

# RURAL WOMEN'S EDUCATION FOR REHABILITATION AND ECONOMIC RELIANCE IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to highlight the importance of rural women's education in the process of rehabilitating and empowering them economically for self-reliance. Women in development is a concept that has now become universally accepted as a most essential ingredient of sustainable human development. In fairness to the part of humanity, the role that women can and should play and indeed have been playing in promoting the well-being of society has never been denied. Only through basic education can rural women's share in economic self-reliance, rehabilitation and social empowerment be enhanced. This situation is guaranteed in the overall philosophy of Nigeria's National Policy on Education which fosters the worth and development of the individual and for the general development of the society. Besides rural women comprise more than one-half of Nigeria's human resources that cannot be ignored *in* holistic development paradigm as without them human development goals will remain elusive.

## **Introduction**

In Nigeria today, one of the songs of national development being orchestrated is the song of women's economic empowerment for self-reliance and rehabilitation. The women elitist group and activists in realization for the need to empower the women in all facets of life have brought their influence to bear on the government to consider women generally in the scheme of things. The famous Beijing Women Conference in China some ten years ago had no doubt galvanized the Nigerian women activists into action and to advance women's interests. One of the rewarding efforts of this group is the creation of the Ministry for Women's Affairs. It is obviously responsible for seeing to issues concerning the progress and advancement of women in all sectors of life. The lady minister of recent in her tour of the nation told her audience in Maiduguri the Bomo state capital that measures have been taken to enable particularly the rural women secure agricultural and other related economic loans.

According to the minister, the plan to provide basic and life-skill education is in the pipeline for the rural women which constitute one of the nation's economic bedrocks. It would appear that there is a shift from urban biased and lopsided development to a new focus of attention on policies, programmes and resources to extricate the rural areas from the vicious circle of poverty. Hence, the Minister's official pronouncements would bring a new lease of life to our rural women who for long are under the yoke of poverty. This can only be made possible, if only the basic education and Universal Primary Health care programmes for rural women are earnestly implemented.

The contrast between urban and rural areas, in the present state of affairs in Nigeria are too glaring. These also exist in both at state and local government levels as a result of severe imbalances in the distribution of infrastructural facilities, economic resources and social services. Very little has been done or accomplished in providing adequately and effectively supporting institutions for the rural communities. Inevitably these biases aggravate economic and social dislocation in the rural areas with the resulting increased suffering for the majority of the population particularly the rural women's folk who are perpetually vulnerable. The objective of this paper therefore is to highlight the importance of enhancing their economic empowerment for self-reliance and rehabilitation.

## **Definition of Concepts**

There are three important operative terms that are worth defining. These are namely; functional education, rehabilitation and economic reliance. Functional Education, according to National Policy on Education (NPE, 1998) is the type of education provided that will make the learner acquire appropriate skills, which include mental, physical and social abilities and competencies as equipment for him or herself to live in and contribute to the development of his or her society. This lifelong education is therefore paramount towards achieving self-reliance among the Nigerian women generally and the rural women in particular.

Such vocational subjects as agriculture, home-economics, cultural and creative arts are

necessary for successful functional education at the primary school level. According to Chukwuma (1989), functional education is one for self-reliance which is dependent on education processes that prepare an individual for a more effective life in his or her community. The educational experience must be adapted to his or her local conditions to enable him or her grasp with the environment, so that the individual can improve his or her standard of living and that of the society consequently.

Ukeje (1979) sees functional education as a major step towards the education of people for their well-being which is concluded in the various ways by which sound habits of health, sanitation and nutrition are practiced to help healthy people increase in their capacity to work, be creative and derive pleasure in being alive. They therefore need to be taught basic knowledge and the behavioural changes required in order to perform better. Functional education that creates room for self-reliance means educating an individual for self-preservation and helping the individual to desire and equipping him with the necessary skills in preparation for individual or work.

### **Rehabilitation**

According to Hornby, (2001), the term means to help to have a normal useful life again; to begin to consider that or what is good or acceptable after a long period during which, they were considered bad or unacceptable. According to Chambers (1956), the term means to restore or reinstate or the act of restoring to forefitted rights or privileges. It would appear that rehabilitation as it relates to economic empowerment of the rural women is now being giving the deserved attention to enable them to live a useful life that will also be beneficial to their society. It is as result of the contrasts existing between the urban and rural settings that have led to reinstating of the rural women. This can be achieved through rural transformation programmes stemming out of a well-designed government's policy framework for economic empowerment of the rural women.

### **Economic Reliance**

Ihimida (1995) and Osai (2000) agree that it is the use of an ability of the individuals to acquire skills through functional education that can help them in life without being dependent on external factors like the government companies, corporations or other organization as their employers. In other words they can be employers instead of being employees.

### **The State of Rural Women: Past and Present**

In Nigeria the centrality of women to economic as well as to the social well-being of the society has always been recognized. What is, and has been lacking is the full commitment on the part of the government to operationalise this recognition. It has been acknowledged that the Nigerian women particularly the rural ones perform five multiple roles namely:-mother, producer, home-manager, community organizer and socio-cultural leader,. Recent studies reveal that there is need to enhance considerably women's capacity in each and every one of these roles through improved access and equality of opportunity. In other words the economic and social empowerment of women must be enhanced (NHDR, 1996).

It has become very imperative that measures to alleviate the burden carried by rural women need to be put in place without delay. The rural women bear excessive burden in fetching and carrying water and wood for fuel, in hoeing and weeding, harvesting, transporting, storing and food processing. The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO, 1996) presented a graphic picture portraying rural women in Africa as the most disadvantaged people in the world treated as if they are like beasts of burden. They undertake three quarters of all agricultural work in addition to their domestic responsibilities.

In order to enable rural women to have full equality and effective participation in the development process, the present burden of tasks which they carry must be considerably reduced. It has been suggested that, task sharing in the home and community must be encouraged and community based day care centres for children must be established in all communities. The provision of water and energy for all by the year 2010 will contribute tremendously in reducing the burden.

Secondly, there is need also to put in place special measures for enhancing women's participation in the production of food and agriculture. The participation of Nigerian women generally in this sector is quite large and widespread. However, there are variations between different states, (NHDR, 1996). In four of the states namely Kano, Kwara, Lagos and Niger, less than 10% of their respective female rural populations are engaged in agricultural pursuits. Whereas, in Benue and

Anambra states 84 and 86% of their female population partake in agriculture respectively, only about 60% and 68% of the rural women in Kaduna, Cross River, Plateau, Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states are involved in farming.

Recent empirical studies by researchers reveal that rural women in the East, West and North-West areas regard crop farming, fishery and livestock as their main occupations. However, there appears to be gender bias in the crops cultivated by women. They usually cultivate cassava, maize, yams and vegetable. Food processing is in the hands of rural women in the North who participate in agriculture and are responsible for food processing. On the whole rural women produce about 80% of food and 65% of cash crop. It is in the national interest for women to be more effectively and productively used for food production in order to achieve the goal of food sufficiency. This goal can only be attained if they are given access to land, credit, farm inputs, extension services and appropriate technical know-how (Gender Related Development Index, 1995).

The rural women have suffered from lack of titles to farmland, illiteracy and ignorance and lack of information which has made access to the services of financial institutions in the rural areas, impossible but could reach a negligible percentage female farmers. It should be noted that women in rural areas, apart from gender bias against them in the availability of farm inputs and extension services, use obsolete and inefficient production technologies. There is need for concerted efforts to develop appropriate indigenous technology and to provide basic infrastructure in the rural areas.

In the light of the above factors, it is clear that empowering rural women to become highly competitive and productive farmers will entirely depend on deliberate policies of empowerment of women that will emanate from a policy framework for economic empowerment by the government at all levels. The Better Life for Rural Women Programme and the Family Support Programmes are attempts made by the first "Ladies" since 1986 to address the problems facing rural women and to empower them economically and socially. Both programmes have made significant impact on Nigerian women particularly in the extension services and development support services.

Having examined the disadvantaged situations of the Nigerian rural women the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1995) suggests that the way forward in addressing these situations is through social and economic empowerment of the rural women, the provision of basic education, water, public health and power for all that will go a long way, in pulling them out of the excruciating and dehumanizing poverty conditions.

### **Functional Education For Rural Women and Economic Reliance**

Going through the preceding paragraphs, one of the criteria, to address the disadvantaged situations namely, illiteracy and ignorance of the rural women is through sound basic education. All the researches conducted in respect of economic empowerment and self-reliance of the rural women reveal that they need the basic education. Certainly, the rural women require life skill or functional education for economic empowerment and self-reliance, as already defined.

Education is essentially a long time investment by the state for its continued existence, preservation of its cultural values and the improvement of the society. Therefore, education is an instrument for national development, self-reliance and rehabilitation. At the individual's level, people want to acquire education for many reasons. Among such reasons could be for the purpose of acquiring knowledge for its sake, and for the understanding of the world around them; to acquire saleable professional and vocational skills for either salaried jobs or self-empowerment and for the improvement of their social status and so on (Igwe, 1989).

Education is expected to be an instrument for producing manpower needs for developing nations like Nigeria, in spite of this objective, such that they could become self-reliant. It is presupposed that education at basic level must have instilled in its products a sense of pride in manual labour and the acquisition of practical skills necessary for everyday problems of which functional education is one. Therefore, the content of Nigeria's education system must be such that will inculcate the desired skills and values in self-reliant rural women. Additionally, such system of education must be geared towards the production of good farmers, as a nation cannot really be said to be developed and self-reliant until she is able to feed her population without relying on imported food from abroad.

The products of our basic education system should be able to think for themselves, participate meaningfully in the act of decision-making on important national issues and in passing mature judgment on all such matters. This is clearly what functional education attempts to inculcate into the mind of the young individual. This is important and very necessary at a time when in Nigeria; today the

idea of economic empowerment and self-reliance is being emphasized particularly at the grassroots level. Education should be able to help our rural women understand and interpret all such decisions (Igwe, 1989).

Furthermore, the rural women interact quite often with the environment and make extensive use of natural resources like land, forest and water and with corresponding damage to the environment. The rural women's household activities involve the burning of wood for fuel to provide fuel energy for cooking and charcoal production. With regard to household sanitation, the women are responsible for dumping refuse around the homes into drains and in other places where they constitute health hazards and pollute the air and water.

It has been observed by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1996) that not much effort has been made to involve the rural women in particular in policy formulation and programme and project implementation on environment. Even more urgently is the need to organize a comprehensive education programme aimed at increasing the level of awareness of the women on environmental sustainability. The system for self-reliance should be able to produce citizens who are alive to their economic responsibilities of their fatherland. This type of education should be designed to develop three attributes in all its recipients namely an inquiring mind or "investigative skill"; an ability to learn from what others do and reject or adapt it to his or her own needs, and a basic confidence in his or her own position as a free and equal member of the society, who values others and is valued by them- for *what he* or she does and not for what he or she obtains. "The implication of the above three attributes are that education for self-reliance should be geared towards imparting the basic principles of modern knowledge. In addition, the products of the school system should also be trained to acquire the ability to adapt to such principles in solving their own problems and those of the society at large.

Comprehensive education, life-skill or functional education is aimed at equipping the individual with skills that will help him or her to cope with the problems exposed by the environment. It helps to equip the individual with basic knowledge in health, sanitation and nutrition as well as coping with stress and problems posed by man-made natural disasters such as wars, violence, crimes, HIV/AIDS, floods and earthquakes (UNICEF, 2000). The rural women should be given the opportunity to acquire the skills that will help them equally to cope with the economic realities of the time in their rural areas. Therefore, life skill education is necessary not only for economic empowerment and self-reliance but also for self-development and rehabilitation through personal efforts. That type of education equips one with good health which is essential for proper thinking and active involvement in any activity that will help the society.

The need for our rural women like any other group to be knowledgeable in skills that will help them overcome their immediate problems such as health, nutrition, sanitation, stresses and psychological problems cannot be over emphasized. Life-skill education which provides quality education in the areas of health and nutrition and as well as prepares the rural women against the hazards and hardships of their environment has become paramount. This is an era when education should be made practical and functional. In other words it should be education for living. Thus the products of this system should become self-employed after graduation or apprentice period. Thus the focus of the entire school system should shift from acquisition of paper qualification or "credentials" to practical and salable skills, that will empower graduates of such system economically and bring about self-reliance (Igwe, 1989).

### The Rehabilitation of Rural Women

The picture of the state of rural women given whether in the past or present by empirical research, reveals a group of people wallowing in abject poverty. This situation has been blamed on adult illiteracy and ignorance and lack of infra structural facilities that will stimulate economic growth in the rural areas. Unless rehabilitating measures are taken to pull out our rural women from such economic doldrums, poverty will persist and no matter how good the government's policy framework for economic empowerment is, if it is not properly implemented with rehabilitation considerations, the whole effort will be futile.

The introduction of adult literacy class based on the idea of practical and skilled education should be the first step in rehabilitating the rural women. The adult literacy classes should be organized while the policy of education for all should be implemented in the rural areas. The present Universal Basic Education (UBE, 2001) should be extended vigorously to the grassroots that is, the rural areas. A situation in which only the urban areas enjoy the UBE scheme because of political

party considerations is unacceptable if the policy of education for all is to succeed.

Catering for rural women's specific needs will not happen by accident except the governments at all levels put in place the necessary programmes. These will include the creation of various commissions for women such as the Rural Women Programme and Family Support Programme (Nigerian Human Development Report (NHDR, 1996). Besides it is noteworthy that there are Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) who have embarked on rehabilitating the rural women by providing them with basic vocational education and had sponsored free medical services from some renowned international organizations from America and Europe. The Total Women Foundation and the Planned Parenthood Association of Nigeria-are the champions who have actually moved their operations to the rural areas for the purpose of rehabilitating the rural women. These NGOs are at the moment fighting the terrible scourge of the dreaded HIV/AIDS disease through their own apparatus for public education in the rural areas, with the rural women as their target (WHO, 1993). These NGOs complement government's efforts in many ways. It is on record that the Total Women Foundation in 2003 was able to provide water in some rural areas in parts of Plateau and Nasarawa states by constructing some water boreholes with pumping machines to make life a lot easier for the rural women who trek for many kilometres in search of water.

### Conclusion

Nigeria's rating in both gender-related development index and gender empowerment measure is indeed still very low. This is because she is among the poorest of the poor in terms of human development and gender inequality quagmire. Therefore the social and economic empowerment of the rural women, the provision of education, water, public health and power for all will pull the country out of this low income underdeveloped trap and out of the excruciating and dehumanizing poverty that is currently the plight of the majority of its citizens particularly the rural women.



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