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# GIRL CHILD EDUCATION AS A VERITABLE TOOL FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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## **Abstract**

*In Nigeria, in Africa and the world at large, education has been viewed as an emancipation weapon from poverty, slavery and ignorance. Education brings about empowerment which in turn gives rise to development in any given society. It is believed that when people are educated, they can easily fend for themselves, their families and contribute meaningfully to the development of the society, this paper highlights the relationship between women empowerment, society development and sustainability.*

Women account for a large percentage of the population of any given society. Unfortunately throughout the ages and everywhere in the world, women have always been regarded as chattel things that could be bought and sold; hence they are treated with great contempt. This negative perception about woman has obviously affected the society adversely.

There is a high rate of illiteracy among women orchestrated by early marriages, human trafficking, poverty just to mention but a few, thereby resulting to lack of empowerment.

Millennium development goals (MDGs) are the most broadly supported comprehensive and specific development goals the world has ever agreed upon. Adopted by world leaders in 2000 and set to be realized by the year 2015. The eight MDGs are watered down into 21 quantifiable targets that are measured by 60 indicators. These goals are as follows:

**Goal 1:** Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

**Goal 2:** Achieve Universal Primary Education

**Goal 3:** Promote gender equality and empowerment women

**Goal 4:** Reduce child mortality

**Goal 5:** Improve maternal health

**Goal 6:** Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

**Goal 7:** Ensure environmental sustainability

**Goal 8:** Develop a global partnership for development.

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It is evident that the objectives of MDGS are to reduce poverty to the barest minimum by 2015.

### **The Concept of Women Empowerment**

Empowerment refers to a situation whereby one's power that has been denied or restricted in performing certain duties is given to him or her such that he or she is able to carry out these duties that could not be performed initially. To Udegbe (1996:9) "Empowerment entails giving people power or increasing their power to be able to do what they could not do before. It means adequate knowledge and capacity, the confidence, the help and the ideas; to decide what is best for them, and act accordingly in fulfilling their own potentials.

It is pertinent to state that empowerment is a psychological process of transformation which can be achieved through constructive changes in a person's environment, psyche and circumstances. Women must perceive the enabling environment so that the negative teachings which have in the past militated against their self-confidence and reliance can be replaced with positive feelings''. In order to attain the MDGS as enumerated be it at local, national or international level.

### **Language**

The relevance of language in human existence cannot be over emphasized. Language is a veritable tool for a smooth interaction to be achieved. Human ideas, feelings and desires are communication through the means of language. Alisah (2007) observed that we are luckier than the primitive man because there is language use in our generation. He went further to note that the relevance of a language will be better appreciated when someone locks up himself in an apartment where the use of language is not necessary he is alone.

To Obuasi (2002) cited by Okwudishu (2007), language is described as the "hard core" of reality, due to the fact that reality is expressed by means of language. According to Adelokun (2008:243):

*It is truism that language is a major means of human communication..... Language is needed for all forms of communication, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Indeed, the ability to*

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*communicate through the medium of language is exclusive to man and without this type of communication, the human society, if it existed at all would be devoid of order and meaning”.*

It is glaring from the afore-mentioned that language plays a vital role in human existence. One can therefore conclude that no human society can survive without a language.

### **French Language in Nigeria**

Nigeria is surrounded by francophone countries. Benin to the west, Cameroun to the east, Niger to the North-West and Chad to the North- east. The presence of these francophone countries calls for a social interaction which can only be achieved through the study of French language in the country. Iroegbu (2012) asserted that the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1996 pronounced the French language a second official language due to its importance. The importance of French language is also attested to by Adewuyi and Temidayo (2000) citing Martini (1996) when they opined that:

*Learning of French in Nigeria makes one to invest in the future of modernity of this country; anyone who speaks French in Nigeria will be able to bridge the gap of communication between Nigeria and our francophone neighbors.*

According to Mohammed (2006), the revised edition of the national policy on Education (2004) made the learning of French compulsory both at primary and junior secondary schools now known as “Basic Education” (1-9). This is to first of all ensure smooth interaction with our neighbors, that is, the francophone countries.

### **Education and Women Empowerment**

Education is perceived to be the light of any given society. A nation whose women are denied access to education is considered backward. This opinion was shared by Mangvwat and Dimka (2006:129) that:

*A well educated society without an equally educated female population has missed the mark. True growth and development can only be achieved when women are allowed unfettered access to education. A well educated women population guarantees good leadership, good education delivery and support, etc”.*

Human development can only be achieved through education. It therefore becomes imperative to place priority on women education which in turn translates to empowerment. Wakili (2006) asserted that women population in the country is greater than that of men, as such; the Government cannot afford to neglect women education. This view is equally shared by Usuala (1995) that education in general is an exercise that engages everyone, women inclusive.

### **Factors Militating Against Women Empowerment**

All over the world especially in Africa, the male folk strongly believe that right from creation, God has placed men as superiors over women, and therefore, women can only play second fiddles in the society. This perception cuts across the two popular religions in Nigeria namely Christianity and Islam. Some see women as instrument, properties or tools in the hands of men. Others also perceive women as people that can be seen and admired but not to be heard. To this end, they are not accepted as equals to men even when they possess similar qualifications and experience. Abdulazeez (2004) asserted that, traditional religion did not help matters in that, in certain societies, women are forbidden to carry out or partake in some activities. For instance in Igbo land, it is forbidden for a woman to break kola nut where men are to participate in the sharing of such, or partake in masquerade dances. Also, in the Ebira culture, women are not permitted to be heads of families as well as attend meetings.

The belief that women are weaker vessels and would not achieve much in developmental process has hindered the development of their natural potentials resulting to de-empowerment of women in diverse spheres of life. Owoeye (2012) is of the opinion that these perceptions are not unconnected with the patriarchal nature of the society in which women find themselves.

### **French Language as a Means of Poverty Eradication**

Poverty according to the Cambridge International Dictionary of English is a condition of being extremely poor. It is vital to understand that poverty is a multi-faceted condition. It has several dimensions among them are illiteracy and ignorance, poor health lack of access to public service and infrastructure, Human-trafficking, insecurity, high unemployment rate amongst others. In view of the above, French language is one of the sure means of reducing these menace. Igbudu (2008:95) postulated that: One step towards success in life is the discovery of one's problems and the next is that of looking for a way of escape.

The study of French language in Nigeria is one of the steps towards solving the numerous challenges facing the nation especially with the empowerment of women which facilitates development and its sustainability. Empowerment women via French language education will certainly contribute towards the development of the Nation.

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Opportunities abound in the Nation for French language speakers. For instance, the multi-national companies like ELF, Alliances française among others. Mokobia (2011) noted that there are several French networks in Nigeria which include nine Alliance française, a French cultural centre, a French Grade school in Lagos, French school in Abuja, French institute in Africa (IFRA) with branches in Zaria and Ibadan. This network employs about 500 Nigerians and 40 French experts. Again, Owwoye (2012) noted that several Nigerian women have excelled in their various fields in the nation as counselors, educationists, writers, scientists, administrators, legal luminaries, medical personnels to mention but a few.

### **Development**

Development is the process of growing or the emergence of new situations. Tafede (1987) describes development as the mobilization of human and material resources towards better living conditions for the individual and the community. In the same vein, Fadafunsi (1988) noted that development is the mobilization, adaptation and use of all resources including human resources within the country in order to attain the needs of the citizens. Development therefore is a process which involves every member of the community contributing towards enhancing better living condition. To this end, French language education remains a means of empowerment to the women so that they can contribute their quota in the developmental strides of the nation.

In furtherance of this paper, the achievements that could arise from the study of French language in Nigeria with the view of sustaining and developing the nation are as follows:

### **Self Reliance**

It is glaring that French language is a tool for achieving self reliance and the eradication of poverty. French language opens numerous avenues for French graduates especially in Nigeria. One with good knowledge of French is opportune to drive away poverty by rendering secretarial services to both French speakers in the country and non French speakers alike.

Moreover, secretarial duties could be combined with the jobs of translation and interpretation. Igbudu (2008) observed that Nigerians who are knowledgeable in French language would not only be self reliant and useful to themselves but are as well asserts to the development and sustenance of the nation. Besides, French language avails individuals who are knowledgeable in this field the opportunity of becoming authors.

Through creative writing incomes are earned and positive contributions are made towards nation building. These are numerous female authors in Nigeria who have written several French books. For instance, Lynn Mbuko, Ifeoma Onyemelukwe and many others, Ogini (1996) noted that Nigeria women writers have been recognized as successful writers and critics in their various fields and have been empowered to contribute meaningfully towards the development of the nation, going by the above

assertion, one would undoubtedly agree that these women would earn good livelihood as well as render assistance to their family members, those around them and as such join forces with government in the fight against poverty and hunger which is a major problem in development countries, Nigeria inclusive.

### **Human Trafficking**

Human trafficking constitutes a bane in the society and it is seen as a crime against humanity. Often times, women and girls in search of greener pastures become victims of this crime. Although many attribute it to ignorance and greed. One glaring fact remains that, the huge promises offered them by the traffickers are irresistible, hence they easily fall prey to this form of violence. In order to curb this menace, women empowerment becomes imperative. Women who are knowledgeable in French are likely not to become victims of human trafficking in that, they are capable of catering for themselves.

In a relative development, with French language education, women are able to secure their children's future by providing their needs and not to destroy it by accepting peanuts and giving them out to be violated. Protecting themselves and their children as well as those around them from human trafficking will translate to nation building and sustainability.

### **Early Marriage**

Early marriage has unarguably become the bane of the society. The education of the girl child will continue to be in jeopardy unless early marriage is checked by all the stakeholders. Culture beliefs, poor parental backgrounds and the patriarchal nature of our society have kept many women in perpetual slavery. According to Wakili (2006:120):

Some societies believe that once a woman is educated, she will be difficult to control and she could become loose, immoral and promiscuous. All these perceptions about women have led to their de-empowerment in so many aspects of life. The need therefore to empower them cannot be overemphasized.”

The above assertion affirms that women are de-empowered by certain beliefs and practices up-held in the society of which early marriage remains at the top of the list because parents who are mainly illiterates willfully give out their girl children to this trade due to material benefits without their consent in several instances especially in the Northern part of Nigeria. This view was reechoed by Ndifon and Akuh (2006) that, in the Northern part of the country; parents give out their daughters too early into the business of marriage without their knowledge because they want to collect bride price from their desired suitors.

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However, women who are knowledgeable in French are likely to send their wards to school because they are educated and can fend for themselves and their families. Through French language education, early marriages will certainly decline in the society.

### **Maternal/Child Mortality**

There is a sharp link between early marriage and maternal and child mortality. It is no longer news that a huge percentage of women die daily through child birth. This ugly and disheartening occurrence is prevalent in our society mainly due to lack of adequate source of livelihood. Poor parents give out their wards for marriage in order to put food on their tables. During pregnancies, most of these women because they are not empowered, lack access to good nutrition and good medical care thereby exposing themselves to the highest danger which is death, unfortunately in severe cases, their kids do not see the light of the day. French language education will go a long way in curbing this menace in our society because women can cater for themselves and their un-born babies because they are empowered.

### **Child Labor**

It is the exploitation of children beyond the limit of their capacities. A typical example is a situation where a child is compelled to work in the farm, business area or at home to the last atom of his or her energy. It is very pathetic that most of these children undergo this slavery at the expense of their education, health and self worth simply because their parents especially the mothers lack financial capabilities to cope with their daily needs. Through French language, women in this category will be empowered thereby respecting and protecting the rights of children who are the future leaders.

### **Political Thugery**

In recent times, politics have become a do or die affair especially in developing countries such as ours. The present day politicians have driven the political system to a negative dimension where thugery has become the order of the day. Sadly, the level of poverty, unemployment, lack of sensitization among others account for increase in the level of casualties recorded in political arena each year. Children and youths who cannot boast of the next meal become victims in the hand of desperate politicians who will rather use and dump them after parting with some naira notes that may merely provide food for a day. Women who are empowered through French language education will make provisions for their wards, send them to school as well as educate them on the dangers of political thugery. The importance of women empowerment is equally emphasized by Wakili (2006) who noted that women are agents of informal and formal education. These women lay foundation for formal education first at home

before the children's enrolment into formal schools. A critical examination of a woman's role in the home shows that, for her to perform her duties as a wife and a good mother, she needs to be empowered.

### **Conclusion**

No society can make meaningful progress without empowering the women who account for a large percentage of its population. Women are agents of development as such; they must be encouraged and give the opportunity to do so. Women's role cut across all spheres of life. This therefore portrays their importance and the position they occupy in the society. The society is retrogressive because the women have over the years been marginalized, neglected and de-empowered. This trend of course needs to be halted and the time is now.

The paper therefore advocates for active women participation in the development and sustenance of the society via French language.

### **Recommendations**

1. The Federal Government should establish more centre's for French studies
2. Multi-National companies operating in the country should collaborate with the Federal Government in funding the study of French language as this gesture will boast the study of the language in the country.
3. God given and fundamental human rights of women should be granted to them by the male folk. Women should not be relegated to the background in the name of customs and religion.
4. Women should be given a reasonable percentage in political positions at all levels of governance.
5. Linguistic immersion program should be sponsored by Federal Government in order to encourage parents to allow their wards to do for French studies. When these measures are put in place, women will be empowered politically, economically and socially.



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