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GENDER BALANCE, EMPOWERMENT AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: FROM LIBERATION TO EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

This paper which is exploratory in nature examines the role women can play and the limitations facing them in being part of development, it admitted that women have great potentials to be harnessed for development and its neglect will obviously be antithetical to real economic, social and political development. If the goals of development which include improved standard of living, removal or reduction of poverty, access to dignified employment and reduction in social inequality, then women who do not only have the crucial role of ensuring the perpetuation of the human race but also constitute the majority of the poor, the underemployed, economically and socially disadvantaged in many societies, must be consulted and actively involved in the development process both at the stage of planning, execution and/or implementation. The work relied basically on content analysis in which existing body of literature from books and journals were used. Useful recommendations ranging from elimination of gender prejudices and its attendant discriminatory practices which were identified as being predicated on injustice were made. The study concluded that it is necessary to eliminate gender inequalities in primary and secondary education and ensuring free and equal rights for women to own and inherit property. This also means doing everything in our power to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violation against women and girls so that social justice and development is entrenched in Nigeria.

Introduction

Issues in gender have generated so much interest generally in the recent past in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Attempts have also been made by different peoples, governments, agencies, including world organizations on the issues of gender especially as it affects women notable among them is the United Nations (UN) decades for women 1975-1985 and 1985-1995. This UN initiative gave raise to such fora on Women In Development as the one in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980) Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995). Therefore, his work therefore is essentially an attempt to evaluate the phenomenon of not only women's studies but also the impact of same on their emancipation for national development.

Contextual and Conceptual Discuss-The Struggle In Retrospect

According to Okeke in Anugwom et al (2000:62) 'the first decade succeeded in raising the consciousness of people, especially Africans to the plight of women, the discriminatory and/or unequal practices against them in social, economic and political sphere.'

In retrospect however, women's movement campaigned to obtain political, social, and economic equality for women. Among the equal rights campaigned for are control of personal property, equality of opportunity in education and employment, equal suffrage in other words, the right to vote, and equality of sexual freedom. In the words of Hannam (2005:5)

'the women's rights movement, also known as feminism and women's liberation, first discernibly arose in Europe in the late 18th century. Although by 1970 most women throughout the world had gained many rights according to law, (but) in fact complete political, economic and social equality with men remains to be achieved.'

Similarly, Gloria Steinem-(who campaigned in the 1960s), a writer, founder of MS Magazine and who helped to found the American Women's Political Caucus and Women's Action Alliance- who had championed feminism and women liberation insists that the cause her colleagues and herself pursue was not only that in women but that in humanism. In fact, she posited in her famous 'Address to the Women of America' that

*This is no simple reform, it is really a revolution.
Sex and race because they are easy visible differences
have been a primary way of organizing human beings
into superior and inferior groups and into the cheap labour
on which the system still depends. We are talking about
a society in which there will be no roles other than those
chosen or those earned. We are really talking about humanism.*

What this course of action has achieved for the womenfolk is rather enormous, indeed, the Women's Movement by about 1960, had achieved some social and economic conditions which helped to shape and expand the role of women out of the home to the factory and office. This, along with other social changes, convinced women to demand equality with men. Including the right to vote which was won through the effort of Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1919. According to Hannam (2005:6) 'Elizabeth persuaded Senator Aaron A. Sargent of California to sponsor a woman suffrage amendment to the US Constitution in 1878. The amendment was reintroduced

every year until Congress finally approved it in 1919, meaning that American women had finally won the right to vote.'

With the re-emergence of Western feminism in the 1960s, the emphasis of the movement was very much on the fact of the personal being political, that is, that women's individual experiences of subordination were not isolated incidents rooted in particular personality differences, but were each an expression of a common political oppression. There was also, early on, a concern for the importance of sisterhood, but this notion has been accused of lacking coherence and integrity in the event of persistent racial and class prejudice within the movement. In fact, the differences between women, as well as their areas of common ground, have themselves become topics in women studies and for feminist academic research in recent years. Howbeit, what is important is that this period provided ample opportunity for the liberty of women or better still, women liberation which manifested especially on such issues as suffrage won some time in 1919.

Women Emancipation In Nigeria

In any case, it was in the second decade (1985-1995) according to Okeke in Anugwom et al (2000:62) 'that African countries became really concerned to some extent, with the phenomenon of women's studies'. In other words, a significant number of African women developed an interest in women's studies only in the 1980s.

It is important to mention here that feminism as a concept though may be defined in various ways is seen as an awareness by women of their exploitation and oppression within the family, at work and in the society including conscious action by the women to change the situation. According to Okeke citing Charlotte Bunch (1979) in Anugwom et al (2000:63) feminism is seen as

a perspective or world view with two long goals-the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice through women's power to control their own lives and bodies within and outside the home; (power here refers not to a hope of domination over others, but (seen) as a source of internal strength, the right to determine one's choices and ability to influence social processes and the direction of social change); it is the removal of all forms of inequality and oppression through the creation of a more just social economic (system).

In relation to the study of women are issues in development, which in this context will be considered as national development. The role of women in national development cannot therefore, be over emphasized. Indeed, the growth and development (mental/physical) of any child is usually attributed to its mother. This means that the child which represent the future of any society owes his upbringing to the woman, in other words, for the future of any society to be guaranteed and secured, the woman cannot be taken for granted. It is in a bid to guarantee the future that it becomes imperative not to ignore the women in national development. We shall for the purpose of this study consider national development to mean sustainable development.

What is sustainable development one may want to ask? Development that is sustainable according to Onah (1995:29) is 'development that does not endanger the natural systems that support life on earth.' Onah further added that the Nigerian Environmental Study Team (NEST,

1991) summarizes sustainable development as that which is a motion, a movement and an approach, which has developed, into a global wave of concerns, study, political mobilization and organization around the twin issues of environmental protection and economic development.

In supporting the above assertion on sustainable development, Dalal-Clayton (2005) cited in Kalu (2007:6) posits that an almost universally quoted definition of sustainable development was produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) otherwise known as the Brundtland Commission (named after the Prime Minister of Norway). It defined sustainable development as 'economic and social development that meets the needs of the current generation without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

It can therefore be said that it is also 'a dynamic approach which according to the Brundtland Commission is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investment, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations'.

Against the foregoing, issues in human development are those which Gloria Steinem the famous women liberation protagonist had in the second half of the last century referred to as issues not in feminism but in humanism. Indeed, meeting human needs is nothing but a commitment to meeting the needs of present and future generations and meeting these needs has various implications such as satisfying socio-cultural and health needs-including a shelter which is healthy, safe, affordable and secure, within a neighbourhood with provision for piped water, drainage, transport, health care, education, child development and protection from environmental hazards. Services according to Kalu (2009:12) 'must meet the specific needs of children and of adults responsible for children MOSTLY WOMEN' (*emphasis mine*). Achieving this implies a more equitable distribution of income between nations and in most cases within nations especially between and among the genders.

In like manner, political needs-including freedom to participate in national and local politics and in decisions regarding the management and development of one's home and neighbourhood, within a broader framework that ensures respect for civil and political rights and the implementation of environmental legislation. It should be noted that no meaningful development can occur when the development of the home, local and national politics are in fetters. When and where freedom and liberty to participate in the democratic process is seriously hindered and hampered by the gender divide.

Consequently, we should join hands in liberating the womenfolk. Africa in the words of Nwachukwu-Agbada (2008:36) cannot be free until her women are free. He went on to add that

'... in a polity like ours in which honesty and commitment have become rare virtue, we should hand over to the women lest we harbor the solution to the poverty of ideas currently pervading the social and political climate of the nation without knowing it...this is because women seem to understand more intimately what it is to be free and unfettered...and it is only as a liberated people, physically and cerebrally, that we can enjoy real development.'

Development will continue to elude any nation whose population especially the women population is economically backward, suffer unemployment and have problems relating to health care including maternal and childcare. It is only when these issues are adequately addressed that the quest from women liberation to equality and then to empowerment will become more relevant and more useful.

The issue of women employment cannot be over exaggerated, this is because once women are employed or are engaged in gainful employment, they help to improve the economic base of their families, as they become income earners. That way, improvement and development begin to take effect. As a matter of fact, the International Conference on Population (1984) specifically addressed the situation of women regarding employment. It emphasized according to Onah (1995:31) 'the need for an articulated policy on women employment with a view of accelerating it.'

However, acceleration of women employment seems to be anything but accelerating. Onah (1995:31) posits that 'rapid population growth especially in the urban areas affects the supply of labour in the economy. The size of the population in Nigeria's labour force defined, as 76 per cent (as of 1995) of the population aged 15-64 is about 37.5 million workers. Women constitute 48 per cent of this figure.' This situation is anything but cheering as it does not suggest development in any way whatsoever.

In respect of maternal health and care, maternal mortality is not only a medical problem but also a social albeit, development problem. The fifth (5th) of the eight (8) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in September 2000 by the United Nations (UN) focuses on reducing Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) by three-quarters (3/4) between 1990 and 2015. The millennium goals include poverty reduction, education, gender equality, reduction of maternal and child mortality. According to Ndikom (2007:17) 'available data indicate that maternal mortality is still high about 1'000 per 10'000 live births in the late 1990s to 2001.' Furthermore, Moss, Darmstadt, Marsh, Black, Santosham (2000) cited in Ndikom (2007:17) stated that

'neonatal mortality now accounts for approximately two-thirds (2/3) of the 8 million deaths in children less than one (1) year of age, and nearly four-tenths (4/10) of all deaths in children less than 5 years of age. Worldwide, 98% of all neonatal deaths occur in developing countries, mostly at home and largely attributable to infections, birth asphyxia and injuries and consequences of prematurity, low birth weight and congenital anomalies.'

Indeed, the achievement of the forth (4) goal of the MDG which is to reduce child mortality can only be achieved if the mother is alive, healthy and knowledgeable. Similarly, the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA, 2005) noted that 'education, together with reproductive health, is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process.'

According to Ndikom (2007:17) 'studies have shown that women with higher educational attainment are more likely to use formal pregnancy related care than less educated'. She went further to add 'that the status of women in developing countries limit their access to economic resources and basic education and thus their ability to make decisions related to their health, nutrition and that of their children'. It therefore follows that educational empowerment is very

important in order to ensure the women and their children remain alive as the foster of the future generation and leaders of tomorrow's development respectively. This is in line with the United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) 2001 report which states in part that '... services in health care facilities, age of sexual debut or age of marriage are all related to educational level and cultural values.'

Accordingly, there can be no gain saying the fact about the crucial role of women in not only nation building but also in national development. Indeed, this has gained so much currency that it has attracted world-wide attention, so much so that it has stimulated concern for the role of women in development as well as the appropriate way of repositioning them from the shackles and fetters of domination through liberation and ultimately to empowerment. For this repositioning effort will only be meaningful if and when they reach or arrive at the point of both socio-economic and political development.

Amujiri (2007:15) had noted 'that it has become an incontrovertible fact that women constitute more than half of the world population and plays important and strategic roles in societal development'. If this assertion is anything to go by, it is then worrisome that the

'...low status of

women, pathetic and deplorable
conditions of women especially in developing countries.
Societal and traditionally rooted bias against women,
discrimination and unjustified violence against them
(are, as it were) the main factors that vitiate women's
role in development.' (Amujiri, 2007)

As a matter of fact, the enormity and pervasive nature of these practices against women particularly in Nigeria have negatively affected the level of social, economic and political empowerment of women including what Amujiri (2007:16) had referred to as their 'capacity utilization' as well as their contributions to national development. Globally, these pathetic and deplorable conditions of the womenfolk have generated serious concern that literature on these challenges have proliferated such that great insight in this regard has yielded.

Against the foregoing, one such insight is the Nigerian situation where women according to the 1991 census figures constitute 49% of the nation's population. Rural women, according to Caritas (2008:33) 'play an essential role in crop and livestock production; they provide the food, water and fuel their family need. They are responsible for the reproduction of the labour force and for producing of 70% of the nation's food supply.' Despite the fact that women are predominantly the food producers of the nation, majority of them are still food insecure and being small holders whose farm size fall below the threshold level for adequate food production, it significantly fails and impedes for them access to financial, physical and social assets.

While reflecting on the Nigerian situation of women poverty and women empowerment, Caritas (2008:34) notes that

'the majority of female sector workers are to be found
in lower cadre occupations...due to power relationship
in the family where men and their families frequently
control household income, many women find themselves
economically vulnerable even when they have secure
employment. This is aggravated by social-cultural norms
that diminish women's status in the family. Different forms

of violence including discrimination (seen as men's property), denial of inheritance, harassment, battering and even rape and human trafficking can be the consequence.'

It should be noted that one basic reason for the vulnerability of women is limited capacity such as illiteracy or low educational attainment (as already pointed out). This singular barrier tends to lock about half or more of the population in the vicious circle of poverty and deprivation. As a consequence, women continue to be underrepresented at most levels of public office. An extra burden is added especially to women through the Human Immune Deficiency Syndrome and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) crisis which affects women disproportionately.

In Nigeria, it is all too clear that women are disproportionately represented among poor households and that poverty is being increasingly feminized. In order to eradicate poverty according to Caritas (2008:35) 'the gender dimension needs to be addressed in development planning.' Caritas further observed that 'interestingly, Nigeria has signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and also the Beijing Declaration. This is meant to remove all obstacles that retard the participation of women in nation development.' Furthermore, Caritas (2008:36) noted that the UN Convention requires from all signatories to 'take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations, and in particular to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women'.

The same rights have to be recognized for both spouses in respect of ownership, acquisition, management, administration, enjoyment and disposition of property. As a matter of fact, a study carried out by Mirrill Lynch Investment Managers cited in Kiyosaki (2006) and quoted in Meneke (2010:6), concludes that women know how to handle money. Kiyosaki went further to give reasons why women are better investors than men as follows-

- a) They are willing to ask for help
- b) Women are great shoppers
- c) Women do their home work
- d) Women are risk bearers
- e) Women have much less ego
- f) Women are nurturers
- g) Women learn well from other women

Indeed, Kiyosaki (2006) in Meneke (2010) concluded by insisting that women are more humble and can stoop low to handle any genuine business in order to take care of their children and members of their family (including their husbands). Therefore, women has to prepared through the instrumentality of entrepreneurial education as one of those appropriates to eliminate discrimination. Infact, Heckler et al (2008) in Meneke (2010:7) explains that entrepreneurial education can offer the desired help for women to shift from traditional sectors to industrial sectors such as high-tech, construction, transportation, public utility, business consultancy services etc.

It must have been in this vein that His Holiness, the Supreme Pontiff, Benedict XVI in his first encyclical (2006) while speaking about charity as a responsibility of the Church posited that 'there can never be room for a poverty that denies anyone what is needed for a dignified life.'

His Holiness is also of the view that there must exist such social and civil order upon which discrimination is eliminated. Benedict XVI therefore opines that

‘building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew...the church is duty bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically. The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible...yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sideline in the fight for justice.’

It is pertinent to observe that issues of gender prejudices and its attendant discriminatory practices are predicated on injustice at least as has been justified by the Church. As part of her social justice crusade, while addressing the African Union (AU) summit on gender equality, Mtengeti-Migiro (2007) in Kalu (2010:7) insisted that it is necessary

‘to ensure that our women take their rightful place in society...eliminating gender inequalities in primary and secondary education and ensuring free and equal rights for women to own and inherit property...and it means doing everything in our power to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violation against women and girls’.

In concluding this piece, we must sound a note of warning, that whereas, the womenfolk are being encouraged to get into the mainstream of economic and national life, the men folk must also effectively secure their place in both economic and national life. This is borne out of the fact that while the womenfolk are gradually but steadily being emancipated, the men folk on the hand are steadily yet gradually losing ground and hold of what and where hitherto were male domain. For instance, while women now achieve and gain admission to study such men dominated areas as aeronautics engineering, natural and physical sciences among many more disciplines as well as rise and increased girl-child school enrollment. It is open secret on the other hand that the boy-child school enrolment has considerably dropped.

In the light of the above, there is regrettably, a corresponding rise and increase in the number of primary and high school age male school dropouts who have become either ‘danfo-bus drivers and/or conductors’ or who are shop keeper in various auto-parts markets around Nigeria, incidentally, most of these young men are of South-East extraction. At the rate the womenfolk are being emancipated from liberation through equality to empowerment, chances are, that in the very near future, and in no distant time, too women would have taken over strategic aspects of human endeavour particularly from that part of Nigeria where the dropout rate is high. This trend will most likely result into a precarious situation which if not checked and urgently too, will become stories of men seeking libration, from whom, one may be tempted to ask? Your guess is definitely as good as mine.

Recommendations

On the strength of the foregoing discussion, the following recommendations have been put forward as follows-

- i. The womenfolk should be given or granted the opportunity to participate in the public policy making. Apart from creating policy framework that can be brought to directly bear on issues that concern and affect them. When that is done, it will certainly offer them the privilege to participate and contribute in national development psychologically, financially, academically, materially, socially and politically.
- ii. There should also be a deliberate attempt at creating awareness, enlightenment and advocacy concerning the place and importance of women in nation building.
- iii. The idea of society that women are the weaker sex and should be treated specially is an issue in self pity, it should be completely discouraged particularly in the area of such jobs in politics and governance.

Conclusion

Howbeit, it must be admitted that women have great potentials to be harnessed for development and its neglect will obviously be antithetical to real economic, social and political development. If the goals of development which include improved standard of living, removal of poverty, access to dignified employment and reduction in social inequality, then women who do not only have the crucial role of ensuring the perpetuation of the human race but also constitute the majority of the poor, the underemployed, economically and socially disadvantaged in many societies, must be consulted and actively involved in the development process both at the stage of planning, execution or implementation.

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