Education and Women Empowerment: A Panacea for Peace and National Development in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The importance of women in peace building and national development is pertinent. However, in all societies, men and women are integrally linked. Gender equality is a human right, empowered women and girls contribute to the health, education and productivity of families, communities and countries, creating a ripple effect that benefits everyone. However, discrimination in girls' access to education persists in many parts of Nigeria particularly within the rural areas, owing to customary attitudes, early marriages and pregnancies, inadequate and gender-bias teachings and education materials, sexual harassment and lack of adequate schooling facilities. This work discusses women in politics, women empowerment, society and status of women, women education, counseling technique or services needed to assist women in actualizing their potentials. There is need for increased participation of women in peace processes and leadership positions through outreach activities such as public awareness, sensitization and rallies; media activities.
Keywords: Gender education, women empowerment, peace, national development

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is an act of building, developing and increasing power through cooperation, sharing responsibility and working together (Bagudo, 2000). Women's empowerment is a critical aspect of achieving gender equality. It includes increasing a woman's sense of self-worth, her decision-making power, her access to opportunities and resources, her power and control over her own life inside and outside the home, and her ability to effect change.

Jackson (2002) perceives the importance of women from their roles as managers. She notes that peace and stability at homes depend largely on the managerial abilities of folk. Women, especially the mothers, plan, organize, direct and coordinate all the resources at home-both human and materials to the benefits of all family including their husbands (Jackson, 2002). Effective management of the homes promotes national development but whenever this is lacking the contrary is usually the case. International conferences of the last decade such as the 1993 conference on Human Rights, the 1999 International Conference on Population and Development, and the 2000 Fourth World Conference on Women, establishe that women's rights are human rights and that gender equality is key to national development, the institutionalization of democracy and good governance.

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Organizations, communities and governments were required to integrate women's empowerment in their activities and to eliminate or modify practices that are discriminatory of women and that curtail their pursuit of rights and capabilities. Women for Peace and Gender Equality (formerly Commonwealth Women's Organization of Nigeria), is committed to empowering girls and women with the skills to promote sustainable peace through inclusive gender equality. They also strive to ensure women's meaningful participation in peace building and policy making process from grassroots to national level in Nigeria. The organization invests in women and girls in order to accelerate socio-economic and political development through a peaceful, equitable and inclusive society. In Nigeria, female participation in education is low when compared to that of their male counterparts (Adefarasin 2005). The situation was worse in the past when the girl-child was not to be given any form of Western education. The Nigerian culture of early marriage did not help the situations. Adefarasin (2005) observes that in order to change a country's vision and its sense of education, the peoples orientation has to change. To reach all the people, the women should be reached first, since they influence the children, the family and in extention, the nation (Adefarasin, 2005).

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DISPARITIES AGAINST WOMEN

Men, using all sorts of excuses, have often kept women out of the public sphere. In Nigeria, it is common to hear politicians make remarks that the current Minister for Health is not qualified because she only has a secretarial degree. The suggestion is to have a more qualified person in her place, preferably of the male gender. This might be a true claim considering that perhaps it would have been better to have someone who knows more about health, maybe a medical doctor. The only irony seen here is that there is usually no mention made of all the men who are holding powerful positions in Government and yet who only have primary school level education. However, since they are rich businessmen with a lot of political influence, it is considered acceptable to have them in power. These double standards are aimed at removing the few women out of the public domain.

Elshtain (1999) writes, "what women have had to contend with all these years is not simply or only the fact that men have been in a position of greater power over women. Men fear the sexual and reproductive power of women. This is reflected in the lengths to which they have gone to protect themselves by projecting that fear outward into social forms, by embedding the need to defend themselves against women in institutions and activities including politics. Men define themselves by that which is 'not-woman; therefore not vulnerable." By using such petty excuses, like women's vulnerability, men continuously keep out women from getting opportunities that would enable them reach their full potential. For example, in Nigeria, no record of any female Governor up till today. Education would enable more women to penetrate into the public domain thereby creating a level playing field, but without it, women will always be a mockery, kept out by petty excuses. Key scholars in history also perpetuate this tradition of holding women down. "Hegel, like Aristotle, excludes women from involvement in the 'good' of public realm. Instead, women are defined by the family. The family is a woman's beginning and her end. The male alone

can become a real and substantial citizen" (Elshtain, 1999). One of the main contributions of education is that it enables the girl child and the woman to get out of this realm of thinking and to see a wider world and in this way envision wider possibilities. If a woman is defined merely by her status as being the home-keeper, without sufficient exposure to education, she starts believing it and only relegates her intelligence, talents and capabilities to the small sphere, 'her home.' With education, she can be able to see beyond her horizons, get a job or start a business and simply better her life.

Gender is a social construct which asserts that the expectations, capabilities and responsibilities of men and women are not always biologically determined. The gender roles assigned to men and women are significantly defined – structurally and culturally – in ways which create, reinforce, and perpetuate relationships of male dominance and female subordination (Jackson, 2002). Through the process of socialization within the family, in educational institutions and other social spheres, boys and girls are conditioned to behave in certain ways and to play different roles in society (Mwangi, 2004). They are encouraged to conform to established cultural norms by being rewarded or punished for their behaviour. At times, the places women occupy in society are essentialized through claims of innate predispositions. This conditioning and stereotyping easily have the effect of questioning the capability of girls and women to perform certain tasks. Repeated regularly, it may solidify and become difficult to uproot from the mental frames of people.

Politics is the art and science of government and it is a global activity, and there is hardly any society in which we do not have politics in one way or the other (Oni, 2001). Women in Africa today and most especially Nigeria remain politically under-represented and economically disadvantaged. Ndubuisi (2005) asserts that Nigerian women have been marginalized in the formal political systems owing to traditional beliefs and practices, which inhibit their advancement and participation in public life. The consequences are that women involved in politics have tended to accommodate issues and policies of specific concerns to women and by extension to the majority in civil society (Oni, 2001). Affirmative action encompassing women liberation movements, women empowerment programmes, first ladies- summits, family support programme, better-life programme could not adequately integrate females into the Nigerian politics (Ndubuisi, 2005). With the first lady's sensitization of women in politics and appointed positions, is the situation sideling change.

FEMININE RESPONSIBILITIES

Within the Nigerian society, there are certain duties and responsibilities that are considered strictly feminine; for instance major domsetic activities such as cooking, cleaning, and looking after the house are seen as the birth right of women to perform . The household and most specifically the kitchen are considered a woman's domain of expertise. Most women in Nigeria, and in places all over the world, are deprived of job opportunities simply because they are women. Most employers feel that if women and most specifically married women got pregnant, the company would invariably go at a loss (Oni, 2001). This is because a part-time person would have to be employed and paid and so would the woman who is on maternity leave. Some employers believe that all this could easily be

avoided by employing a male. Based on the fact that there are no binding labour laws in Nigeria with regard to taking gender considerations on board when it comes to employment, most employers often get away with it. Most often, most single ladies, before they are offered a job, are made to sign a document stating that they are single and that in the event of their getting pregnant, they would not hold the company accountable if the company decided to terminate their employment contract. This discrimination, based on women's childbearing role, is highly ironical considering that for society to continue, women are still expected to bear more children, preferably sons. In this way, even women who are educated still have a hard time finding gainful employment. There is also the societal attitude that goes hand in hand with not supporting education of the girl child and especially to higher levels. Parents are often worried that if their daughter is too well educated, she might not get a husband to marry her (Jackson, 2002). This inadvertently leads to social stigma directed towards the girl's family. Her education is seen more as being negative than progressive, and especially if she does not get a job or gets a low-paying job. The family and community feel that the money wasted on her education should have been used to do other important things. Parents are therefore usually not keen in encouraging their daughters to seek higher education. Instead, suitable suitors are often suggested and a constant reminder made to the girl that she was not getting any younger.

Women, Economy and Agriculture
Globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of women's equality, the gender impact of which has not been systematically evaluated fully. However, from the micro-level studies that were commissioned by the Department of Women and Child Development, it is evident that there is a need for re-framing policies for access to employment and quality of employment. Benefits of the growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, the feminization of poverty, increased gender inequality through often deteriorating working conditions and unsafe working environment especially in the informal economy and rural areas. Strategies will be designed to enhance the capacity of women and empower them to meet the negative social and economic impacts, which may flow from the globalization process.

In view of the critical role of women in the agriculture and allied sectors, as producers, efforts will be made to ensure that benefits of training, extension and various programmes will reach them in proportion to their numbers. The programmes for training women in soil conservation, forestry, dairy development and other occupations allied to agriculture like horticulture, livestock including small animal husbandry, poultry, fisheries and alot of others will be expanded to benefit women workers in the agriculture sector. Also, to enhance women's access to credit for consumption and production, the establishment of new, and strengthening of existing micro-credit mechanisms and micro-finance institution will be undertaken so that the outreach of credit is enhanced to reduce the level of poverty. Other supportive measures would be taken to ensure adequate flow of credit through extant financial institutions and banks, so that all women below poverty line have easy access to credit.

Women and Contemporary Issues

The important role played by women in electronics, information technology and food processing and agro industry and textiles has been crucial to the development of these sectors. They would be given comprehensive support in terms of labour legislation, social security and other support services to participate in various industrial sectors. Women at present cannot work in night shift in factories even if they wish to. Suitable measures will be taken to enable women to work on the night shift in factories. This will be accompanied with support services for security, transportation and so on. A holistic approach to women's health which includes both nutrition and health services will be adopted and special attention will be given to the needs of women and the girl at all stages of the life cycle.

The reduction of infant mortality and maternal mortality, which are sensitive indicators of human development, is a priority concern. Women should have access to comprehensive, affordable and quality health care. Measures will be adopted that take into account the reproductive rights of women to enable them to exercise informed choices, their vulnerability to sexual and health problems together with endemic, infectious and communicable diseases such as malaria, TB, and water borne diseases as well as hypertension and cardio-pulmonary diseases. The social, developmental and health consequences of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases will be tackled from a gender perspective (Matembe, 2002). To effectively meet problems of infant and maternal mortality, and early marriage the availability of good and accurate data at micro level on deaths, birth and marriages is required. Strict implementation of registration of births and deaths would be ensured and registration of marriages would be made compulsory.

Education and Women

Peace education is not merely a structured knowledge that strives to make one think in a certain way, but rather an education that enables one to think more critically, make decisions more creatively, and have a chance at a better existence in the world today. This discrimination against women when it comes to their access and opportunities to education is an embodiment of the cultural violence against women in Nigeria and a violation of one of their fundamental human rights. Although the world is making progress in achieving gender parity in education, prioritizing girls' education provides perhaps the single highest return on investment in the developing world. Equal access to education for women and girls should be encouraged to ensure peacefull coexistence in society. To eliminate discrimination against women, universalized education, illiteracy eradication, gender-sensitive educational system, increased enrolment and retention of women in society should be given its right place (Independent Policy Group, 2003). To ensure effective operation of the women or girl child education, there has to be strict enforcement of laws against premarital sex, selection and the practices of female foeticide, female infanticide, child marriage, and child abuse as well as child prostitution among others. One of the major differences that education would make, would be in giving female children and women a sense of self-esteem that would enable them to fend and stand up for themselves and their rights. Both formal and informal education for the female children and women is relevant.

Formal education would equip her with the necessary qualifications required and informal education would empower her to be able to stand up for her rights. Access to and retention of girls and women at all levels of education, including the higher level, and all academic areas contributes to their continued progress in professional activities and thus becomes a huge factor in their empowerment. A society that marginalizes more than half of its population cannot expect positive outcomes; instead it will always face lopsided development that does not culminate into overall economic gains for the society.

Women's role in peace, development and humanitarian efforts: Implication for Counselling

Women do make efforts to take advantage of opportunities within their environment. Women in the Southern part of the country, for example, take to trading in the market. Women in many Northern States tend to be confined in their homes from where they engage in productive activities (giving birth). In agriculture, women are found to be more active everywhere in Nigeria. In other occupations women are increasingly taking positions in the development of the nation. What is required is for more women to participate in politics and be in positions of decision-making. Nigeria can now boast of women lawyers, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, teachers, professors, engineers, architects, management consultants, civil servants although few in high positions, and the like (IPG, 2003).

However, all these important breakthroughs in the recognition of women's rights in the peace and security arena dwarf in comparison with the bitter realities of women in most crisis and post-crisis situations, where little has changed. In too many places, most women and girls continue to live in extreme vulnerability, suffer unbelievable human rights abuse and remain totally marginalized in all decision-making that affect their lives and their communities. Humanitarian crises, caused by conflicts or natural disasters, reinforce, increase and perpetuate social inequalities and discrimination, including gender inequalities and exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities. During humanitarian crises, we witness more sexual and domestic violence, as well as violation concerning housing, land and property rights, personal documentation and status rights.

Nigerian women are still not having the opportunity of enjoying full education, social and economic rights. This can be seen from the above obstacles facing Nigerian women which were earlier discussed. These constraints have some implications for counselling as follows:

a)   Some Nigerians deny the participation of women in peace processes and leadership positions through engagement of stakeholders;

b)   Women who are denied right and privileges need to be re-oriented so as to achieve individual growth and development for women.

c)   Nigeria women who are unable to demand for their rights need assistance in order to achieve self-actualization.

To assist Nigerian women, counselors could adopt any of the following;

a)   ***Assertiveness Training:*** Training and participation in an international conference on conflict prevention and peace building for women leaders in Nigeria. Women

who are unable to demand for their rights, due to low self-concept can be assisted to do so through the use of assertiveness training technique. This involves acquisition of some useful skills by clients to develop self-confidence and seek for their rights.

b) *Guidance Service:* Counselors should make guidance services for individuals and groups. Counseling/information services should be made available to people in their community. These services will bring into focus the benefits that are imbedded in the provision of equal rights and opportunities to all irrespective of religion, sex, age and other differences. Provision of educational opportunities to women by governmental and non–governmental Organizations which will give them access to employment opportunities, enable them to expand their roles, occupy important positions and contribute to the political, economic and social development of their country. Seminars, symposia, career talks, skills development programmes and workshops could also be organized to sensitize and motivate governmental and non- governmental organizations to provide the necessary assistance to empower women.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The state of affairs of women in the Nigeria State as revealed by this work can be attributed to lack of empowerment on the part of women and to sexual and gender motivated violence, which is deplorably on the upsurge. Women have largely failed to make the shift from the grindstone to the boardroom. In order to override this, now more than ever, Nigeria needs to act to empower women by taking steps to eliminate inequalities by the promotion and fulfillment of women's potential through education, empowerment and employment hence giving paramount importance to the elimination of poverty and illiteracy and clamoring for sustainable development and positive holistic peace. Without an education, the girl child is crippled even before she begins to walk. It is therefore essential to conclude that education is a tool for women empowerment and a panacea for peace and national development. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- In order to contribute to poverty reduction in Nigeria, women should be empowered educationally, politically, economically and socially.
- To improve the health and general well-being of women their access to information on sexual and reproductive health should be adequately facilitated.
- There is need for increased participation of women in peace processes and leadership positions through outreach activities such as public awareness, sensitization and rallies; media activities, such as radio and TV programmes and documentaries.
- There is also the need to improve the status of women and empower them to address their gender needs adequately.
- A uniform platform of advocacy for resolving social issues and eradicating inequalities at a grassroots level for policy-level changes should be provided.

- Effective bottom-up three-prong approach for ending hunger and poverty: mobilizing people at the grassroots level to build self-reliance, empowering women as key change agents and forging effective partnerships with the local government on peace building is anecessary approach that should be explored.
- Informing and engaging the public by using education, women entrepreneurship and advocacy skills to create a platform to increase awareness of the issues facing teen mothers and gender-based domestic violence is a veritable tool to solving the women problem.

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