
Education as a Tool for Women Empowerment in Nigeria

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In Nigeria and other developing countries, it has been the common practice to marginalize women especially in the social, political and cultural circles of life, against having equal educational opportunities with their male counterparts. This situation has impeded women from making meaningful contributions towards sustainable social and economic development of the nation. Women empowerment through education is a critical factor in the achievement of greater economic development. It is within this sphere that this study identifies education as a veritable tool for achieving women empowerment for a sustainable national development. On this basis, it suggests and recommends that women generally should be effectively empowered through direct access to education, given more opportunities to participate in politics, have free access to information, participate in governance and in decision making. This could be achieved through the elimination of limiting cultural and traditional practices that are meted against the women. Equal opportunities should be given to both men and women without prejudice at all levels of national activity as a measure of promoting gender equality.

Education already is known as a means of acquiring knowledge and skills which enable one to transform the society and maximize individual's freedom. By this, every knowledge gained in the process of education enables one to realize his role socially, politically, culturally and economically. It is a process that endows individuals with ability to see things from the right perspective. The National Policy on Education (2004) stated among other things that education is an instrument for national development. Against this vision, this study highlights the point that any process of education whether formal or informal should be able to make individuals understand

the useful roles they should play for the development of the society. In this regard, no government that is serious about sustainable development can afford to neglect the education of women and their role in the scheme of things. Women need to be empowered and encouraged to participate fully in national development. Their contributions in national issues help to transform lives in the rural areas because majority of women live in the rural environments. Through education, a woman can become empowered economically, politically, socially, and otherwise to the extent that she can contribute immensely alongside the men in the development of the nation.

UNESCO has noted that the most neglected section of the poor in any country is the women folk; and the cause of this gender imbalance in development are the already existing biases on the conceptualization of development strategies and the poor data bases in which such plans are made. It is worthy of note that empowerment of women depends largely on how the flow of power is negotiated in favour of women. This also depends on the political muscle or strength women have in demanding for their empowerment in all aspects of life in the society. 1975 was marked as the international year of women, and 1975 -1985 as the United Nation's Decade for women which generated a high level of interest in all aspects of the conditions of women both in politics, social, economic and academic areas. Therefore, the need for total emancipation of Nigeria women through education becomes an important national issue.

There is the need for grass root sensitization campaign to educate women who are still wallowing in ignorance, poverty, low mentality, diseases, etc. so as to wake and turn them around for a better and brighter future through education. It is evident that one's educational background affects the quality of life and standard of living one enjoys. Therefore, this paper sets out to address two important questions: what does empowerment of women mean? What is the relationship between women empowerment and education?

Women Empowerment

According to China and Macaulay (2009), empowerment refers to increase in the political, social and economic strength of an individual and communities. It can also be referred to as a process of opening up something that has absolutely unlimited potentials. Empowerment according to Weidemann (1989) reduces vulnerability, decreases dependency, implies action not passivity, and it means being at the centre, not on the periphery of affairs. This indicates that individuals that are empowered will be involved in the crucial issues of the nation. The Liberian President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 1985, defined empowerment as the broadening of choices, the expansion of options and alternatives available to women in determining their own destinies. This

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means that women should be involved in decision making especially on issues that affect their lives in the country.

Everett, (1991) noted that the issue of women empowerment was re-echoed when 730 women from different countries around the world met in Washington DC in 1989 for the fourth International Conference of Association for Women in Development. According to Everett (1991), empowerment of women is a means of mainstreaming women in development. This in turn emphasizes the importance of the impact women participation can make to national development. Earlier to this movement, Women had been grossly neglected in governance and in participating in the scheme of things especially in less developed nations due mostly to lack of education. In the light of the new awareness, there is need for paradigm shift to proactive steps to empower women sufficiently to participate actively in governance and all in aspects of the national economy so that they add value to their contribution to national development.

Educational Empowerment

Education is one of the most important means of empowering women in terms of knowledge, skills and self reliance needed to participate fully in national development. Education is an important tool for all but most especially for the women folk. There is a saying, “train a woman and you train a nation”. The education of women is an entry point to other opportunities and this can have multiplying effect within the family and the society at large. Investing in the girl-child’s education is one of the most effective ways to eradicate poverty.

Educational empowerment goes beyond the acquisition of literacy. In the case of women, it involves skill acquisition in all spheres of the national economy including the boldness and confidence to compete with their male counterparts. To this end, the sensitization on the importance of girl-child education should be heightened down to the rural areas. Emphasis should be made that no career is male specific and cultural and religious biases against women in participating in national affairs must be removed. Gender equality must be demonstrated in appointment in public offices. Nigeria is making remarkable improvement in this area.

Political Empowerment

In the political sphere previously, women were left out in political engagements in the country, yet they are the ladder by which the male politicians climb to the top because they are greater in number than men. This is strengthened by the report that women account for more than 50% of the population, but they are under-represented in national affairs relative to their population (Federal Republic of Nigeria,

1987; Population Reference Bureau, 1998). Women are only mobilized to actualize the agenda of their male counterparts because they are not properly empowered.

The contention that there was bias against women in traditional Nigerian society is obvious to scholars of history of Education in the country (Amegwom 2009). Women were only to be seen and not heard. Their place was in the kitchen. They were also regarded as sex objects whose major role is to raise children for the continuation of the family line. Other reasons that prevent women from venturing into politics include the diabolism/crudity and muscle flexing that men exhibit in the practice. If by any design a woman gains a political position, the male counterparts will scheme and do everything possible to pull her down. A good example is the case of Honourable Patricia Ette who was elected as Speaker of the House of Representatives in 2009 but was schemed out of the office shortly after assuming office and a male counterpart in the person of (Honourable Aminu Tambuwal) was made to replace her.

One of the ways to bring about dynamism in the desired rapid development of the country is to empower women politically by electing and appointing them into positions of authority and giving them freehand to perform while removing the syndrome of “mere woman”. Awe (2001) posited that a lot can be achieved by a nation that taps the resource of women. Perhaps part of the reason for which Nigeria has remained underdeveloped is her inability to give women opportunity to bring their potentials to bear in governance.

The potentials of women in governance have been demonstrated in this recent administration of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan as he appointed a number of women into various positions in the Government. A few examples are Professor Ngozi Okonjo Iweala as Coordinating Minister and Minister of Finance, Mrs. Dizeni Madueke who is Minister of Petroleum, Oby Ezekwesili, former Minister of Mineral Resources, Dora Akunyili who was Director of NAFDAC and a lot of others. They have helped to move the country forward in the Transformation Agenda of the President in their various of assignment. Their success is because they endeavoured to neglect the cold bickering of their male counterparts coupled with the empowerment they got through education. With above examples, women should endeavor to join politics and shun the prejudices that deterred them from active participation in it. (Shaheed, 1995) had noted that education broadens the experience of women and gives them access to new resources and skills. This implies that education is a social tool that is imperative for the continued survival and growth of the human society. The National Orientation Agency, Ministry of Women Affairs and other Agencies should do more to sensitize women and encourage them to avail themselves of the opportunities available to them in political engagements.

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It is pertinent to note that only in the present dispensation that women have been brought to the lime light in appointments to positions of authority. A number of them have been appointed or elected as Senators, Deputy Governors, Legislators, Ministers, Commissioners, Directors, Councilors, etc. by the administration of President Ebele Azikiwe Jonathan which is a good stride in the right direction and an attempt to bridge the gap which previous administrations deepened. The score cards of these women have shown that they have performed very creditably and contributed to the growth and stability of the country's economy. More positions for women are being expected. It is anticipated that one day, a woman president will emerge in Nigeria if the women participation is further given the boost.

Health Empowerment

Evidently, women are the worse hit in terms of health matters. Through education women will acquire relevant information and skills about proper health care and environmental management. Great hope lies in the fact that the various curricula of the country's institutions of learning from basic to tertiary level have been revised to give greater emphasis on population and family life education, environmental studies and health education. What remains is for parents and guardians to send their girl-children to school and for the older women (who did not attend formal school) to enlist in Adult Education programmes offered in their various localities.

Enlightenment campaigns by Women Affairs Ministry, National Orientation Agencies etc will also help to empower the women (particularly the rural women) in the areas of controlling practices that are unwholesome to the health and manpower development of the nation, such as child labour, trafficking in women, prostitution which increases HIV/AIDS infection among the populace, indolence among youths, consumption of alcohol and drug abuse. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) among other things should bring the vices of child labour to the fore during their programme every June 12, each year.

Parents and other well-to-do members of families should endeavor to provide radios and televisions in their homes to enable women and children to listen to various educational and enlightenment programmes that are provided through these media every day. These will empower women to acquire skills that can catapult them to positions of responsibility and honour in the country.

Legal Empowerment

Legal empowerment is demonstrated when one is able to know his/her rights and is able to pursue the protection of those rights. If the larger cream of the women are educated, they will be able to know their rights and do everything possible to protect them, especially in the areas of family cases that come in the form of property

ownership, divorce, husband's death, etc. Women should be encouraged to enlist in Legal studies.

The Benefits of Women Empowerment

When women are effectively empowered, they will participate actively in issues of national concern. Empowerment of women leads to political, educational, social and economic emancipation. Empowerment of women will afford them the ability to organize and create awareness on issues that have great impact on economic development of the society. Empowerment of women ensures full integration in development at all levels (Esu, 1996).

It has been observed that in many remote areas in Nigeria, women contribute a substantial portion of the labour required for infrastructure development (Esu, Essang, 1992). It is against such background that the economic empowerment of the women is imperative and necessary to enhance manpower potentials at the grass-root level. Economic empowerment therefore must be backed up by sound education. Women need to be spared of all forms of the stereotyped prejudices, biases and misconceptions of womanhood so that they come to know that they are not lesser beings.

Women need education to broaden their ideas, knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values and perceptions of issues and events and this can make them live a better life and also make them contribute meaningfully to any national discourse.

When women are appointed to decision making positions in the government, and when women voices can be heard and their opinions considered, they will always emphasize programmes that are aimed at empowering women in all aspects of national life.

A typical example is in this present dispensation where Dame Patience Jonathan wife of President Goodluck Jonathan is championing the course of women empowerment in Nigeria through different programmes. Issues concerning women are very paramount in her mind.

The National Commission for Women Affairs is established to champion the cause of women in Nigeria. Equally, a ministry of Women Affairs is in place and a woman is appointed to be the head. These are developments in the right direction. It is interesting to note that despite the social and attitudinal barriers that limit women in Nigeria, the percentage of women in key positions in government in the present Administration has greatly increased by more than 35% and the government is highly commended for it. The provision of formal, informal and adult education can go a long way to empower women and the government is doing well in this direction. What

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remains is for parents and husbands to allow their female folk to come out for these programmes.

It is solicited that more and more women be appointed to key positions in the government since the ones already serving have proved that they can be as good as the men folk or even do better.

An investigation of women's political participation in Nigeria reveals that women are still occupying a small percentage of national legislative seats. Women constitute about 50% of the electorate yet they occupy only less than 20% of national legislative seats.

However, majority of women at the grass-roots (the villages) are yet illiterates. It is the view of the author, that such women be encouraged to avail themselves of the opportunities offered by adult education and distance learning programmes available in the country. This done, they will realize their competencies and then see the need for them to participate in politics. The low number of women in political leadership positions is due to their lack of political empowerment. Previous governments discriminated against women and failed to appoint them to political positions. It is therefore argued that one of the strategies to be adopted is to create critical mass of women leaders who will spine and encourage other women to seek political leadership roles and responsibility in the country. The dynamics of power and the direction of political forces can be changed by educational and social mobilization of women at grass-roots. Importantly, any government in power should give women opportunity to contribute to governance by appointing them to positions of authority.

If women at the grass-root level are educated, they can be harnessed and mobilized for full and active participation in political, economic and other national issues, including the ability to educate their children and contribute in no small measure to enhance the standard of living and quality of life of their families and the society at large. As the adage goes, "if you educate a man, you educate an individual; but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation". The participation of women in adult education should be encouraged; because it is through this process that mothers in the rural villages will be more knowledgeable as to adopt better strategies that will maximize the life chances of their children by taking appropriate decisions regarding marital, economic, medical, child spacing and rearing and lifestyle issues.

Other ways of promoting women's full and equal participation in governance is by devising appropriate development policies based on accurate facts. It is regrettable that accurate data on women's activities and contributions to economic and social development in either rural or urban areas in Nigeria are not known. It is

necessary to raise accurate data on women activities and achievements as it will spur other women to want to participate and achieve in national endeavours. If many women are properly educated, they will know what to do and how best to do them in all circumstances.

According to Esu and Essang (1992), it is only education that can remove the societal “fetters and chains” from women so that they can develop side by side with their male counterparts. Women can be empowered to better their lives if they are taught the basic principles. Virtually, all developmental programmes depend on education because they all require persons who are skilled at all levels to manage capitals, human resources, technology, other services and administration in every sector. Women can be empowered through giving them credit facilities for business and training them in skill acquisition for different entrepreneurial engagements.

Conclusions

In this paper, the concept of empowerment of women through education was discussed. It is noted that education is the surest and greatest instrument through which women can be empowered socially, economically and politically for them to contribute meaningfully in national development. It is revealed that women are in the majority of rural dwellers and that education is the only means of making them develop their potentials which will help them in meeting their basic needs. It is suggested that well articulated and systematic educational programmes be designed for women. Grass-root enlightenment campaign programmes should be continually extended to the rural areas to encourage the women to enlist in adult education programmes.

Social mobilization efforts should also be extended to rural women in rural areas to enable the women to see themselves as partners in national development efforts. The government is encouraged to create a level playing ground to enable women participate in politics, and to give more women opportunity to serve at all levels of government.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

1. To have equal access to education with their male counterparts, women should be empowered educationally, economically, and politically.
2. The government can adopt and enforce policies and programmes for empowering women so that all stakeholders in the society will give women direct access to productive resources such as land, income and credit facilities in the public or private sector.
3. The government should legislate against some policies, biases and prejudices that women face culturally and traditionally which deter them from engaging

in public services. The church and the entire society should team up to abolish these ugly monsters against women. Awareness campaign should be carried out to stop some of those obnoxious acts against women in the various societies.

4. The government should promote gender sensitization at all levels to bring equality in employment, school admission and other opportunities.
5. The parents are not left out, they should give their children equal opportunity to education(both male and female).
6. Mothers should encourage their female children to read courses that are related to politics such as law and political science. All stake holders should encourage young women to be involved in politics through awareness campaigns, seminars and workshops among others.
7. Government as a matter of urgency should show adequate political will and commitment to issues of gender equality and empowerment of women by implementing, enforcing and achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

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