



Empowering Nigerian women for national development: State of the art, challenges and prospects.

A.O OVUTE., N. G. DIBIA. and S.C OBASI

*Department Of Science Education College Of Agricultural And Science Education
Michael Okpara University Of Agriculture, Umudike.*

ABSTRACT:- Women empowerment can be described as the provision of adequate opportunities to women to develop their potentials and contribute to the development of the nation in particular and the world in general. It has been observed that women have been disempowered since creation. Efforts made so far towards women empowerment has yielded little fruits. This paper is therefore an attempt to re-emphasize and re-awaken the mind of humanity on the undisputable role of women in national development. The paper examined challenges hindering Nigerian women's effective contribution to national development, roles of women in national development, efforts made so far towards women empowerment and how Nigerian women could be empowered in order to contribute to national development. The paper finally suggested that since the role of women in national development is very important in the development of any country, the Nigerian government owes it as a duty to remove those artificial and institutional barriers based on religion, culture, or traditional considerations which have incapacitated Nigeria women in participating effectively and freely in national affairs particularly, at the political and economic levels so that women will contribute their quota to National development among others.

Keywords:- Educational, National Development, Women Empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Woman has been defined in so many ways as; the weaker vessel, feeble minded being, child bearer, emotional being, man's helper, caretaker, man's better half, man's wealth preserver, man's soul mate, home managers, among others (Okereke, 2010). No matter the number of categories the woman is placed on as stated above, she is more than these. A woman is powerfully created with superior structures. She is impeccably and uniquely made by her creator.

The emergence of 21st century laden with sufficient evidence; scientifically and otherwise, has proved that women are capable of holding leadership positions as men. Woman, as many think, are not naturally weak. They neither have limited contractual capacity nor lower intelligence quotient than men. This is proved in the likes of women like Margaret Thatcher "the iron lady", former Prime Minister of Britain, Indira Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India, Queen Elizabeth II of England, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia. In Nigeria, we have women like Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Finance Minister, Late Professor Dora Akunyili, former Minister of Information and Director of NAFDAC, Dr. Ndi Okereke Onyiuke among others who distinguished themselves in leadership and administration of Nigeria.

In the last two decades, according to Olaleye (2008), debates, on the status of women and the need to integrate them into development process of any nation have ranged on at national and international workshops, seminars among others. In Nigeria today, the women have come a long way in business, politics, education, sports and other professions. They have made an indelible mark in their efforts to conquer the limitations of the past which have sought to place them permanently in the kitchen and bedroom. Nigerian women are still relegated to the background as they lack the educational, economic and political power necessary to actualize their innate potentials. Ifedili and Ifedili (2012), asserted that Nigerian women are stalled by culture, which made them, vulnerable to effectively join the workforce and contribute to economic and thus, national development. Majority of Nigerian women have not been fully mobilized and empowered to contribute to national development. Otherwise, we would not still be talking about women empowerment.

The concept of development has been viewed from different angles; social, economic, political and cultural. Okemakinde (2014) viewed development to depict positive change and development in socio-economic and political conditions or situations of the society. Olomukoro (2012), views development in terms of human

*Corresponding Author: A.O OVUTE.

potentials and capabilities in the context of relations with other social groups. He further emphasized that development means greater understanding of social, economic and political process, enhanced competence to analyse and solve problems of day-to-day living, expansion of manual skills, greater control over economic resources, restoration of human dignity, self respect and equality. Thus national development is a multi-dimensional process involving the transformation and improvement of the economic, social and political situations.

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. Mills and Friesen (2001) see empowerment as the authority of subordinates to decide and act. It is something people do for themselves which involves solidarity and participation in the struggle for greater control over their lives. 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 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 is stirring up the spirit of a person to do the extraordinary or seemingly impossible thing.

Lasiele (1999) described women empowerment as the provision of adequate opportunities to women to develop their potentials and contribute to the development of the nation in particular and to the world in general. It is seen as the provision of conducive environment or opportunities to women to contribute their quota to the social, political and economic development of a nation. Okereke (2010) viewed women empowerment as the act of strengthening women to rise up and handle the challenges of life. He further said it is about motivations which help women to do what they thought they could not do. Okemakinde (2014) see women empowerment as a veritable mechanism to increase women skills and abilities, their control over the resources and decisions affecting their lives. Woman empowerment is therefore, regarded as the breaking of barriers that limit women from doing certain things men do in the society. It is setting women free from cultural and traditional bondages that militate against their productive powers and development.

The history of development clearly teaches us that nations are built by the collective will of the citizens and creative hard work. It is evidence that one of the weaknesses of the emerging economies of African nations today is the failure to deeply involve women in the process of governance and development (Okereke, 2010). No nation can develop to the limit of its potentials unless women are fully empowered to take up responsibilities as men and work collectively towards the political and socio-economic development of the country. To fully empower women requires a holistic approach to break the cultural and traditional barriers that hold women in bondage in a free world of equal opportunities. The time has come when women should be fully integrated into the scheme of things for national development.

It is against this background that the paper discusses factors that inhibit women's contributions to national development. It identifies various economic activities through which women meaningfully contribute to national development, areas women can be empowered for national development and recommendations that will empower women to contribute meaningfully to a rapid and effective national development will be given.

II. CHALLENGES HINDERING NIGERIAN WOMENS EFFECTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Women in Nigeria no doubt belong to the disadvantaged group in the society when compared to their male counterparts for reasons beyond their making and control. There is obviously no deliberate policy of discrimination against women in Nigeria, yet some obnoxious traditions, habits and ideas about women inhibit their progress and active participation in national affairs.

In spite of the seemingly remarkable achievements recorded by women world over, Nigerian women remain severely constrained in their efforts to play a major and decisive role in the social-political and economic development of the nation. Agu (2007) blames the colonial authorities for setting the 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. Such cultural beliefs and practices are found in the idea that men are superior to women and this has helped to deny women of their rights as human beings. These disparities between Nigerian women and men have hindered the Nigerian women from contributing meaningfully to the development of the nation. The problems include:

a) Illiteracy

Education is basic to a person's ability to maximize any opportunity that may arise from development. Education, whether formal or informal constitutes a vital instrument for socio-economic development of any society as well as the upliftment of the individual concerned (Ainabor & Ovbiagele, 2007). Unfortunately, the problem of gender disparity in Nigerians educational development as is the case of other parts of the world, remains the basic constraint to women development in Nigeria.

The importance of literacy and women empowerment in promoting gender equality and the advancement of women was further stressed by the Millennium Development Goals (2000) the Education For All (EFA) and Dakar Goals (2002). Access to women educational development programmes, in the words of Kagitabasis, Goksen and Gulgoz (2005) is considered one of the main factors for women empowerment and national development. For women to be integrated into development process, they need quality education, in order to become co-partners in national development. The problem of gender imbalance in access to basic education in this country has not been fully addressed going by gender disparities in school enrolments (FMWA, 2006 & FME, 2007). Preference for male education and anti-women education traces which are still visible in some parts of Nigeria, particularly in the far North (Ainabor, Eregha and Ovbiagele, 2006) contribute to women's less access to basic education. This gender imbalance to access to educational development opportunities has for a long time hindered women's full development of their potentials and consequently affected their contributions to national development.

b) Cultures and Tradition

Various cultures and traditions in Nigeria restrict the role of women to domestic activities, such as keeping the home clean, bearing children, cooking food for the entire family members among others. The society as at today sees these roles as less important as they require less extensive formal education for one to be able to perform them. Most cultures and traditions in Nigeria depict male dominance in all situations and as such females are inferior. These unfortunate belief systems have been a major obstacle to women development in Nigeria and as such constraints to their contribution to national development.

c) Sex stereotype

During the period of socialization females are usually trained to believe that there are different roles for males and females as well as the superiority of males over females. Adults also discourage competition between males and females and as such the female feel inferior to the males. Yomi (2007) also raised another challenge which he described as the "patrilineal system of descent" in which generations are identified through male off-spring. The responsibility for the preservation and continuity of the "family tree" rests on the male children and special recognition are accorded them than the females in the preparation for their adult roles. These mentality formed from childhood hinders the woman from aspiring to great heights and as such cannot exhibit Gods potentials in their lives and hence cannot contribute enough to the development of the nation.

d) No sufficient power

Nigerian women are generally not "aggressive or assertive" enough to seize leadership mantle from their male counterparts (Lasiele, 1999). People who lack power drive will find it difficult to assume leadership position. This impediment may be attributed to low self concept on the part of Nigerian women most of whom believe that males are better than them in human endeavors. This notion hinders them from trying to compete with their male counterparts which would have given them the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to national development.

e) Religious beliefs

The different religions in Nigeria have different views as regards the position of women in worldly affairs. Some religions strongly believe that women should only be seen and not heard while some view men as superiors, few others see them as equal. This difference in beliefs adversely affects the way women are treated and opportunities provided to them. As such what they believe in affects their effort towards national development.

f) Low participation of women in politics

Women do not often see themselves as viable instruments of political participation and national development (Okemakinde, 2014). The level of women's participation in politics is still very low in Nigeria. Very few women in Nigeria contest for elective post, rather, they limit their political activities to voting or appointment into political positions. The complacency of women in several aspects of national life not only reduces their capacity for manoeuvre in a male dominated society but also helps in perpetuating the culture of reducing women to positions and roles of second fiddle. This was why Agu (2007) believed that women see politics as a dirty game, a business which involves intimidation, rigging, assassination, kidnapping of opponents and all sorts of electoral violence which they cannot cope with. This attitude of women may be related to their level of education and poor economic base a situation that hinders them from contributing meaningfully to national development.

g) Poor Economic Base

Most Nigerian women are poor. This situation may be related to their low level of educational attainment. In business, most 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 (Okemakinde, 2014). The access of women to finance is so minimal that women are generally disadvantaged in terms of economic stability and independence. With poor economic base of most women their contribution to national development will be less substantial.

Nigerian women like their counterparts in other developing countries of the world, suffer from undue discrimination, marginalization and exploitation by the men folk through the instrumentation of their cultures and traditions and as such cannot contribute their quota to national development.

III. ROLE OF NIGERIA WOMEN IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

One of the most serious problems faced by the Nigerian development is non active participation of women in the national affairs. Women had tangible records of economic activities, largely in peasant societies where women made large contributions to community and national development. However, these contributions are not really recognized, but the truth is whether one holds a pragmatic or a humanistic view of development, the participation of women is necessary in national development. The analysis of women's traditional and preservation responsibilities demonstrated that they filled significant roles in the economy and in society, such as cultivation, food processing, food preservation, animal husbandry and marketing, in addition to caring for their homes and families (Okereke, 2010). The following areas have been identified as potent avenues by which women have collectively contributed to national development:

i. Grassroots solidarity

Women's grassroots initiative, groups and organizations are highly functional and supportive to communities and nations. Women's capacities for co-operative action were a large part of the reason for identifying them as the "backbone of rural development" (Okereke, 2010). They organize themselves for wide-ranging purposes, mutual savings and loan systems, house construction and improvement, cooperative farming and marketing, mobilizing funds for scholarship, starting nursery centre and installing water supplies. Despite the substantial accomplishment of women groups, women are still regarded as not contributing meaningfully to national development.

ii. Food production

Women's traditional roles in economic activities were neither evident nor even acknowledged in the modern sectors of agriculture, industry, commerce and government. The contribution of women to food production in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. Over time, women have paid their dues immensely both as individuals and as groups in Nigeria in the food production process. They clear the land, till, plant and tend crops. They harvest, store, preserve and even ensure that produced food ends up edible on the dining tables.

In Nigeria, women work the land and feed the population. Women are instrumental to the development of most prosperous agricultural regions in different parts of the country and Africa in general. The devaluation of women's work done in sustainable economies is the natural outcome of a system constructed by capitalist patriarchy. These roles are not accorded their rightful recognition in the society but seen is mere on times.

iii. Food preservation and storage

Apart from roles women play in the cultivation of crops and livestock domestication, they preserve and store food crops. For example, African bread fruit, cassava, palm oil, cocoyam, among others are specially preserved by women. These foods that are preserved and stored provide food especially during planting seasons when food is in short supply. It provides food security for the family and community.

Women have continued in their struggles to be relevant in the development process of the nation though their efforts are neglected in the nation's planning process. In professional technical occupations, they are found mostly as teachers and nurses. Some are also found in clerical occupations. Generally, women dominated the non wage sectors. Okogie in Ker (1999) observed that women make their greatest contributions to the economy in the agricultural sector. Trading is another area women contribute to the economy of the country. Many are engaged in both local and cross border trade which boosts the economy.

IV. EFFORTS MADE SO FAR TOWARDS WOMAN EMPOWERMENT

Women over the years have made several efforts to change their conditions but such efforts have been sporadic, uncoordinated and unsustainable. Deliberate organized efforts aimed at changing the status quo of women is a recent phenomenon. World conferences with women issues top on the agenda have been held at various times. There was the 1975 conference at Mexico City, 1980 at Copenhagen, 1985 at Nkrobe, 1995 Beijing conference and even the recent women summit held on 18th October, 2014 at Abuja at the instance of Dame Patience Jonathan, the wife of the Nigerian president, all geared towards women improvement.

These conferences have succeeded in bringing gender issues to global attention. The international conference gave the problem of women a global outlook and emboldened them to articulate the issues of critical concern and lobby for attention and assistance. This made the International and National Institutions and agencies more responsive to women's needs and aspirations.

The international conference on population and development held in Cairo in 1994 was a major breakthrough in the empowerment of women. It identified the empowerment of women and improvement of their status as essential to the realization of the full potential of economic, political and social development of any given human society.

The Beijing conference centered on upholding the earlier conventions on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. The Beijing conference recognized the need for the empowerment of women and equality between men and women as prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all the peoples of the world.

In Nigeria, several bodies and organizations emerged with the objective of empowering women, protecting and promoting their interest. The defunct Better Life for Women Programme, the Family Support Programme (FSP), Family Economic Advancement programme (FEAP), the National Womens Commission (NWC), the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS), are Governmental Organizations (G.Os) that were all geared towards women empowerment. There are also non-government bodies with similar targets.

Many African countries have formulated policies to promote women empowerment and development. For instance, Nigeria has adopted a “National policy on Women”. This is to promote and protect the rights of women and increase their participation in government. The National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) document expresses governments commitment to 30 percent representation for women and the Federal Government is trying to keep to that policy.

All these and other efforts put in place have not yet yielded enough fruits as ‘majority of women remain unempowered even though some have received the supposed vehicle (Education) through which empowerment could be conveyed. This is mainly due to some variables that constitute obstacles/barriers to empowerment that have not yet been removed and the *Modus Operandi* of the exponents of women empowerment.

V. EMPOWERING THE NIGERIAN WOMEN TOWARDS NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The foregoing constraints notwithstanding, full actualization of the potential of Nigeria women is not hopefully beyond achievement in the next millennium. In the traditional African societies, women represent the most essential ingredient in the formation of an important bio-social group known as the family. However, Fasugba (2000) was observed opines that many women are now engaging in activities and jobs hitherto regarded as the exclusive reserve of men. He further stated that since women have become conscious of their rights, they have continued to slug it out with men in all areas of human endeavours. For instance, there are now more women in the middle and high management level jobs than it used to be though the percentage is still small.

One major way by which women could be empowered is acquisition of vocational skills education. The right of women to be self-reliant and self-employed can be achieved through the acquisition of vocational skills that are related to their environment. This will enable them to engage in small scale enterprises, which is one of the ways of reducing the incidence of poverty and unemployment among women and consequently become empowered enough to contribute to national development.

Okemakinde and Tijani (2009), are of the view that the major pre-requisites for empowering women in the society include:

- Being sensitive to issues of gender and other aspects of humanity and interaction where social inequality can emerge;
- Endeavour to utilize existing resources in the given location in a productive manner whenever possible;
- Giving people who live and work in the given community an active role in a decision making process regarding the delivery of services;
- Giving opportunities to excluded groups to participate in public policy matters;
- Formalizing, disseminating and enforcing legal rights among others.

The above reveals that the income generating programmes are a practical solution to empowering women and strengthening their positions in the society (Okemakinde, 2014).

Kester, Okemakinde and Ejerewa (2005) are of the opinion that women can be empowered to sustain the economy through education. They further stated that the Nigerian government should emphasize the importance of education of female population not only in arts, the humanities and social sciences but also in science and technology. Also there should be sensitization of the parents and key stakeholders about the importance of female students in learning. Teachers should equally assign female students to leadership positions, and use female educators and professionals as role models for career talks and guest lecturers.

Women can be empowered orally, by the use of inspiring words that will awaken the inner being of a woman to the realization of the potentials she has and inherent abilities that can make her actualize great things. Written empowerment that one receives from written materials like books, magazines, articles among others will bring back fresh ideas and push one to accomplish her task. Women need it to integrate into national building. It helps them to actualize gender equality and claim their rights, have access to resources and

technology and needed services. This will help them influence policies. Women therefore deserve “Literacy Empowerment”.

Empowering women financially is one of the most powerful ways of empowering women. Okereke (2010) defined money as a defense, security, prime move, strengthener, life giver and god of the universe. Money gives a person power, authority and influence. Money answers nearly all things, gives one boldness and confidence. Financial empowerment is very vital to a woman because she needs it to start a business, finance projects, run organizations, get involve in politics among others. With enough finance, the woman will contribute immensely to the national development of a country. To empower women financially they should be allowed to have access to loans and mortgages.

Women empowerment will remain a mirage if women themselves are not fully involved. To ensure full and sustained participation, women should eschew petty jealousy, envy, greed, gossips, slandering, belittling and not having confidence on their fellow women some vices that destroy women bonding.

VI. CONCLUSION

The need to empower Nigerian women cannot be over-emphasized particularly in a democratic society which recognizes the need for individuals to develop their potentials and contribute to the overall development of the nation. It is therefore imperative that awareness be created on the benefit that could be derived from women empowerment and as well as assist women to realize their potentialities in order to contribute meaningfully to national development.

The empowerment of Nigerian women towards national development should be a matter of top national priority, which demands the attention and genuine commitment of every responsible member of the society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to promote women empowerment towards national development, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. The creation of awareness is important in any issue of vital importance to this global challenge. The awareness should centre on what women empowerment is, its benefits to individuals and to the society and way of achieving it.
2. 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.
3. Government should as a matter of deliberate policy promote gender balance in access to education in Nigeria by insisting on the enrolment of certain percentage of girl children in schools. This is in line with the Affirmative Action that requires about 30 percent of women to be elected to political positions in African countries.
4. The ministries of Women Affairs all over the Federation should 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 to create positions of responsibility and advancement for the women folk.
5. Women on their part should strive to break through development barriers with great determination, perseverance, unbreakable solidarity and genuine desires to conquer the natural challenges of their origin.
6. Every women forum, whether in the city or rural areas, should be effectively utilized as an avenue to educate the illiterate ones among them on skills, knowledge and values that will help them improve their social, economic and political life style.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Agu, S. (2007). Gender Equality, Education and Women Empowerment: The Nigerian Challenge. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Research Development*, 8; 1:66-72.
- [2]. Ainabor, A.E & Oviagele, A.I.O. (2007). Implications of women education for poverty alleviation in Nigeria. *Journal of Academics*, 2 (2) P. 43.
- [3]. Ainabor, A.E; Eregha, E.E. & Oviagele, A.I.O. (2006). Women education in Nigeria: Implications for socio-economic development. *Journal of Academics*, 1 (1)
- [4]. Federal Ministry of Education (2007). National Bureau of Statistics, Abuja.
- [5]. Federal Ministry of Women Affairs (2006). Nigerian Gender Statistics. Digest, Abuja.
- [6]. Ifedili, C.J. & Ifedili, C.A. (2012). Managing girl-child education in Nigerian Universities for better productivity. *European Journal of Business and Social Sciences*, (193): 96-102.
- [7]. Kagitabasi, C, Goksen, F and Gulgoz, S. (2005). Functional Adult Literacy and Empowerment of women: Impact of a functional Literacy Program in Turkey. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 48 (6): 472-498.
- [8]. Ker, B.O. (1999). Enhancing Women’s Economic Contribution To National Development. *The Counsellor*, 17(1) 259-269.
- [9]. Kester, K.O; Okemakinde, S.O & Ejerenwa, G.N. (2005). Women Education and Entrepreneurship in Nigeria: A path to sustainable livelihood. *Journal of Adult Education and Development*. 3 (1): 51-65.

- [10]. Lasiele, Y.A. (1999). Women Empowerment in Nigeria: Problems, Prospects and Implications for Counselling. *The Counsellor*, 17 (1), 132-137.
- [11]. Mills, D.O, & Friessen, G.B. (2001). Empowerment. In S. Crainer and D. Dearlove (Eds.) *Financial Times Handbook of Management*: Prentice Hall. 323-333.
- [12]. Okemakinde, S.O; Okemakinde, T and Tijani, T.K. (2009). Non-formal Education as a panacea to Women Empowerment in Nigeria. *International Journal of Educational Issues*. 4 (1):42-55.
- [13]. Okemakinde, T. (2014). Women Education: Implications for National Development in Nigeria. *European Journal of Globalization and Development Research*. 9 (1) 553-564.
- [14]. Okereke, C. (2010). Gender Equality and Women Empowerment. Nigeria, Akutaenwere press.
- [15]. Olaleye, F.O. (2008). Empowering Women through Education. In M. Boucouvalas, & R. Aderioye (eds.) *Education for Millennium Development*. Essays in Honour of professor Michael Omolewa.
- [16]. Olomukoro, C.O. (2012). Influence of Literacy Education Programmes on Socio-Economic and Psychological Empowerment of Women in Edo and Delta States, Nigeria. An Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis University of Ibadan, Ibadan.
- [17]. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2014). New 8th Edition. New York, Oxford University press.
- [18]. UNESCO, (2002). Education for All: An International Strategy to Operationalize the Dakar frame work for Action of Education for All (EFA) <http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/global.cocomprehensive-efa-strategy-2002-ghtml>
- [19]. Yomi, M.K. (2007). Women: The Disadvantaged Specie. Ibadan: Third World Information Services Publishers.