

Women Empowerment and Strategy in Context: An Analytical Discourse

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Abstract

Women are female humans, who have reached the age of adulthood and have the right to vote in elections and referendums and to hold public office. In Nigeria women empowerment would mean leveling the playing field so that men do not have an advantage over women in fulfilling their potential, whether in business, politics, or other social platforms. It is opening space for women to have unfettered access to education, skills, and participation in the decision-making process on matters that affect them. The empowerment of women has a lot of developmental benefits, not just for the women, but for every other person who is connected or related to them. Although a lot of efforts have been made towards women empowerment by the government, non governmental organization and the women themselves, yet much more needs to be done to have positive result that is significant. This paper recommends the implementation of the gender policies already enacted for the benefit of women to reduce all forms of discriminations and harmful cultural and traditional practices, sensitization of parents and communities to become aware of the benefits of girls child education, re-orientation of men on their attitude towards women, establishment of skills acquisition centres to empower those women who dropped out or never attended school at all, role modeling of other successful women and giving of loans and micro finance benefits to women entrepreneurs who could mentor other women.

Keywords: Women empowerment, strategy, context, analytical discourse

INTRODUCTION

Women are female humans, who have reached the age of adulthood and have the right to vote in elections and referendums and to hold public office. Women have been called all sorts of names, including the weaker sex; be it as it may women as the female gender are indispensable part of any home or any society. Awe (1990) observed that the importance of women could be seen from their roles as managers of homes. She noted that the peace and stability of homes depend largely on the managerial abilities of the women folks. What is true of families is also true of whole nations, because effective management of homes affects the wellbeing and development of the nation at large. Oyebamiji (2006) observed that women make up more than 50% of the Nigerian population while Nwiro (2012) corroborated that about half of the world's population is women who are ideally supposed to contribute half of the world's economic, social and political input. Women are hardworking, dependable, obedient and when given the chance are accountable in handling positions of trust. Women tend to be more sensitive to issues of affiliation, inclusion, loneliness and acceptance. They have greater tenderness, understanding and are empathic. The role of women in the survival and continuity of any society is certainly not under contentions. What has remained an issue of serious concern is that in spite of the acknowledged role women play in nation building and development, various societies have continued to treat them as second class citizens. By virtue of their physiology, women are the givers and nurturers of life. The social responsibilities that come with this biological function make women a peculiar force in the overall national growth and development; hence, their condition in the society would definitely affect the overall development of the country and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, women are grossly neglected and disregarded. From a comprehensive report presented by the British Council Lagos on Gender in 2012 it was chronicled that only 15% of Nigerian women have bank accounts, and yet, of the 162.5 million people in the country, 49% (80.2million) are females (Nwiro, 2012). One can then imagine what is happening to the 39% of the Nigerian population (women) who have no need for banking because they have no business with the banks.

Women empowerment has been variously conceptualized - socially, economically and politically. It can be seen as the provision of adequate opportunities to women in order to develop their potentials so that they can contribute to the development of the nation in particular and the world in general. Adewole (1997) described women empowerment as the provision of enabling environment or opportunities for women to contribute their quota to the social, political and economic development of a nation. Eyinade (2010) opined that women empowerment is the ability and freedom to actualize long-held dreams. In Nigeria, he maintained, female empowerment would mean leveling the playing field so that men do not have an advantage over women in fulfilling their potential, whether in business, politics, or other social platforms. It is opening space for women to have unfettered access to education, skills, and participation in the decision-making process on matters that affect them. Isah and Nafiu (2013) viewed the concept as the phenomenon of giving total official authority or freedom or status that men folks enjoy to women in a manner that safeguard discrimination against them or their under-representation in all sectors of the economy.

Nigeria, like some other African countries, has some traditional practices that are disadvantageous to women. These practices like the patriarchal system, cultural beliefs, socio-cultural practices and traditionally approved roles for women help to subjugate women to a state of servant-hood. The patriarchal system is seen by Ogunbiyi (2012) as a male dominated structure and practice institutionalized by the males through exercising physical, social and economic power over women. The males determine norms and define appropriate rights, responsibilities and behaviour of women. The reinforcement of male power bring about the conferment of second class citizen status on women, so women need to submit in humility. Long before the advent of Christianity the African societies have been male dominated. Even with Christianity the males have only taken the part of Ephesians 5 verses 22 and 23 that talks about submission of wives; leaving verse 25 that admonished husbands to love their wives. There are so many socio-cultural agreements that make women so 'spineless' like early/arranged marriage, plurality of children, preference of male child over the female child and excessive dependence of the woman on the man for support, which brings about abuse of the women who is eventually seen as too demanding.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

The empowerment of women has a lot of benefits, not just for the women, but for every other person who is connected or related to them. Having gone round the whole world, the former United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan of Ghana has this to say:

Study after study has shown that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier and better fed; their income, savings and reinvestment go up; and what is true of families is also true of communities and, in the long run, the whole countries (Annan 2003).

Egwu (2007) observed that countries all over the world have been acknowledging the logic that no full development can be attained without utilizing the potentials of the women population that constitute the substantial fraction of the total population. This truth underscored the Federal Government's promulgation of Decree no. 11 of 1995 establishing the National Centre for Women Development built in 1992 in Abuja. Egwu also lamented that in the past, despite their noble roles in the development of the society, women have not been well treated. They have indeed been denied equal rights to basic education, economic advancement, always alienated in matters of governance through discriminatory and often times harmful traditional practices that have deliberately humiliated them. In addition to the above, other problems have been identified as responsible for women's exclusion from opportunities to add their talents towards the development of their nation such as: illiteracy, poor economic base, religious beliefs, sex stereotype, insufficient need for power, low participation of women in politics and the discriminatory attitudes of males (Enyinade 2010). With the problems of under-utilization and other prejudices faced by women, it has become imperative to emancipate and empower women so as to unleash their potentials.

A lot of efforts have, however, been made towards women empowerment by the government, non governmental organization and the women themselves. However, Isah and Nafiu (2013) while reporting on their findings of a research in Niger State on women empowerment, noted that despite government's efforts towards empowering women in the state, the number of women in senior appointments in Niger State's civil service is still very low compared with their men counterpart as shown in table 1 below:

Table 1: Number of women in Senior Appointment in Niger State, Nigeria

GL	2003		2007		2011	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
13	349	87	489	141	663	21
14	269	74	553	103	110	91
15	89	13	153	22	64	20
16	52	2	69	7	24	8
17	5	0	9	0	89	26
SG	73	7	29	5	124	7
Total	832	183	1300	278	1064	173

Note: GL in this table means grade level while SG means senior group.

Source: American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics 2013, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 12-14.

The above studies if carried out in other states of Nigeria will give similar statistics with little variations only in the Western and Eastern parts. The election held in April of 2007 which is actually the last general election should also throw light on the state of affairs in Nigeria as far as women and positions of authority are concerned. A total of 1,200 (One thousand, two hundred) women aspired for the 1,532 (One thousand, five hundred and thirty two) positions. Out of the number of aspirants only 660 (six hundred and sixty) women won their party tickets. After the elections only 93 (ninthly three) women eventually became successful: Senators = 9. National Assembly

Reps = 27, Deputy Governors = 6 and State Houses of Assembly = 52. The above statistics may be more meaningful when seen in the light of the number of seats taken by men. Both the President and his vice are men. Out of the 36 states there is no female Governor and only 6 women Deputy Governors, 30 others are all men. In Ebonyi State House of assembly, for example, out of the 24 seats available only 3 are women, no Senator out of 3 and no Member of House of Representatives out of six is a woman. The question here is whether women will be well represented. The answer is a capital no, because there is no how men can possibly represent women who are physiologically different, enough.

The above statistics is a far cry from the agreements at the Beijing Women Conference of 1995 that gave birth to the 30 percent Affirmative Action aimed at empowering women. Affirmative Action programmes which have since been adopted by the United Nations, opened up educational opportunities for all minorities and for women of all races. This lofty idea has also empowered women to demand for their rights, although, ironically marginalization of women across Africa continues unabated in spite of contentious declarations and charters signed by member countries (Ozo, 2011).

STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

In view of the ongoing discussion on the marginalization and subjugation of women to evil traditional and cultural practices, certain strategies have been tried and some are also advocated for a better future for women like:

- implementation of the gender policies already enacted for the benefit of women to reduce all forms of discriminations and harmful cultural and traditional practices;
- women education;
- re-orientation of men's mind-set through gender education;
- counselling women for education and development through information and communication technology (ICT);
- sensitization of parents and communities to become aware of the benefits of girls child education;
- establishment of skills acquisition centres to empower those women who dropped out or never attended school at all;
- role modeling by successful women, and
- giving loans and micro finance benefits to women entrepreneurs who could mentor other women.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GENDER POLICIES ALREADY ENACTED FOR THE BENEFIT OF WOMEN TO REDUCE ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATIONS AND HARMFUL CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

Maina (2012) observed that the Nigerian Government's vision 20:2020 which currently drives its economic transformation at all levels, seeks to redress the subordinate role of women in the Nigerian society. To address gender-based violence, several initiatives have been put in place by the Government, civil society groups and International organization. Such initiatives include: development of policy on sexual harassment in school, development of a gender Policy for Nigeria Police force, and training for Senior Police Officers to respond to issues of violence against women. There is also the phase 1 of the Democracy and Governance (D&G) project, supported by the United State Agency for International Development; which is implemented in part by the Johns Hopkins University Population Communication Services (JHU/PCS) and the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) in nine Nigerian States. Their main project was to enhance women participation in politics, reviewing the civil rights and liability of people and government and empowering women. To achieve this they organized workshops and sensitization programmes, lobbying and advocacy campaigns to support women aspirants.

Women organization like Nigerian Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), Civil Resources Development and Documentation Centre (CIRDDOC), Enugu State, Women Inspiration Development Centre (WIDC), Osun State., Women's Technology Empowerment Centre (W-TEC), Lagos State, Empowering Women for Excellence Initiative (EWEI), Kaduna State and a host of others have embarked on empowerment seminars and workshops, advocacy and sensitization campaigns for women. The efforts of these women organizations and the Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), though slow, but have steadily gained a lot of grounds in enlightening and empowering women; giving them forum to interact and discuss the best ways of improving themselves. All these have been efforts made to help women meet up with their quota following the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, yet most of the gender policies already enacted for the benefit of women to reduce all forms of discriminations and harmful cultural and traditional practices have not been fully implemented.

WOMEN EDUCATION

Most of the Millennium Development Programmes (MDGs) are directly geared towards women development. The educational situation of women in Nigeria is not only low but pathetic and puts them at a disadvantage. Since education is the basis for full promotion and improvement of the status of women, it is the basic tool that should

be given to women in order to encourage them to take up their position in order to achieve the noble objectives of MDGS in Nigeria. Education for empowering women does not imply just formal education for children and adolescents at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels; it implies also education on part-time basis given to adults of all educational backgrounds who are already working and participating in the development efforts (Oyelude and Bamigbola 2012).

Maduabum (2002) described education as an aggregate of all the processes by means of which a person develops abilities, attitudes and forms of behaviour that enables him/her to live effectively and efficiently in the present society so that he/she may be able to advance or improve it. Education is the basis for the full promotion and improvement of the status of women. It is the basic tool that should be given to women in order to fulfill their roles as full members of the society. Women education is particularly valuable as a strategic investment in human resource, as the social returns are high. Women education as seen by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) (2005) has a tremendous impact not only on their development, but also on that of their families and communities. It acts as catalyst in virtually every dimension of development and poverty alleviation; with outcomes such as reduced fertility, reduced infant mortality, improved child survival, better family health, increased educational attainment, higher productivity, and generally improvement in the nation's economic situation.

Studies have shown that education influences decisively a woman's overall health, and access to paid employment, and therefore enables her to make informed decision about herself and to assume a status and identity beyond those that are linked with child rearing and family. ESCAP further emphasized that literacy is not merely about basic skills of reading and writing; it is about providing individuals with the capabilities for understanding their lives and social environment as well as equipping them with problem-solving skills. Literacy therefore, is a foundation of human resource development and is critical to enhancing the general quality of the people's life. As important as education is to women and national development, available statistics show that women lag behind men in all areas of education. For instance, UNESCO (2006) observed that in spite of the many declarations aiming at making gender parity and education a reality, gender disparities persist throughout the education system. It is observed from data on enrolment, retention and transmission that in many countries, girls and women lag behind boys in early childhood education, primary, secondary, and higher education and in non-formal and literacy education programmes as well.

RE-ORIENTATION OF MEN'S MIND SET THROUGH GENDER EDUCATION

Asiyanbola (2005) opined that patriarchy is a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions. In research he carried out on 'Patriarchy, male dominance, the role and woman empowerment in Nigeria', he concluded that there is need for gender education. This gender education must target all groups irrespective of social class and age because boys as young as three years old are searching for masculine models for their sense of self. His findings included that men's household activities/roles involvement is affected majorly by the cultural orientation of men. Men growing up without good models normally grow up with inflated ego and hyper-masculine chauvinism, tending towards violence. Re-orientation of the men's mind set through gender education will help them to understand women better and hence treat them with more respect, tenderness, care and compassion. Seminars, training and workshops could be organized for men to opening discuss and interact with women on a platform that will give everybody opportunity to learn about the other, thereby enhancing better understanding and better treatment in future.

COUNSELLING WOMEN FOR EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT)

Counselling has been viewed by Nwachukwu (1996) as a relationship between a professionally trained competent counsellor and an individual seeking help in gaining greater self understanding and improved decision making and behaviour changing skills for problem resolution and developmental growth. People need counselling to have better self-understanding and improved decision making skills, values and perception with its concomitant ways of making choices. Many women have negative self concept as a result of the situations they have found themselves. With counselling they could have better understanding of themselves and behaviour changing skills to the extent that they could seek self education through internet facilities.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been defined by Okenwa (2000) as the various modern devices and applications, such as cable, satellite, the online network and telemetric applications that facilitate the circulation of ideas and create a link between data and human beings. The Internet has made it possible for people all over the world to communicate with one another effectively and inexpensively. Unlike traditional broadcasting media, such as radio and television, the Internet does not have a centralized distribution system. Instead, an individual who has Internet access can communicate directly with anyone else on the Internet, post information for general consumption, retrieve information, use distant applications and services, or buy and sell products. This media can now make education easier for women, the use of information and communication

technologies (ICTs) could enhance their efficiency. We now live in the world of ICTs. As McWilliams (in Nkwocha, 2004: 13) observed “those who don’t bother about computer don’t bother about the future and the future is where we are going to spend the rest of our lives.”

SENSITIZATION OF PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES TO BECOME AWARE OF THE BENEFITS OF GIRL CHILD EDUCATION

As a result of the illogical and irrational thought that girls would always get married and leave their homes, parents in Nigeria are reluctant to train their children who are girls, especially in the rural areas. Females have significantly lower literacy rates than males across most of African countries generally. The resultant effect of this anomaly is that most women are illiterates who do menial jobs and earn next to nothing. The few who are educated and in good jobs end up taking care of both their matrimonial and parent’s homes, since the males do not always mind about their relatives.

ESTABLISHMENT OF SKILLS ACQUISITION CENTRES TO EMPOWER THOSE WOMEN WHO DROPPED OUT OR NEVER ATTENDED SCHOOL AT ALL

Skills acquisition centers could be the answer for women who dropped out or never attended schools for various reasons that are unconnected to culture or patriarchy. Rural women, especially, need to learn how to use modern gadgets in cooking and farming to help them mass produce some of their products in commercial quantity. Skills, such as, sewing, knitting, baking, interior decorations and weaving can be collectively done by women as a cooperative in order to attract government interests and loans.

ROLE MODELING OF OTHER SUCCESSFUL WOMEN

There is a popular saying that when a person or a group turns out well no one wants to know about the models, it is the work that counts. Modeling involves demonstration of behaviour that is desirable in order to allow others to copy or emulate. Women who are successful should be role models for others, who have not been sensitized or motivated enough to make efforts. Social skills training is a method of helping people who have problems interacting with others. A lot of rural women do not have social skills that could help them get along with people in situations where they need help. Social skills like, right volume and voice pitch, maintaining eye contact, keeping a comfortable distance, maintaining conversation and facial expressions can be learned from models during sessions of interactions. Other survival and entrepreneurial skills like sourcing for fund, time management, business ethics and growth could also be discussed to help those who are interested in business. Educated women in various high positions could also talk about their careers – entry requirement, work ethics, on the job training and what it takes to get to the top.

GIVING LOANS AND MICRO FINANCE BENEFITS TO WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS WHO COULD MENTOR OTHER WOMEN

In the area of giving loans and micro finance benefits to women the Nigerian government has tried so much. In April of 2011 there was a review of the Microfinance Policy Framework. The main target of the review is to eliminate gender disparity to ensure that women’s access to financial services is increased by 5% above the normal 10% for all. Micro-Finance Banks (MFBs) are now required to give a periodic returns showing gender disaggregated data of their service delivery. Other banks like the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Bank of Industry (BOI) and the National Economic Reconstruction Fund (NERFUND) have all been sensitized to train and give credit facilities to women entrepreneurs.

Okai (2012) commented on the World Bank, African Development Bank and World Economic Forum in the African Competitive Report of 2011 that the rate of women’s entrepreneurship is higher in Africa than in any other region. This statement he maintained is not necessarily a sign of economic empowerment as most women entrepreneurs are found in informal sectors highly characterized of low growth and low profit. There is, therefore, the need to draw women into the economic mainstream for any tangible development. Economic opportunities should be created to enhance women in starting and developing entrepreneurial ventures.

The National Microfinance Development Strategy (2012) outlined a table showing the financial inclusion/access in selected African countries. Nigeria was shown to have more people excluded from financial access than South Africa and Kenya. The table does not reflect a gender segregated data, however, which means that women could be excluded to greater degree, if the data took care of gender distribution. (see table 2)

Table 2: 2010 Financial inclusion/access in selected African Countries

Country	Bank Access	Other Formal Access	Informal Access	Excluded
South Africa	60	4	10	26
Kenya	22.6	17.9	26.8	32.7
Tanzania	12	4	27	56
Zambia	14	9	14	63
Mozambique	12		10	78
Nigeria	30	6.3	17.4	46.3

Source: National Microfinance Development Strategy (2012)

IMPLICATION OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The implication of encouraging women to overcome their deprivations and disabilities will not only enhance their full emergence into the main stream of the affairs of the nation through tapping their natural endowment – talents, abilities and capabilities but will, on the long run, lead to the realization of their potentials and goals; hence their self-actualization. The outcome of an enabling and facilitative environment can never be over-emphasized; people put in their best when they are encouraged. A society with greater gender equity experience faster economic growth, and benefit from greater agricultural productivity and improved food security. (Isah and Nafiu 2013)

Empowering women to participate in and lead public and private institutions makes these institutions more representative and effective. A mini research carried out by Nduka-Ozo (2013) on the possession of the 18 (eighteen) outstanding qualities and characteristics of a Professional as outlined by Irojiogu (2012); showed that females possess most of the qualities. Fifty respondents, which included twenty five men and twenty five women, were given a simple questionnaire of 18 items thus, (see table 3). Almost all the respondents agreed that women possess most of the qualities except being team players, being cooperative and being punctual. Many women may not cooperate when they find out that the majority is wrong and their lack of punctuality could be as a result of the great jobs they do at home to see that everybody is satisfied. The result shows that men are more punctual may be as a result of being waited upon. Their cooperativeness and team play could be attributed to their ability to navigate emotions, pursue noble goals and engage intrinsic motivation as corroborated by Ogunbiyi (2012). Navigating emotions suggest that more often, women will find their emotions in charge rather than proactively and mindfully working on them.

Table 3 Distribution of the possession of outstanding qualities and characteristics

Qualities and Characteristics	Male	Female	Obtainable
Approachable	05	45	50
Trustworthy	10	40	50
Supportive	12	38	50
Respectful	06	44	50
Accountable	23	27	50
Courteous	08	42	50
Dependable	20	30	50
Team player	32	18	50
Competent	26	24	50
Respectful	13	37	50
Integrity/honesty	18	32	50
Considerate	10	40	50
Empathic	08	42	50
Cooperative	36	14	50
Committed	24	26	50
Dependable	22	28	50
Punctual	36	16	50
Passionate	12	38	50
Total	321	579	900

Source: Outstanding qualities and characteristics of a professional – S.N. Nduka-Ozo, 2013.

CONCLUSION

The potentials of women to a great extent have remained unutilized as a result of subjugation by all forms of gender inequity or inequality which culminates in gender discrepancy and discrimination. Women should be encouraged to overcome their deprivations and disabilities; they need to be empowered socially, politically, educationally and economically to enhance their full emergence into the main stream of national and international socio-political development. Efforts to empower women may be unrealistic if they wallow in ignorance; education is the passport to women liberation, total emancipation and consequent empowerment for proper advancement. In spite of the fact

that Nigeria is a patriarchal society, she has a history of women who have occasionally made effort to break away from the ordinary, to do exploit for their communities. Women like Queen Amina of Zaria, who commanded an army to drive away invaders, Fumilayo Kuti who led a revolution against leaders who where despots and Margaret Ekpo who was an activist. Mention must also be made of the Aba women who were angry at high taxes imposed by British officials and the low return on their palm kernel crops. They, therefore, rose up in mass protests, burning buildings and driving off some of the authorities and government troops sent and approximately 50 women were killed in the conflict. The few women that have been tried and tested with high positions in their various countries have all delivered, women like Golda Meir of Israel, Margaret Thatcher, the 'iron lady' of Britain, Imelda Marcos of Philippines, Eillen Johnsom-Sirleaf of Liberia, Prof Dora Akunyili of Nigeria and so many others. Women should be allowed to show case their God given talents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is hereby highly recommended that women education should be encouraged as it has been noted above that efforts to empower women may be unrealistic if they wallow in ignorance. Education is a sure way for women liberation and ultimate emergence of well groomed families that should metamorphose into a well groomed nation. In other to achieve women empowerment following should also be enhanced:

1. Implementation of the gender policies already enacted for the benefit of women to reduce all forms of discriminations and harmful cultural and traditional practices.
2. Sensitization of parents and communities to become aware of the benefits of girls child education.
3. Re-orientation of men on their attitude towards women.
4. Establishment of skills acquisition centres to empower those women who dropped out or never attended school at all.
5. Role Modeling of other successful women
6. Giving loans and micro finance benefits to women entrepreneurs who could mentor other women.

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