
Empowerment of Nigerian Women Towards National Development

By

C. P. C ONWUBIKO

*Department of Library & Information Science
Abia State University,
Uturu.*

Abstract

This paper is on the empowerment of Nigerian women towards national development, it gives a panoramic overview of the dehumanizing and traumatizing conditions of women. Then it goes further to consider the political awareness, participation and contributions of women in the realms of politics, business and economy, education and the professions. The challenges of women contributions to the development of the Nigerian nation are highlighted. In order to ameliorate these challenges recommendations are made which among others include the proper education of women and the elimination of cultural and religious hindrances as well as fully granting women their constitutional rights to gainful employment and effective participation in the affairs of the nation.

Women are the fundamental human reservoir of every society. In the traditional societies of Africa and Asia, women represent the most essential ingredient in the formation of that all important bio-social group known as the family.

Women in most societies, whether developed or developing, are regarded as currency with which political and economic alliances are cemented. Thus in social anthropology, the transfer of women between lineages and clans is regarded as a medium of communication more potent and clearest than language itself (Coleman, 2007). As agents of procreation and child rearing women are the recognized agency for the extension and continuation of the human specie through the generations.

The industrial revolution in England and other parts of the Western World in the 18th century drastically altered the primary role of women in the society. Women thenceforth could be seen playing roles hitherto regarded as the exclusive reserves of men in the economic, political and social lives of the society. In the African setting,

women have played the role of bread winners and decision-makers in many families in the event of the demise of the father of the house or inadequate male presence. This absence which could be brought about by death, sickness, old age or other forms of physical and mental incapacitation have thrust women in the centre stage for the performance of functions far removed from their traditional responsibility of house keeping.

Fasugba (2000) argued that many women today are engaged in activities and jobs hitherto regarded as the exclusive reserve of men. He further states that since women have become conscious of their rights, they have continued to slug it out with men in all areas of human endeavours.

In Nigeria today, the women folk have come a long way. In business, politics, education, sports and the professions. Women have made an indelible mark in their effort to conquer the limitations of the past which have sought to place them permanently in the kitchen and bedroom.

Be the above as it may, it is not all through a bed of roses for women and their empowerment. The above illustration is just about the infinitesimal few number of women who have been able to excel in their endeavours through their own dint of hard work. The majority of women in Africa, Asia, and even Europe and America have not been fully mobilized and empowered to contribute to national development. If it had been so, we would not have been talking about good health for women, educational, economic, social, cultural and political empowerment of women. And in all its ramifications, women would not have been segregated and discriminated against so much so that they are sexually tortured and harassed in their seeking for employment, contracts, political positions and in other endeavours.

In as much as this paper will present a review on the dehumanizing and traumatizing conditions of women, it will go further to take a detailed and critical look at the major indices of women participation in national development, vis-à-vis political, economic and educational considerations. How far has the Nigerian woman achieved self actualization in the above areas? What are the major handicaps and challenges of women, and what more could be done to secure a better leverage for Nigerian women if they are to participate effectively, fully and more meaningfully in the development of the Nigerian nation in this 21st century?

Women: Nature and Conditions: An Overview

Women, described as the feminine gender are created by God for procreation and continuity. Unfortunately, they have been dehumanized and traumatized in so many ways. Of the 1.3 billion people who live in abject poverty around the globe, 70 percent are women. For these women, poverty doesn't just mean scarcity and want. It means rights denied, opportunities curtailed and voices silenced. According to Unagha (2006) poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not being able to go to school and know how to read and write. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living for just one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is power

Empowerment of Nigerian Women Towards National Development

lessness, lack of representation and freedom. All these are majorly encountered and faced by women.

Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, according to the United Nations Millennium Campaign (Unagba 2006) to halve world poverty by the year 2015. The overwhelming majority of the labour that sustain life-growing food, cooking, raising children, caring for the elderly, maintaining a house, hauling water – is done by women, and universally this work is accorded low status and no pay. The ceaseless cycle of labour rarely shows up in economic analysis of a society's production and value.

Women earn only 10 percent of the world's income. Where women work for money, they may be limited to a set of jobs deemed suitable for women-invariably low pay, low status positions.

Women own less than 1 percent of the world's property. Where laws and customs prevent women from owning land or other productive assets, from getting loans or credit or from having the right to inheritance or to own their home, they have no assets leverage for economic stability and cannot invest in their own or their children's future.

Women make up two-thirds of the estimated 876 million adults world-wide who cannot read or write, and girls make up 60 percent of the 77 million children not attending primary school. Education is among the most important drivers of human development; women who are educated have fewer children than those who are denied schooling. They delay their first pregnancies, have healthier children. Each additional year of schooling a woman has is associated with a 5-10 percent decline in child deaths, according to the United Nations Population Fund (2010), and are far more likely to send their own children to school.

Yet where women do not have the discretionary income to invest in their own or their children's education, where girls' education is considered frivolous, and where girls are relied on to contribute labour to the household, they miss this unparalleled opportunity to develop their minds and spirits. Their countries suffer too. The World Bank (2009) estimated that nations in South Asia and Africa lose 5-1 percent growth in per-capita income per year compared to similar countries where the girl child has greater access to quality basic education.

In many societies around the world, women never belong wholly to themselves, they are the property of others through out their life. Their physical well-being-health, security and bodily integrity- is often beyond their own control. Where women have no control over money, they cannot choose to get health care for themselves or their children. Where having a large number of children confers status on both men and women – indeed where child bearing may be the only marker of value available to women frequent pregnancy and labour can be deadly.

World Health Organization (2008) data indicate that in Afghanistan and Sierra Leone women's lifetime chance of dying in child birth is one in seven, while in the United States it is one in 3,418 and in Norway and Switzerland, one in 7,300. In any given year, 15 percent of all pregnant women will face a life-threatening complication, and more than 500,000-99 percent of them in the developing world will die. Some 130

million girls and women, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa have been subjected to genital cutting or mutilation at the behest of their parents, and 2 million more face the blade every year, according to the United Nations Population Fund (2010).

Around the globe, home and community are not safe havens for a billion girls and women. At least one in three females on earth has been physically assaulted or sexually abused, often repeatedly and often by a relative or acquaintance. In the words of Otiteh (2004) violence against women and girls rivals cancer as a cause of morbidity and mortality for women of childbearing age. Even within marriage, women may not be able to negotiate when and what type of sex to have, nor to protest their husbands' multiple sex partners. Poverty and exclusion push some girls and women to engage in sex work, almost always the desperate, last choice of people without other choices.

According to the U.S. Department of State (2010) over 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders annually; 80 percent of these are women and girls, and the majority are forced into the sex trade. And in the midst of conflict and natural disaster in countries around the world, women's risk of violence skyrockets. Systematic rape as a weapon of war has left millions of girls and women traumatized, forcibly impregnated, and/or HIV positive. These factors combine to explain why today more women than men around the world are HIV positive. In sub-Saharan Africa, more than twice as many young women as young men are living with HIV, according to International Labour Organization (2009).

Political Awareness and Participation

Though it has been observed that Nigerian women have made some appreciable impact in their contributions to the development of the Nigerian nation. It is indeed necessary to have presented how these women have been dehumanized and traumatized. This is imperative because this writer does not want to create any impression that it has been a bed of roses for Nigerian women and indeed other women in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

The active participation of a large number of women in the political fora is strangely a new phenomenon. Although in the past, Nigeria has seen amazons like Margareth Ekpo, Fumilayo Ransome Kuti, Madam Tinubu of Lagos and a handful of other activist, women have often been relegated to the background in national politics. This situation however seem to be changing as women are now making serious and appreciable impact in the political life of the country, especially since the 2005 Berjin conference and women affirmative position (Aweh, 2006).

Emezi (1998) held the view that women have not featured meaningfully in Nigeria's political life. He opines that "... looking back at the political development of this country an independent observer will conclude that women have contributed next to nothing in this very important aspect of human life." He feels that the role of women in political matters is as minimal as it is in many other fields.

The lateness of Nigerian women into Nigerian political arena has been blamed on the deliberate colonial policy of undermining the political zeal of the Nigerian woman (Coleman, 2007). He argued that the effort of women were violently disrupted by the colonial experience. Women seemed to be the most hard hit, for with their

Empowerment of Nigerian Women Towards National Development

Western pre-conception of female inferiority the colonial administrators tended to relegate women to the background of irrelevance in the scheme of governance.

It is instructive to note at this point that in the last forty to fifty years, Nigerian women have created a noticeable impact in the political life of the nation. In the traditional African society, several factors combined to relegated women to the second fiddle role and participation in national affairs. Such factors include cultural placements, religious belief systems and traditional prejudices. Despite these serious handicaps or impediments which are actively exploited by the menfolk, Nigerian women have been seen to break even, such that today they have become a force to reckon with in the developmental processes of the nation.

During the second Republic (1979-83) Nigeria had her first female senator in the person of Mrs Franca Afegbua. In the fourth Republic (1999-2004) three women were elected into the senate while fifteen got elected into the House of Representatives' Agoawike (2000) believed that the fourth Republic has been a period of re-awakening for Nigerian women both in terms of elected offices and political appointments. She expressed her feelings; "it might not be an exaggeration to say that the fourth Republic has been the best outing in political participation for Nigerian women."

During the civilian government of Obasanjo, women seemed to be adequately accommodated and placed in areas of intense visibility as they held important and prominent positions. The Ministries of Aviation and Transport were headed by women. The Ministers of State for Science and Technology and the sensitive Ministry of defence were also women. These women were able to prove that they possess the quality, talents and character traits required not only for the growth of the nation but for the enhancement of the progress and well-being of the human society in general. Today many women occupy elective and appointive positions. For example, in the appoint of commissioners and advisers made by Governor T. A. Orji of Abia State and sworn in on Wednesday, 3rd August, 2011, over 35 percent of the appointees are women. Women are indeed making their mark in the political affairs of the Nigerian nation (Broadcasting Corporation of Abia State 6'oclock news bulletin of 3-8-2011).

Business and Economy

Perhaps, the most eloquent statement for the pivotal role women have played and are still playing in the 50 years of Nigeria's independence is the appointment of Ndi Okereke Onyike as managing Director of the Nigeria Stock Exchange. Not only is she the first Nigerian woman to tower above thousands of well qualified men to clinch this most powerful positions in Nigeria's economic and financial establishment; she is an embodiment of the traditional doggedness and fierce determination of the Nigerian woman not to be swept aside most especially in the affairs of the nation (Fasugba, 2000).

The above statement, though flamboyant and glamorous is an eloquent testimony to the pivotal role the feminine gender is now playing in the development of the Nigerian economy. It is indeed a remarkable feat for a woman to preside "at the second largest and most dynamic stock exchange in Africa". (Agoawike, 2000). Onyike is not alone in her role as a major actor in the economic live wire of the

nation. Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iwala was the Minister of Finance who worked tirelessly to get a reprieve for Nigeria's debt during the Obasanjo civilian regime. Today she has been reappointed the same minister of finance by the Goodluck Jonathan's administration. Also Olitayin Olakunrin was once the president of ICAN-Institute of chartered Accountants of Nigeria for a number of years. Prisca Soares once held sway as the head of the National Insurance Corporation of Nigerian (NICON), the biggest insurance conglomerate. Bola Kuforigi Olubimi and Maria Sokenu once held high profile positions as managing directors of UBA and People Bank respectively. Do we have to forget the contributions of Prof Dora Akunyili and Mrs Oby Ezekwesili and a whole lot of others.

Njoku (2006) strongly felt that Nigeria today can boast of "a rich history of women achievers". This writer posits that right from the pre-colonial times, Nigerian women have battled their way to recognition in Nigeria. They have been able to work a very tight rope in a society that is still very traditional and create a balance between the traditional role of women in an African society and gaining empowerment to wield influence rather than subordinate to the role of their male counterparts. Women have made significant contributions in terms of manpower resources and general economic returns at various levels to the economic development of the nation. In fact, Nigerian women have shown remarkable zeal and shrewdness in the economic development of the nation.

Education and Professions

From the period of the early 5th century B.C. philosophers like Socrates, Aristotle, Plato and others, education has been accepted as a major instrument of change and development in the society. Njoku (2006) held the view that women, as a result of their educational background are now in the best position to make the home more comfortable for their husbands and children. Aside from being sympathetic and loving wives, most educated women are more often the bread winners of their families in cases where the husbands in one way or the other cannot assist the family.

Women have since independence attained Olympian heights in the administrative hierarchy and academic institutions of the country. Grace Alele Williams (Prof) blazed the trail as the first Nigerian woman to occupy the office of Vice Chancellor in a Nigerian University (University of Benin). Jadesola Akande and Laraba Abdulahi also attained the same status in university administration. Bolanle Awe was the director of the Institute of African Studies for many years. In Nigerian universities and other tertiary institutions, women have risen to top positions as professors, deputy vice chancellors, deans, directors, heads of department, and rectors and provosts of polytechnics and colleges of Education Professor Stella Ogbuagu who has worked as a consultant on demography at the UN was sometimes the Deputy Vice Chancellor of Abia State University, Uturu.

A couple of decades ago, the journalism profession was seen largely as the exclusive reserve for men. Today, the story has tremendously changed as women have made substantial in-road into the top echelon of the profession. Doyin Abiola, Abike Dabiri-Erewa, now a member of the House of Representatives and the Late May Ellen,

Empowerment of Nigerian Women Towards National Development

Ezekiel (later May Ellen RMD), Mrs Remi Oyo, and a host of others in the TV and radio broadcasting media are in there in the list as women journalists who have excelled (Agoawike, 2000).

There is indeed no gainsaying the fact that women in all its ramifications have tremendously contributed to the growth and development of Nigeria in all areas they found themselves.

Challenges to Nigerian Women in Contributing Effectively to National Development

In spite of the seemingly remarkable achievements recorded so far, Nigerian women remain severely constrained in their efforts to play a major and decisive role in the socio-political and economic development of the nation.

Tombere (2004) blamed the colonial authorities for setting a dangerous stage and precedence for the weakening of the influence and role of women through what has been described as the “abrogation of the social stability” which the Nigerian society had enjoyed before the coming and intrusion of the British colonialists. The result of this dislocation was the relegation of the role and functions of women to the background in the Nigerian society, particularly in the areas of leadership and political responsibility.

Most traditional societies in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia see the role of women as fundamentally revolving around child rearing and general domestic care of the family. With the duties of women so rigidly defined, they assume their duties of cooking, washing and childbearing and then see themselves even in their marital homes as a figure to be seen and not to be heard (Fasuba, 2000). This situation creates a culture of male supremacy, superiority and dominance with little consideration given to the thoughts and feelings of women in the larger scheme of things.

Women in Nigeria like in other developing countries of the world suffer from undue discrimination, marginalization, and exploitation by the menfolk through the implementation of their culture of religious and traditional beliefs which placed men as super human beings. Globally, the access of women to finance and capital is so minimal that women are generally disadvantaged in terms of economic stability and independence. Research and studies have shown that despite the enormous amount of work women do, they control less than ten percent of the world’s resources.

Another worthy to note challenge raised by Yomi (2007) is what he described as the “patrilineal system of descent” in which generations are identified through male offsprings. The responsibility for the preservation and continuity of the family tree rests on the male children and special recognition are accorded them in the preparation for their adult roles. The female children on the other hand, are seen as commodities that would sooner or later be sold off to distant homes in distant lands. This explains why the birth of a male child is an occasion for celebration and joy than the birth of females. The inability to produce male children has wrecked many marriages in the Nigerian society.

Women on their part do not often see themselves as viable instruments of political participation and growth. The complacency of women in several aspects of

national life not only reduces their capacity for maneuver in a male dominated society but helps in perpetuating the culture of reducing women to positions and roles of second fiddle.

In business, women do not often involve themselves in high profile ventures. They prefer instead to engage in petty trading where the gains and losses are articulated at the end of each day. Uchendu (1993) believed that women see politics as a dirty game, a business which involves thuggery, intimidation, rigging, assassination, kidnapping of opponents and all sorts of electoral violence which are brought into play in order to gain an undue advantage over opponents. Women being the weaker sex, do not always have the strength and courage required to cope with the rigours of politics in a developing country like Nigeria.

Conclusion

It is the contention of this paper that the implementation of these recommendations should not be done in isolation of the other. Rather they should be systematically and holistically taken. Once this is achieved, the empowerment of Nigerian women and the contributions to national development would be a foregone conclusion.

Recommendations

Empowering Nigerian women towards national development should be a matter of national top priority which demands the attention and genuine commitment of every responsible member of the society. It is along this line that the paper feels inclined to put across some useful suggestions and recommendations which could be brought into play for the realization of the noble goals of women's contributions to national development.

The Nigerian government has a crucial role to play in providing an enabling ground for Nigerian women to rekindle their hope and faith in the ability of the system to provide for its people irrespective of sex, age, ability, religious inclination and other mundane considerations.

The Nigerian nation owes the women folk the responsibility of removing those artificial and institutional barriers based on religion, culture or traditional considerations which have incapacitated the ability of Nigerian women to participate effectively and freely in national affairs particularly at the political and economic levels.

Women on their part should strive to break through these barriers with great determination, perseverance, unbreakable solidarity and genuine desires to conquer the natural challenges of their origin. In this solidarity, women should fight the cause of women, garner massive support for female candidates at election times. Women achievers should act as source of inspiration and torch-bearers to those who are less empowered.

Women organizations and movements have important roles to play by seeking to protect the interest of women. These organizations and movements should shoulder the responsibility of seeing that institutions of society are not deliberately structured to

Empowerment of Nigerian Women Towards National Development

place hindrances and constraints on the paths of women. The Ministries of Women Affairs all over the Federation need to play a great role in bringing to focus the fundamental challenges of the women folk which the government and other institutions of state owe the responsibility to tackle. To achieve this, constant pressure should be brought to bear on the authorities that be to create positions of responsibility and advancement for the women folk.

According to Omoladum (2000), the family needs to understand that laying a solid and stable foundation for the girl child is a vital link in the overall development and advancement of the society and the humankind. The girl child should not be denied the necessary of exposure, socialization and refinement of modern education as a fundamental prerequisite for tackling the numerous challenges of adult life.

The Nigerian government owes a great responsibility to all citizens of this nation because in the last several years the government has not lived up to its responsibilities. Usman (2000) lamented that majority of Nigerian women and other citizens live in dehumanizing environment without access to food, clothing and shelter. They live in abject poverty, squalor, starvation and hunger. They live even below the base line of poverty. In a country richly blessed and endowed, the failure of the government to cater and provide for the people is in all its ramifications inexcusable and could be described as crime as humanity. The Nigerian government should therefore see it as a matter of top national priority and urgency to provide the basic necessities of life for the people.

Nigerian women and indeed all other citizens have the right not only to express their opinions in national issues but to take active part through the due process in shaping the policies and decisions that determine the destiny of the nation and her citizens.

Every Nigerian child, including the girl child is entitled to good education, employment, social and health services, protection from abuse and exposure to the vicissitudes of life. These are the rights of the Nigerian child and should not be seen as a privilege. Suffice it to say therefore that the Universal Basic Education recently introduced by the Federal Government should be given all the encouragement and support it needs to succeed.

References

- Agoawoike, A. (2000). *Women of substance: Africa today*. London: Aframedia Publishers.
- Akande, J. (1991). *Participation of women in politics: Their rights and duties*. Being a paper presented at the association of women judges inaugural meeting. Lagos.
- Aweh, B. (2006). *Nigerian women and political participation*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Babatunde, M. (1997). *Basic institutions of society*. Lagos: Lagos University Press.

- Coleman, J. (2007). *Nigerian background to nationalism*. Los Angeles: University Press.
- Egbo, S. (2000). *Issues in Nigerian's constitutional development*. Enugu: John Jacobs Publishers.
- Emezi, C. A. (1998). *Women in Nigeria today*. Owerri: Spring Field Publishers.
- Fasuba, O. (2000). Vacancy: Tough women only. *The Punch* (2/5/2000). Lagos: The Punch Press. P.25
- International Labour Organization.(2009). *The HIV/AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia*. Geneva: ILO Press.
- Njoku, O. (2006) . *Nigerian women and the challenges of our time*. Lagos: Basic Publications.
- Ochiagha, C. (1994). *The future of Nigerian women: A counseling perspectives*. Enugu: SNAAP Press
- Omoladun, J. (2000). *The neglect of Nigerian women*. Ibadan: Evi-Coleman Publications.
- Otiteh, O. (2004). *An introduction to sociological studies*. Ibadan: Heineman Education Publishers.
- Tombere, F.A. (2004). *Images of the Nigerian women*. Abuja: National Centre for Women Development.
- Uchendu, P. (1993). *The role of women in politics: Past and present*. Enugu: FDP Publishers.
- Unagha, A.O. (2006). Sources of information on new economic partnership for African development . *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 8(2). Online: libr.uni.edu: 2000/LPP.LPPv 8n2.htm.
- United Nations Population Fund (2010). *The dangers of genital mutilation*. Lagos: UNPF Publications.
- US Department of State (2010). *The effects of human trafficking*. Washing D.C: Government Press.

Empowerment of Nigerian Women Towards National Development

Usman, A.(2000). *Nigerian women today: A sociological perspective*. Ibadan: Evi-coleman Publications.

World Bank (2009). *The neglect of the girl child education in sub-saharan Africa and Asia*. New York: World Bank Publication.

World Health Organization(2008). *Maternal mortality and child morbidity in Africa*. New York: WHO Press.

Yomi, M.K. (2007). *Women: The disadvantaged specie*. Ibadan: Third World Information Services Publishers.