participate in politics and can also run for presidency or governorship in this country.

Lack of women in political leadership position in great number is an important reason for women's lack of political empowerment. It is therefore argued that one of the strategies to be adopted is to create critical mass of women leaders who will move other women into political leadership roles.

The dynamics of power and the conjunction of political forces can be changed by educational and social mobilization of women at grassroots.

Empowerment of Women and Education

This chapter looks at education as a great instrument for women empowerment in all facets of the nation. It is believed that women at the grassroots level can be mobilized and educated effectively for full participation in politics, economic and other national issues. It should be realized that education does not only prepare women to participate in development but also afford their off-spring opportunity for participation as the adage goes "if you educate a man, you educate an individual, but when you educate a woman, you educate a nation". This is necessary because they would be able to generate informed discussion over issues especially events and national issues such as family planning. They would be in position to benefit from informed choices of occupations.

The participation of women in adult education should become more pronounced. It is through this process many mothers in the rural settings will become more knowledgeable as to adopting the strategies which would maximize the life chances of their children, by taking decision in marital, economic and medical areas.

The right to self determination is essential for the empowerment of women in Nigeria. Women need to be educated on the importance of education. Women groups should evolve more associations and credit societies to articulate gender interest. Such process will promote literacy among women.

Another way to promote women's full and equal participation is by devising appropriate development policies based on accurate data. However, accurate data on women's activities and contribution to economic and social production in either rural or urban areas in Nigeria are not known. Structural adjustment policies in Nigeria have been even more devastating for women's educational progress. A situation where preference as to who should come in the family where there are boys and girls. If many women are literates, then they would be more aware of what to do and how to do them.

Finally, women's representatives in all fields of endeavour can only be commensurate with their numerical strength when more women have access to education. According to Esu, Essang, it is only education that can remove the societal "fetters and chains" from women so that they can develop side by side with their male counterparts. It is hoped that women could be empowered to better their lives if they are taught the basic principles. All development programmes depend on education for the simple reason that they all required

skilled workers at all levels to manage capital, technology, other services and administration in every sector.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the concept of empowerment of women through education. It has been noted that women need to be empowered economically, educationally and politically in order to make their impact felt in the country as partners in progress. Education has been seen as a great asset for women empowerment. Women are the majority of rural dwellers; education is therefore a means of meeting their basic needs. It is therefore suggested that a well-articulated and systematic educational programme designed for women is needed in order to meet the goals of empowerment of women in development. There is also need for educational programmes provided in all local government areas to improve the lot of rural women. Grassroots enlightenment campaign to educate rural women who are wallowing in poverty and ignorance is necessary in order to achieve political and economic empowerment.

In realization of the importance of social mobilization and rural development effort, it is suggested that both educational and rural women should come together to tackle their problems as partners in progress. Education is the only cure as well as engaging in top policy makers in dialogue with grassroots women on crucial issues affecting women.

Recommendations

1. Women should be empowered both educationally, politically and economically for them to attain equal access to education with men. Efforts to empower women should be strengthened and expanded at both local and national levels.
2. The government can adopt and enforce deliberate policy framework and programmes for empowering women by all stakeholders in the society by giving women direct access to productive resources such as land, income and credit facilities in the public or private sector.
3. The church and the entire society should abolish some cultural and traditional practices meted out against women through policy framework and awareness campaigns at both state and federal levels.
4. The government should promote gender sensitization at all levels to bring equality in employment, school admission and other such opportunities.
5. Parents should give equal educational opportunities to both male and female children. They should stop attributing certain roles in the family to either their male children or the female children.

6. Women should encourage their female children more to take up areas of study and training that are pertinent to political carriers such as law and political science. All stakeholders should make efforts, collectively and advocate that women be involved in politics through awareness campaigns, seminars and workshops, among others.
7. Government as a matter of urgency should show adequate political will and commitment to the issue of gender equity and empowerment of women by implementing, enforcing and achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

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