

An Appraisal of the Status of Nigerian Women: Educational Implications and National Development

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Abstract This paper critically examines the status of women at different levels of development. It tries to examine the role Nigerian women played at three different epochs and how they were being influenced by the system of education prevalent at the time. This was discussed under three broad headings: Women's status in pre-colonial era, women status in colonial era and women's status in post colonial era. Emphasis was made on over all view of women status vis-à-vis women education and national development. It concluded by saying that there has been slight improvement on the status of women at present, though not as expected compared with the women population in the country. The paper however recommended the following among which are: Joint effort of the three tiers of government for effective implementation of women's programmes in the country. Literate women should endeavor to use any women forum as 'classroom' where knowledge, skills and values that will alleviate their poor self esteem can be effectively impacted.

Keywords Women, Development, Status, Education, Stereotype, Pre-Colonial, Colonial, Postcolonial

1. Introduction

1.1. Women Participation in the Development of Their Communities

God did not stop creation until woman manifested in the scene. No human society is complete without womenfolk. This is equally applicable to the nations of the world. Development of any human society could hardly be attainable when women's roles are not factored in, nor acknowledged and appreciated. This is because, women form about half the world population (Akubue 2001). She equally maintained that any society which neglect such a large number of human resource potential cannot achieve any meaningful development. This reality is also articulated in Amucheazi (1991) when he described African traditional society women as being hardworking and resourceful in the following words:

They engage themselves in income generating activities of various types such as, processing of palm-oil and garri, soap making, weaving, sewing and pottery. Generally, African women carry significant proportions of the work –load in food crop production, animal husbandry, food processing and distribution. They combine all these with their traditional role of procreation and home management.

Implicit on the above statement is the fact that women are important resource for development. Judging from the Contributions of the rural women in the development of their

communities' one could be right to imagine that naturally women are embodiments of national development. No wonder the United Nations Organization (UNO) on realizing the importance of women in national development, set up in 1946, a commission on status of women. Reference[2] noted that concerted effort was made since 1946 to improve the status of women in educational, cultural and political, economic and social spheres of life all over the world.

Development in the context of this work has to do with the transformation of the entire society through total mobilization of every member of the society irrespective of sex. This kind of development is such that opposed to any form of obstacle whether political, economic or sociological in the process of transformation. This premise is hinged on the fact that there shall be no meaningful development of any nation where development indices is gender stereo-typed. This is because for genuine national development to be attained there is need for both men and women to complement each other as each has specific role to play. Concept of development in this context is based on Anglo-American perspective which Afigbo (cited in Amucheazi, 2001) itemized into five components among which is eliminating inequality. It is the view of this paper that if gender equality treaties and covenants are effectively implemented in Nigerian national development will be easily idealized.

2. The Objective of the Paper

For clearer focus on the topic under discussion, this paper analyzes the status of women in three different epochs or stages of nation development in Nigeria. The presentation is

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as follows:

- An overview of women in national development
- Women status in three epochs: pre-colonial era, colonial era, and post-colonial era,
- conclusion and recommendations

3. An Overview of Women in National Development

In trying to examine the views on impact of women on development, this paper equally recognizes the collaborative effort of both sexes on developmental issues. It is pertinent to note that the development of any human society is determined by the effort and commitment of its members irrespective of age, sex or class. In the development process everyone is carried along.

Contributions of women to national development all over the world and Africa in particular are a global reality. In the pre-colonial era, women were not only equipped with the skill of child rearing and home management but were equally equipped with political, social, economic skills which they acquired through initiation, rituals apprentice and ceremonies. In line with the above view Mannahein and Stewart (cited in Ojeh, 2007: 28) noted that “women helped significantly to shape the mental and attitudinal infrastructures of a pre-colonial past”. In view of the natural potentials, influence, numerical strength and indispensability of women in every society, Reference[4] opined that women need adequate formal education to enable them face challenges of changing global economy. In the same vein Onwuka (2008:57) maintained that “educated women are crucial in the development of any nation. Uneducated women are not only a hell on earth, but a real drag on progress.

The importance of women in development has been articulated in the human rights document edited by Ezeilo (2008: 324) as in the following lines:

“The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is essential for the achievement of sustainable development”. Similar to the above assertion is a statement incorporated in Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC 2003: 38) which stated that “without the active participation of women and incorporation of women’s perspectives in all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality development and peace cannot be achieved”.

By implication the above view points to the fact that exclusion of women in any development indices may lead to no development.

4. Women status in pre-colonial Era

Education in the pre-colonial era was regarded as indigenous knowledge and informal education. That was a natural process of growth and development. It was the local

knowledge that was unique to a given culture or society. Indigenous knowledge are those experiences, insights and skills applied by the people of a particular community to maintain their livelihood.

The type of education the individual receives in the traditional society is based on gender stereotype. A girl-child in the pre-colonial era as in the traditional setting today was expected to learn the skills that would make her play the role of responsible adult womanhood. This simply means that gender role was pre-determined by the sex of a person. While female child was exposed to socially imposed responsibilities of motherhood and domesticity, to embrace the characteristics of motherhood which are rooted in the domestic functions reserved for her sex, her male counterpart was being socialized into manhood status.

Despite the domestication of women’s role in the pre-colonial era, women still waxed very strong in political and economic spheres and other related areas. The virtues exhibited by some women like queen Amina of Zaria and Moremi of Ife in pre-colonial society is an attested fact. One could assume that the elder women in the pre-colonial era, apart from training the younger ones on skills of child rearing and home management, also inculcate in them skills of economic and political development. Describing this situation in the pre-colonial era as in[4] stated that women all over the world and African in particular, during the pre-colonial era apart from their domestic role as mother, made immense contributions in areas of farming, trade and distribution as well as the local craft and industry. Apart from this also women in the pre-colonial period acquired certain political skills that enable them to some extent carry out certain political functions which helped to shaped pre-colonial political infrastructures.

Nigerian women during the pre-colonial era were described as in[8] as a period when women participated actively in politics. She went further to state a good number of examples of the effective political participation of Nigerian women as follows:

Among the Igbos, the institution of umuada have definite rituals and political role to play in the village;’ among other Ika Igbo women and Ossamari there was unique involvement in local politics; among the Yorubas women actively participated in politics, for instance, moremi stepped into political welfare singlehandedly and saved his society and Idia king’s mother was the first to have her own separate court with the same royal paraphernalia as the Oba, in Lagos and abeokuta, madam Tinubu showed power of the traditional Yoruba woman in the political life of her society prior to 1914. In Hausa land, there are records of women who held titles and offices like the Iya, Magajiya and Mardani. As title holders they held outstanding positions in the society like their male counterparts. (Ikejiani 2001: 21-22)

Judging from the above experiences, one could contend that even though society stereotyped women’s role to mere household keeping, women in the pre-colonial period did not limit themselves to such particular role, rather they competed with their male counterparts in economic, social and political

spheres. This is no doubt as a result of experiences acquired from their environment which was passed unto the younger women folk.

5. Women Status in Colonial Era

Just like gender-stereotyped form of education in African traditional society and pre-colonial period, the western-type education was premised along this ideology. Western type of education was introduced for the purpose of preparing boys for available job opportunities within the system, such opportunities required recipient to live away from their homes. Ezeani (1998:100) posited that “the basic premise of the colonial gender ideology was therefore, the domestication of women. They were not to function in the public domain like the men”. He further maintained that the purpose of education was to enable men acquire skills that help them to serve in public offices. This view was supported as in[5] who succinctly stated as follows:

When western-type education was initially introduced, it was considered useful only because it prepared boys to be able to qualify for employment as clerks, interpreters, teachers, catechists, evangelists, stewards, cooks etc for government offices commercial houses and missionaries. Girls were not considered fit for such employment opportunities. (Onwuka 2008: 53).

It is pertinent to point out that in the process of time few educated men who were teachers, clerk and catechist who knew the value of western education in human development, encouraged their wives to go to school. In order to encourage girls' enrolment in schools some school proprietors and missionary schools initially allowed girls to attend school without paying fees, while some allowed them half of the fees paid by boys as in[5]. Reference[9] was of the opinion that schools that was established for girls then, was just to prepare them to be good mothers, wives and not to be seen in public life.

As we have earlier mentioned, despite the stereotype role of women in the traditional society, women still compete with their male counterparts in all spheres of life. On the contrary, the western- education brought sharp dichotomy or contradiction in the women's role. This however, uplifted men in the social ladder and relegated women.

This ugly incident had however made development in Nigeria an uphill task. This means that development cannot be tied to a particular sex. No one sex is too important in the issue of development. The virtues deposited in womenfolk in creation, if thoroughly nurtured will help in no small measure the development of the entire society. No wonder as in[4] maintained that, “women by virtue of their natural potentials, influence, number and indispensability in any functional society needed sufficient formal education that equip them to face challenges posed by modernity and civilization.

Considering the innate ability of African women one could rightly say that the colonial master envisaged certain innate virtues in African women and decided to destabilize

them by denying them right to education. During colonial period, women were prevented from making their possible contributions to the development of their society. Uchendu cited as in[8] noted that economic and political suppression of women in the colonial era gave rise to Igbo women's protest in Eastern Nigeria in 1929. This situation however, is against Palmer and Almazi (1991) and Anugwom (2009) who maintained that, socio-economic improvement of nations can be achieved through the acquisition of education and broad empowerment of women. However, despite the obnoxious policies of the colonial administration women vehemently rejected the whole colonial order. The political and economic force of women in colonial time was described as in[8] thus: “These women employed their traditional organization...to mobilize all women in most part of Aba, Owerri and Opobo etc; in order to assert their rights politically as had been during the pre-colonial era”. The active role played by Madam Tinibu, Mrs Ransome-Kuti in mobilizing women against taxation cannot be forgotten.

6. Women Status in Post Colonial Era

Education is seen as powerful instrument through which national development can be attained (Federal republic of Nigeria FRN 2004). Education in this sense has no gender or sex attachment. This is because the type of development referred to in this work requires corporate participation of members of the society, men and women alike. The fact remains that “the task of nation building demands that all hands should be on deck in order to initiate ideas, make plans and participate in their actual implementation For maximum contribution towards national development in technology and positive outcome, both sexes (male and female) should be equally interested in science and arts subjects (Kano 1995). The above claim simply shows the relevance of both sexes (male and female) in national development. This is why “gender equality and women empowerment continue to be central theme in global treaties, covenants and declarations because they are now acknowledged as important to people centred development roadmap.

On seeing that education is one of the powerful instruments of empowering women with the knowledge and skills that would help them to participate actively in the development process, Nigeria became a signatory to the United Nations 1979 convention known as Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)). This convention has variously been described as the “Bible of women empowerment” and “women's international Bill of rights” as in[7]

Despite the effort of various governments to close the gap created by gender discrimination, there still existed wide gap between men and women in public life and in all sectors. A lot of traditional and cultural factors have been claimed to be limiting women educationally and economically among other opportunities. These cultural practices that constituted a lot of barriers to women educational opportunities are all

imbedded on political, economic and religion realities of the people (Ozigbohi 1998).

Judging from the situation narrated above one can still contend that at the pre-colonial stage women in their own circle were able to acquire knowledge and skills that helped them to compete with their male counterpart in all spheres of life. One can therefore argue that the decline in women education could be traced to the discriminating policy in education and training given by the early Europeans (Boserup cited as in [14]).

The Nigerian women have done a lot to escape from cultural prejudice and male chauvinism that inhibited their progress. The women most of the time prefer to work in groups to enable them solve their socio-economic political and cultural problems. They pull their meagre resources together and are able to provide social services, infrastructure in their communities and thereby promote development and community solidarity.

Women form Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) to fight economic obnoxious policies that are against women such as political participation, legal status, child marriage and "osu" (caste) system. One of such women important group is the National council for women society (NCWS), made up of educated and influential women. Their objective is to assist women groups in the rural area and educate them on how to be self reliant and thereby play important role in their homes as mother and contribute in nation building. The council set up scholarship scheme and skill acquisition centres for indigent girls of school age. They have done a lot to enable the present generation escape from the unfortunate experience of their predecessors by setting up hostels for young girls to make school assessable to them. The NCWS see education as an instrument for the up liftment of women socio-economic status.

The NCWS became the "spokesman" on matters affecting women in Nigeria. The women on their part have embraced the opportunity given by both Federal and state governments by attending adult education classes at the centres established by the government to learn how to read and write and acquire other skills.

Some women groups especially in the rural areas undertake and complete such projects as installation of electric generating plant, water bore hole, and repair of toilets in their general hospital. It can be said without much contradiction that in the post colonial era the status of women have fairly improved. Women have endeavoured to overcome discrimination against them through education. It is a common feature in Nigeria to see women in very highly placed positions. Some are medical doctor pharmacists, architects, university dons of all ranks including professors bankers, media women and even business tycoons. Nigerian women have indeed ventured into male dominated professions which include aviation armed forces and so on. In fact in all spheres of life women are there working both in Nigeria and in many other countries contributing socio-economic development. Access to education has gone a long in making

Nigerian women realize their potentials

In the informal sector of the economy the rural women have made impact in food crop production, processing and distribution and animal husbandry.

7. Conclusions

Women had been noted to have potentials that are necessary for development. However, they are still denied certain rights due to some psychological, sociological, cultural and traditional factors. The convention on the elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has not been fully implemented in Nigeria. Though there seemed to be a slight improvement in women involvement in some sectors but the change is not significant compared with the number of women population in the country.

To encourage women to contribute to national development requires policy and creative programme actions that will alleviate them from certain legal impediments to their participation in public life.

Having considered women as potential tool in development process, and the impact they had created through traditional education Eze, (20080) suggested the integration of the indigenous knowledge system, along side, the popular education framework and the modern educational system. Education in the real sense does not mean only formal schooling. Far from formal schooling education, education means equipping individuals with societal norms and habits, knowledge and skills that will make them contribute meaningfully toward self improvement and co-operatively work towards the development of the entire nation.

In line with the above as in [4] description of education or educated person seems to agree with the above view. He stated as follows:

Schooling is not for everybody in many countries and individuals who have not been to any school cannot necessarily be said to have been denied education. Indeed, they could be involved in a variety of activities which enable them to realize themselves and to live fully as human beings. Secondly, schooling does not guarantee the acquisition of the necessary knowledge skills, habits, sentiments and values which promote development. (Onwuka 2008: 51-52).

Implicit on the above statement is that apart from formal schooling, knowledge, skills, values etc can still be acquired through what may be referred to as indigenous education.

8. Recommendations

In view of the forgoing, the following recommendations were made:

- Federal, states and local governments should work hand in hand to support the effective implementation of women programmes in the country.
- Educated women should work hard to ensure that they raise social awareness of large number of women in the rural area, through effective programmes that are educative, (in-

digenous knowledge system) and mass communication as these will help to improve their self confidence.

- Every women forum whether in the city or rural areas should be effectively utilized as 'classroom' to educate the illiterate ones among them on skills, knowledge and values that will help them to improve their social, economic and political life style.

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