

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

The livelihood and empowerment verve of the family and invariably the nation rest directly or indirectly on the woman and she must be actively engaged to function effectively. No woman should sit idly by these days and be expecting whatever the man brings home before she can address subtle and sometimes urgent needs arising from her immediate environment. Women's livelihood and empowerment is like a service in mutual responsibility and light-bearing labour which if properly channelled will produce synergy that will bring better and greater results than the sum of what each gender would have produced individually. The paper seeks to address the proper perspective of gender issues on livelihood and empowerment of women to improve not only the living standard of persons and families but the nation and the world at large.

Keywords: Gender issues, women, livelihood, empowerment, national, transformation.

Introduction

Gender equality and women's empowerment are products of gender equity and one of the major components of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Sustainable development is not just a national but a global concern and there is a growing interest in strategies to enhance the economic status of women. This is because women form an important part of nation's labour force and the economic role played by them cannot be isolated from the framework of development. Globally, the poor economic conditions brought about by the global economic meltdown has resultant effects such as unemployment, violence, poverty, health breakdown, crime, riot, insurgencies of various magnitude across nations of the world, etc. When women are economically empowered and buoyant, they would be able to contribute positively to national development. It has often been said that "when you train the boy-child, you train an individual but when you train the girl-child, you train a nation". In spite of the truthfulness of the above assertion, many men still believe that keeping their women in total subjection is keeping them away from what is beneficial not only to their persons but to the family and the nation at large. Issues of gender should not even arise when it comes to livelihood and empowerment because these cut across class, age and gender but unfortunately, women lack sufficient economic resources that can help them meet needs and organising themselves into strong persons that will add value to their world. The importance of women in nation building and sustainable economic development cannot be over-emphasised. Their role in the family is not competing but complimentary.

Statement of the Problem

Studies have shown specific challenges that women and girls face just because of their sex. As a result of this, they have become the victims of devastating forms of sexual violence used to reach political and military goals; they are educationally backward and ignored compared to their male counterparts; socially oppressed; legally cheated; technologically suppressed; and religiously silenced. This issue is receiving more attention because of the unanimous approval by the UN Security Council of Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, in 2000. The statement of the problem of this paper is addressing these different areas and proffering ways forward.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this paper amongst others are to:

- highlight the different areas women need to be empowered;
- create visibility on the specific challenges faced by women and girls;
- describe the efforts of women on managing and overcoming the maltreatment they face; and
- explain the need to involve women in the national transformation processes as their inputs will enrich the nation for sustainable development.

Methodology

The data for this paper focus purely on relevant documents and declarations published in print and on the Internet before, during, and after the 1995 Beijing conference. Also, other published works by scholars of diverse disciplines and NGOs were consulted. Interviews were conducted with different women, ranging from rural uneducated, semi-illiterate and literate women most of whom are outstanding in different walks of life and all of whom are experts on issues relating to women, education, legal matters, religion, science, and technology. Revealed were the women's priorities on areas of concern, conclusions about the influences of science and technology on women's lives, views of women's unique actual and potential role insustainable development and ideas for the future. Analyses of the interviews revealed that, generally, there appear to be fundamental perspectives on the role of women not only to advance themselves but advancing their families, societies, nations and the world at large. The study resulted in recommendations related to women's contributions to science, different institutional barriers to advancing women and how these barriers can be overcome.

Review of Related Literature

There will be no meaningful tool of development without empowering the women that are the backbone of rural and national economies. They comprise the largest workforce in the agricultural sector. Walingo, (2009:8) is of the opinion that about 43% of the world's agricultural workforces are women. In Africa, 80% of the agricultural production comes from small farmers who are mostly women. Traditionally, women are treated as properties to be owned and to produce children, take care of their homes, husbands and their farms. Women are therefore socially oppressed, educationally ignored, politically exploited, legally cheated, sexually molested, technologically suppressed and even religiously silenced. These areas will be looked into in this paper

and we will all see the effects on national transformation if women were to be treated otherwise.

Women desperately and urgently need to be empowered. Meetika, (2009:12) opines that "when women are empowered, whole families benefit and these benefits often have ripple effects on future generations". Empowerment of women should be an active and on-going process that will give room to women to fully realize their capacities and potentials in all aspects of life. Empowerment is defined by *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* as "to give someone more control over their own life or the legal right to do something". Empowerment in this paper however will be defined as being fully aware of one's rights and not just knowing them but being able to stand one's ground and voice one's opinion in matters of concerns and general livelihood. Empowerment creates enabling environment and opportunities because empowered women are no longer at the mercy of anybody neither are subservient nor dependents. The dichotomy of public/private certainly underscores the African patriarchal victimization of women. Women's voices were mostly squashed and they were projected more in the private domain while men operated in centre ground. Women never had much say in community matters and in most instances, they tacitly condoned and were brainwashed into accepting their slavish status.

The world according to Fonchingong (2009:1) all over is replete with happenings that project male dominance and inadequately pleads the case of the African woman. It becomes imperative according to Chukukere (1995:3) to trace the genesis of gender inequality in African setting. "The presentation of the female gender is mostly sloppy and biased. An obnoxious and pestiferous culture provides clauses that inhibit the progress of women and maintains them permanently in the suffocating stench of submissiveness". Male dominance is so entrenched in our system that as if it had not done enough harm, women are made by men to either directly or indirectly take up arms against one another in a world where they were supposed to be united in their war against oppression and suppression. It is very saddening that most of the suffering women go through comes directly and indirectly from women with specific reference to widowhood rites in Igbo land. Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1994:14) traces gender inequality in the Igbo society as hinging on the tenets of the gender socialization process, customary and traditional practices. It is also pathetic to note that the emancipation drive commences at the first cry of a baby depending on the sex. While a woman who gives birth to a male child rejoices and has a sense of accomplishment; the birth of a male child is also accompanied by pomp and heavy feasting. If it is a female child, especially if it is not the first time, the same woman will be emasculated, demeaned and demoralized. For instance, while Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958:28) slaughters a goat for one of his wives who has had three sons in a row, Madume in *The Concubine* (1966:16) is demoralized by his wife's inability to produce a male heir. On the other hand, a barren woman is stigmatized, considered asocial misfit and invites the wrath of her family and society. As a consequence of the male-dominated tradition, many of the depictions of African women in literatures, televisions, advertisements, billboards and even in conversations of men are reductive-perpetuating popular myths of female subordinates.

Instances of female subordination as a result of tradition and culture feature mainly in the call for men to give women the proper role and respect they deserve. This

concern is buttressed by Omolara Ogundipe Leslie (1994:4) who identifies traditional structures as one of the mountains on the back of an African woman. These traditional structures are not out of the world issues especially "Marriage". The heavy hand of tradition as against women is visible in the marital institution. The intensity of marriage in the sociology of African life is heralded by Oriaku (1996:18). He posits "...marriage both in real life and fiction, is perhaps, the most circumscribing factor in the life of an African woman". Marriage acts as an avenue for violence and a plethora of injustice against women, a phenomenon Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (1985:2) call "the intersection of multiple oppression". In *Anowaby* Ama Ata Aidoo (1970:12), Badua defines the traditional role of women "marry a man, tend a farm and be happy to see her peppers and her onions grow. A woman...should bear children many children so she can afford to have one or two die." As a custodian of tradition, he is emphatic "a good woman has no mouth and brain". This position is picked up by Kofi Ako who reminds his wife Anowa of her limits in their verbal tussle over the possession of slaves "who are you to tell me what I must do or not do?"(p.29). "We all know you are a woman and I am the man" (p.30).

While male readings indicate that "the man is the point of reference in this society, Palmer (1983:40) stresses that "as child bearers, women are pivotal to the literal survival of community and societal norms". Every normal human look forward to a blissful marital settlement but this is not mostly so for the women folk. They suffer untold hardship and to add salt to injury are made to look stupid and seen as failure if they refuse to continue in the suffering. It is no wonder Emecheta (1974:34) sees the motif of marriage as a form of slavery for the woman. Women's debased position is given negative credence in Linus Asong's *The Crown of Thorns* (1995:45). He looks at marriage as an institution where the man's genitals are "washed" by his wife. "...A virgin had been chosen to wash the genital of the chief". These parochial views must change if we must move forward as a nation. As earlier mentioned, there are areas basic and relevant to our everyday concerns and if properly channelled equally, women will be able to contribute their own quota to national development.

Issues and Challenges of Gender Inequality

Educationally Ignored

Educationally, it has been observed that women have not been fairly treated in the least. If there is going to be any sustainable development in the world. This has to be addressed properly, starting from when parents begin to see and treat children equally not that the female children be seen as burden to be rid of. With the important role education plays in human development as it empowers irrespective of sex and make them productive such that they can develop themselves and contribute meaningfully to the development of their society. The importance of the education of the girl-child cannot be over-emphasized. The education of a woman is critical to the well-being of many people around her.

According to UNICEF (2002), girls formed the majority of 120 million children who do not go to school in the developing world. In Nigeria in particular, UNICEF report indicates that 39% of women marry before they turn 18 and 19.6% marry by age 15. This figure shows that such women were either deprived education completely or they dropped out of school. The United Nations Department of Information (2000)

reports that the girl-child often faces discrimination from the earliest stages of life, stating that the girl-child still lags behind in education performance when compared with the boys due mainly to their workloads within and outside the family. Though some key government policies have been favourable to the improvement of the girl-child education and achieving equity (British Council 2012), a lot still need to be done to bridge the gap.

Socially Oppressed

It is men's world and honestly speaking it is a crooked world. Generally, it is a known fact that women can be very socially entertaining. Check out any celebration in any part of the nation that women are not actually the motivation and fun with all sorts of colourful attires and tasteful delicacies. This can actually be an avenue to bring about innovations that will add value to the nation. This singular area where women seem to hold sway it's been used against them as wasteful and not serious minded people.

Politically Exploited

The political scenario at the various platforms across the nation is proof enough that women are being exploited. For example, the idea of state-creation exercise that commences in May 27, 1967 from existing four regions to twelve states, subsequently further divided into nineteen states and the Federal Capital Territory on February 1976, 21 states on 23 September 1987, 30 states in 21 August 1991 and 36 states on 1 October 1996. All these efforts did not factor-in gender considerations as none of these states has been able to produce one substantive female governor. Samuel & Segun (2012:9) states that those newly created states did not allocate sensitive positions to women but continue to further male dominance over women because men occupied the leadership of virtually all political climes and very little was heard of women in politics.

Notwithstanding, the fourth republic emerge and a paradigm shift occurred through what the political scientists according to Ihemeje (2013:12) refers to as "centrifugal and centripetal forces". Feminists have continued to advocate for gender equity or gender balance particularly through "the affirmative action" where both elective and appointive seats/offices are to be automatically allocated to women. On record, some progress have been made in certain respects, the past Jonathan led administration in involving and giving women about 35% participation, is a step in the right direction but it is clearly not enough as it is still minimal and of little significance. Women are by nature insightful and look at issues holistically and by instinct, hindsight and foresight can tell where an issue will end. Unlike men who will only be objective and look at issue from one angle not mindful of the outcome/consequences. For sustainable development and national transformation to take place, enough of the campaign, it is time for laudable actions. Women must be politically relevant and given utmost priority in the affair of the nation.

Legally Cheated

A gender analysis of Nigeria's local laws and policies affirms that many legal instruments are discriminatory, and at best, gender-blind. Ranging from the constitution to the criminal code, local edicts to customary laws, women's rights have been systematically undermined. Violations of women's rights are further complicated by the existence of three legal systems- English Laws, Customary Laws and Sharia Laws. One outcome of the tripartite legal system infers Ladan (2008:2-4), is the presence of numerous gender insensitive local laws that are not easily documented and consequently difficult to monitor.

Nigerian Constitution is embedded in the patriarchal system which produced it. This is quite evident in the language it utilizes, as well as many of its provisions. Section 26 of the Constitution discriminates against women's right in the area of residency. It gives Nigerian men the right to acquire citizenship for their foreign wives by registration; however, women cannot legally extend the same right to their foreign husbands. Section 29(4) (b) states that "any woman married shall be deemed to be of full age" is discriminatory and encourages child marriages. Section 12 restricts implementation of international treaties signed by Nigeria except the treaty has been "enacted into law by the National Assembly." Nigeria NGO Coalition Reports (2008:47-58) that the implication of this is that Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination (CEDAW) and other gender friendly treaties had been ratified by Nigeria, but they have not been transformed into a domestic law capable of enforcement. Sometimes when women can no longer bear with situation of things, they seek legal redress to issues but over and over again are being cheated basically because they cannot financially afford the services of lawyers or the men would have bought their way with judges which is not strange in a society like ours and this has hampered national development in many ways. Given the federal system with almost autonomous powers, advocating the abrogation of such one sided laws may be complex but not hopeless, may be cumbersome but not impossible.

Sexually Molested

There is growing awareness of the links between sexual and gender-based violence (SGVB), health, human rights and national development. Sexual molestation in its various forms is endemic in communities around the world, cutting across class, race, age, religion and national boundaries. Countless women interviewed have indicated and strongly agreed to sexual molestation ranging even from their homes, work places and on the streets. Daily newflash are full of rape, incest and even murder of women after being gang raped. Violence, and the fear of violence, severely limits women's contribution to social and economic development, thereby hindering achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and other national and international development goals. Rape and domestic violence account for 5-10% of healthy years lost by women (WHO, 2001). Any woman for whatever reason who has been sexually molested will have bouts of emotional, psychological and sometimes psychiatric imbalance and such will not be able to contribute optimally to national development and transformation.

Technologically Suppressed

Technology defines the present era we are in. When women are excluded from science and technology in any culture, that culture is bereft of half of its talent and ability to solve social problems and improve its people's quality of life. ICRW (2010) observes that technology is essential to women's economic advancement and clarifies how it puts the process in motion by showcasing technologies that have helped women in developing countries to increase their productivity, create new entrepreneurial ventures, or otherwise access new income-generating pursuits.

Many existing technologies had the potential to benefit women but, for a host of reasons, were never embraced or adopted. Thus, developing and distributing technologies that meet women's needs must focus on key steps of the process that carry the technology from conception through use and widespread adoption in the field. Particular attention should also be paid to existing technologies that haven't been adapted or distributed to the full benefit of women. Because women are particularly well-placed to identify solutions for their own problems, engaging them at key points throughout the design and implementation process ensures the technology will be used and will create results meaningful to businesses as well as to individual women. And for the most effective results, wherever possible women should be actively leading the effort to design and deploy technologies to meet their needs—as technology innovators, designers, developers, and distributors, as well as advisers. The experts agree that science and technology are decisively important tools for the advancement of women. They believe that women's involvement in the applications of science and technology will lead to beneficial and productive uses. They say that science and technology are particularly useful in four critical areas: education and training, economy (also linked with poverty), health, and communications/media. The experts also agree that the Internet is the one technology that most clearly appears to be embraced by both the developed and developing countries.

Religiously Silenced

Men generally hide behind religious references in both the Holy Bible and Koran to perpetually silence women. In Christianity, the bible enjoins women/ wives to be submissive to their own husbands in Ephesian 5:22 (NKJV) and Genesis 3:16 (NIV) it says women's love will be toward their husbands and he shall rule over them. Men take these quotations to the extreme and subject women to untold hardship all in the name of religion. In Judaism, if a woman were to have sex with someone other than her husband, she would be committing adultery and any children she would have with the unmarried man she had sexual relations would never be allowed within the Jewish faith and she would be ejected from the faith as well. However, if the husband were to have sex with another woman outside of the marriage, he would not be considered as committing adultery and the children he would have would not be ejected from the faith. In Islam, women cannot be seen not to talk of being heard going by the purdah practice where women are kept indoors and if they have to go out for any reason must be covered from head to toe. All these insults on women in the name of religion should be checkmated. If men will stop hiding behind religious extremism, read and follow holy writings objectively and in total context not just what suits them out of contexts, we will live in a better world

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper has attempted to add another dimension to the looming question of inequality in African especially relating to sustainable development and national transformation through a gender lens. Aspiring to contextualise the specific areas where gender divide/gap need to be filled but the tendency has been to draw hasty conclusions on the dilemma of the African woman whenever the issue of gender is raised. It is an established fact that women's potentials have not been fully tapped due to numerous constraints. The lack of educational, economic and political powers to realize their innate potentials have serious implications and setback in women empowerment. It is high time for male and female especially Africans in this contemporary era to retrace their beliefs, roots, and in the process, find a point of convergence that will provide greater meaning to national transformation and sustainable development. Like the Founder, Peace links USA, International Alert Betty Bumpers (1990:10) asserts

'It is not because we think better than men, but we think differently. It's not women against men, but women and men. It's not that the world would have been a better place if women had run it, but the world will be a better place when we as women, who bring our perspectives, share in running it'

Therefore, sustainable national transformation should interrogate the need for a paradigm shift and structural changes of national machineries to accommodate broader issues of gender equality, social justice and equity rather than the narrow fixation on women empowerment issues, which have only achieved cosmetic changes without fundamentally dismantling entrenched structures and institutions that hold gender discrimination and women disempowerment. Creating a gender responsive and equitable nation requires absolute commitment from the highest levels of government, that is: the Presidency, the Executive Council, the Legislature and the Judiciary. Transforming the Nigerian predominantly patriarchal mentality requires recognition of gender as core value and strengthening a lasting policy planning for national development.

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