

Women Empowerment as a Strategy to Quality Education and Economic Development

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Abstract

The process of women empowerment embraces areas of self reliance, internal strength and capacity that entails the social, economic as well as political aspect of women lives. Women must feel they are able other than unable to effectively contribute in issues that impact on their lives. Therefore the need for women empowerment cannot be overemphasized. This article examined issues of women empowerment in relation to quality education and economic participation in Nigeria. The study indicated the important of education as a key to success and lack of it is capable of hampering women's contribution to national development. suggestions are put forward on how to improve women education.

Keywords: *Development, Education, Empowerment, Gender and women*

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Background to the Study

Inequality of opportunity between the sexes is rarely recognized as a problem or almost is seen as an issue that would disappear with coeducation. Sex stereotype appears to be deeply embedded and taken for granted aspects of the social and intellectual differences between men and women.

Meighan (1981) opined that gender inequality in education opportunity is not seen as a problem and hence received less attention thereby placing women under a lot of education disadvantages. Throughout the world, females are the victims of education inequalities. This is not an isolated phenomenon but directly reflects the monopoly of which men enjoy higher level of the economy and policy. It is common in Africa for sons to receive education before daughters and for the latter to catch up only as schooling becomes universal for boys. Even then considerable inequalities of enrolment are common at the post primary level (Blackemore and Cooksey, 1981).

In recent time there had been various outcry in most parts of the world concerning the status accorded women, a lot of studies have shown that women were not given equal opportunity in life as their men counter parts. There exists in balance between men and women especially in the areas of education and economic development. The welfare and development of women have become an area of great concern to many organizations and agencies which result into formation of policies and programme focused on women, many have realized that one's sex should not create inequality between men and women. In most societies people are socialized from birth to hold certain attitude and values about life, for instance what are those appropriate behaviours for men and women in the society? Which activities belong to men and women?. How these activities are valued and rewarded depends on the societal set up. This has created some expected roles for men and women in the society (James, 2012).

The original of this bias attitude towards women is traceable to some rigid traditional ideologies, socio-culture and religious beliefs where women are supposed to yield to the dictates of men. According to James (2012), women are seen as creatures who have to take a second place in the society (Adejaelo, 1996). States that in most families the birth of a female child is received with half-hearted gratitude than when a male child is born, men therefore have low regard for women. They are made to be submissive and yield themselves under men. She must by very means keep to her place, education. Education which enables an individual to function effectively and have influence in the society, will be a great tool. Women that have no access to education are denied this opportunity (World Bank, 1994). Report has shown that there is continued disparity in education in terms of enrollment and graduation. Illiteracy is higher in women than men. That is why very few of them are included in the general affairs of the societies in which they belong to. Education therefore is a powerful tool for advancement in the hand of women, lack of it is capable of hampering their contribution to national development.

Research Method

The research method adopted for this study is secondary data. The sources of the data include textbooks, journals, reports, magazines and internet.

Literature Review

The Roles of Women in the Society

Women from time immemorial have been addled with many family responsibilities and traditionally assigned many roles including custody of children, maintenance of home, feeding of the family and preservation of the family health. Consequent upon these tradition role expectations they become a significant factor in socio-economic and political development of a country. Apart from roles previously enumerated for the typical women, the modern day woman who is expected to be a wife, then a mother is like her traditional counterpart, expected to play the role of a dutiful home keeper. In playing this role she is expected to be capable of handling challenges of modern world of computer. Another challenge before her is the child before and after school. This is especially pertinent because she is expected to prepare the child to be able to cope with the challenges of the contemporary world. This simple implication of this reality is that the typical contemporary woman is not likely to play these roles efficiently unless she is fortified with adequate and quality education (Habila, 2012).

Women Empowerment and the Provision of Quality Education

According to Esere (2001), women empowerment can only be achieved through the provision of adequate and quality education to the women folk. This is crucial because no matter how rich or vast a nation is, without an effective, efficient, adequate and functional education for all its citizens (men and women) education which is relevant to its immediate needs, goals and objective such a nation would find it difficult to stand on its own. The branch of education being advocated is that the type of education in which is embedded the spirit of self realization and all that is needed for the country's overall development like mass literacy, economic empowerment etc. The need for women education is also informed by the fact that purposeful occupational achievement and satisfaction is ensured by deep self awareness and understanding which can only achieved through the provision of quality education. This has been noted is likely to guarantee women struggle to improve their status. The empowerment suggested is such that entails the process of challenging power relations and gaining wide control over source power. This however, cannot be achieved without the provision of reasonable access to formal and functional education to the women folk. This is based on the promise that education has been adjudged to be a viable instrument of change in the positive direction (Habila, 2012).

The Universal Basic Education states that provision of formal and functional education is needed for the women folk because:

1. It would empower them to know and ask for their rights to education, health, shelter, food, clothing etc.
2. It would empower them to fight against every form of discrimination against their folk, assert themselves about their right to equal treatment with their men counterpart as citizens of this nation.
3. It would empower women to take decision and accept responsibilities for taking such decisions concerning themselves.
4. It would give economic power to the women and thereby enable them to contribute their quota to the economic growth of the nation.
5. It would help avail women with the opportunity of participating keenly in the world of sophisticated politics and governance as enlightened citizens
6. It would help women to reduce maternal and infant mortality through improved nutrition, improved child rearing practice, health care and prevention against killer disease.

7. It would empower the women scientifically through exposure to science and technological education for the challenges of the present technological and information communication technology (ICT) break through unfolding worldwide.

Government Intervention in Education for Women

Nigeria and Nigerian leaders considered the neglect of the girl-child have made several efforts to breach and eliminate the negative view on the female child through provision in the constitution for free, compulsory and basic education for all Nigerian without discrimination. The establishment of Federal Girls College and at state levels in a bold step towards achieving girl-child education in Nigeria. Today, women are involved in governance, ministries for women affairs were established at both Federal and State level, women empowerment programmes set up, clubs in school set up for girls, the African Charter on the rights and welfare of the child and other non-governmental organizations have been set up to ensure compliances and support of the international organizations on the abuse and neglect of rights of the girl-child education in Nigeria and Africa at large.

Many policies have been introduced by government in Nigeria at different levels (Federal, State and Local) in the past and present which focus so much on women education. This is so because the society cannot have an absolute positive development if women are relegated to the background, women education is paramount to the development of any nation (INICEF, 1996) indicates that the government of Nigeria are trying compared to its counterparts from Asia, middle East and Africa in terms of bias which exist in the area of healthcare, which girls and women are said to enjoy lesser health care with various exploitative sexual practices, nutritional inequality between boys and girls must be addressed.

The government has enacted edicts and statutes to eliminate traditional customs and rites harmful to girls physical, mental and emotional health through advocacy programmes and actions such as campaign on various media on the importance of girls child health. The use of women non governmental organization such as Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), National Council of Women Society (NCWS), Nigerian Army Officers Women Association (NAOWA) to mention but a few. Traditional community leaders should be involved in condemning harmful practice like female circumcision, early girl-child marriage and gender discrimination in education and health care.

In September 1986, a workshop was organized to prepare a blue print on women education. This blue print which serves as the frame work for women education in the country identifies the following goals and objectives:

1. Increase tempo of mass mobilization and advocacy of equity of access to education for all children at all levels, irrespective of age or gender, with particular efforts made to emphasizes to benefits derivable to society for girls education.
2. Enforcing legal provision of penalties to withdrawal of girls from school for marriage.
3. Enforcing existing laws prohibiting hawking and street trading by girls with penalties stipulated for violators.
4. Guarantee free and universal primary education for children as a right for all citizen.
5. Increase an open up scientific, technological and vocational educational chances to all those registered in the educational system according to interest without prejudice to any gender or sex.
6. Expand facilities for "second chance" functional and literacy education to adult women.

7. Reinforce current non formal education programme to provide selective type of learning for specific objectives for adult women and secondary school drop outs and women who desire to further their education.
8. Improve the quality of education by increase the number of school teachers and teaching aids.

Status of Women Empowerment in Nigeria

The level of women education is low in Nigeria, most especially in the Northern part of the country. Although Nigerian women still have along way to achieving equality with the male counterparts, a good number of women in Nigeria are now found in enterprising occupations such as university lecturers, law, business, medicine, military and other paramilitary.

Domestic Empowerment

It had been observed that resources that are of great importance in the lives of women for the purpose of meeting their domestic activities are inadequate and not available in most cases, therefore women domestic empowerment is very low. In an average home in Nigeria, women and children move in search of water, fire wood and coal for domestic uses, wasting a lot of their time and energy instead of going to school. Basic services and consumables like pipe-borne water, electricity, kerosene and cooking gas are not within reach of the average Nigerian, therefore the search for these services are subjecting women and children to undue hardship.

Economic Empowerment

Women economic empowerment in Nigeria is low compared to their male counterparts. Many women still live on menial jobs that do not have economic values. Women empowerment goes along way in reducing child abuse, if women are empowered, their children receive more care and education. Low education coupled with cultural discrimination is constraint to women's empowerment. Statistics shows that 31% of women in Nigeria are literate against 54% for men. It is believed that a women's place is in the kitchen and they are perceived as some of their husband's properties. The goals of women's empowerment are to be directed towards restoring the dignity of women hood as a sound, intelligent and functional members of the society.

Political Empowerment

Political empowerment of women in Nigeria has been enhanced by the level of education. Today, women are gradually occupying their rightful positions. Awareness is being created that women should participate in partisan politics. Women are discriminated against in occupying many positions in comparison with their numerical strength. However, Nigeria women have started occupying position such as Ministers, Senators, Member House of Representatives, Members State House of Assemblies as Deputy Governors, Commissioners and various important positions (Habila, 2012).

Women Contribution to Economic Development

In Nigeria, women are in virtually all economic activities especially agricultural production. Infact, agriculture can be said to be more important to women as a source of employment than to men. According to Joeke (1989) "there are far more women relatively speaking in agriculture in Africa". While the Institution for Agriculture Research (IAR, 1987) in describing Nigeria agriculture reported that women still dominate the farm labour. Saito and Weidman (1980) observed that 60-80% of crops especially vegetables are produced by women. Several studies conducted in the Southern and Northern parts of Nigeria show that women were indeed food producers.

WOFAN (1996 cited in Abubakar, 2003) opined that Nigeria women produced about 80% of food for the family. The Yoruba women in the savannah area played a prominent role in sustainable agricultural production. They help their men to plant, weed, harvest and apply fertilizer to maize, tobacco and cassava. Igbo women in the forest zone of Southern zone of Nigeria are mostly take part in Agricultural production than their Yoruba counterparts. Hence women have land allocated to them usually by their husbands which are used to grow cassava, cocoyam, pumpkins, beans etc for farming and for supporting the family. In addition the TIV society of Benue state, men clear and prepared land and make moulds for the women to plant maize, yams, millet and cassava. They do the weeding, harvesting and transporting of all crops. In addition they are responsible for processing yam, cassava, millet and grinding them into flour for both house hold consumption and sale.

Nigerian women especially in the North participate in animal husbandry practice especially raising ruminants and poultry. Processing and marketing of dairy product is very common among the pastoral Fulani who are permanently settle women farmers. The Kilba women in Hong Local Government Area of Adamawa state clear, burn, plough and plant crops such as ground nu, vegetables, pumpkins etc they weed, harvest, thrash and transport crops for consumption and sale.

Given the importance and roles of women in agricultural production in Nigeria there is the need to ensure effective and functional education in the performance of such roles. In such an endeavour, the continuing roles and usefulness of the women farmers will need to be planned and programme. The first aspect is that of the active involvement of the women folk in grass root farming at the village, inter village level, city and intercity level. This is attained by the development and promotion of women organizations include village women movement, business and craft guilds, women credit union and women's village/city forum among others such organizations will help in enhancing the roles and incomes as well optimum employment of women in rural communities or agricultural production. In the second aspect is a programme development of Agric business in the country's rural landscape. The concept seek to emphasize an integrated development of agro industries around women farmers at the village or city levels. The development of rural cottage processing and elementary industries has to take the large women labour available into consideration. This is an area where rich dividends can be reaped by learning from the experiences of southeast Asia in agribusiness and cottage industry development.

Theoretical Framework

This research work is guided by Feminist theory which is one of the major contemporary sociological theories which analyse the disparity between men and women in the society. Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical, fictional or philosophical discourse. It aims to understand the nature of gender inequality. It examines women's and men's social roles, experience, interest, chores etc. Feminist focuses on the promotion of women's rights and interests. It also focuses on analyzing gender inequality. Themes explored in feminism include discrimination, objectification, oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping. Thus Feminist theory is sub divided to include: Liberal feminist, radical feminist and psychoanalytical feminist.

1. Liberal Feminist: The liberal feminist argue that society holds the false belief that women are; by nature are less intellectually and physically capable than men, ths it tends to discriminate against women in the academy, the forum and the market place.

Liberal feminist believe that female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks the women entrance to and success in the so called public world (Wikipedia)

2. Radical Feminist: The radical feminist theory seek to abolish patriarchy by challenging existing social norms and institutions rather than through a purely political process. This include challenging the notion of traditional gender roles, opposing the sexual objectification of women and raising public awareness about such issues as rape and violence against women (Wikipedia).
3. Psycho analytical Feminist: The Psychoanalytical feminist believe that gender inequality comes from early childhood experiences, which lead men to believe themselves to be masculine and women to believe themselves feminine. It is further maintained that gender leads to a social system that is dominated by males, which inturns influence the individual psychosexual development. as a solution it was suggested by some to avoid the gender – restructuring of the society co-education, allow women economic and political participation (Wikipedia).

The feminist theories discussed are relevant to this study because they analysed the gender inequality women experienced in the African society.

Modernization Theory

The modernization theory sees education as a change in traditional attitudes, beliefs and practices that are inimical to human and national development (Hallak, 1990; Lynch, 1997). It is argued that from economics productivity, educational investment also contributes to social transition of both the individual and the society which is fundamental to the overall development process. The modernization theory is expected to revolutionize the general harmful belief that women by the nature of their gender and physiological make up are child bearers. They are traditional seen as home makers, they are supposed to oversee and coordinate the activities of the home. Similarly the modernization theory intends to revolutionize unfounded beliefs and socially prescribed perceptions, as embodies in any cultures, which are processed and disseminated through socialization process that females are intellectually inferior. Such traditional and cultural beliefs have gone a long way in affecting the social and educational lives of women Amucheazi (1996) cited in Chiroma, A.S *et al.*, (2012). If the women are received quality education, positive changes in attitudes, beliefs and practical will be achieved, which will tend to support the theory of modernization.

Conclusion

Education is a powerful tools in empowering women to contribute to national development, lack of it is capable of hampering their contribution to national development. therefore the value of women education for social, economic and national development cannot be over emphasized.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are put forward:

1. Nigerian government and non governmental organizations should adopt a gender sensitive frame work to discuss issues of gender disparity.
2. Government should introduce free education to females child and also introduce adult education programmes to women.
3. Emphasis should be place on Girls Secondary Schools to provide them with quality education especially on science and technology to enable them have a brighter future.

4. Government should empower the women with credit facilities to enable them engage in small scale business and agricultural production.
5. Government as a matter of urgency introduce labour saving technologies to women including those in Pudah and enlighten them on the importance of sustainable economic development.

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