

EMPowering Nigerian Women as Tools for Nation Building

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ABSTRACT

Women empowerment can be described as a conscious attempt designed and systematically applied by society to achieve a definite purpose of elevating the status of female gender group economically, socially and physically. In other words, empowerment can be seen as re-orientation and restoration of latent hidden talent and knowledge in women. Generally, women have been treated as the weaker sex; they suffer marginalisation and alienation in many ways as a result of the socio-cultural, political and economic factors which are human-induced. The paper, relying on secondary data, examined the factors necessary for the Nigerian women to contribute towards nation building. Also, the paper reveals that the level of women participation in socio-political endeavours is insignificant as evidenced by appointments and elective positions occupied by women. Therefore, the exclusion of women from participating in the affairs of the country will impede Nigeria's quest for sustainable development. The paper concludes that women should be provided with enabling environment to enhance their participation in the affairs of the country

Introduction:

Women empowerment is receiving attention not only in Nigeria but in other countries of the world. The United Nations and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have included gender equality and women empowerment in their development goals. The 2030 sustainable development agenda also has a stand-alone goal on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Likewise, the United Nations has shown their support for women empowerment by declaring between 1976 and 1985 year for women, mandating that all governments should lay emphasis on women and see them as an integral component of national development; Nigeria should not be an exception in this regard. Similarly, the Beijing conference of 1995 in China

thereby aiding their contribution towards nation building. Finally, the paper suggests that Nigerian women need to be adequately empowered to unveil all the potential in them.

Keywords: Nation-building, women, empowerment, women empowerment.

fashioned ways of improving the wellbeing of women. The clamour for women empowerment has intensified considering the central role they play in various societies. Women empowerment is a conscious attempt designed and systematically applied by society to achieve a definite purpose of elevating the status of female gender group economically, socially and physically. In other words, empowerment can be seen as re-orientation and restoration of latent hidden talent and knowledge in women. When women are empowered, they are brought from the position of disempowerment into the position of strength and voice, and they are given opportunities without restrictions; the empowered woman has a means of livelihood and has little or no dependence on anyone.

Naturally, Nigerian women irrespective of religion, ethnic group or place of abode are talented, gifted and hardworking thus the need for women to be actively involved in nation-building would be a boost to the political, economic and socio-culture spheres in the nation. A typical Nigerian woman plays the role of mother-head domestic service such as caring for children, spouse etc. No wonder women are relegated to the background with the saying that women should be seen but not heard. Women have been known to be actively involved in farming activities as a means of supporting their family needs, they are solely responsible for food processing despite their multiple roles as mothers, nation builders and homemakers.

Instructively, during the pre-colonial period in Nigeria, women shared equal power with men in some cultures. The women then were powerful in the economic and socio-cultural sectors. Women such as Queen Amina of Zazzau, Gumsun and Magira of Borno Empire, Iya kekere (king wife) in the Oyo Kingdom, Madam Tunubu of Lagos were at par with their male counterparts in nation-building. The Umuada (daughters of the same family) in Igbo land constituted part of the governing body. But later, women unlike before became confined to the domestic chores and that was during the colonial era. This period did not necessarily enhance women status. Women began to lose some of the economic

authority hitherto enjoyed. In fact, politically, economically, the position of women took a bad turn and women were neglected and maltreated.

Education which is the window to the acquisition of knowledge, skill and self-confidence and empowerment was denied the womanhood. Women were encouraged to take the course that is complementary to the domestic roles while men were oriented towards professions which tend to enhance their future. The continued relegation of women brought about the Aba women riot in 1929, where the women protested against the forceful tax imposition, on the Igbo women, who were traditionally exempted from paying tax to colonial administrators. Similarly, there was also Adire dyers of Abeokuta riot between 1929 and 1930. The Egba women series of nonviolent mass protests that took place from November 1947 to 1949 in Abeokuta, as a result of a system of taxation adopted by the colonial administration in which women were required to pay tax from age five and their male counterparts to pay from age 16, (Ajasa 2016). Corroborating, Akinlaja, (2016) posits that the discrimination in the age of commencement of payment of tax led to eventual dethronement of the king of Abeokuta in 1949. Subsequently, Okereke (2010), submits that no nation can develop to the limit of its potential unless women are fully empowered to take up responsibilities as men and work collectively towards the political and socioeconomic development of the country.

Classification of Concepts

Women are a blessed species endowed with distinctive physiological features to play the role of childbearing and caregiving in human societies.

Okereke (2010), defined a woman as the weaker vessel, feeble-minded being, child bearer, emotional being, man's helper, caretaker, man's better-half, wealth preserver, soul mate, home managers, among others. He stressed that despite the number and group of women, a woman is powerfully made by the Almighty.

Empowerment

Empowerment has been defined in so many ways and the meanings differ according to the context. But almost all the definitions agreed that empowerment is a change of values. This is in corroboration with Gutierrez et.al, (1995) that empowerment is ubiquitously used by presidents and poets alike, yet its meaning often seems hazy and undeveloped. The concept of empowerment has been unevenly developed and has been used in different ways. Some described

empowerment primarily as a goal, others as a process, and some others as a form of intervention. Arguably, Rappaport (1984), noted that it is easy to define empowerment by its absence but difficult to define in action as it takes on different forms in different people and contexts.

Empowerment is an ongoing process and a means of providing resources, encouragement and motivation needed to perform at an optimal level, it enables women to take control of their own lives, set their own agenda, organise to help each other and make demands on the state for change (Young 1993).

Also, Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2014) defined empowerment as giving somebody power or authority to do something; to give somebody more control over their own life or the situation they are in.

Page and Czuba (1999) described empowerment as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives, a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities and in their society, by acting on issues they define as important. Empowerment is multi-dimensional since it occurs within sociological, psychological, economic, and other dimensions. This implies that it can occur in individual, group, and community levels.

United Nations in (1994) during the International Conference on Population and Development, submits that women empowerment has five components which include women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Empowerment according to Okereke (2010), is a process of giving strength, push or enablement to do something to make it perform the desired or expected task. He further explained that empowerment in relation to a human being is a mental, spiritual, intellectual, moral and physical re-awakening. It is strengthening the feeble or weak-minded person(s) and helping them rise up and be part of the political and economic revolution going on in the nations of the world. It can also be seen as stirring up the spirit of a person to do the extraordinary or seemingly impossible thing.

Similarly, Mayoux (2005), declared that empowerment is a multidimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations. This is in accordance with Page and Czuba (1999) who argue that empowerment can occur at all levels of life.

The World Bank (2009), in its approach to empowerment for economic growth and poverty reduction, describes empowerment as the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.

Kogi government (2004), viewed empowerment as a way of changing the attitude and potentials of individual's to positively re-direct them to gain control over their life or situation. This infers that empowerment is the total transformation of a woman's inferior status in society and also a way of having control over one's life.

Women Empowerment

Empowerment is a process of opening up something that has absolutely unlimited potential. It means reducing vulnerability and dependency. This implies action not passivity and being at the centre, not on the periphery.

Further, Everett (1991) opines that women empowerment is the broadening of choice; the expansion of opinions and alternatives available to women in determining the course of events, which will shape their lives and determine their own destinies. Women empowerment means creating conditions that enable women to make choices, this implies that women may have different preferences than men, but also different abilities to make choices while bargaining for power and access to resources.

Krishna (2003) views women empowerment as the process of increasing the capacity of women to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes.

Malhotra et al., (2009), defines women empowerment as women's ability to make strategic life choices where that ability had been previously denied them. Women empowerment is all about enhancing women to enable them to participate fully in different issues in the country. Empowerment is central to the processes of maintaining the benefits of women at individual and collective levels. This also implies that empowering women will contribute enormously to national issues.

In his contribution, Lasiele (1999), described women empowerment as the provision of adequate opportunities to develop women potential so as to contribute to the development of the nation in particular and to the world in general. In other words, it is the provision of conducive environment or

opportunities to women to contribute their quota to the social, political and economic development of a nation.

Assuredly, Okereke (2010), stated that women empowerment is the act of strengthening women to rise up and handle the challenges of life. He further stated that it is the motivation that helps women to do what they thought they could not do.

Okemakinde (2014), submits that women empowerment is a veritable mechanism to increase women skills and abilities, their control over the resources and decisions affecting their lives. Woman empowerment is, therefore, the removal of the limitations women encounter while performing those roles that they are unable to in society. It is also setting women free from all manner of cultural and traditional rules.

Nation Building

The concept of Nation building has been viewed by many from different perspectives and there is an absence of consensus among scholars on what it really constitutes. Nation-building is associated with national integration, national consciousness, national unity, construction and modification of socio-political and economic structures so as to move with the times, (Gotep,2000).

Accordingly, Carson, (2003) submits that Nation-building is the intervention in the affairs of a nation-state for the purpose of changing the state's method of government.

Notably, Gambari (2008),during the first Anniversary lecture on Mustapha Akanbi Foundation, upholds that nation-building has many important aspects namely, building a political entity which corresponds to a given territory, based on some generally accepted rules, norms, and principles, and a common citizens, building institutions which symbolise the political entity – institutions such as a bureaucracy, an economy, the judiciary, universities, a civil service, and civil society organizations. Above all else, nation-building is about building a common sense of purpose, a sense of shared destiny, a collective imagination of belonging. Similarly, Mezieobi, (1994) posits that nation-building is a multi-faceted, complex process of building the socio-political and economic dynamics of political society in such a way as to facilitate the polity's continued independent sustenance, development and growth. Meaning that, in the process, there is a concerted effort by the political leaders to integrate citizens who are naturally diverse in terms of culture, religion, language, economy, education and politics to

form a united and stable society. Surmising from the above, nation-building can be further described as the overall development of a country economically, politically, socially and culturally. That is the integration of all the citizens in the affairs of a country. It is against this background, that this paper attempts to examine the factors that are necessary for women empowerment in Nigeria.

Factors Necessary for Empowering Nigerian Women

Education

Education is the most powerful instrument for the empowerment of women Olakulfi, (2006), Education is a transfer of required skills to an individual to make him function well in society. It is also a weapon to capacity building and element necessary for sustainable development and should be offered to women. Acquiring basic education is a means to meaningful contribution to development. Without it, one remains ignorant and ignorance, they say is a disease. Education assists in mental thought and decision-making. No wonder professor Ukeje described education as power while Chief Mrs Adeleye(OFR) opined that when you have educated the women, you have educated the whole nation. According to UNDP education report of 1981, the illiteracy rate among women in Nigeria is 70 per cent and that is why women still remain poor, hence cannot contribute to nation building. Enlightened and educated mothers are bound uprightly to produce quality children than the less privileged and illiterate mothers. In line with Omoladum (2000), she contends that 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. This implies that women should not be denied access to education and other factors necessary for life so as to overcome the challenges of life.

Also, World Bank, (2009) maintained that nations in South Asia and Africa lose 5-1 per cent growth in per capita income per year compared to similar countries where the girl child has greater access to quality basic education. There is a need to reduce the disparity. As homemakers, they are in endowed with abundant knowledge and leadership skills. They, therefore, need to be encouraged. They should be seen as their men counterparts. The era when woman function was to reproduce is over. Biblically, women are presumed to be appendages of men. This, however, does not impede playing complementary roles to one another. There is a need to involve them in decision- making. Nigerians should take specific steps towards recognising the actual works of women particularly in the

matters of governance because as home managers they are naturally endowed with great leadership skills. Women such Mrs. Ngozi Okonjo-ewealla, Late Mrs. Uzo Nwaizu, Mrs. Oby Ezekwesiri, Prof. Adenike Grange, late Prof. Dora Akunyiri, Mrs. Okereke Onyiuke, Mrs Ellen Sirleaf of Liberia, Mrs Hilary Clinton, Mrs C. Rice of United States of America, Mrs. D. Alison Madueke, Dr. Mrs. Ibru, Mrs. Fumulyo Kuti, Dr. Safiya Mohamed, Mrs. Ama Pepple, and other powerful women in other countries of the world had creditably performed in spite being wives and mothers.

Financial Services

Women are key agents for achieving the transformation, economic, environmental and social changes required for sustainable development. According to Tagore, Women are the builder of the nation's destiny, they seek integration into the national main streams of equal partners in program and development. Nigeria women are concentrated in low-income jobs, therefore it is difficult for them to secure loans. Finance houses do not recognise them as their male counterparts. The government should find an alternative means of rendering financial assistance to women to enable them to carry on economic activities. Countries such as Indonesia and India have a lending system to empower women. Once women cannot present any form of collateral, it is always a problem securing financial assistance from banks and other financial institutions in Nigeria. There is a need for government to give concession to the women by waving collateral, this will enable them to have direct and unhindered access to loan facilities in the banks in order to spur them towards economic ventures. The establishment of microfinance institutions in the country has not assisted matters as the interest charged on loans is high though collateral free. Izugbara, (2004) argues that access to savings and credit facilities potentially strengthens women's economic decision-making capacity; improves their skills, knowledge, support networks and enhances their status in the society. He further argues that microcredit enables women to be economically, socially and politically empowered to be able to make investment and earn income. Financial training and loan knowledge, if established in the country, would create an opportunity for self-employment and significantly increased women's security, autonomy, self-confidence and status within the household and in society at large. It is imperative to establish specialised banks for the Nigerian women so

as to boost quick and easy access to loan facilities thereby leading to high productivity in the economy.

Production

Majority of Nigerian women are farmers, they are mostly found in rural areas. Women grow about half of the Nigerian food but hardly own lands. They do all these (produce and process crops) by the aid of outdated implements. Chukueze (2010) affirms that notwithstanding the fact that women in Nigeria produce most of the nation's food (60-80% of the labour input in Africa), and are responsible for the survival of their families, they are inadequately recognised or rewarded for their efforts.

Similarly, in the socio-economic structure of the Igbo in Southeastern Nigeria, Gallagher,(1981) explained the superiority of men over women. He stated that 'yam' which is regarded as the king has to be planted before the numerous crop of the women.

According to Ikpeze (2000), the patrilineage system predominant in most Igbo society that confers on men the control of land combines to confer superiority of men over the women. This confirms the earlier statement, that women grow half the Nigerian food but have no access to land. Majority of Nigerian women are self-employed either as unpaid or family workers and there is no enhancement to improve their farming activities so as to enjoy the economics of large scale. If empowered with new technology, it will boost their production and also encourage them to compete in those jobs exclusively reserved for men in terms of farming.

Information

It is now an accepted fact that the world has moved from the industrial to the knowledge or information society. It is also known that the driving force of this new society is Information and Communication Technology (ICT) or simply information Technology (IT). Further, it is a global consensus that any nation or community or individual that lags behind in the acquisition of IT faces the bleak prospect of not only being marginalised but completely bypassed. Nigerian women are very enthusiastic about the trend of IT and are willing to network with and form part of the global village. It is therefore imperative on the part of the government to provide the requisite ICT infrastructures and a well-trained human resource that would facilitate the training of women in IT software to

enable them to log onto the rest of the world towards their socio-political and economic empowerment.

Professionalism

In some societies, certain functions are set aside for women due to some cultural impairments. It is believed that women are inferior compared to their men counterpart. The industrial revolution in England between 1780 and 1850 saw a dramatic change for women. It necessitated the movement of women to vocation such as hairdressing catering and textiles. In Nigeria, the story is worse. An average Nigerian woman is seen as a baby making factory, housekeeper and care giver. Even when they are lettered, Nigerians tends to qualify female professionals by prefixing their title with gender stress. Official applications today are addressed as Sir, even when she could be a female. Specifically, in England, when an English Philosopher S. Mill presented the first woman suffrage petition to parliament, it was received with an uproar; parliamentarians declared that women were physically and intellectually inferior to men, unfit to exercise judgment in political matters. Women are prohibited from being part of the decision-making processes of some societies. In some societies, politics is exclusively reserved for men.

Kasomo, (2012) in his study revealed that one of the factors confronting women's participation in leadership is the lack of enough participation and empowerment in decisions that affect their lives in a political and social process. Today in Nigeria, the records over women in government are pitiable, there are three out of eight women in the Senate and five out of 17 in the House and the numbers in the State Assemblies is not encouraging and the appointment is the only avenue where the gap between men will be bridged.

Similarly, in Anambra- state Nigeria, women who indicated their interest in governorship position were clearly informed that Anambra seat is not meant for girls despite the fact that if given the opportunity to serve this will enhance their social and political empowerment.

Notably, Omenma, Onu, and Omenma (2016) argues that because religion and politics are interwoven in the traditional African setting, politicians covertly label women who dare into participatory politics as being morally bankrupt and not worthy to lead. While Farzana (2005) is of the opinion that social institutions are deeply patriarchal and resistant to progressive social change, they can act as a real brake on the agenda for gender equality. These are social conditions which

are prevalent in African culture that is linked to the limitation of women participation in nation-building. This also represents a typical instance of women deprivation and marginalisation. However, nation-building does not happen by accident rather it is built by men and women irrespective of gender.

Conclusion

Any country in its quest to attain sustainable development must strive to key into the potential of all its citizens regardless of race, religion and gender. Taking for granted issues that will discriminate one sex over the other have adverse effects on the achievement of any nation. Empowering the Nigerian women can achieve more rapid economic growth because of their essential contributions to the economic, social, political areas of the country. Women empowerment revolves around the means through which women can be encouraged to be self-reliant and self-confident. Women should be part of any developmental issues in Nigeria because they are a viable tool for poverty eradication and it is important to note that without an improvement on women's right and participation in social, economic and political life, the achievement of nation building of any economy may not be attainable. Likewise, Clinton (1998), contends that a nation's progress depends on the progress of women as well as the strength of democracy. This implies that for any development, a country needs the full participation of women. Nigeria as a country should not pay lip service to women issues because they are the best managers of resources and people. Women on their part can contribute more to nation building if given the right enabling environment and resources; they will boost the production of our national economy and accelerate the economic development of the country. As homemakers, nation builders, they are endowed with abundant knowledge and leadership skills, hence empowering them becomes imperative.

The Way Forward.

- The Nigerian government should see women empowerment as a matter of national priority and urgency to spurn all forms of discrimination against women to enable them to contribute their own quota towards nation building.
- The Nigerian government should fulfil the 35 per cent of the elective positions that Nigerian women enjoyed during the last administrations so that the yearnings of the women will be met.

- The Nigerian government should create an enabling environment for Nigerian women to revive 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 government should also eliminate all forms of artificial and institutional barriers that impede women from participating effectively in family and societal issues.
- The Ministries of Women Affairs need to intensify efforts towards sensitisation of citizens and civic education to foster a change of attitude towards women.
- Women on their part should endeavour to fight their own cause by protecting, supporting and inspiring one another.
- There should be a fair representation of women by involving them to participate in economic, social, political, cultural and other areas of government activities because enhancing full participation of women in government affairs is a pre-requisite for building a coherent nation.

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