

Education and Women Empowerment in Nigeria: A Review

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ABSTRACT

The concept of women empowerment has been widely examined by scholars and well elucidated in the documents and literature of donor agencies. Karl (1995) in Patrick (2008) observed that even before the concept was made popular, women have been seeking to gain control over their lives and to participate in decision making processes in their community and state. Education is the key to unlocking the potentials of all individuals' communities and societies. Education is seen as light and illiteracy as darkness. Women should be empowered adequately, educationally in order to bridge the existing gap. We should not lose sight of the important roles that women play in the society as nations' builders. Empowerment is the ability to attain development for economic performance. Women empowerment is the placement of power on the female gender to exercise and maximize her God's given potential and resources in order for her to contribute positively to the development of her society. The writer recommends that government should provide scholarship for the girl-child education in order to empower more women in our society and enhance our socio-economic growth as a country among others.

Keywords: Education, Empowerment, Women Empowerment.

Introduction

Empowerment could be seen as enabling women to gain control over their lives and to participate in decisions that affects them. Karl view is shared by Garba (1997) and Gabriel (2000). But according to Crawley and Aruma as cited in Patrick (2008), it is more than having access to the decision making platform. It involves emancipating women from the shackles of oppression and giving them power.

Similarly, Medel-Anonuevo (1997) sees:

Empowerment as a process and the result of a process whereby the powerless or less powerful members of a society gain greater access and control over material and knowledge resources and challenge the ideologies of discrimination and subordination; and transforms the institutions and structures through which unequal access and control over resources is sustained and perpetuated.

Empowering women involves a radical measure because it requires redefining the notion of femininity and masculinity as well as changing male-female relationship. Bhasin (1992) outlines what empowerment of women implies:

It means recognizing women's contribution and women knowledge... having women fight their own fears and feeling of inadequacy and inferiority... enhancing their self-respect and self-dignity... women controlling their own bodies, becoming economically independent and self-reliant... controlling resources like land and property... reducing women's burden of work especially within the home... creating and strengthening women group and organization, it means promoting qualities of nurturing, caring, gentleness not just in women but also in men.

Bhasin notion of empowerment is quite encompassing and comprehensive. It includes cultural, social, political and economic empowerment. Empowerment is not an end. It is a means to an end. Empowerment ensures equality, justice and promotes democracy and sustainable development.

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Empowering women will make them not just object and receivers of development, but makers of development. It helps to enhance the level of women participation in the development process and build their capacity and resources for effective contribution to their society.

Braimoh (2000) describes education as:

The weapon of social change, a bedrock of national, socio-economic development, an instrument for changing (for the better) the culture of oppression, ignorance, victimization and perpetual dependence.

Education in this sense is not to be regarded as a mere acquisition of academic intelligence of facts and information. The type of education envisaged here is the Reconstructionist type of education that will usher in a new turn of mind of the man. Man needs the kind of education that will enable him to reinterpret and transform his societal and national values within the framework of the modern day realities. By this education becomes an instrument for necessary ideological changes that will usher in an equitable society without boundary and limitations, a society full of equal opportunities and where limitations will be within the confines of the constitution and capabilities rather than on sex differences.

Basisaiye (2000) in Fielding as cited by Nsirim (2008) saying that:

...Empowerment is about those with power giving those whom they decide are appropriate recipients greater capacity to make decision about the nature of their work or greater involvement in their legitimate sphere of interest.

He went further to state that:

The word empowerment carried with it, a promise of autonomy and the capacity to shape work in the ways which not only reflects but develops the skills, expertise and aspiration of the person who is empowered.

In another vein, George and Ekpo (2005) quote Okeke as seeing empowerment as “to give power, to give authority, to enable a person or group of persons to gain power”. They went further to quote Azikiwe as seeing empowerment as “giving or providing the means for self-reliance and independence”.

Empowerment is a word coined from the word “empower” which means to invest with power (economic, political, social and legal power). It also means to equip or supply with an ability or official authority. Empowerment, according to Oxford Dictionary is ability to attain development for economic performance. Empowerment is a social process that promotes participation of people, organization and communities towards the goals of increase individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life and social justice (Wallerstein, 1992 in Okafor, 2008). For Okafor, empowerment means to give someone impetus to function at a maximal capability. Empowerment if applied to gender relates to social placement of power on the female gender to exercise and maximize her God’s given potential and resources in order for her to contribute positively to the development of her society. This could be attained through different measures like gender equality, economic empowerment enfranchisement, removal of all social tradition and religious constraint that have hindered her from participating actively in social, economic, legal, political and family decision making.

According to Okafor, many researchers such as Walkerstein (1992), Weldon (2002) and Tripp (2005) have also described the role of women movement in improving women’s social and political power as important. According to these researchers, greater access of women to educational and physical resources will increase their changes of professional, political and economic development.

Women Empowerment

Empowerment of women results from the fact that women account for over 60% of the Nigerian population. In spite of the different roles of women in the society, such as wives, daughters, mothers and economic drivers, their participation as long as business, politics, social and economic decision making is concerned is still very low (Adelaja, 2003 in Okafor). Empowerment enables women to participate fully in family and societal decision making, attend increased health and control of their children education. As Thomson (2002) in Okafor puts it, without empowerment, women timid and natural activities will be worsened off because the majority of Nigerian women are illiterate, live in economic deprivation and in poor rural areas of the Niger Delta (Rivers State).

High illiteracy leads to their marginalization and exclusion from participating in most decisions which affects their lives. Such decisions are personal, political, religious,

social, and economic and they are often victims of individual harassment, national conflicts and military coups, dictatorship and corruption (Aderinwale, 2002 in Okafor 2008). It is believed that women in Rivers State and in Nigeria have a low economic status, their contributions to the socio-economic growth and development in Nigeria is not more than 30% compared to that of men. Women has important role to play in enhancing the economic development of the state and nation at large. Empowering women will give them the opportunity to develop the capacity to participate effectively in political debates and development issues. This includes building women's capacity to formulate and analyze development paradigms and approaches, promote civic education, literacy, skill training and human resource development among women which must serve as a means of enhancing women participation.

Women empowerment will free them from subjugation, exploitation and oppression. Empowerment of women will enable them to revise and rewrite their stereotypical images and encourage them to express their views and exploit their potentiality to the fullest. Bhasin, observed that empowerment of women cannot be separated from empowerment of nature as their empowerment help to save forests and reduce pollution and degradation of the environment. Empowerment as a process and as a result of a process is not ascribed. It can be achieved through collective and individual efforts. Kwapong (2005) in Patrick (2008) observed that since 1970s women empowerment process have moved from welfare, women in Development, Gender and Development (GAD) to Mainstreaming and Empowerment (M&E). According to Karl (1995), Rogers (2005), Abazi (2005) and Aruma (2006) as cited in Patrick (2008), the measures commonly used by development agencies and government to empower women are employment creation, income generation activities, access to credit, integrated rural development, provision of basic needs and services and promoting fertility control.

Recently, women empowerment focuses on integrated quality health care, Universal Basic Education and rural women literacy programme. Also, promotion of women in governance, ensuring women access to legal aid and justice. Although advocacy on women issues has received global attention, not much has been achieved in Nigeria; these include Ministry of Women Affairs at both federal and state levels. Women Education Units (federal and state levels), Better Life for Rural Women, MAMSER, Family Support Programme Grassroot (Skills Acquisition) and in Rivers State, the Adolescent Project (TAP). Laudable as they were, these programme emphasized women empowerment yet women are still marginalized, poor and relegated to the background. These programmes only benefited a limited number of women who were at the forefront, while the target group continues to wallow in poverty, illiteracy, disease and even death.

The United Nations MDGs is a positive strategy that should improve on the status-quo and place women on the fast lane of development because women issues are implicitly and explicitly entrenched therein. The United Nations (1993) in Ijah (2008) observed that women constitute a substantial percentage of the world's population but they receive only a small proportion of its benefits and opportunities. In addition, the quality of life of women has never been equal to that of the men anywhere in the world.

However, present economic realities prove that gone are the days when women were regarded as only fit and destined to marry and remain therein as human reproductive machine. Gone also are the days when it was held that only men should work outside the home as wage earners and bread winners while women remained at home as wage and bread consumers.

This 'second fiddle' role is fast fizzling out, paving way to increase participation of women in decision making (Ijah, 2008), sufficiently empowered, women can perform just as men, if not better. Examples abound in Nigeria and beyond. Meaningful development can only be achieved through positive contribution of all stakeholders irrespective of sex, race or creed. Women the world over have been known for their various contributions to the development of their respective communities and nations. In past times, women founded ancient settlements even in Nigeria and Rivers State. When properly and adequately empowered, women contributed immensely to socio-economic, political, religious and cultural development of their communities (Orji, 2003 in Ijah, 2008).

Apart from unquantified and unrecognized roles of human reproduction, home managers and future securers, women are farmers, traders, civil servants and entrepreneur. Research has proved that in sub-Saharan Africa and Nigeria in particular, women contribute immensely in the agricultural sector. A survey of sex composition of the agricultural labour force in sub-Saharan African indicates that the percentage of female farmers ranged from 70% - 75%. While men do the heavy intermittent jobs of clearing, fencing and preparation, women hoe, weed, harvest, transport, store, process and market the produce much more than the men (Orji, 2003, Maidugu, 2001, Ike, 2006, in Ijah, 2008). Women engage in economic activities in order to assist their husbands, children and move their entire society forward. Food insecurity is counter-productive; therefore improvement in the status of women translates to a reduction of food insecurity and stability in the society.

Conclusion

Education is the key to unlocking the potentials of all individual's communities and societies. Barikor (1983) as cited in Ijah equates education with light and illiteracy with darkness. Education is a process of instilling and shaping or modifying the attitudes, habits and behaviours of the individual for proper adjustment in the society. An illiterate person is a dangerous citizen. An illiterate woman may administer expired drugs on her sick children, thereby jeopardize rather than improving their health. Women education is a veritable strategy for the achievement of women empowerment. It has a spill-over effect on the family, community and the state and society at large. However, the UNESCO Information Document (1986), reported that nearly 98% of the world's illiterate are found in developing countries with Africa having 64% of this figure. Moreover, 60% of Nigerians belong to this category. Similarly, the News (2002) in Ijah (2008) said that two-thirds of the world's 876 million illiterates are women. With these startling revelations, it becomes imperative to critically finance and support this sector in favour of women.

We should not lose sight of the important roles that women play in the society. As bearers of life, women are responsible for the perpetuation of the human race. As such, they are the building blocks of the society. A society that fails to provide adequately for her womenfolk to grow and develop should be prepared for a vicious cycle and all the attendant problems. In spite of recent concerted efforts to facilitate women empowerment, Ayodele (2004) as cited in Ijah (2008) informs us that the walls of gender disequilibrium still remains as thick as ever. Gender equality is still unfavourable to the female sex.

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