

GRASSROOTS MOBILIZATION, WOMEN ASSOCIATION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

The present study evaluates the role of women associations in national development. Specifically, it identifies and evaluates the various women associations and the type of development projects they embarked upon. It also look at the areas to which government, private organizations and NGOs have assisted the association's efforts. With a sample size of one hundred and sixty (160) respondents from three women organizations in Oron Federal Constituency of Akwa Ibom State, it was observed that, projects which respondents have participated in, and which have contributed to community and national development include, roads, markets, educational, and town-hall projects. With regards to personal welfare, members have accepted that, financial empowerment, enlightenment and political awareness among others, have been their personal experience. The study suggests that, leaders of women associations should be more proactive and sensitive towards the goals they have chosen to pursue in order to achieve sustainable development through women associations.

The development process affects women and men in different ways. According to Momsen (2004), the effects of colonialism, the peripheral position of poor countries of the South, the penetration of capitalism, all lead to the modernization and restructuring of subsistence and centrally planned economies, which increase the gender based disadvantages. Scholars such as Abasiokong (1989), Robinson (2006), Udoh (2008) and Nzinjah (2010) have argued differently that, the modern sector has taken over many of the economic activities of women, such as food processing and making of cloths, which had long been the means by which women supported themselves and their families. Although it has been argued that relieving women of these time consuming responsibilities has given them the freedom to find other, perhaps better sources to earn their income, it is observed that, majority of better-paid jobs involving new technology still go to men whose income is less likely to be spent on the family (Also see Egboh, 1987; Udoh, 2011 and Kamer-Mbote, 2003).

It has been argued elsewhere that modernization of agriculture has altered the division of labour between the sexes, increases women's dependent status as well as their work load, a situation which places women at a disadvantage in many societies (Udoh, 2008). Also in many underdeveloped societies, women do not often have control over resources such as land and water, and are generally excluded from access to family land. According to Ekong (2003), male mobility is higher than female, both between places and between jobs, and more women are being left alone to support children. Momsen (2004) also argues that, in some communities, especially in the Middle East, South Asia and Latin America, women cannot do paid work or travel without their husbands or father's written permissions. According to her, women also carry a double or even triple burden of work as they have to cope with domestic work, child care and subsistence food production, in addition to an expanding involvement in paid employment.

Scholars like Ogbuagu (1989), Awa (2001) and Ibeze (2006) believe that everywhere, women work longer hours than men. According to these scholars, the pressure on gender relations of the changing status of women and of rapid economic restructuring, combined with growing impoverishment at the household level as well as discrimination at the social and occupational levels for many are crucial to the

failure of women in their contributions to national economic development (Also see Fernando, 1987 and Udoh, 2010). In realization of the above, the United Nations in 1946, set up the commission on the status of women to recommend and report to the Economic and Social Council on how to promote women's rights in politics, economic, civil, social and educational fields, and to make recommendations on "urgent problems" requiring immediate attention in the field of women's rights (UN, 1994). By the turn of the century, there had been three United Nations Development Decades (UNDD) conferences, while the Decade for Women (1976-85) culminated in a conference in Nairobi (Kenya) in 1985. At the conclusion of the first two Development Decades, it was found that the extent of poverty, disease, illiteracy and unemployment in the south, and in particular among women had doubled. Unfortunately, the UNs Decade for women saw only very limited changes in favour of women while institutionalized male dominance keeps increasing, especially in less-developed societies. (Also see Uwar and Gbana, 2004; Okah, 2006, and Akpan, 2005).

In recognition of the apparent slow pace of change on women's socio-economic status and their in-effective contributions to national development, the UN Decade on Women evolved a new strategy to mobilise women in those societies. An awareness on the need to consider women when planning for development was therefore considered as an appropriate strategy. In the United States, Obasi, Emmanuel and Michael (1999) observe that, the Percy Amendment Act of 1973 ensured that women had to be specially included in all projects of the Agency for International Development. In line with the above, the British Commonwealth established a Women and Development Programme (WDP) in 1980 a strategy that was latter supported by all member countries. According to Awa (2001), Sanco (2006) and Udoh (2010), women's organizations and Network at the community and national levels have come to play an increasingly important role in the initiation and implementation of development projects worldwide.

In Nigeria, as in other developing countries, in spite of the challenges facing women, their role in national development cannot be underestimated. According to Ogbuagu (1989), Imoudu, (2011), Ekong (2003) and Okah (2006), women in Nigeria are vital tools for socio-economic development. Their contributions to the development of the family, community and the nation in the midst of discrimination and segregation are commendable. Abasiekong (1989), Ekong (1988) and Akpan (2005) observe differently that, Nigerian women are the major source of labour in food and fibre production. Other noticeable contributions have been recorded in trade, business, education, health, administration, security, and politics. These, according to Nzinjah (2010), depend on the level to which they are mobilized incorporated into women associations.

In support of the above view, Ama (2014) argues that, grassroots mobilization and women association could provide a necessary platform which women could be incorporated into the development fold of the society. Mobilization and membership in association have also been regarded as necessary tools toward achieving women's participation in national development and as a strategy for women's empowerment. Women association and grassroots mobilization are also necessary for rural women to pull their energies and efforts together to achieve corporate and individual goals. In recognition of the above, the present study seeks to investigate how grassroots mobilization and membership in women association help women to make useful contributions to their community in particular and the entire nation in general. Specifically, the study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To identify various types of women association and the influence of such associations in the lives of its members in Oron Federal Constituency.
- ii. To examine the goals of these associations vis-à-vis improvement of living standard of its members.
- iii. Identify their challenges and how they could be ameliorated, and
- iv. To make useful recommendations that could improve the management of women associations for sustainable development in Oron Federal Constituency.

In order to achieve the above goals, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- i. Are there women associations in the study area?
- ii. What are the goals of these associations?

- iii. What challenges exist that inhibits their goal attainment and how could these challenges be ameliorated?

Methodology and Design

The study is carried out in Oron Local Government Federal Constituency of Akwa Ibom State, South-South Nigeria. This comprises Oron, Mbo and Orue Offong Oruk Local Government Area. Data for the study were collected between February and April, 2014. A purposive sampling technique was used for sample selection. Cluster sampling method was used for the study. One each from Oron, Mbo, and Orue Offong Oruko Local Government Areas, respectively. Twenty percent (20 percent) of members in each of the association were systematically selected for interview. In all, one hundred and sixty (160) women respondents, divided into five (5) sections were used for data collection. Section A elicited data on respondents' personal characteristics. Section B elicited information on the knowledge of women associations in the area. Section C elicited answer on the goals of women association in the area, while section D elicited answer on the challenges of women associations that inhibit the attainment of their goals, while Section E examines measures that could be adopted to solve these challenges. Likert scale analytical technique was adopted for data analysis. Responses were scored from strongly agree (4), agree (3), strongly disagree (2), disagree (1). Responses were judged using either the "agree" or "disagree" standpoint. Simple percentage was used in interpreting the data.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopted the following theories to explain the phenomenon of women association and national development in Oron Federal Constituency. These include, the Welfare Theory according to Momsen (2004), Women in Development theory (WID), Gender and Development theory (GAD), as well as Empowerment theory (UN, 1975; Young, 2002 and Parpart, 2002). According to Momsen (2004), empowerment was regarded as a weapon of improvement for the weak which was wielded through grassroots and participatory activities. Having realized the benefits of empowerment other nations adopted the term particularly from the 1990s in their development programmes to achieve the same objective. Empowerment is therefore a programme designed to improve the people's condition economically.

Also, membership in development association has been identified. Several countries and institutions have come to see membership in associations as a means for enhancing efficiency and participation in development activities without changing previous development strategies. Several development literatures see women association as a method of social transformation and achieving gender equality. Again, Uchendu (1968) explains that empowerment through association is a broad development process that enables people to gain self-confidence and self-esteem. According to Abasiokong (1988), allowing both men and women to actively participate in development decision-making enhances their level of involvement in such project. The association approach is associated with the use of participatory approach of development and often meant working with women at the community level in order to build organizational skills.

In Nigeria and other developing societies, women's potentials are being harnessed through membership in co-operative associations as a strategy for economic empowerment. Women have been organized by government and Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) under associations, unions and co-operative societies. Through such bodies, they are able to obtain short-term loans and are also trained for improved agricultural practices, trade and other economic ventures. At the national level, the Women for Change and Development Initiative (WCIDI) of the former First Lady, Dame Patience Jonathan, boosted the participation of Nigeria's women both in politics and other economic endeavours. The programme had a spill-over effect at the State and Local Government levels. The programme objectives which include the liberation of Nigeria's Women from the bondage of traditional and gender discrimination seek to promote the participation of women in national development. It has actually increased the level of women's participation in politics by securing at least, the 30 percent position for

Nigeria's women in politics. Other benefits include financial assistance for agricultural activities, trade and education.

In line with the above, the present study views association membership as a strategy through which grassroots mobilization could be achieved. It is a strategy by which women could be encouraged to participate or contribute towards national development. Evidence from Ekong (2006), Udoh (2010), Charles (2010) and John (2011) shows that, empowerment of women particularly women in rural communities is usually through associations. It reduces women's total dependence on their husbands as the bread-winner of the family. It has also encouraged women to start up small-scale business of their own, thereby making them financial contributors to the welfare of their homes. Studies by Ekong (1988) also show that empowerment of women through co-operative associations has come to be recognized in South-South Nigeria as a strategy for reducing the family burden on men. Evidence shows that, women are now contributing to their children's education, building of family houses as well as contributing to community development projects. When they join co-operative associations their chances for success in business opened up financial support for them.

It has been argued by Okonkwo (2001) that empowerment of women may not necessarily be financial alone. Studies show that empowerment could come in the form of training, provision of farm or industrial inputs or by encouragement to join co-operative associations. Over the years, women associations have helped women to secure soft financial loans that put them at financial independence, start up their small-scale industries, build personal houses or even sponsor their children in schools. It has also helped to narrow the gender gap in a male dominated society as ours. Association therefore forms the basis within which the present study derives its explanatory and theoretical linkage.

Appendix I

Table 1: Demographic Characteristic of Respondents

	Characteristics of respondent	Frequency	percentage
i.	Gender:		
	Male	27	15.9
	Female	133	84.1
	Total	160	100.0
ii	Age (years):		
	20-24	21	13.1
	25-30	44	27.5
	31-35	58	36.3
	36-40	21	13.1
	41-45	11	6.9
	46-50	3	1.9
	51 and Above	2	1.3
Total	160	100.0	
iii	Educational Level:		
	Primary 6 and below	43	26.9
	Below secondary school	62	38.8
	SSCE/WAEC	24	15.0
	NCE, OND	17	10.6
	HND and Decrees	14	8.7
	Total	160	100.0

iv.	Occupation:		
	Farming	48	30.0
	Trading	6	39.3
	Civil Servant	19	11.9
	Business	23	14.4
	Unemployed	7	4.4
		160	100.0
v	Monthly Estimated Income:		
	below ₦5,000	21	13.1
	₦6,000-10,000	62	38.8
	₦11,000-15,000	47	29.4
	₦16,000-20,000	21	13.1
	₦20,000 and above	9	5.6
	Total	160	100.0

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2014

Results and Discussion

i. **Personal Characteristics of Respondents:** From the analysis of the responses one hundred and sixty (160) respondents, it is observed that 15.8 percent were males while 84.1 percent were females. Also, 13.1 percent were of age between 20-24 years, 27.5 percent fall between 25-30 years while 36.3 percent fall between 31 and 35 years of age. 13.1 percent were between the ages of 36-40 years, 6.9 percent between the ages of 41 and 45 years while 1.9 percent were between the ages of between the age of 51 years and above. Majority of the respondents were graduates of primary and secondary schools while a large majority have incomes ranging from between N6,000 -10,000 and N11,000, N15,000.

ii. **Identification and Membership in Women Association in the Area:** On the question: Are there women associations in the area? In answering the question, respondents identified several women development associations such as Eyo Abasi Women Association in Oron Local Government Area, Advanced Ladies women Association in Mbo Local Government Area, progressive Women Association, Beach Women Association, and Like Minds Women Association, all in Oron Local Government Area. Other associations identified by respondents include Methodist Women Association, Apostolic Church Women Association, Catholic Women Association, Redeemed Women Association, among others. Generally, if the one hundred and thirty three respondents, more than three-quarters (75.9 percent) agree that they belong to one women association or another. Also, 23 or 17.3 percent belonged to more than one women association in the area. On the question: To what extent does membership in women association influenced women's participation in individual, group and community development projects, Analysis of descriptive statistics of Eyo-Abasi Women Association indicates that, the organization's most prominent activity was that of uniting all the women in the community (3.28). Also, with a score of 3.23, it was observed that the Advanced Ladies Association has created opportunity for increased financial autonomy for women. Also, with a mean score of X3.05, it was observed that Women Association creates avenues for women to be involved in funding of community projects by making some financial contributions, while it was also observed with a X core of 2.95 that women Association has created awareness for women to participate in political activities. Assessing the impacts of Women Association further, findings from the study show that these associations have created unity among women (X3.28). It has also enhanced the way that women share their experiences (X3.23), while some women (X3.02) have reported that the association has created financial pool that has promoted their financial independence. Again, it has also been observed that at Eyo-Abasi, political participation has increased among members of women association than non-members.

iii. **Goals of Women Association in the Area:** Findings from the study show that, about three-fifth, (78.6%) of the respondents claimed that their associations received technical assistance from government

in many areas. About sixty-five percent (65.0%) of the respondents claimed to have benefited from training assistance on family planning, child spacing, immunization and child care. Udoh, (2010) confirmed earlier that government has provided the rural women with improved cassava cuttings, fertilizers, and training on how to use these new products. The study also confirms that government has been assisting women associations on how to render proper account (auditing) for those who are engaging in petty trading, and also assist in monitoring and supervision of their businesses. The implications of the above is that, government is interested in improving the welfare of women and such advantage could be realized if women form and belong to registered women organizations. According to Ekong (2003), this is one of the ways that the gender gap between men and women could be minimized. It also acts as a support to the efforts of women in toward economic development of their various communities.

iv. **Challenges Faced by Women Association in their Efforts to Contribute to National Development:** Findings from the present study shows that all the respondents (100.0 percent) have traced their problems to the gender discrimination and obnoxious socio-cultural beliefs in the society. For instance, sixty-three percent (63.0%) of the respondents agree that gender discrimination has placed women at a disadvantaged condition and thereby making them vulnerable to abuse, denial, rejection and discrimination. Again, eighty-seven (87.0%) of the respondents observed that socio-cultural factors such as not allowing women to have a share in the family property, placing women lower than men in the family's social scale of preference in training and education, the incidence of early marriage and early child birth also combine to reduce the social worth of women, and therefore reduce their chances of contributing to national development. From the findings above, it could be deduced that, if women form and belong to associations, they would have a united front to make their plights known in the society. Such move would encourage government and donor agencies to support them in their economic ventures.

Conclusion

From this study, it can be concluded that in spite of several challenges, women have been involved in development activities such as financial contributions, co-operative farming, road maintenance, building of schools, provision of water, electricity and health needs to their various communities. Majority of women identified to have made the above contributions were members of one women organisation or another. The findings show that women associations have assisted their members in various ways through financial assistance, technical assistance, training and education, enlightenment, funding of projects, creation of awareness as well as unity among the women. Government has, from time to time assisted women through their membership in development associations. This therefore means that, there is a positive relationship between belonging to women development association and contributions to community and national development.

Recommendations

To encourage increased membership in women association for positive development, this study recommends that:

- Operators of women organisation should be more proactive and sensitive towards the goals they have chosen to pursue.
- Training and research on women organisation be intensified, particularly, on its functionaries as this is observed to be the basis for its sustenance and survival.
- More emphasis should be placed on group projects by association members as this is more realizable than individual projects.
- Government should increase its level of assistance to women associations in the country in other areas particularly on grants, soft loans, farm inputs and technical assistance.

By so doing, the gender gap in our societies will be reduced and women will contribute more to national development.

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