

# VOCATIONAL COUNSELLING AND THE STATUS OF NIGERIAN RURAL WOMEN SKILL DEVELOPMENT: CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE

*Rev. Canon B.C. Okeke (Ph. D.) and Mrs. Obidiegwu Uche. J*

## **Abstract**

Women play very important role in national development. The roles relate to a complete range of socio-economic activities. They (women) are not only users of basic services, bearers and socializes of children and keepers of the home, they also represent a productive potential which is not being fully tapped. Thus, the paper sought to ascertain the socio-educational and technological status of women in Nigeria. The paper equally looked at the standard set by the United Nations on gender issues and how that is being met in Nigeria. It also considered the effort of NGO's and other professional standards of Nigerian rural women, and highlighted some tactics and strategies for overcoming problems rural women encounter in the process of seeking better living. Recommendations and conclusion were made.

## **Introduction**

Women constitute a gender and not a social class. There are different categories of women with differing access to the means of production, access to power, wealth and influence. These involve urban, rural women, poor and rich women, working class and bourgeois women. Rural women are those Nigerian women who work long hard hours as wives, mothers, domestic planners, breadwinners at farming, fishing, trading or weaving with little resources, with children on their backs, fetching water from streams and ponds far away from home and far away from her other responsibilities of fetching firewood under the rain, or sun. The above description differs from that of bourgeois or pretty bourgeois women who mostly live in modern homes with a number of house helps, including personal drivers. They are wealthy and influential, and some control means of production. There is the third group of Nigerian women who are complete housewives, purely dependent on their husbands in everything, because their husbands forbid them from working because of their cultural influence. The fourth group of women are the widows who are in their homes in the villages, forbidden by cultural practices to participate effectively in any social and economic issues that will help the family, because it is a taboo to do so until some number of years she has to mourn the spouse have expired, and in process of mourning, the properties of the deceased husband will not belong to her but to the family of the husband. She can only be allowed to share a little of the deceased spouse's properties including land if she allows herself to be abused sexually by the relations of the husband. The children, if any, will be shared to the relations as house helps. The fifth group of women are those that end up in their long suffering and persecution as prostitutes either because of childlessness, divorce or death of their spouse. While there may be difference between women, in Nigeria women are .subordinated and discriminated against on the basis of their gender. This discrimination manifests in various ways regardless of their class position in the society to which the woman belongs. Women suffer discrimination on the basis of culture. They are socialized to accept inferior positions in the society. This is reinforced by the patriarchal system, which also manifests itself in culture. Most peasant women suffer as a result of their class position within the social structure. They also suffer as a result of gender. The social, economic and technological status of women is actually difficult to be ascertained. Since majority of women are in the rural areas and since the majority of those who live in the villages are certainly peasant and poor (INDP, 2000), this paper will assume that a majority of Nigerian women are poor and engage in rural agricultural, petty trading, and other minor vocational craft. Those who are rich and of high socio-economic status are insignificant. In spite of their social, economic and technology position, they form the basis and vita! ingredient of every family.

## **Socio-Educational and Technology Status of Women**

The social status of Nigerian women could be assessed primarily on the basis of their access to education, health and how they relate to the law, or extent to which they have basic human rights. Issues of family rights, marriage, employment, cultural rights, etc., are important in assessing the social status of Nigerian women. It is an open secret that right from the home, female children are denied the privilege of pursuing academic interest. Men are given wider preference with respect to education. Parents are more concerned for their male children to be useful in the society than female children. This is because they believe that the male children will inherit the home and keep the lineage and name of the family alive, while the female children will finally be married outside the family and become another person's property. They feel that training a female child is like training her for another person (the husband) to gain: it is sheer waste of

money. Even now, in spite of the efforts of government and non-governmental agencies such as UNDP, UNESCO, and UNICEF, many families are yet to encourage the education of the girl child. In the Islamic schools, the ratio of girls to boys shows that girls are still lagging behind.

It is quite unfair that in most families where resources are inadequate to (rain all children in the family, it is often the girls that will be left at home to help in the house keeping and learn a trade. A majority of young persons on the street hawking some wares are girls who are not going to school. And often these girls that are hawking become victims of violence and rape and other vices that are prevalent in the third world. Some of the girls who are likely to be virgins before they start the hawking at the age of seven to eighteen will be exposed to sexual abuse of men in uncompleted buildings or craftsmen's workshops or bachelors' homes. Thus, they can be preganated or infected with diseases like HIV, AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases.

In the Northern parts of Nigeria where most women are in Kule or Purdah, the women are highly restricted from going out for any social activity or school because of (heir Muslim culture. Their girls are not allowed to go to school either; they are only used as messengers to carry messages around for them. They end up growing as illiterates, will marry early, have many children and be like their mothers, thus replicating a culture of poverty, illiteracy and female oppression (Okeke, 1996).

It appears to be a national culture that most girls that are able to go to school are discouraged from taking Maths and science subjects that will eventually lead the person into Technology and other science-related professional courses. In some girls' schools, the science and technical subjects are not even included in the syllabus.

Girls are encouraged to offer Home Economics since they will end up in their homes as house wives. Others are asked to study Arts subjects such as English, Religious Studies and Education core course to enable her teach Arts subjects. Most women are being discouraged from getting higher degrees. Those who do so may, not have husbands. Men may be scared to marry such, even among the men elite.

In fact, the status of women in the area of Science and technology education continues to be a concern because girls still register less than boys in every university and polytechnic entrance examination in the country (JAMB, 2002). Very few women are into the prestigious profession like medicine, pharmacy, accounting, engineering, 'architecture and the natural sciences. The society has instead chosen some career lines for women. A woman is more likely to be a nurse where a man is a doctor, a secretary, a man her boss: a catering and domestic worker, a textile worker where a man will be her manager, sales manager, productions manager, personnel and general manger. Almost all nursery and primary school teachers in Nigeria are women. However, the head teacher is usually a man especially in the arts and humanities subjects are women dominates but most principals of secondary schools are men. Interestingly, in the Arts and Humanities where women are more in teaching and learning in the junior schools men still head. That is the same in university education. Fewer women are seen as academic staff in Universities NUC Report, 2002).

The implications is that women occupy jobs that have less social value and prestige, lower wage levels and usually, dead jobs that have no prospects of promotion. They have been brain washed by the society whose culture and social lives (Nigeria) are male favoured, that science and technology-based courses are too difficult and are therefore for the male, since males are used to handling difficult things both mentally and physically.

There have been series of attempt by the stakeholders in pressuring the government to change the trend. In 1974, the Federal Ministry of Education established women's unit to allow for consistent policy towards providing more education to females. In 1977. the National Policy on Education was introduced and it was reviewed in 1981. These also reinforced the need to encourage parents to send their daughters to school. The gender discrimination of the female in Science and Technology was highlighted in the National Educational Rolling Plan of 2001. Federal Government Colleges for girls were also established in all the states as mixed colleges, so that the psychology of girls over science and technology will be eliminated.

The established of these colleges was a right step but it has not helped matters because more males students are seen in these mixed schools than girls. The percentage of male over female has been 70% to 30% (ERDC, 2002). In 1986, a blueprint on women in Science and technology education was initiated and a blue print on mass literacy was adopted in September 1989. These were to promote every aspect and form of governmental and non-governmental agencies to all levels. The major objectives of the blue prints include:

To awaken the awareness of people to the fact that equal science and technology educational opportunity is the right of all citizens irrespective of sex, age, locality, creed or social status and should therefore be made available to all;

To educate parents and the general public so as to bring about a change in attitude towards

women educational programmes;

To orient the attitudes of all females, irrespective of age, towards science and technology education; and

To awaken the consciousness of all women to the need for the development of a positive self-image, self-reliance, overcoming inequality, economic growth of women, reducing poverty of women and increasing their personal welfare.

The essence was the provision of more educational opportunities for girls from primary to tertiary levels and the promotion of science among females. In addition to this, Akinsinde (2000) stated that government at all levels as a matter of urgent national policy should establish and enforce a law that will discourage withdrawal of girls from primary schools to tertiary education for whatever reason. Also, policy on hawking and street trading is to be prohibited by law. And all levels of education should be tuitions-free for girls. Girls' schools are now to be headed by female principals and co-educational schools will be at least female principal and co-educational schools will have at least a female vice-principal, in fact, all these have been the locus of the Women Affairs Ministry in Nigeria and Association of Women Vocational Counsellors in Nigeria for the past three years.

Women in fact constitute the majority of illiterates in Nigeria. At all levels of education, males represent a higher ratio to females (Fos, 1995). By 1991, the proportion of literate men to women was 54:31 and the total female literacy rate was far below 15% while that of men was above 40%. A more recent survey shows that 83.7% of females had no form of education in the North Eastern States of Nigeria (Borno, Yobe, Adamawa and Bauchi). The North Western States (Kano, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Jigawa, etc) had 87.8% of women who had no formal education. The case in the Southern States was slightly better. In the South East (Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Rivers, Imo, Cross Rivers, Anambra), only 36.2% of women had no formal education.

In the South West (Ogun, Lagos, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, etc), at least 26.1% of Taraba, Kwara, Niger, Kogi) are in between the south and north in terms of average figures of illiteracy of women (UNDP, 1996).

The enrolment of girls in all levels of education in Nigeria demonstrates discrimination against females (Maduewesi, 1996)- There are remarkable disparities according to state and region (NERD, 2001). In all states and regions of Nigeria, women lag behind men in access to education. For instance, only 7.6% of women interviewed in the Northern part of Nigeria had some primary education whereas in the Southern part of Nigeria, at least 25.9% had. In the case of primary school enrolment, only 12% of female children of school age are registered in the primary school in the north, 44.44% of girls are in school. By the time the girls have reached secondary school age, only 40% of them in Northern Nigeria are allowed to continue by parents and societal influence. The situation in the rural areas is even worse, than that in urban areas. As UNICEF (1990, P.45) States, three quarters of rural women aged 5-24 years are illiterates in Nigeria, only half in urban are illiterates. Fos shows that 49% male and 39% female literacy rates was recorded in Nigeria by 1995. According to Okeke (1996), the illiteracy in Nigeria is being gradually reduced. Between 1975 and 1990 the percentage of girls enrolled in school rose from 4.5% in 1984 to 15% in 1990. As at present the enrolment among female students in the polytechnics and universities in the Northern part of Nigeria is still at 12 and 12.9 respectively.

Several reasons account for the gender gaps in education in Nigeria namely:

1. The existence of a strong patriarchal ideology (culture) accords male children priority for schooling. The western education is assumed to be for boys whereas the females are merely-equipped to become good wives.
2. The economy plays a part as reasons for gender gap. Nigeria was rated 16<sup>th</sup> position as the poorest nation. The general downturn in the economy made it impossible for parents to pay the school fees of all their children. Nigerians have large families with several wives and children, with extended families. The depressed economy gives parents a reason to limit the children they could conveniently pay for. This coupled with the dominant culture helps parents to allow only boys access to education. In some cases, girls are not only denied access to education, they are given out in marriage so the dowry paid on them is converted to school fees for the boys.

Religion has also been a cause of gender gap in education in Northern Nigeria where Islamic religion is dominant, some religion parents frown at the idea of allowing females to acquire western education. They fear western education may expose girls and corrupt them (Hussaini, 1994:13). Lack of sustained policy and action plan on women education in Nigeria is a contributory factor.

One of the major obstacles to bridging the gender gap in education is the unwillingness of government at all

levels to enforce appropriate instruments. Less than 5% of women are involved in Agriculture in Europe and America. In Nigeria, 85% of economically active women are into peasant agriculture (Obianunwa, 1992 P. 98). In spite of their role in agriculture, women are discriminated against. Afonja (1984) states that rural women get only token cash gifts from their husbands in return for services rendered in the farm throughout the year. Great farmers as they are Nigerian women still do not own land and depend on men to acquire farmland each year. In some parts of Nigeria like Delta State, Edo State and some parts of Rivers state, only women produce food. Husbands and younger people migrate to the cities to look for other jobs.

A recent survey (Ityaryar and Obiajuwa) shows that the main problems women in agriculture face include:

Lack of land, since all lands belong to men; lack of farm input like fertilizers and storage facilities such as jute bags, etc; labour saving machines like harvesters; take-off capital for purchase of inputs and land; men fight their wives regularly over issues bordering on funds realized from the women's farms; and lack of effective women's cooperative society on farms.

In some states in southern Nigeria, (Edo, Delta, Cross Rivers) there are cases where girls are sold as servants. The "employers" pay so many months wages and the girl is now to work for him in Lagos or any part of the country. All over the country, a woman has no family right and inheritance. She has no legal right to her own children. The property in the house belongs to the man even if bought by wife. When the man dies, relatives maltreat the widow and confiscate the property.

In the Southern Eastern part of the country and in the urban areas in South West and South southern parts of the country, there is increase in gender sensitization and publicity campaign and with the help of the churches on the right of women in the society, men and women are gradually changing. These oppressive practices may not have stopped, but they have not been increasing. The social status of women in Nigeria is changing from inferiority to some dignity. But how far this goes depends on how far there is a rise in the economic status of women in Nigeria.

Okeke (1996) stated that the economic contribution of women is high but the benefit they derive is very low because: Women lack access to credit facilities, through UBA Scheme and People Bank were established two decades ago to address this imbalance but, the balance is yet to be addressed;

An insignificant number of women are employed in industries of their choice.

Women are deficient in acquisition of modern technology and therefore have no plan in the modern industrial sector. In addition, government has never made any serious provision for the women to train in technical schools and acquire relevant technology to perform in the world of business and technology. As of now, men have monopoly and control of trade, industry, technology, business sciences and politics in Nigeria. This has continued to be so because there are continuing gender gaps in political participation and decision making. The highest decision making bodies in Nigeria have no women included. In politics only a negligible number of women are voted into party political office or into government office as chairperson in a local government area or as legislator. Out of 396 senators in the upper legislative house, three are women, others are men. In the house of representatives, the nation's lower legislative house, of 792 members, only 15 are women. Women are denied leadership positions even at the grassroot level.

### **Tactics and Strategies for Overcoming these Problems**

The social structure is the major determinant of power and powerlessness. To empower women, it will be first and foremost important to alter the class position of majority of Nigerian women hunted by poverty and deprivation. This will enhance their opportunities for more education, better employment in the public and private sectors, good health services, water and other basic needs. How does the alteration of their social status come about? There is power in unity of organized groups. When women see the need to come together to form groups, associations and organization to address the need of women, the process of empowerment would have begun. Women associations and organizations already exist in Nigeria. The recent survey carried out in various parts of the country by the Directorate of Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) recently identified more than five thousand vocational women groups and associations across the nation but reports that those groups are potential groups for vocational activities and mass literacy development but not effectively for now because of lack of proper empowerment. There are also women cooperatives which have increased across the country as a result of introduction of the programmes: Better Life for Rural Women, Family Support Programme, and Women Daily Bread Programme. These are programmes introduced by respective heads of states, governors' wives which have no direct benefit, effect or dividend to the women. The programmes are mostly politically motivated, therefore, their existence was

not even known by the women. But if such associations and groups will be encouraged and its policies implemented to the end, it will help to raise more awareness on the marginalization of women, which will hence lint! ways to tackle it.

Presently, women from Niger-Delta numbering 3000 rioted to the companies to provide jobs for their children and themselves. Such move should be refined to reflect provision and training of those women in skills, vocational and technical areas.

Associations like Women in Nigeria, National Council for Women Societies, Association of Women Lawyers, Association of Women Engineers, should be encouraged by the government and non-government groups to promote women empowerment in Technological and science skill areas. This is in line with the decision of world women conference held in China last three years. These kinds of women elite group if promoted and supported, have greater potential of influencing women's environmental policy. Political education will be an important aspect of the overall political function of women organizations. Education is, and will continue to be basic tools which any deprived group will deploy. Our task and the task of the women in Nigeria cannot be successful if women are not educated. Education makes people aware of place, aware of things, aware of living, and even much more aware of one's social and the need for vocational, technical and science skill and knowledge. Women association without education will not be hopeful. They will be like Marx's idea of peasants as potatoes in a bag, they will lack requisite consciousness, access and power to influence public policy about women and the environment.

The state and local governments must have serious roles to play in the education of women. But perhaps a national women's group will serve as a vanguard. Women's group and associations should lobby some patriotic groups such as Nigeria Labour Congress, students union', Christian or religious groups. Academic Staff Union of Universities, the Federal House of Assembly. These groups will help her to promote women favoured programmes.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

The empowerment of women in Nigeria through every possible means is very essential to the nation's development. Science, technology and maths education is seen as the best antidote to superstitions, taboos and ignorance that have been found to be more prevalent among women in Nigeria (Alele, 1986). The mind of the citizen is freed from the shackles of ignorance through education. The enlightened mind is thus able to contribute more meaningfully to self and national development.

Also, female literacy has been shown to boost national per capita income. Records have shown that there is appositive significant correlation between female literacy and economic and social development of the countries in Africa.

Fourth, the Nigerian woman is traditionally relegated to the background relative lo the man hi socio-political, technological and economic affairs. The issue has been ascribed to societal role expectation. This role expectation derives from a long history of deprivation of women from school and the resultant illiteracy. The illiterate women are assumed to lack mental aptitude, knowledge and skills to participate meaningfully in discussion and decision - making.

Also, women are more vulnerable and are mostly affected in the prolonged civil wars and violence in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Thus their education will help them to say "No" to men's oppressive attitude of struggling to hold power.

Women emancipation will help to uplift their health standard.

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