

NATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY TO GENDER EQUALITY AND EQUITY: CHALLENGES FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

The issue of gender inequalities which result in social inequality between the sexes is an age long phenomenon. Gender specialists and anthropologists view it from a cultural perspective, stemming from primitive states by folklores and tradition. From this viewpoint the secondary status of women is both universal and pan-cultural. Other experts see it from a religious point of view, arguing that God created the woman with rib from the man and made her the man's helpmate. These reasoning and ideas about the female gender have affected the socio-economic, political, cultural and religious life of the woman in many parts of the world. Men who are chauvinistic in nature see the female gender as a mere instrument of fun pro-creation that should not be reckoned with any serious concern. This paper is intended to examine and explore the gender-inequalities that obtain in human social and societal systems, look at their impacts, appraise the efforts of government and other social agencies at reducing or eliminating the obnoxious practices, and proffer ways on how to eradicate the discriminating treatments meted to the female gender.

Introduction

The subject of inequalities, resulting in social inequity between sexes is a matter that has been under intensive debate by social anthropologists and gender specialists for decades. Social anthropologists using western societies have long traced the differentiation along cultural lines, which mostly stem from the primitive states established by folklores and traditions. Some scholars notably, Ortner (1974) and Billington et al (1991), have asserted that, the secondary status of women in societies is one that is a true universal, pan cultural fact. They explained that in all societies women are seen as somehow closer to nature and men closer to culture, to civilization. Many other sociologists have also canvassed this submission, especially the women-nature and men-culture notation. Hirst and Woolley (1982), Harding (1986), Sydic (1987) and Moore (1988), in their individual arguments have stated that, gender, like class, is not simply a social category but a phenomenon that is both relative and relational, meaning that women and men exist as social groups, and therefore should be defined in terms of each other. The opinion is that gender differences stem from ideas, beliefs, and practices about women's and men's roles, work and leisure as well as sexuality on account of their "real" biological distinctions. The bottom line is therefore, is that women are looked upon as being morally superior to men and are regarded as the guardian of society's morality. They should thus, not enter the public and morally corrupting world of politics and business but remain in the private sphere of home and family (Davidoff and Hall, 1987). With the above reasoning came all manner of discrimination and deprivation against women in order not to "soil" or "mess" them up. Every country has its gender-driven peculiarities that affect the female folk. In Nigeria, the discrimination dates back to the pre-colonial era up to the immediate postcolonial period when a number of social tools were employed against women. The discriminative enforcements included the use of religion, ethnicity, traditional beliefs, trade and industry, education and physical violence as well as obnoxious laws all of which not only sub-gender the women folk but, down-slide them to the grade where most of men's societies regard women as menu for entertainment and procreation. The woman is also beheld as one who should have no voice or capability of her own even to administer her husband's estates and property in case he dies before her.

Recently, women are increasingly becoming aware of the above-stated relegation by the male folk and together with "liberal" men and governments, they have construed all the discriminative acts as obstacles and challenges that must be crossed or surmounted in pursuit of the fundamental human rights. Human rights ensure the dignity of the human person and also the equality of men and women under the universal law's and enshrined in the charter of the United Nations.

Declaration and Challenges

The Universal Declaration of human rights affirms the principle of inadmissibility of discrimination and proclaims that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth therein, without distinction of any kind including distinction based on sex. Based on the above resolutions, declarations and recommendations adopted by the UN, specialized global agencies and conventions were set up for promoting equality of rights of men and women, the UNICEF-sponsored convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, for example proclaimed that "discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respects for human dignity and therefore, is an obstacle to the participation of women on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries". This hampers the growth in prosperity of those families and the full development of the potentialities to serve their countries and humanity.

The unedited final outcome document of the ad hoc committee of the whole special session of the general assembly of the United Nations entitled "Women 2000" on gender equality, development and peace for the 21st century, outlined several further actions and initiatives to effectively implement the Beijing declaration on women rights, the final outcome document is a supplementary to the Beijing Declaration and the platform for action adopted at the 4th World Conference on women in 1995 as contained in the report of the conference. One of the declarations expressed concern that in situations of poverty, women have the least access to food, health, education training and opportunities for employment among other needs. Such factors as race, age, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, stability, family status, and socio-economic status (including living conditions) as well as environmental disasters and diseases constitute barriers to full equality and equity and to full advancement of women in relation to men.

These obstacles or barriers have to be reduced or entirely removed in the spirit of the Beijing Declaration and to tackle them is the sovereign responsibility of each nation, the Nigeria country report on the implementation of the Beijing platform for action 1995-1999 (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development, Abuja November, 1999: p. 75), is a compendium of all actions embarked upon by the governments and non-government organizations in Nigeria between 1995 and 1999. The report gives a documented accountability to all issues bordering on gender equality and equity. These questions now arise:

- a. How have we tackled the issues raised?
- b. To what extent have we worked on the obstacles or factors outlined?
- c. What have we achieved?
- d. What are the challenges?
- e. What still remains to be tackled?

In providing answers to these questions, we must focus our points thematically to reflect the most pressing areas needing full attention.

Women and Challenges of Democratic Governance

As a result of the growing acceptance of the importance (to society) of the full participation of woman in decision-making and power at all levels of governance especially in this democratic dispensation, the Nigerian women are now challenged to take greater responsibilities in political positions. They no longer shy away or regard democratic governance as a pre-requisite for men. That in the wake of the 4th Republic (1999-2003), Nigeria produced a deputy governor in Lagos state, a women speaker in Benue State House of Assembly, a number of women senators and many women members of the Federal House of Assembly from different states of the federation is sure proof to the above claim. The Obasanjo-led democratic government had also ceded 30% (thirty percent) of electoral positions to women. There are also powerful, intelligent, focused and seasoned women directors, general managers, special assistants to Mr. President, State Commissioners as well as female members of the Federal Executive Council. Many women also occupy top civil service positions like Directors and Permanent Secretaries. In the academia, there are many women professors while in the judiciary women are judges-in both lower and upper courts. They are not left behind even in parastatals and business lines.

The proportion of women in democratic governance keeps rising just as the agitation and

campaigns by several women groups and NGO'S for more women appointments are stepped up. Women politicians are also becoming more and more dogged and determined as they have learnt from resilience not to give up at the slightest provocation and intimidation. The cases of Lagos State Deputy Governor slugging it out with her State Chief Executive, and the woman speaker of the Benue State House of Assembly who put up a hitherto unimaginable wall of defence to stop the Executive masterminded impeachment moves against her, are glaring examples of successes recorded by our women politicians, and act as a pointer to the greater positions they will hold in future.

In spite of these achievements by our women in democratic governance across the country, many of the women folk are still unexplored, under utilized and under represented in the vast areas of human endeavour and responsibility in comparison with their male counterparts. The factors of religion, primitive beliefs, poverty, illiteracy, gender discrimination (unfavourable to women) and outright intimidation, deprivation and violence against women by the men still pose as strong obstacles that need to be cleared.

Women Resource Mobilization and Fund Allocation

When we consider that by the 1991 census, women constitute more than 50% of the Nigerian population, that women constitute not less 75% of the total peasant agricultural labour in the country; that women are the natural custodians of the family; that women constitute over 60% of petty traders dealing on a wide array of essential commodities and food stuff; and that with the increasing rate of female enrollment in schools, colleges and tertiary institutions, a great majority of the country's processed and skilled manpower will be occupied by women, there would not be any gainsaying that the Nigerian government or society will in no distant time, be taken over by the women folk. The question now is how has the Nigerian government and society fared in addressing these?

Firstly, the Ministry of Women Affairs has been created at the Federal and State levels to take care of the issues that particularly affect the women, to champion their causes and plights against all forms of discriminations that sub-gender them from the men level, to remove all obstacles to their overall advancement, and to sensitize and then mobilize them into greater positions of responsibility in service of their fatherland. That more women are today coming into the main stream of administration, public service, and private participation as well as religion, music and sports goes to show the level of success our people have attained in this direction.

Secondly, the first ladies at the state and federal levels now, more than ever and compared to their predecessors, are vividly displaying the much cherished elitism and far reaching commitment to governance and distribution of the state resources to effectively benefit the family (women and children). What therefore, need to be achieved is for the proper consideration, planning and implementation of adequate allocation of funds to benefit the categories of the Nigerian women whose resources are utilized for the development of this country. Funds should be allocated appropriately to our teeming women farmers, artisans, micro and small-scale entrepreneurs and industrialists, politicians, students, apprentices, producers of essential commodities and transporters to ease off the poverty effects and negative influences. The funds could be in form of soft loans, interest-free grants, bursary awards, bonuses, prizes and scholarship to deserving students and careering civil servants who want to advance their status.

Implementation of International Treaties and Resolution on Women

The Nigeria country report on implementation of the Beijing platform for action covering 1995-1999 published by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development, Abuja, gives a detailed action taken by the Nigerian government agencies and NGO's between 1995 and 1999. The areas covered include examples of successful policies, programmes, workshops and enlightenment campaigns to implement such concerns like women and poverty, women education and training, women health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and economy, women in power and decision making. Considerable successes were reported in the publication with a few obstacles listed and a number of further actions and initiatives required to tackle them.

Women Health: Although there is awareness on the needs for the implementation for the women health programme it should be stepped up especially among policy makers and planners to cover all aspects of women health throughout their life cycle most importantly, during their reproductive period. The costs of receiving gynecological and paediatric treatments as well as antenatal and postnatal cares are still high. This militates against the health of women. Laws should be passed to bring down the costs to the most affordable minimum whether in the public and private hospitals and clinics. By so doing, the life

expectancy of the women will increase considerably in the long run

Women and Information Dissemination: The development of information and communication technologies especially the Internet, has contributed to global information dissemination and improved communication opportunities for the female gender. However, the development and access to the Internet facility is limited in developing countries such as ours where illiteracy, lack of computer literacy and language barriers prevent most women from using the information and communication gadgets to get across to their counterpart in the advanced countries. Effort should be intensified to procure the new in-built facilities and to get more and more women in the remote rural areas (now being gradually electrified) to benefit from the training in their use.

Women in Public Administration Or Public Office: Government the world over appears to be responding to the clarion call of integrating the women folk into governance and decision-making. Many countries of the world are beginning to be alive to gender inequality. The profile of female leaders appears to have increased of late. In 2005, Angela Merkel of Germany, joined the club of female world leaders and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf followed suit in 2006. In spite of the swelling of the number by two, the population is still very minute compared to that of their male counterparts. Some of the world female leaders are Michelle Bachelet (President elect of Chile), Luisa Phase I huge (Prune Minister, Mozambique), Helen Klark (Prime Minister, New Zealand), lanja I lalonei (President Finland), Begun Khaleda Zia (Prime Minister, Bangladesh), Mary McAleese (President Ireland), Gloria Arroyo (President of Philippines), Maria do Carmo Sidera (Prime Minister, Sao Tome and Principe), and Viara Vike-Preiberga (President of Latvia). From the above, it is heartening to note that in the whole world, only eleven countries are ruled or led by women, the rest are men. The proportion is very insignificant but we believe it will appreciate some day.

In Nigeria, President Olusegun Obasanjo's democratically led government appears to be the most responsive to gender equality ever in this country. His government experimented and discovered the rich natural endowment in women and so, has decided to utilize the women effectively. To this effect, he appointed many women into public offices, examples of such appointments are; Her. Akunyili (Director General, NAP'DAC), Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (Minister of Finance), Nnadi Lsma; (Minister of Education), Irene Chigbue (DG Bureau for Public Enterprises), Oby Ezekwesili (Minister of Education), Dame Virgy Etiaba who has been alternating as Governor and Deputy Governor of Anambra State, and Hajia Chiroma (Minister of Women Affairs) and a host of others too numerous to mention in this paper. The Obasanjo administration also encouraged women into elective positions and allotted at least 30% (thirty percent) of elective positions to women. Government does all these to bridge the wide gap between the male and female participation in public administration and decision making and it is quite commendable.

Women and Nigerian Law: Review and Enforcement of Existing laws

Legal reforms have been undertaken to prohibit all forms of harmful traditional and customary practices and negative stereotyping against women. The governments and women's NGOs including the National Council for Women Societies (NCWS) have contributed immensely to raising awareness that women's rights are human rights. Successes have been recorded at the state and national levels in this direction, for example, in 2001, a women-NGO in Enugu State got a private bill through the state House of Assembly that was subsequently passed into law abrogating as obnoxious traditions and customs against widows. In Edo State, the wife of the former Governor (Mrs. Eki Igbinedion) aroused enough national awareness of the harmful effects of trafficking in women and engaging in female prostitution. Together with the efforts of the late Nigeria's first lady and the wife of the Vice President whose NGOs are very powerful and vocal against all abuses on women, girl child, and handicapped children. Bills are under way at the National Assembly for an Act into law banning all forms of activity against the progress of the Nigerian women and girl child

Constraints and Prospects

From the foregoing, and from the general experience being evidenced, addressing the issue of gender equality and equity in Nigeria especially from the angle of implementing the Beijing Platform for action to stop all forms of discrimination against women, a number of constraints have cut to size the degree of success envisaged. The constraints include the following among others: inadequate and untimely release of funds, inadequate funding of major social programmes benefiting women, and most NGOs have very weak financial base to operate. Moreover, there is inadequacy of trained manpower and of resources (both capital and

recurrent) at all levels of government for effective implementation of gender programmes. The slow pace of change of negative attitudes towards women's position in relation to men tends to lower their active involvement in state affairs. This stems from (he observed difficulty in eliminating some deep-rooted cultural attitudes and practices towards women (c g. widows and the girl child). Finally, the level of female illiteracy keeps getting high in some states that promote obnoxious sect-driven laws.

Recommendations

One would think that the way forward to reverse and speed up the above listed constraints should be for us as a nation, as a people, as men and women equal under the universal law in Nigeria to truly get committed and show' the commitment in obliterating all forms and shades of gender inequality and inequity against the women folk. The various agencies of the UN (e.g. UNIFEM, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP), bilateral agencies, human rights groups and many women civil society organizations the world over, have in several ways supported the campaigns for gender equality and equity. All that is needed is for the nation to unite in appreciating and utilizing the successes recorded so far. For more breakthrough in this endeavour one would recommend, thus:

- i. That public awareness and policy advocacy that addressed the different dimensions against women and the girl child be stepped up and properly energized.
- ii. Government to increase her effort and interest in initiating more policies and laws to promote gender equality and equity and to bring the women at par with their men counterparts.
- iii. That greater impetus be given to human rights networks and other institutions and agencies to reach out effectively to all nooks and crannies where gender inequality and inequity are still practiced unfettered.
- iv. Many more reliable statistical and analytical data on women appointments, employments, educational status, trade and industry positions, and gender-based violence be vividly displayed and provided. This will enable stakeholders in gender issues to ascertain or determine the progress made or achieved in addressing gender equality and equity.
- v. Encouragement should be given to local and international collaboration efforts, while synergy and impact garnered among concerned agencies to achieve greater success.

Conclusion

In this paper, some of the pressing issues that arise in the progress and obstacles in the way of gender equality and equity at the national level were analyzed. It is a global fact that discrimination against women and the girl child started from society's primordial perception that women are closer to nature and men to culture, and that women are the custodians of morality and thus, should not venture with men into politics, science, technology, arts and culture and should rather stay reclusively in the home to look after the family. With increasing awareness and objections those discriminative actions against women, the global community has risen up vehemently to instill gender equality and equity in all spheres of life. In Nigeria, efforts by the State and Federal governments have yielded tremendous successes even though, much is still required to be accomplished.

Finally, with increased inter-agency and inter governmental cooperation increased commitment and patriotism at the national level in Nigeria and at the regional level in Africa and beyond, the global integration of women in all sphere and the eventual elimination of obstacles to gender equality anti equity will be realized.

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