Women Empowerment: Barriers and Benefits

By

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Abstract

Worldwide, females are being discriminated against in the acquisition of formal education and in the world of work. Not many women are in positions of high influence and power. Many of them are not economically empowered too. This paper therefore, examined the concept of women empowerment and the benefits the individuals and the society stands to derive from empowering women. It also identified barriers to women empowerment and discussed strategies for empowering them. In the face of the place of women in the development of nations, the paper concluded that women should be empowered to make them functional so that they can contribute to the nation’s growth and stability. Based on the conclusion reached, it was recommended among others that government should improve overall enabling environment for women as well as giving financial assistance to them to enable them set up small businesses.

A great number of Nigerian women had never been to school because they have been discriminated against in the acquisition of formal education. Culturally, the ultimate achievement for women is often portrayed as marriage. As a result of poverty and religious beliefs many parents in the northern part of Nigeria give out their daughters’ hands in marriage at very tender ages to husbands for dowries for the upkeep of their family. These husbands who are usually much older do not allow their much younger wives to go to school and enlightenment programmes for fear that these young women will be exposed to outside influences. These are programmes that could have augmented their inability to attend regular conventional schools. Unfortunately,
many of these girls, experience pregnancy and child birth complications such as, Vesico Vagina Fistula (VVF). In Many cases, VVF patients are dumped by their husbands who now see them as liabilities to face long years of misery.

Gender discrimination is not limited to Nigeria. For instance, in India, only 45 percent of girls are enrolled in primary school and 36 percent in secondary school. In Ethiopia, there are many cases of child brides (Offorma, 2009). These are girls that are supposed to be in school. Women in Afghanistan suffer similar fate.

Though currently, more girls attend school than any time in the past, they still face the problem of unemployment. As one of the main goals of education is development, the lack of it has greatly affected the development of women.

Nigeria has one of the lowest rates of female entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa. Majority of women are concentrated in casual, low skilled and low paid informal sector employment (Elegbede, 2012). This had made it imperative that females are educated to empower them for the demands and challenges of life.

Human development outcomes for girls and women are worse in the northern part of the country where poverty levels are higher than in the southern part and where educational levels are much lower than in the south. The maternal mortality rate and insecurity in northern Nigeria are also higher. On maternal mortality, the 2012 DFID Gender Report in Nigeria noted that Nigeria has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality in the world (Elegbede, 2012).

As expected, women are the most hit by the negative consequences of poverty, diseases, conflict and insecurity. They also lack access to factors of production in a society largely controlled by men. Not many women are in positions of high-influence and power. In Nigeria, only 25 out of 360 members of Nigerian House of Representatives are women (Elegbede, 2012). Female Senators are few and there are no women governors. Though there are deputy governors they are very few and in states in the South West and South East. Until very recently, Africa had just two female heads of state. To have appreciable development at the local, national and international levels, women should be empowered. In the words of UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon “when we empower women, we empower communities, nations and the entire human family”. It could be concluded that the progress of women is the progress of the world. Therefore, women empowerment should be pursued with the vigour it deserves.

The Concept of Women Empowerment

Empowerment is defined by Sharland (2007), as the process through which an individual who feels unable to change something in her life is supported in finding
Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities which entails the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities. He added that empowerment is probably the totality of the following capabilities:

1. Having decision-making power of their own
2. Having access to information and resources for taking proper decision.
3. Having a range of options from which you can make choices (not just yes/no, either/or).
4. Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making.
5. Having positive thinking and the ability to make changes.
6. Ability to learn skills for improving one’s personal or group power.
7. Ability to change other’s perception by democratic means.
8. Involving in a growth process and change that is never ending and self-initiated.
9. Increasing one’s positive self-image and overcoming stigma (p.1)

Empowerment is providing support in the forms of finance and technical assistance to the marginalized. In economic development, the empowerment approach focuses on mobilizing the self-help efforts of the poor, rather than providing them with social welfare (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/empowerment, 2014).

The BusinessDictionary.com (2014) described empowerment as a management practice of sharing, rewards and power with employees so that they can take initiatives and make decisions to solve problems and improve service and performance. Therefore, empowerment is based on giving people skills, resources, authority, opportunity and motivation that will contribute to their competence and satisfaction. Once empowered, the individual is ultimately driven by her belief in her capability to influence events.

Women empowerment is the cultivation and fortification of women with the capacity to acquire self-actualization critically with good education and knowledge. With knowledge, the empowered women can critically discern the means of acquiring a healthy sense of identity and power (wiki.answer.com/Q/).

The issue of women empowerment is so important to have made President Barrack Obama, come up with the presidential memorandum on the coordination of policies and programmes to promote gender equality, and empower women and girls globally, ensuring that women and girls, including those marginalized are able to participate fully in public life, are free from violence and have equal access to
education, economic opportunity, and healthcare, increase broader economic prosperity, as well as political stability and security. (The White House, Office of the Press Security, 2013).

To further affirm the place of women in the prosperity and stability of nations, the American Secretary of State John Kerry, emphatically stated that no country can get ahead if it leaves half of its people behind. He added that women’s issues as we know, are more than just women’s issues. They are families’ issues, they are economic issues, they are unity issues and they are justice issues (United States Department of State: Office of Global Women’s Issues, 2013).

When a woman is empowered, self confidence is built into her, which gives her a sense of personal strength. Empowerment makes one able to express her feeling with authority and being able to decide something and then do it right. That is why women should be placed in the very heart of sustainable development. Young women if empowered with tools to address the specific challenges they face, are a strong force for progress, and reform in all sectors. A good example can be found in Professor Wangari Maathais, winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. This notable environmental and human activist organized workshops on civic education to encourage the Kenyan women to look for the cultural, political, and economic policies and practices that were the root causes of environmental problems, and to take action to address those root causes (Warner, 2012). She was able to do these and many other things that imparted positively on other women and the society, because she was educated and thus empowered.

**Empowerment Benefits**

The most important benefit of empowerment lies in its capacity to accelerate the pace of social change and economic growth. Through empowerment tools such as education and training, developmental attitudes and choices are strengthened.

It has also being discovered that ICT education has brought deep changes to women’s patterns of thinking and communication. The benefit of this lies in the immense role IT plays in supporting women entrepreneurs. For instance women entrepreneurs in Nigeria have started using this new technology to improve their business. Most women entrepreneurs in urban Tanzania have used email and Internet services to communicate with their business partners and friends (Munkvold & Tundai, 2005). Internet services are now used to search for product related information within and outside the shores of Nigeria. Several other positive effects from using IT include increased sales, access to new customers and market. IT has also led to improve efficiency of operations. For example, women running garment related business used the internet to search for new designs for women’s choices, thus enabling them to
improve their products and enter foreign markets in countries in Africa and other continents. This has led to economic growth. As a matter of fact, when economy grows, poverty decreases and when poverty decreases, it leads to increases in the development of the families and communities.

The Arab spring has been a turning point for women, in the Middle East. The Arab women shoulder to shoulder with their men challenged and brought down the government of the day in the affected countries. By challenging the patriarchal norms of the society, the growth of these visible women has brought about a paradigm shift in the decision on women in the Middle East. No longer are they talked about, they are the ones doing the talking (Aarshad, 2013). And in Saudi Arabia, women are fighting for their inalienable right to drive vehicles like men. All these are happening, because the women are educated and are in position to know what they want and what is good for them.

Malalai Joya, a young woman weathered all barriers to serve as a parliamentarian in the National Assembly of Afghanistan. This former school teacher and activist stood up to the Afghanistan ruling politicians (who she publicly called criminals, killers, warlords and mafia drug lords (who threatened to rape her and on four occasions, tried to kill her). Malalai spearheads anti war movement which earned her the appellation, “bravest woman in Afghanistan” (Goodspeed, 2010). Another woman of courage is Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma who was recently released from many years in jail. Furthermore, in spite of all odds, Malala Yousafzai a Pakistani school girl stood up for education and got shot in Mingora Swat by the Talibans for this. This attempt on her life has embolden her and made her resolve even stronger (Wikipedia the free encyclopedia, 2014). In Nigeria, the likes of Dr. Oby Ezekwesili and Joe Okei Odumakin have been fighting relentless to improve the lots of people especially oppressed girls and women.

These brave women were able to stand and fight prejudices, injustices and suffering because they are educated and as such empowered with a vision to understand better the world they live in and have been equipped with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to face and address the many challenges of today and tomorrow.

Concrete steps taken to train and educate women on political participation will not only raise their awareness, it can also make them fight for their rights thereby safeguarding their rights. An empowered woman can help to promote peace and prevent conflict. Hillary Clinton in December 2011 at the Georgetown University discussing an executive order signed by President Obama to implement the first ever United States National Action plan on women, peace and security said, “for years,
many of us have tried to show the world that women are not just victims of war, they are agents of peace (Warner, 2012).

Women maternal roles as well as their closeness to the children, and invariably the youth, stand them on a vantage position to broker peace. Examples of these women of peace are Visaka Dharmadasa of Sri-Lanka who worked conscientiously to stop the war there; Ibtisam Mohammed, a Muslim Palestinian who promoted inter-faith respect and understanding between the Palestinian Druze, Jews and Christians in a region rife with a lots of religious conflicts, and the Women in Peace Building Programme (WIPNEP). Many women who have come to the fore to build peace and assume leadership position are able to do these because they are empowered with the requisite education, training and exposure (Usman, 2013).

Empowerment makes women to be functional, more enlightened and conscious of their situations. Empowered women have imparted positively on their families. For example, families have enjoyed improved livelihood, healthcare, nutrition and the general wellbeing of the communities. There is promotion of healthier sexual behaviour and relationship because informed mothers who are in a better position to teach their children to resist peer pressure and vices.

**Strategies for Empowering Women**

Education is the process through which individuals are made functional members of their society (Ocho, 2005 cited by Offorma, 2009). As an empowerment tool, it equips women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the nation’s development process.

One empowerment strategy is to assist marginalized people to create their non-profit organization, using the rationale that, only the marginalized people themselves can know what their own people need most by reducing the need for ongoing dependence. A non-profit organization composed of the indigenous women could ensure their own organization does have authority and could set their own agendas, make their own plans, seek the needed resources, do as much of the work as they can, and take responsibility for the success of their projects or the consequences, should they fail (Whatley, 2008).

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is a tool for developing individual and the society. If appropriately used, it has a great role to play in the empowerment of women especially in the battle against the HIV/AIDS scourge. It can be an invaluable tool in training care givers and facilitating the development of support networks for people living with HIV/AIDS and their care givers. For instance, by reading other people experiences, patients can better educate themselves and become
more knowledgeable than those who are not empowered to use the internet. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/empowerment, 2014).

The central goal of ICT education is Human Resource Development (HRD). HRD is aimed at increasing the knowledge, skills and capacities of people in a society in order to bring about economic growth and development. Microfinance can serve as a strategy for poverty alleviation and economic empowerment of Nigerian women, most especially those in the rural areas. This has become very necessary because only about 15 percent of women have bank account (Elegbede, 2012). Microfinance is a financial strategy especially for women who have been disempowered from a formal system that limits their access to finance and credit.

Researches have shown that an alarming number of women are not empowered to live sustainable lives. Most of the factors militating against girl child access to education are also the barriers to women empowerment. Yet those young women are mothers of the future leaders of our nation. If the mothers are not adequately educated and empowered, how would they be able to take good care of the future leaders of the nation?

In Ethiopia, girls are sometimes abducted for marriage when they are no more than eight years old (Offorma, 2009). In Northern Nigeria, girls at tender ages are given out in marriage. In South Africa, report of Human Rights Watch warns that sexual violence and abuse are hampering girls’ access to education. Those prone to sexual violence and abuse are children of the poor. In Afghanistan under the Taliban, females have simply been barred from schools. To them, the best thing that could happen to the female is marriage. Early marriage is therefore, a barrier to women empowerment.

One major barrier to women empowerment is fund. Women lack financial resources to set up small scale businesses. Some had been denied access to fund while many others out rightly had refused to access funds in Microfinance Bank probably because they do not have the knowledge to open accounts with banks. From every indication, there is an urgent need for the economic empowerment of women. Economic empowerment of women has a multiplier effect on their social and political empowerment and then on the nation’s economic growth and stability (Ikenwa, 2009). Another barrier is lack of computer skills for accessing Information Technology (IT) services. Language barrier and lack of time are other challenges. For instance, an individual who can neither read nor write may not be able to use the IT services. Moreover many married women lack the time needed to learn the computer skills. Male dominance is another barrier to women empowerment. Men make things difficult for women for fear of losing their patriarchal control over them.
Conclusion

This paper looked at the concept of women empowerment and its benefits to the individuals and the society. It identified strategies for empowering women as well as barriers to women empowerment. The paper concluded that women should be adequately educated and empowered to make them functional so that they could contribute to the nation’s growth, peace and stability. Empowerment should not be perceived by men that they will lose out as a consequence of women’s gain. Instead, empowerment should be seen as collective power that is expected to bring people together for positive and beneficial change.

Recommendations

Based on the literature reviewed and the submissions of this paper, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government should improve the overall enabling environment for women empowerment. This is a prerequisite for an enduring transformation.

2. Women equality should not just be on paper, it should be translated into innovative measures where there will be no barriers to effective integration of gender across all spheres of human endeavour.

3. The number people using the mobile network in the rural communities have increased, however, only few (if at all any) rural woman is computer literate. It is therefore, recommended that the local, state and federal governments as a matter of responsibility provide schools and civic centres with computers and connectivity.

4. Out of school young (married) women should have access to IT training programmes. Local Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) could do this by organizing workshops for stimulating human resource development. This could be done in collaboration with international bodies who may give financial and technical support. Such bodies include the ‘World Education’ which has a story of successfully applying its participatory institution building methodology in Microfinance and small business enterprises in parts of Asia, Europe, Africa and North America.

5. In the face of women’s place in the economic development of nations, financial assistance should be given to them. Finance houses should avail women loan opportunities to make it easier for them to establish their own businesses so that they can be self reliant and be in a better position to cope with the challenges of poverty. Women should be taught through enlightenment programmes how to open account with banks of their choice,
how to come up with business plans or ideas and how to negotiate with the banks for loan. They should be educated on the challenges of handling sourced funds. This will enable them know how to separate ones business from oneself as well as knowing how to account between working capital, gross profit and net profits (Ikenwa, 2009).

6. Men should be supportive as fathers and husbands in the quest of empowering women. This they can do by giving moral and financial support to their daughters and wives. In addition, husbands should allow their wives attend workshops for empowerment trainings whenever such opportunities come their way.

References


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