

Nurturing Gender Equality: It's Implication for National Development

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ABSTRACT

Gender has become a lingering topic across the globe and Nigeria, a male dominated society is not exempted. In the year 2000, 189 heads of state in Africa developed a set of goals to be achieved by 2015 called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Among the objectives was the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment. The question then is “how can we nurture gender equality in order to promote national development?”. This is the central focus of this paper. The role of women in national development cannot be undermined especially as the 2006 National Population Census shows that women constitute 48.79% of the total population in Nigeria. This is a theoretical paper which adopts the social conflict theory of gender in its explanation of how society places the two sexes in an unequal position of wealth, power and privilege. The paper holds the view that women are endowed with human resources and skills that can be equated to that of men, and can foster national development in the society. Therefore, it recommends that the input of women in the various sectors of the nation should be encouraged.

Keywords: Empowerment, Equality, Gender, National Development.

INTRODUCTION

Gender study is an interdisciplinary study which draws its analysis from the social sciences; most especially from sociology, anthropology, economics and geography. The gender perspective of development encompasses a whole range of areas, starting with the way we as development agents perceive the needs of those we seek to assist. Fetenu as cited in Ogato (2013) posited that knowing the practical and gender needs of women, their differences and also, the importance of participation in identifying and meeting these needs by those concerned are paramount to the success of any development interventions.

Gender is a term that has psychological and cultural connotations, if the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female', the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine', these later might be quite independent of biological sex. (Haralambos and Holborn (2008) ; Stoller, 1968. P.9). According to Macinios (2007), gender refers to the personal traits and social positions that members of a society attach to being male and female. Gender operates as a dimension of social organization, shaping how we interact with others and how we think about ourselves. So it is of great importance to state that any discussion about Nigeria's future must entail the consideration of girls and women because of the role they play in the society.

The 2006 National Population Census reveals that the females constitute 48.79% of the total population in Nigeria but even with this, it has not been able to engender meaningful development in spite of her huge natural resources and endowment. According to the Gender in Nigeria Report (2012), Nigeria's 80.2 million women and girls have significantly worse life chances than men and also their sisters in comparable societies. Violence compounds and reinforces this disadvantages and exclusion. No doubt, women are Nigeria's hidden resource. Investing in women and girls now will increase productivity in this generation and will promote sustainable growth, peace and better health for the next generation.

Most of the poorest people in the world are women and part of what makes them poor is the discrimination they face purely because of their gender. Mollé and Mtenga (2000) and World Bank (2007), argued that it is traditionally accepted that women's societal roles are restricted to domestic activities like cooking and raising children. Therefore, changing the tradition structures against women in a community requires institutional reforms. In other words, influencing the behaviours of local people and protecting their interest can be realized in a community only by reforming institutions which provide incentives and regulatory mechanisms. (Ogato, (2013) as cited in Mollé and Mtenga, (2000); Tiruneh et al (2001); Dejene,(2003); Baden and Oxaal, (1997). According to the Department for International Development (DFID, 2007), in sub-Saharan Africa, women produce 80% of basic food stuffs but a survey of credit schemes in five African countries revealed that women receive 10% of the credit given to the male small holder. This is the reality of a world that is too often stacked against women. Gender in Nigeria Report (2012) reveals that women and girls suffer systematic disadvantages and discrimination is

magnified for those in the poorest states and sectors of the economy. Hence there is need for gender equality in every society.

Ogato (2013) posits that the Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD) is a case in point. It called for the recognition that empowering people, particularly women to strengthen their capabilities is a main objective of development and that empowerment requires the full participation of the people, the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions, determining the functioning and well-being of societies. The United Nations Fourth World Conference Report is another reference point that calls for the platform for women empowerment. (Baden and Oxaal, 1997). The Department for International Development's (DFID) gender equality action plan and Millennium Development Goals sets out crucial objectives; one of which is gender equality and women's empowerment. Similarly, United Nations have advocated that women's empowerment is fundamental to sustainable development.

In the light of this, this paper was conceived as an attempt to critically examine the importance of gender equality and the extent to which it can foster national development. It is in the context of the above that the paper adopts the central objective which is to ascertain how gender equality and women empowerment promotes national development. The key research questions are as follows: Does gender equality contribute significantly to national development? How can we nurture gender equality in order to foster national development?

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

➤ EMPOWERMENT

It refers to the process of increasing the opportunities of people to take control of their own lives. It is about people living according to their own values and being able to express preferences, make choices and influence – both individually and collectively – the decisions that affect their lives. Empowerment of women or men includes developing self-reliance, gaining skills or having their own skills and knowledge recognized, and increasing their power to make decisions and have their voices heard, and also, negotiating and challenging societal norms and customs.

➤ GENDER

Gender refers to the personal traits and social positions that members of a society attach to being male and female (Macinios, 2007). It is the meaning a culture attaches to being masculine and feminine. Gender draws attention to the socially constructed aspects of difference between men and women. It is often confused with sexism, the belief that a sex is innately superior to the other (Macinios, 2007). Sexism is biological oriented while gender is cultural oriented. Giddens (2006), made a distinctive comparison between sex and gender. Sex, to him, is referred to as the anatomical and physiological differences

that define male and female bodies while gender by contrast, concerns the psychological, social, and cultural differences between males and females.

➤ **GENDER EQUALITY**

It refers to women and men having equal rights, freedom, conditions and opportunities to access and control socially valued goods and resources and enjoy the same status within a society. It does not mean that the goal is that women and men become the same, but rather that they have equal life chances. This applies not only to equality of opportunities but also to equality of impact and benefits arising from economic, social, cultural and political development.

➤ **NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

National, according to Longman dictionary of contemporary English, refers to a phenomenon that embraces a whole nation. Lawal and Oluwatoyin (2011) as cited in Naomi (1995) believe that development is usually taken to involve not only economic growth, but also some notion of equitable distribution, provision of health care, education, housing and other essential services all with a view to improving the individual and collective quality of life. Similarly, Lawal and Oluwatoyin (2011) as cited in Chrisman (1984) also views development as a process of societal advancement, where improvement in the well being of people are generated through strong partnerships between all sectors, corporate bodies and other groups in the society. It is reasonable to know that development is not only an economic exercise, but also involves both socio-economic and political issues and pervades all aspects of societal life.

National development therefore can be described as the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a country or nation. This is best achieved through development planning, which can be described as the country's collection of strategies mapped out by the government for national development.

HINDERANCES TO GENDER EQUALITY

Gender discrimination is one of the leading social problems all over the world. (Abass et al, 2011). This is dominant in patriarchal industrial societies and very predominant in our traditional societies before the advent of industrialization. Gender issues are more prevalent in patriarchal societies (Giddens, 2006). The Nigerian society transcends from the male cultural value system where patriarchy is the order of the day. There are several factors that can be adduced as hindrances to gender equality in Nigeria. These factors are education, socio-cultural and biological factors;

- **EDUCATIONAL FACTORS:** Variation in education levels are a very important source of gender discrimination and inequality. Most developing nations, like Nigeria are poor and cannot

see their kids through a higher education. Thus, the women are often stepped down for the men. Sachs (2013) stated that education can be an equalizer if everybody has the opportunity, but it can also be a source of inequality. Lauer and Lauer (2002) posit that traditional roles assigned to women inhibit their commitment to higher education, which in turn diminishes their prospects in formal labour participation. Bameke (2001) also shared in the view above and asserted that females are withdrawn from school into marriages otherwise they are allowed education considered ample for a good wife. Such attitudes, values and beliefs have gender consequences which definitely affect the formal labour market participation. Some other authors like Debra et al (2005) maintain that women are given educational opportunities now but they are for specific courses and jobs. Nwagwu et al (2009) stated that women have been stereotyped into certain occupations because of their lack of scientific enterprise and technological skills. These skills can only be obtained through formal education.

- **SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS:** Nigeria is a patriarchal society and the belief and practice that view men as more superior to women has also crawled its way into all the sectors of the economy. Nwagwu et al (2009) stated that patriarchal ideologies amongst others are a militating factor against the active participation of women in the formal sector in Nigeria. Gender gap and inequality are reinforced by the socialization process. Socialization of children into specific roles, by parents and relations in line with the culturally prescribed gender stereotypes is also a contributory factor in gender discrimination. Socialization of children into stereotyped gender roles account for the differential and discriminatory practices that are expressed all through the life long process (Nwagwu et al, 2009). International Labour Organization (2004) asserted that socio-cultural attitudes and restrictions are contributory factors to gender inequality.

- **BIOLOGICAL FACTORS:** Women are the child bearers and keepers of the home. Those who are single and unmarried will still grow older and get married someday. This has also rendered them more domesticated than the men. The biological make up and the child bearing role of women have affected their jobs and in turn have left some jobless without an income. According to Nwagwu et al (2009), cost of meeting maternity leave payment constitutes deterrent to women's employment in the labour market and some employers even smartly avoid them. Some of them could even resign and as such the funds used for training would be wasted. Alele Williams (1990) asserted that although motherhood is seen as the hallmark of 'femaleness', it was often used against women in employment opportunities (Nwagwu et al, 2009)

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Human resources are the most vital tools in the development of any nation. These resources are found in both male and female, and are collectively necessary if utilized for economic growth and development. Nevertheless, most of the human resources in the nation are not optimally utilized as there is some level of discrimination on women that yields to gender inequality and

hinders their possible contribution as well as the role they can perform towards national development. In as much as women have traditional roles to their homes and families, they also have roles to perform in the various sectors of the economy. It is a known fact that the traditional roles placed women as the weaker sex whose biological make-up defined her social status (Sachs, 2013). In other words, their labour and work did not attract salary or monetary income. Industrial revolution and some other factors have influenced and altered the economic position of women but their social roles were barely altered. Studies such as Olojede (1998) have shown that women constitute half of the world's population, and have in no small measure contributed to the development of society.

Recent statistics shows that the male population slightly out-weighed the female in terms of demographic data, just as the last Nigerian national population census that took place in 2006 showed that females were 68.3 million, which is about 48.78 percent and males constituted 71.7 million, which is 51.22 percent of the total population of about 140 million (Federal Republic of Nigeria Population Census, 2006). In such a situation, it is out of place and risky not to provide an equal platform for both sexes to express their rights as well as abilities. This is still the case in Nigeria and has slow-paced the nation's development. Presently in Nigeria, women are still not represented in politics, social and economic sectors, although in the President Goodluck Jonathan's Administration, it has risen to 35% (Ajani, 2013). Nevertheless, Doshima Suswan, the wife of the Benue State Governor has said that the 35% flaunted by the president is a scam and is far from being implemented (Ajijah, 2013). This ought not to be so.

Women constitute an indispensable force in the quest for national development of any nation (Asaju & Adagba, 2013). It is also important to enable women participate in the economic, political and social activities of every nation aspiring to attain development. As stated by Catherine Russel at the US Ambassador at large for Global Women's Issues; that is one of the ways for any country in the world to accelerate development and to eliminate poverty as women will invest their incomes in their child's health, nutrition and education that will in turn improve their family living condition (Widiadana, 2013). If development includes an improved standard of living and absence from poverty, then women can contribute to national development especially when they earn an income for their labour as it will upturn the standard of living of their families and reduce the poverty level. According to Obi (2010), in recent years the traditional view that earning an income is exclusively a man's role no longer holds true in the modern society.

Women have a primary role to play in the family, thus they need to be emotionally and physically healthy because healthy parents breed healthy children and a healthy society. It is also imperative that Nigerian women be given an equal platform and opportunity in the eight main spheres of influence in the economy namely: Media, Arts, Culture and Entertainment, Health, Science and Technology, Education, Business and Economy and Religion, so that they can contribute immensely to the growth of these spheres and consequently to national development.

Notable women that have significantly transformed these diverse sectors include Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala who has contributed immensely to the development of the economic and financial sector, the Late Professor Dora Akunyili who reshaped the health sector through the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), Professor Ruqayyatu, the former minister of Education who also contributed to that sector, Hon. Abike Dabiri Erewa who created a voice for female gender in Media, Omotola Jalade Ekehinde who recently received a national honors for her immense contribution to art and entertainment among others. It is therefore obvious that women have roles to play in agriculture, health, finance and reduction of poverty, education and politics.

RECENT TRENDS IN GENDER ISSUES

Globally speaking, significant strides have been made by many countries towards advancing the cause of gender equality. A current gender gap report from World Economic Forum (2011) reveals that Nordic countries: Ireland, Norway, Finland and Sweden rank 1st to 4th in gender gap closing rate by the forum. However, Gender Institutions and Development (GID) also reveal that persistent discrimination and repression are most marked in Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, The Middle East and North Africa.

In Nigeria, various policies as well as views have been established in an attempt to foster gender equality. According to the Chief Executive Officer of Standard Chattered Organization, Mrs. Sola Adesola, during the Women In Management and Business (WIMBIZ) seminar, 2014, women are the needed key to economic development. She said this while being interviewed by the Channels Television News Team, Lagos. She further hinted that most women have small scale businesses they manage in one way or the other and if properly managed and supported by the Federal Government can lead to an increased large scale business that will in turn increase the country's revenue through tax etc.

Former President Olusegun Obasanjo, on his own part believes that women can do better in public offices than men. He said this on the 5th of November when members of the National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), paid him a visit at his Hilltop residence in Abeokuta, where he was presented with a Father of the Nation plaque. He said: "one of the best journalists that ever served me was a woman and that was the late Mrs. Oluremi Oyo. In politics, women are more reliable than men. When a woman says she is with you, you can really take it that she is with you. But if a man tells you he is with you and you catch him in another meeting, he will tell you it is politics. It should not be so. When a politician's words cannot be believed, then you are turning politics into another thing. A politician must be a man or woman of honour that believes in morality.

In recognition of the ever increasing role of women in the journey towards development, several organizations, both private and public, have begun to create programs targeted towards harnessing the resource pool of the women folk in the country. For instance, in 2006, Access

Bank Nigeria PLC partnered with International Finance Corporation (IFC) to create business opportunities for female entrepreneurs in Nigeria through the Gender Entrepreneurship Management Programme. The programme targets Nigerian women entrepreneurs engaged in medium and small scale business ventures. Furthermore, in 2014, the bank has announced its 'W' initiative, seeking to further promote gender equality and economic development in Nigeria. Benefits to women include access to a range of loan product and credit facilities, education on finance matters through the "W" community on health and family programmes among a number of other services. The "W" initiative also offers support to women-owned small scale businesses. Therefore, in spite of the fact that reducing gender disparities may not be an easy task, it is however feasible with coherent, sensitive and feasible strategies.

NURTURING GENDER EQUALITY TOWARDS NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The world is unequal and it is most unequal for women and girls. According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) policy (2012), most of the poorest people in the world are women and part of what makes them poor is the discrimination they face purely because of their gender. Nigeria has a democratic government which ought to give a voice to all her citizens. Thus, the need to nurture gender equality is paramount because democracy promotes development. However, gender equality is yet to be achieved. Gender equality is paramount to national development and perhaps, this explains why 189 heads of state developed the Millennium Development Goals in which they enlisted the various factors that can promote national development by 2015 and placed gender equality was amongst the top three in the list.

Although, the problem of underdevelopment in Nigeria can be linked to various problems/factors like corruption, theft of public funds, pipeline vandalisation, terrorism, gender inequality and so on, gender inequality is one of the silent killers of national development. This is because women are about 48.7% of the total national population and are yet to be given equal opportunities. Hence, it is only the other percentage fractions (which are the men) that are utilized. How then can such a nation develop fully? The agricultural sector that has been set aside for the oil sector had a lot of women participating in it during the pre-colonial era. Women could still be used as major players in the agricultural sector, in household food and nutrition as well as in natural resources management. According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development policy (2012), women account for 43% of the agricultural labour force in all developing countries and up to 50% in Eastern Asia and Sub-Sahara Africa. Women use the natural environment on a daily basis for water and as a source of fuel wood as well as make use of natural products for economic and medicinal purposes (IFAD, 2012). Thus, it is disturbing that women significantly have less access than men to the assets and services that would enable them to increase their productivity.

Nigeria is a nation dominated mostly with small scale businesses. Entrepreneurship has great potential to contribute massively to employment generation, economic growth and development. The entrepreneur space in Nigeria is mostly dominated by men and there are still some challenges that female entrepreneurs experience when compared to their male counterparts because of their gender. Today, there are some statistics that women are starting up new businesses more than their male counterparts because of their innovation and creativity and that the high success rate of this businesses show that women are more focused and resourceful than their male peers (This Day National Paper, 2014). There are women who produce homemade soaps, air fresheners, bleach, and sanitizers and so on. However, these women barely receive any form of support of any kind nor even have access to assets and services that can increase their productivity. According to the This Day National paper, October 14, 2014 publication, it stated that Nigerian women operate in an unfavorable business environment characterized by various challenges ranging from infrastructural deficiencies, corruption, low access and high cost of finance and weak institutions. This is mainly characterized by unequal access to benefits and opportunities.

The challenge therefore is to ensure equal opportunities for women and men to engage in development activities, in terms of opportunities to participate and in the sharing of the benefits. Women are a vital part of the society and should be given a voice in every sector of the nation. If we say that Nigeria has a democratic government, then moving towards democracy without moving towards equal representations of women is not becoming democratic (DFID, 2013). Any developing nation planning for complete national development must first utilize and maximize all her human resources and create a society that encourages gender equality.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

In order to provide a solid and reliable framework for this study, the social conflict theory, a sociological theory which defines society in terms of the inherent struggle between dominant and subordinate social groups for scarce resources has been adopted. Rooted in the ideas of Karl Marx, the social conflict's major proposition is that social problems emerge when the dominant groups, by virtue of their position, oppress the subordinate groups.

From the viewpoint of gender, social conflict theory suggests that men who have acquired the status of the dominant gender in virtually every patriarchal society subordinate women in order to maintain the position of power, authority and privilege. According to a prominent classical proponent of this theory, Frederich Engels whose comparison of the family structure to the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is most notable, women had less power than men in the household because they were dependent on them for wages, thus assuming the role of proletariat in Marx's terms.

Contemporary theorist, Rae Lesser Blumberg (1984) further approached the theory of social conflict with an analysis of gender stratification which provided emphasis on women's degree of

control of the means of production and the distribution of economic surplus. Blumberg's theory examines the position of women in comparison with men from the earliest to the most complex societies of the late twentieth century. Thus, Blumberg suggests that stratification in the society is as a result of women's control to the means of production and the allocation of surplus value relative to men. Blumberg further espoused that if women's relative economic power is at the micro level of the household, leaving the males to control the macro social spheres, the resultant effect will be a reduction in the power that women should have in the household. On the other hand, if women possess power at more macro levels, their position in the micro level of the household will be enhanced.

In applying the social conflict theory to the nurturing process of gender equality while examining its impact on national development, it should be noted that the role of Nigerian women in national and economic development is an issue that demands serious consideration especially as the number of women in the country is fast equating that of the men. Therefore, the more women have economic power at macro levels of social organization, the more their relevance at the micro level will be appreciated and the more they will be able to gain access to other forms of power such as political, ideological, and even cultural, thereby increasing their influence in the society.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is an obvious fact that women are Nigeria's hidden treasure and investing in women and girls now will boost productivity and enhance the wealth of the nation in the long run. The stability, prosperity, growth and sustainability of Nigeria economy lie greatly on the equal rights of the citizens but cultural and social traditions strengthen everyday discriminations in developing nations. The resultant effect is that women who could surmount and overcome poverty challenges' are denied the opportunity to make a difference. There is no doubt that when women gain equal rights with men, development is achieved. Gender equality must be at the heart of every developing country. Gender equality is not a complicated idea, it's simple; women must have the same rights as men and discrimination has to stop, discriminatory practices are most unacceptable to countries with which women are working to support its development. (DFID, 2007).

Arising from the foregoing, we realize that our crucial role as sociologists is to harness those forces that organize society in very different ways. With this in view, the following are the recommendations of the paper:

- The Nigerian society should promote gender equality and give the women a stronger voice in all spheres of their endeavors. Women should be allowed to hold leadership positions because they possess skills and talents that are equitable to that of men which can foster national development.
- Gender equality should be built in the work place by investing in new learning and development programmes. Women and girls should not face discrimination in their

everyday lives as discrimination limits the choices they have, the freedom they enjoy and the contribution that they can make to advance national development.(DFID, 2007)

- The government should confront and transform the social norms and institutions that discriminate against women and girls such as acceptability of domestic violence. Discriminatory social norms and practices affect educational outcomes for girls and boys. The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) data shows a strong relationship between the prevalence of early marriage and the gender gap in secondary school enrolments. Countries with a higher share of girls who are married have a greater gender gap in secondary school enrolments. When this gender gap is analyzed according to all dimensions of the SIGI, the most significant factors are “Restricted Civil Liberties” (women and girls’ access to public space) and “Restricted Physical Integrity” (women and girls’ control over their own bodies), even when allowing for country income level and urbanization.(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2012)
- The inputs of women in the various sectors should be encouraged. Gender in Nigeria Report (2012) recommends policies to improve the lives of women and girls and identify priorities for action. Excellent policies and intentions have not translated into budgets or action to make the changes required if women are to contribute effectively to Nigeria’s development. The National Gender Policy has yet to bear fruit, while implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has stalled.

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