Empowering Nigerian women for national development: Challenges and prospects

Accepted 30th December, 2017

ABSTRACT

Women empowerment can be described as the provision of adequate opportunities to women to develop their potentials and contribute to the development of the nation in particular and the world in general. It has been observed that women have been disempowered since creation. Efforts made so far towards women empowerment has yielded little fruits. This is why the paper is attempting to re-emphasize and re-awaken the mind of humanity on the indisputable roles of women in national development and challenges hindering Nigerian women's effective contributions to national development; efforts have been made so far towards their empowerment and how best Nigerian women could be empowered in order to contribute to national development. Suggestions from this paper amongst others are: Nigeria government should remove those artificial and institutional barriers based on religion, culture, or traditional considerations which have incapacitated Nigerian women in participating effectively in national development. In doing these, we make them belong and contribute their quota in national affairs politically and economically to the growth and development of Nigeria.

Key words: Empowerment, women, women empowerment and development.

INTRODUCTION

Women have been defined by scholars in so many ways as: the weaker vessel, feeble minded being, child bearer, emotional being, man's helper, caretaker at home, man's better half, man's wealth preserver, man's soul-mate and home managers etc (Okereke, 2010). No matter the number of categories the woman is placed as aforementioned, she is more than these. A woman is powerfully created with superior structures. She is impeccably and uniquely made by her creator. The emergence of 21st century laden with sufficient evidences; scientifically and otherwise, had proved that women are capable of holding leadership positions as men. Women, as many think, are not naturally weak. They neither have limited contractual capacity nor lower intelligence quotient than men. This is proved in the likes of women like Margaret Thatcher “The iron lady”, former Prime Minister of Britian, Indira Ghandi, former Prime Minister of India, Queen Elizabeth II of England, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and President of Liberia. In Nigeria, we have women like Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Finance Minister, Late Professor Dora Akunyili, former Minister of Information and Director of NAFDAC and Dr. Ndi Okereke Onyriuke among others who distinguished themselves in leadership and administration of Nigeria. In the last two decades, according to Olaleye (2008), debates on the status of women and the need to integrate them into development process of any nation have ranged on at national and international workshops and seminars among others. In Nigeria today, the women have come a long way in business, politics, education, sports and other professions. They have made an indelible mark in their efforts to conquer the limitations of the past which have sought to place them permanently in the kitchen and bedroom. Nigerian women are still relegated to the background as they lack the educational, economic and political power necessary to actualize their innate potentials. Ifedili and Ifedili (2012), asserted that Nigerian women are stalled by culture, which made them vulnerable to effectively join the workforce and contribute to the economic and thus, national development. Majority of Nigerian women have not been fully mobilized and empowered to contribute to
national development. Otherwise, we would not still be talking about women empowerment.

Women have been described by Lasiele (1999) as the provision of adequate opportunities to women to develop their potentials and contribute to the development of the nation in particular and to the world in general. It is seen as the provision of conductive environment or opportunities to women to contribute their quota to the social, political and economic development of a nation.

Empowerment is defined by Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2014) as giving somebody power or authority to do something; to give somebody more control over their own life or the situation they are in. Mills and Friesen (2001) see empowerment as the authority of subordinates to decide and act. It is something people do for themselves which involves solidarity and participation in the struggle for greater control over their lives. Empowerment according to Okereke (2010) is a process of giving strength, push or enablement to do something to make it perform the desired or expected task. He further explained that empowerment in relation to human being is a mental, spiritual, intellectual moral and physical re-awakening. It is strengthening the feeble or weak-minded person(s) and helping them rise up and be part of the political and economic revolution going on in the nations of the world.

Women empowerment has been viewed by Okereke (2010) as the act of strengthening women to rise up and handle the challenges of life. She further said it is about motivations which help women to do what they thought they could not do. Okemakinde (2014) sees women empowerment as a veritable mechanism to increase women skills and abilities, their control over the resources and decisions affecting their lives. Women empowerment is therefore regarded as the breaking of barriers that limit women from doing certain things men do in the society. It is setting women free from cultural and traditional bondages that militate against their productive powers and development.

Scholars viewed the concept of development from various angles such as: social, economic, political and cultural. Okemakinde (2014) viewed development as the ability to depict positive change and development in socio-economic and political conditions or situations of the society. Olomukoro (2012) sees development in terms of human potentials and capabilities in the context of relations with other social groups. He further emphasized that development means greater understanding of social, economic and political process, enhanced competence to analyze and solve problems of day-to-day living, expansion of manual skills, greater control over economic resources, restoration of human dignity, self-respect and equality. Thus, national development is a multi-dimensional process involving the transformation and improvement of the economic, social and political situations.

The history of development clearly teaches us that nations are built by the collective will of the citizens and creative hard work. It is evidence that one of the weaknesses of the emerging economies of African nations today is the failure to deeply involve women in the process of governance and development (Okereke, 2010). No nation can develop to the limit of its potentials unless women are fully empowered to take up responsibilities as men and work collectively towards the political and socio-economic development of the country. To fully empower women requires a holistic approach to break the cultural and traditional barriers that hold women in bondage in a free world of equal opportunities. The time has come when women should be fully integrated into the scheme of things for national development. It is against this background that the paper discusses factors that inhibit women’s contributions to national development. It identifies various economic activities through which women meaningfully contribute to national development, areas women can be empowered for national development and recommendations that will empower women to contribute meaningfully to a rapid and effective national development will be given.

CHALLENGES HINDERING NIGERIAN WOMEN FOR EFFECTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Women in Nigeria no doubt belong to the disadvantaged group in the society when compared to their male counterparts for reasons beyond their making and control. There is obviously no deliberate policy of discrimination against women in Nigeria, yet, some obnoxious traditions, habits and ideas about women inhibit their progress and active participation in national affairs. Inspite of the seemingly remarkable achievements recorded by women world over, Nigerian women remain severely constrained in their efforts to play a major and decisive role in the social-political and economic development of the nation. Agu (2007) blames the colonial authorities for setting the dangerous stage and precedence for the weakening of the influence and roles of women through what has been described as the “abrogation of the society stability” which the Nigerian society had enjoyed before the coming and intrusion of the British Colonialists. Such cultural beliefs and practices are found in the idea that men are superior to women and this has helped to deny women of their rights as human beings. These disparities between Nigerian women and men have hindered the Nigerian women from contributing meaningfully to the development of the nation. The problems include the following:

Illiteracy

Education is basic to a person’s ability to maximize any opportunity that may arise from development. Education, whether formal or informal constitutes a vital instrument
for socio-economic development of any society as well as, the upliftment of the individual concerned (Ainabor and Ovbiagele, 2007). Unfortunately, the problem of gender disparity in Nigerians educational development as is the case of other parts of the world remains the basic constraint to women development in Nigeria. The importance of literacy and women empowerment in promoting gender equality and the advancement of women was further stressed by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2000); The Education For All (EFA) and Dakar Goals (2002).

Access to women educational development programmes in the words of Kagitabasis et al. (2005) is considered one of the main factors for women empowerment and national development. For women to be integrated into development process, they need quality education in order to become co-partners in national development. The problem of gender imbalance in access to basic education in this country has not been fully addressed going by gender disparities in school enrolments (FMWA, 2006; FME, 2007). Preference for male education and anti-women education traces which are still visible in some parts of Nigeria, particularly in the far north contribute to women less access to basic education (Ainabor et al., 2006). This gender imbalance of access to educational development opportunities has for a long time hindered women full development of their potentials and consequently affected their contributions to national development.

Cultures and tradition

Various cultures and traditions in Nigeria restrict the roles of women to domestic activities such as keeping the home clean, bearing children and cooking food for the entire family members among others. The society as at today sees these roles as less important as they require less extensive formal education for one to be able to perform them. Most cultures and traditions in Nigeria depict male dominance in all situations and as such females are inferior. These unfortunate belief systems have been a major obstacle to women development in Nigeria and as such constraints to their contribution to national development.

Low participation of women in politics

Women do not often see themselves as viable instruments of political participation and national development (Okemakinde, 2014). The level of women participation in politics is still very low in Nigeria. Very few women in Nigeria contest for elective post, rather, they limit their political activities to voting or appointment into political positions. The complacency of women in several aspects of national life not only reduces their capacity for maneuver in a male dominated society but also helps in perpetuating the culture of reducing women to positions and roles of second fiddle. This was why Agu (2007) believed that women see politics as a dirty game, a business which involves intimidation, rigging, assassination, kidnapping of opponents and all sorts of electoral violence which they cannot cope with. This attitude of women may be related to their level of education and poor economic base, a situation that

Poor economic base

Most Nigerian women are poor. This situation may be related to their low level of educational attainment. In business, most women do not often involve themselves in high profile ventures. They prefer instead to engage in petty trading where the gains and losses are articulated at the end of each day (Okemakinde, 2014). The access of women to finance is so minimal that women are generally disadvantaged in terms of economic stability and independence. With poor economic base of most women their contributions to national development will be less substantial. Nigerian women like their counterparts in other developing countries of the world, suffer from undue discrimination, marginalization and exploitation by the men folk through the instrumentation of their cultures and traditions and as such cannot contribute their quota to national development.

Roles of Nigeria women in national development

One of the most serious problems faced by the Nigerian development is non-active participation of women in the national affairs. Women had tangible records of economic activities, largely in peasant societies where women made large contributions to community and national development. However, these contributions are not really recognized, but the truth is whether one holds a pragmatic or a humanistic view of development women participation to national development is necessary. The analysis of women traditional and preservation responsibilities demonstrated that they filled significant roles in the economy and in the society such as: cultivation, food processing, food preservation, animal husbandry and marketing, in addition to caring for their homes and families (Okereke, 2010). The following areas have been identified as potent avenues by which women have collectively contributed to national development:

Grassroots solidarity: Women's grassroots initiatives, groups and organizations are highly functional and supportive to communities and nations development. Women capacities for co-operative action were a large part of the reason for identifying them as the “backbone of rural development” (Okereke, 2010). They organize themselves for wide-ranging purposes, mutual savings and loan systems, house construction and improvement, co-operative
farming and marketing, mobilizing funds for scholarship, sharing nursery center and installing water supplies. Despite the substantial accomplishment of women groups, women are still regarded as not contributing meaningfully to national development.

**Food production:** Women's traditional roles in economic activities were neither evident nor even acknowledged in the modern sectors of agriculture, industry, commerce and government. The contribution of women to food production in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. Over time, women have paid their dues immensely both as individuals and as groups in Nigeria in the food production process. They clear the land, till, plant and tend crops. They harvest, store, preserve and even ensure that produced food ends up edible on the dining tables. In Nigeria, women work the land and feed the population. Women are instrumental to the development of most prosperous agricultural regions in different parts of the country and Africa in general. The devaluation of women's work done in sustainable economies is the natural outcome of a system constructed by capitalist patriarchy. These roles are not accorded their rightful recognition in the society.

**Food preservation and storage:** Apart from roles women play in the cultivation of crops and livestock domestication, they preserve and store food crops. For example, African bread fruit, cassava, palm oil and cocoyam, among others are specially preserved by women. These foods that are preserved and stored provide food especially during planting seasons when food is in short supply. It provides food security for the family and community. Women have continued in their struggles to be relevant in the development process of the nation through their efforts and are neglected in the nations planning process. In professional technical occupations, they are found mostly as teachers and nurses. Some are also found in clerical occupations. Generally, women dominated the non-wage sectors. Okogie in Ker (1999) observed that women make their greatest contributions to the economy in the agricultural sector. Trading is another area women contribute to the economy of the country. Many are engaged in both local and cross border trade which boosts the economy.

**EFFORTS MADE SO FAR TOWARDS WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

Women over the years have made several efforts to change their conditions but such efforts have been sporadic, uncoordinated and unsustained. Deliberate organized efforts aimed at changing the status quo of women is a recent phenomenon. World conferences with women issues top on the agenda have been held at various times. There was the 1975 conference at Mexico city, 1980 at Copenhagen, 1985 at Nkrobe, 1995 Beijing conference and even the recent women summit held on 18th October, 2014 at Abuja at the instance of Dame Patience Jonathan, the wife of the Nigerian President, all geared towards women improvement. These conferences have succeeded in bringing gender issues to global attention. The international conference gave the problem of women a global outlook and emboldened them to articulate the issues of critical concern and lobby for attention and assistance. This made the international and national institutions and agencies more responsive to women's needs and aspirations. The international conference on population and development held in Cairo in 1994 was a major breakthrough in the empowerment of women. It identified the empowerment of women and improvement of their status as essential to the realization of the full potential of economic, political and social development of any given human society.

The Beijing conference was centered on upholding the earlier conventions on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women empowerment. The Beijing conference recognized the need for the empowerment of women and equality between men and women as prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all the people of the world. In Nigeria, several bodies and organizations emerged with the objectives of empowering women, protecting and promoting their interest in national development. The defunct Better Life for Women Programme (BLWP), the Family Support Programme (FSP), Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), the National Women Committee (NWC) and the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS), were Governmental Organizations (GOs) all geared towards women empowerment. There are also non-government bodies with similar targets. Many African countries have formulated polices to promote women empowerment and development. For instance, Nigeria has adopted a “National policy on Women”. This is to promote and protect the rights of women and increase their participations in governmental activities. The National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) document expresses government's commitment to 35% representation for women and Federal Government is trying to keep to that policy. All these and other efforts put in place have not yet yielded enough fruits as majorities of women remain un-empowered even though some have received the supposed vehicle (Education) through which empowerment could be conveyed. This is mainly due to some variables that constitute obstacles/ barriers to empowerment that have not yet been removed and the Modus Operandi of the exponents of women empowerment.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to promote women empowerment towards national development, the following recommendations are hereby made:
1) The creation of awareness is important in any issue of vital importance to this global challenge. The awareness should center on what women empowerment is, its benefits to individuals and to the society and ways of achieving them;

2) The Nigerian nation owes the womenfolk the responsibilities of removing those artificial and institutional barriers based on religion, culture or traditional considerations which have incapacitated the ability of Nigerian women to participate effectively and freely in national affairs particularly at the political and economic levels;

3) Government should as a matter of deliberate policy promote gender balance in access to education in Nigeria by insisting on the enrolment of certain percentage of female children in schools. This is in line with the Affirmative Action that requires about 35% of women to be elected to political positions in African countries;

4) The ministries of women affairs all over the federation should play a great role in bringing to focus the fundamental challenges of the womenfolk which the government and other institutions of state owe the responsibility to tackle. To achieve this, constant pressure should be brought to bear on the authorities to create positions of responsibilities and advancements for the women folk;

5) Women on their part should strive to break through development barriers with great determination, perseverance, unbreakable solidarity and genuine desires to conquer the natural challenges of their origin;

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

CONCLUSION

The need to empower Nigerian women cannot be over-emphasized particularly in a democratic society which recognizes the need for individuals to develop their potentials and contribute to the overall development of the nation. It is therefore imperative that awareness be created on the benefit that could be derived from women empowerment and as well as, assist women to realize their potentials in order to contribute meaningfully to national development. The empowerment of Nigerian women towards national development should be a matter of top national priority which demands the attention and genuine commitment of every responsible member of the society.

REFERENCES


