

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE NIGERIA EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Nigeria like other countries are still pregnant of sustainable development and have not fully realized that the midwives are women and for a successful delivery to take place, women need to be empowered first, if not there will be constant miscarriage and abortion. The roles most Nigerian women played and are still playing in the little chance given to them have showed that if given more, Nigeria will achieve a sustainable development. The differences between men and women lie in their training not in their natural endowments. The type of training men receive, which makes them to excel in many ways, if given to women, they would equally excel. If women are free from all conventional setbacks, they will perform their roles well and achieve success in other fields of human endeavour. What they need to prove themselves as wonderful agents of development is a just and fair society without gender discrimination.

Keywords: *Development, Women Empowerment, Nigeria*

1. Introduction

Nigeria, over the years has been facing a lot of serious developmental challenges. These challenges have been barriers to sustainable development in the nation. Most of these challenges confronting the nation are Poverty, Gender Inequality, High Unemployment Rate, Terrorism, Political Instability, Economic Recession and High Level of Illiteracy. Despite all the efforts and measures put in place by the present and previous administrations towards achieving sustainable development, this challenges are increasing on a daily basis. The situation in 2020 became severe when Nigeria and the rest of the world were hit by COVID-19 pandemic which led many Nigerians to untoward hardship and death. The EndSars saga, terrorism in the North East, killings by unknown gun men in the South East and political infighting generated by the desire to benefit from extractions among the politicians/elites have finally led many people to conclude that Nigeria, a country blessed with many natural and human resources is now a failed state.

The questions now are, since Nigeria got her independence till date, how many Nigerian women have been allowed to actively participate in politics? Why is there inequality in Nigeria politics today? Do women lack the ability to lead Nigeria? Importantly, why are the Nigerian women not allowed in decision making, peace keeping and peace talks? All these questions constitute the problems that this paper

seeks to investigate, to see how involving and empowering the women to contribute in the affairs of the country both politically and economically will help to bring sustainable development in Nigeria. This paper argues that the achievements and contributions of some great women in the society in the past are tremendous. Hence, women should be allowed to participate fully especially now
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that the country is facing a lot of social unrest. This work employs the method of hermeneutics as a method of arriving at solutions in the course of this research. This method of philosophical inquiry involves the philosophical interpretation of concepts and ideas in order to discover their hidden meanings. This work concludes by suggesting that for there to be a sustainable development in Nigeria, women must be empowered and allowed to participate fully in peace keeping, politics and decision making.

2. Women Empowerment

Empowerment can be defined as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important. Evans Offor (2006: p 7) in his book *Women Empowerment* holds that empowerment entails the legalization of the rights of women and authorization to have social rights to speak, to take part in public affairs and to defend their beliefs. In the same way, women's empowerment refers to women's ability to make strategic life choices where that ability had been previously denied them.

Accordingly, empowerment is central to the processes of maintaining the benefits of women at individual, household, community and broader levels. It involves the action of boosting the status of women through literacy, education, training and awareness. Hence, women's empowerment is all about allowing and equipping women to make life-determining choices across different issues in the country.

2. Gender Equality

Gender equality is understood to mean that the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are male or female. It is also defined as a situation where all human beings are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by strict gender roles; that the different aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favored equally. The ultimate goal of gender equality is the non- existence of discrimination on the basis of one's gender. It simply means treating all human beings, (male and female) equally.

3. Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development arises due to the change of human perception as to what development is. Development perspectives shifted gradually, leading to what we perceive today as sustainable development. In the 1950s and 1960s, the focus was on the economic growth and productive capacity of a country. However, in the 1970s, the focus shifted to equity matters, i.e., social development and income distribution, as awareness grew of the prevailing gap between rich and poor. In the same period, environmental protection came into the picture as one component of development: knowing the impact of economic growth on the environment. Hence, sustainable development is perceived broadly nowadays. Accordingly, the most frequently cited definition of sustainable development is “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. It calls for attention to be paid to the interest of future generations while attempting to satisfy our present needs.

Following the aforesaid changes in development perspectives, sustainable development is also understood to have three interrelated pillars: Human development index, Gender development index and Human poverty index.

It is further noted that “the goal, and indeed the ultimate test, of sustainable development is the convergence among these three trajectories of;

1. Human development index
2. Gender Development index
3. Human poverty index.

This shows that sustainable development can be achieved if and only if those three elements are satisfied cumulatively. These dimensions have equal and interrelated importance; the absence of one will impede others.

4. National Development

When we talk about development, it involves two things, human development aspect and material development aspect, but our focus here we will be on human development aspect. The human aspect of development is concerned with promotion and enhancement of human values. These are bricks with which people's social relationships are built. A strict observance of these values makes people real human beings and guarantees the realization and enjoyment of people's well-being. Nwabuiro Ideyi (2007), cited in Ezeani (2004:99) by Martin Okeke, has this aspect of development in mind when he writes:

Development is about people. It is about the quality of life of people, their capacity to improve the conditions of their existence, to reach, control and utilize their resources for greater productivity and enjoyment. It is about the autonomy and self-respect of the individuals as a free member of his community. It is to be brought about by people.

In this respect, development is people-centered. It aims at advancing people's well-being by improving and transforming their social, intellectual, economic, institutional and environmental conditions through the exploitation, mobilization and just distribution of human, material and institutional resources.

As a nation, Nigeria's overriding goal is unity and a desire to remain together as one nation. But given the demands of the changing times, this unity must be based on the well-being of Nigerians; hence the emphasis is on the overall well-being and on factors that enhance, promote and advance it. These factors include, improved human relations, recognize and emphasize the need for every Nigerian to uphold values of love, justice, trust, truthfulness, fairness, patience, dialogue, communal life etc. These are ingredients of development and where they are recognized and allowed to operate, people's well-being is guaranteed and the foundation of their unity remains strong.

National development is a process whereby every aspect of a given society undergoes transformation geared towards an improvement in the quality of the people's life. It means that all the segments of the population should be empowered for the development of their overall well-being. In case of default, as being observed in Nigeria, where any of the federating units and components is neglected, national development will adversely affected. In Nigeria, the most neglected part of the population is women. Some societal practices kept active by chauvinists have combined to reduce women to a powerless lot, severally disabled to make meaningful contribution to national development. Nigerian society can simply be described as patriarchal society.

5. Women and National Development

Women empowerment and development is very essential to national development and to the realization of sustainable development. In the history of Nigerian development, most progress made in terms of national development are great contributions of Nigerian women who despite societal challenges have risen above board and stood tall. In the first 16th century, the modern city of Zaria was founded by a woman called Queen Bakwa Turuku. Moremi of Ife and Emotan of Benin were amazons who displayed tremendous bravery and strength in the politics of Ife and Benin respectively. Nwanerum led the historic event of the Aba Women Riot of 1929 over unfair taxation (Ideyi,2007:101). From the period of independence in 1960 to date, many Nigerian

women have emerged in the political scene to champion the cause of women with a call that what concerns all should be decided by all. Names of these prominent women are so numerous to mention, however, for the purposes of our discussion here, we will mention but a few: Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-iweala the Director General of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Dr. Obiageli Catherine Ezekwesili, late Prof. Dora Akunyili, Former Managing Director of the National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), leading the fight against adulterated pharmaceutical drugs, Maryam Aloma Mukhtar the first female justice of the supreme court of Nigeria.

The roles of these women have in different ways raised the political consciousness of Nigerians. They have etched their names in gold and their invaluable contributions can never be forgotten in the annals of history. There are myriads of women in politics even presently that have done very well and are still performing excellently. Today, many countries of the world are making efforts to bridge the gap between men and women, but in Nigeria, the representation of women in government is still very low compared to what obtains in other nations of the world. There is no doubt that women have some potentials and right to contribute meaningfully to the development of their country. Therefore, the Nigerian government should work towards empowering women in order to achieve the desired sustainable development goals. Thus, affirmative action on woman should be at the top of policy formation and institutional transformation in Nigeria.

6. Setbacks for Women

In the history of creation, the Bible tells us that after creating man, the Lord God said: "It is not good for a man to live alone, I will make a suitable companion to help him" (Genesis 2:18). It is therefore most surprising that the same man for whose comfort and company, the woman was created turned round to discriminate against the woman, his companion. The point is that Nigerian women have not been properly empowered and have not been given their rightful positions and opportunities in the Nigerian society. They are accorded an inferior status which might be one of the reasons they lack political knowledge and don't like participating in politics. This has created setbacks in their efforts to contribute to the development of the country. These setbacks are seen in all ramifications of their lives such as culture, education, economy, social life, religion, politics etc. For instance, women have complained about Nigeria system of party meetings time. According to them, political party meetings are held mostly in the night and, to them, it is difficult for responsible women to attend such meetings. As a result, most of them shy away from being involved in politics. Though, few women have defied this norm, registered as party members and attend meetings but most unfortunately, they are stigmatized and labeled wayward and irresponsible by the society.

Lack of support from men and the loss of values amongst female politicians as well as lack of funding are also setbacks for all women. Other instances of women's subjugation, marginalization, discrimination and oppression are women not allowed to bail persons in police custody, women in some parts of the country have no right of inheritance, and women are considered unfit to hold some public office. It is no surprise that in the whole 36 States of Nigeria, no woman has become an elected governor or has been the President. Are women incapable of ruling? The simple answer is no.

Finally, women themselves are serious setback to themselves. Most of them prefer men to rule them. According to Kevin C. Arua (2006:140), lack of unity among Nigeria women is one of the biggest obstacles to women empowerment. Women hardly see anything good in their fellow women.

7. Ways to Empower Women

Empowerment in its simplest meaning refers to the process whereby people's capabilities and potentials are harnessed and fully developed to enable them take control of their lives and destinies. This is in order to get the maximum happiness and fulfillment in life and contribute maximally to the process and development of their nation and the human family. Since the aim of development is people's well-being and people themselves are the agents of development and women constitute more than half of the world population, women should be properly empowered towards national development such as psychological, economical and political.

To empower women, it has to start from women's mind. Women are brought up to see their first and last role as that of pleasing men and carrying out their wishes. They are made to believe that male child is more important and needed than female child. They see themselves as weak and inferior to men. In order to empower women, those falsehoods have to be replaced with truth. There should be a serious reorientation program specially made for women to correct the wrong impression about women and inculcate the right values on them. Women must be liberated from the shackles they are trained to voluntarily impose upon themselves. It is for women interest and in the interests of society. Nigerian women should be allowed to possess economic power. They are mostly found in low scale economic activities such as petty trading, hawking, soap making, weaving of clothes, etc. These provide job opportunities for women but the income from all these are very meager. They need access to factors of production such as land, capital, labour and entrepreneurship which are the sources of wealth.

Politically, what will happen to Nigeria if a woman is to be allowed to occupy the Presidential seat? Democracy has lasted for many years but no woman has ever been

the governor of the states let alone the president. Does it mean that women are only good for voting but not to be voted for? For women to play an effective role as agent of development, they need to be liberated and empowered, for what is good for men is equally good for women. The destinies of both men and women are joined together for good or for bad. "Men and women may not be equal just like no two human beings are equal but they are certainly complementary and must learn to march side by the side to whatever glory that awaits the race"(Ideyi 2006: 105). With the issues raised above, it glaring that women empowerment programme is constantly needed to remedy the damage already done to womanhood and for the nation to attain the level of development it desires. If this is done, it will unleash the great potentials embedded in women to the amazement of Nigeria and the world.

Conclusion

People have credited to Francis Bacon statement that knowledge is power but many of us know that use of knowledge is actually where the power lies, for it is through the use of knowledge that power is generated and exercised over others. In the same way, most Nigerian women have acquired knowledge but were not allowed to use it especially in political field where major decision making and policy formation take place. For our country to reach the level of sustained development of our dream, we need, as a matter of urgent public importance, involve women in all aspects of human development. This will be achieved through organization of seminars, conferences and excursion tours for both men and women so as to enrich everyone's mind, mentally, politically, socially, economically and other wise. Women should unite, love their fellow women and stop using them as prostitutes/ women trafficking (woman- to-woman), hawking and so on. When women love and help themselves, they will achieve their desired freedom very fast.

From the foregoing, this paper has shown that sustainable development is needed in Nigeria and for Nigeria to achieve this, women ought to be involved in all spheres of life and all fallacies peddled against women should be dispelled. When this is achieved, both men and women will come to the realization that the difference between men and women lie in their training, and societal misconceptions, not in their natural endowments or mental ability. Men likewise women have one major thing that made them human; rationality. Women are no less humans to men, they are coequal and humanity will not be said to have fully developed if the potentials cum capacities in women are not fully explored and put to maximum use.

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