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WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION FOR INDIVIDUALS AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined the concept of women empowerment through education which includes the provision of functional education for girls and women through skills such as sewing, dying, cooking, baking, typing, knitting, and awakening the consciousness of all women to the need for the development of a positive self-image. It examined the legislation on women's education such as socio-cultural religious and superstitious beliefs which inhibit women and prevent them from self-actualization, thus placing them in a perpetual subordinate position that must also be abandon. It also talks about the benefits of women's empowerment through education which states that educating women will encourage technological innovation, improve food production, promote skills development, increase economic efficiency, support family planning, and improve the general quality of life. It highlighted pre-requisite for Women's Empowerment such as empowerment should be sensitive to issues of gender and other aspects of humanity. It also suggested ways of empowering Women through Education for a Sustainable Economy that the Nigerian government should emphasize the importance of the education of females not only in arts, humanities, and social sciences but also in science and technology. Lastly, it talks about the relevance of women's education and empowerment to the Nation, particularly on girls as an individual, the community, and the nation at large. Conclusively, empowerment makes a person choose and demand. It makes the person able to choose her goals, generate opportunities to reach the goals, and determine the overall direction of her life.

KEYWORDS

Women, Empowerment, Education. Individual, National, Development.



INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has expressed a commitment to education with the belief that overcoming illiteracy and ignorance will form the basis for accelerated national development. Regardless of the incontrovertible evidence that education is crucial to the development of the citizenry and the nation, inequalities in access to education still exist. Millions of hapless people in Nigeria including children are excluded from the processes and outcomes of education (Otive, 2006). Nigeria is a signatory to the 1990 Jomtein Declaration of Education For All (EFA) by the year 2000, and also a member of the group of E-49 Nations committed to the total eradication of illiteracy. In spite of this, the nation's literacy rate is said to be around 51.08 percent in the year 2008 (UNESCO, Institute for Statistics, 2008). With gender differences in addressing this national trend of low literacy rate, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Northern Education Initiative (NEI) tend to bridge the gender gap in education, by creating awareness on the need for women education which has been at a disadvantage.

Women education is a global priority for UNESCO and is inextricably linked to UNESCO's efforts to promote the right to education and support the achievement of education and literacy showed that almost two-thirds of the world's 792 million illiterate adults are women. This situation has not changed and the latest projection indicate that this ratio will remain at this level by 2017 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2012).

That means the world would miss out on a critical gender disparity which has been highlighted by both the Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Among the obstacles of women education is the ability to access the right to participate in and complete their education, without hindrances from poverty, geographical isolation, minority status, disability, early pregnancy, male dominance, and traditional attitudes. UNESCO (2009) indicated that the discrimination against girls and women exist in all educational institutions. An estimated 35 million girls of primary school age and 37 million girls of lower secondary school age were not enrolled in school in 2009 worldwide. The extent to which girls are disproportionately excluded from education is higher at the secondary level than in primary education and increases further from secondary school levels to tertiary institutions.

Women Empowerment through Education

The word empowerment means equipping one with the ability to do or act, control, exercise right or authority in one's society. Women empowerment connotes all purposeful efforts aimed at imparting education to women that may be formal or informal, regular or irregular with the ultimate aim of repositioning the knowledge skill and competencies required of them. Apart from the provisions in the National Policy on Education, the Nigerian Government at various levels has taken several practical steps to improve women's participation in education. For instance, the Federal Ministry of Education in September 1986 established a full-fledged women's education section charged with the following responsibilities NBS (2013).

- a. Provision of more educational opportunities for girls from primary to tertiary levels.
- b. Creating awareness for all citizens to the fact that equal opportunities exist irrespective of gender, age, locality, creed or special status, and should therefore be made available to all.
- c. Re orientating the attitude of all females irrespective of age towards education.
- d. Provision of functional education for girls and women through skills such as sewing, dying, cooking, baking, typing, knitting,
- e. Awakenning the consciousness of all women to the need for the development of a positive self-image.
- f. Promoting the education of girls and women in the fields of science, technology and mathematics.

According to Bolliva (2010), for Nigeria to move forward as a nation, she must remove all forms of discrimination against women in education. Equal educational opportunities should be created for both men and women. On the 18 December, 1979, the convention on the elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women was adopted by United Nations General Assembly. This convention becomes an international treaty on

3rd September, 1981, after twenty-one countries had ratified it. About ten years after, more than one hundred countries of the world, perhaps including Nigeria, have agreed to be bound by the provisions of this convention. For all practical purposes, the twenty seven articles of this convention provide straight forward blue prints for removing all forms of discrimination against women in the Nigerian educational system. Nigeria must therefore, sincerely implement the provisions of the convention.

It should be stated that the Nigerian federal Government is doing a lot to improve women's education as a separate Ministry for Women has been established at federal and state levels. In September 1986, the Federal Government convened a workshop specifically to prepare a blue print on women education in Nigeria. The blue print prepared by the workshop was adopted by the National Council on Education in 1987 some of the recommendations are:

Legislation on Women Education

There should be a legislation that girls should remain in school; this is in line with the 1989 UNICEF's convention on the right of the child, which called for national legislation that set 18 years as the minimum age for marriage. This would defeat early marriage prejudices and child bearing, which are factors that cut short the education of girls and women.

- a. Any socio-cultural religious and superstitions belief which inhibit women and prevent them from self-actualization, thus place them in a perpetual subordinate position must also be abandon.
- b. Women in modern technological societies should be educated in order that they in turn would bring up the future leaders of their countries to meet the expectation of tomorrow.
- c. Career guidance and counseling: in order that the education of women in the developing countries to be directed towards the right path, more women should be trained as career guidance counselors, to advice female students at the various institutions.
- d. Women centre and Early Child Care Development (ECCD):these serve as avenues for women to earn income generating skills to give them a firm economic base.
- e. Parents are to give equal opportunity to children irrespective of sex.
- f. Government to discourage withdrawal of girls from primary school
- g. Government to enforce laws prohibiting hawking and street trading by young girls of school age.
- h. Government to establish more single sex boarding schools for girls.
- i. Positive discrimination towards women such that more of them should be admitted into higher institutions.
- j. The curriculum of non-formal education for women to cater for both rural and urban women, and secondary school drop-outs.
- k. Education of women with special needs to be encouraged that is nomadic women, women in purdah, women in rural areas, drop out women, widows, single families and career women.
- l. Government is to encourage special education for women who are specially gifted or handicapped.

For all these provision to be effective government must go beyond paper works, appropriate legislations should be enacted to implement these provisions. Any parents, employer or educational authority found discriminating against women in educational system should be made to face the full weight of the law. Gender inequality is too deep into the Nigerian minds that some drastic steps must be taken to curb it.

Benefits of Women Empowerment through Education

Educating women will encourage technological innovation, improve food production, promote skills development, increase economic efficiency, support family planning and improve the general quality of life. Whether the society believes it or not, an educated woman is saved from frivolous and misleading associations thereby promoting a sense of warm affection and security with her family in particular and the nation at large. Women education can restore and improve the dignity of man and usher in sustainable development. Educating women will involve more and more women in decision making whether at the local, state or national level as

Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, Directors, Vice Chancellors, Governors, Deputy Governors, Commissioners and other key top and middle decision making positions.

Akande (1999) stated that the type of education Nigerian women need is that which will equip them for self-reliance in the technological world. It is education that will help women utilize their potentials and consequently contribute meaningfully to the family, community and national development. He stated that the undisguised fact is that only women can empower themselves and their empowerment is deeply linked to basic education and economic self-reliance. However, in addition to the indisputable evidence of women's contributions to the survival of national economy, a broadened conceptualization of empowerment would take us beyond the need to prove women's role in national productivity. Development scholars such as Oyebanji (1993) agreed that development must be a matter of fusing social and economic objectives, not only for an increase in production, as a resource of redistribution, resulting in improvements that will benefit the entire community.

Women empowerment can successfully be achieved by designing and implementing well planned and organized educational programmes. Women need greater access to educational opportunities, skills acquisition and position of authority for them to be truly empowered. To this end, development programmes are designed to improve living conditions of women and how to allow them participate in process that will enhance their development at home, community and national levels. The main objective is to alleviate their burden through appropriate empowerment programmes. In Nigeria, different programmes are embarked upon to improve the welfare, the civic, political, cultural, social and economic development of women. The Decree No 30 of 1989, which established the National Commission for Women, was promulgated to formulate a national policy on women and development. All programmes for women are carried out by this Commission. The objectives of the commission in the words of Oyiso and Olomukoro (2012) were as follows:

- a. Promote welfare of women in general.
- b. Promote the full utilization of women in the development of human resources and to bring about their acceptance as full participants in every phase of national development, with equal right and corresponding obligations.
- c. Promote responsible motherhood and maternal health of women.
- d. Stimulate actions to improve women's civil, political, cultural, social, and economic education.
- e. Support the work of nongovernmental organization and to play a coordinating role between government and Nigeria women organizations
- f. Encourage the sense and essence of cooperative societies and activities amongst women both in urban and rural areas and stimulate in them creative entrepreneurship in the field of cottage and small -scale industries.
- g. Formulate and propagate moral values within the family unit and in the public generally and to establish programmes with institutions and organizations to inculcate moral education in women and children, and,
- h. Work towards the total elimination of all social and cultural practices tending discrimination against and dehumanization of womanhood.

Amali (2016) stated that many Christian and Muslim women's organizations were active in offering adult and non-formal educational opportunities to women so that they can serve as a tool for sustainable Development. So are many other NGOs such as Officers Wives Associations of Nigeria Armed Forces (Army, Navy, and Air Force). Similarly, many donor agencies such as UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, British Council, among others combined enormously to various educational programmes for women in Nigeria.

Other initiatives include the United Nations Girls Education Initiatives (UNGEI) which promoted the enrolment of more girls in schools under the African Girls Education initiative (AGEI) with financial support of the Norwegian government that was also put in place to promote women's status (Oladipo, 2007). It is pertinent to note that, women's development can be greatly enhanced through active participation in the aforementioned literacy programmes and application of the skill equipped, thereby improving their livelihood and overall

wellbeing. In order to buttress the link between education and development. Imhabekhai and Olomukoro (2007) stated that literacy is a basic instrument in social transformation and modernization. It influences the rate of development and its possession or otherwise facilitates or retards the level of development. Ezegbe and Akubue (2012) pointed out that any society which neglects women in her human resource potential cannot achieve any meaningful development. They emphasize that the African traditional society women as being resourceful and need empowerment through education.

To buttress the fact that women cannot be empowerment without education. Adekola and Abanum (2010) argued that development cannot take place without education. They stress that development require an educated and enlightened populace, and that the difference between the developed and underdeveloped countries of the world is related to the level of literacy among the populace. In addition, Bolliva(2010) stated that investing in women literacy carries very high returns; it improves livelihood, leads to better child and maternal health, and favors girls' access to education. He further emphasized that when women are literate, it is the society that gains. Education is seen as powerful agent of socialization in that it plays a tremendous role in preparing an individual to render active service in income acquisition, career development, and useful service for self, the family and society at large. Women are also in the capacity to assist government achieves its laudable goals and objectives through public enlightenment and national mobilization campaigns. In general, education wipes away ignorance, political apathy and encourages mutual; understanding and cooperation among the various strata in any given society.

Offorma (2009) said the role of women in the economic benefits include employment, earnings, enhanced general productivity, consumption behaviour, fiscal capacity, and intergenerational effect. One of the most consistent correlations is between increased literacy skills and the probability of employment. A women education that is properly designed and provided has the tendency of imparting skills and knowledge to participate and makes them more productive in self-employment or in employment by others (UNESCO, 2006). Empowering women education can translate into general political participation and thus contribute to the quality of public policies and to democracy. If the relationship between education and political participation is well established educated people were more likely to vote and eschew tolerant attitudes and democratic values (Hannum& Buchman, 2012).

Egbo (2000) pointed out that literate women have been known to contribute to the political stability and peace of a country. Hence, Kassim and Eghiator (2005) buttressed the fact that educated women participate in politics and are able to contribute their knowledge to national unity, reconstruction and development. From the above benefits it could be seen that women education renders ineffective the traditional belief that the place of the women is the home. It has also revealed that in this jet age, women are a force to reckon with in the political and socio-economic life of the nation. The role of women has gone beyond the four wall of their home and extends to all spheres of human endeavour and empowering in the socio-economic development of the nation.

Okemankinde (2014) observed that in the traditional African society, women represent the most essential ingredient in the formation of an important bio-social group known as the family. However, Fasuba (2000) insinuated that many women are now engaging in income creation and jobs hitherto regarded as the exclusive reserve of men. He further states that since educated women have become conscious of their rights, they have continued to sing it out with men in all areas of human endeavors. One major way by which women could be empowered is acquisition of vocational skills education. The right of women to be self-reliant, self-employed can be achieved through the acquisition of vocational skills that are related to their environment. This will enable them to engage in small scale enterprise, which is one of the ways of reducing the incidence of poverty and unemployment among women in the society.

Pre-requisite for Women Empowerment

Okemankide and Tijjani (2009) asserted that the major pre-requisite for ensuring women empowerment in the society are:

- a. Empowerment should be sensitive to issues of gender and other aspects of humanity and interaction where social inequality can emerge.
- b. Empowerment should endeavour to utilize existing resources in the given location in a productive manner whenever possible.
- c. Empowerment should ensure that training and retraining are encouraged and aimed at improving the competency of staff, within the organization through regular support and supervision.
- d. Giving opportunities to excluded groups to particulate in public policy matters,
- e. Formalizing dissemination and enforcing legal rights, and
- f. Encouraging organization so that the people who belong to the excluded social sector can fully participate and influence the strategies adopted by the society.

Ways of Empowering Women through Education for Sustainable Economy

The above major pre-requisite are practical solution to empowering women and strengthening their positions in society. Kester, Okemankinde and Ejerenwa (2005) were of the opinion that women can be empowered to sustain the economy through education by the under listed points:

- a. The Nigerian government should emphasize the importance of education of females not only in arts, humanities and social sciences but also in science and technology.
- b. There should be sensitization of the parents and key stakeholders about the importance of female students in learning.
- c. Teachers should assign female students to leadership position and use female educators and professionals as role models for career talks and great lecturers.
- d. Teacher should encourage the female to participate fully in action based learning and not to allowed male students to dominate classroom or laboratory activities.
- e. Educationist should avoid the exclusive use of generic nouns or pronouns. The use of more female illustrations and examples should be encouraged
- f. There should be positive motivation and reinforcement of female students by teachers.

Anyebe (2001) asserted that feminist have advanced the issue of empowerment of women through education as means of challenging patriarchal ideology of domination and women subordination transforming the structures and institutions that perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality is as well as equal opportunity for women at all levels in all spheres of human endeavour. Akinsanya (2011) defined empowerment to be a process of challenging power relations and gaining greater control over the sources of power as well as the consequences of that process which may take the form of individual self-assertions, protests, collective resistance or mobilization that challenge basic power relations.

Mills and Freisen (2001) explained empowerment as the authority of subordinates to decide and act. It is something people do for themselves where culture, religion and traditional belief place men as super human beings. Globally, the access of women to finance is so minimal that women are generally disadvantaged in terms of economic stability and independence. Yomi (2007) also raised another challenge which he described as the "patrilineal system of descent" in which generations are identified through male offspring.

The responsibility for the preservation and continuity of the 'family tree' rests on the male children and special recognitions are accorded them in the preparation of their adult roles. Okemankinde (2014) concluded that Nigeria nation owes the Nigeria women folk the responsibility of removing these artificial barriers based on religious, culture, or traditional considerations which have incapacitated the ability of Nigeria women to participate effectively and freely in their social and economic development as well as enhancing the development of the nation at large. Other variables of socio-economic development include wealth, health, political participation, language development, home environment, and parental interaction.

Women Empowerment and Socio-economic Development

Gwadabawa (2003) maintained that educated women are seen as people who know their rights and responsibilities, and who is in a better position to train their children and give them a good foundation on hygienic matters. According to them, an educated woman has the advantage of bringing up children not only hygienically but also provide healthy food and adequate nutritional care for the child's healthy wellbeing. Secondly an educated and gainfully employed mother is often in a better economic position to augment the family's nutritional needs and requirements.

According to Adama (2008) women education is needed for higher productivity and accessibility to better job, special remuneration, higher advancement rates, leadership and independent mind. The vital role of Women Centre of Continuing Education is to instill the concept of service as chief means of securing blessings and happiness for this and succeeding generations. We can easily recognize, even by her appearance, a girl who has received good education. She is fashion conscious and knows how to dress herself. There are also some notable advantages of women education. Being educated, a woman can manage her home much more efficiently. She can maintain family budget and expenses. She has ample knowledge of hygiene and health and this helps her to maintain hygiene standard of her kitchen and its cleanliness.' In short she is a successful manager of the household.

An educated woman understands her duties well. She is a source of comfort to her husband in times of trouble. Besides this, an educated mother has a lot of advantages. She can teach a lot of things to her children. She gives them elementary education and keeps them neat and clean. She can also help her husband in his office work. Every life is full of ups and downs. If a husband is out of employment, his educated wife can be of great help to him. The husband may be ill or he may meet with some accident. In such an emergency an educated woman can get a job for herself. An unfortunate widow, if she is educated, need not remain at the mercy of others. Adama (2008) buttress the fact that she can support herself and her children without any support from anyone with acquired skills.

Despite the numerous benefits accruing from the participation of the women on various economic activities to the communities and the nation at large, Oniye (2008) study reveals that there are factors that constrain the empowerment of women in these economic activities. Nwosu (2008) showed that illiteracy or low level of education household-burden, husband influence, corruption and the likes are among the factors constraining women empowerment and participation in economic activities. This is in accordance with the observation of the *Akinsanya, (2011)* who noted that participation of women in economic activities at all levels is hampered by factors such as limited resources, lack of government assistance, lack of training and educational opportunities, cultural values and discrimination against women.

The Role of Women in Politics

The education of women is of great importance to a nation's socio political development. Okemakinde (2014) maintained that education enables women to know their rights, privileges and responsibilities. Politically, every country depends on enlightened citizenry in order to arrive at very meaningful decisions that will guide it to achieve its various political programmes and agenda, literacy enables people to engage in meaningful decision and critically examine various options before taking an independent judgment particularly in cases of political representation. Thus, literacy according to Haruna (2001) Education gives the individual the opportunity to participate effectively in the process of their governance especially women who are mentally sound. As partner in progress, the participation of the enlightened women folk in the nation's body politics can augment men's political effort and strife.

At this juncture, it may perhaps be necessary to recognize and mention the political leadership and contributions of great Nigeria educated women. Among these were: Professor Alele Williams of the University of Benin (Nigeria), Mrs Ngozi Iweala of the World Bank, Late Mrs Dora Akunyili of NAFDAC, Mrs Obi Ekwensili of Women Liberation and Empowerment, and a host of them.

Relevance of Women Education and Empowerment to the Nation

Boson (2009) enumerated the benefit of women Education in terms of the girl as an individual, the family: community and society, and Nation as follows:

The girl as individual: Education leads to greater self-esteem and self confidence, and opens new horizons for girls, enabling them to discover their own potential, to develop themselves fully and increase their resistance to gender discrimination,

The family: Durkheim (1956) explained that Education helps girls and women to have a positive impact on their families better childcare (vaccination, schooling) better nutrition, decrease in child mortality better communication with the children and other family members. A recent study shows that the decrease in child malnutrition between 1970 and 1995 is attributed to the tune of 44%; to improvement in female education. Bonvilla (2003), concluded that women's education is combined with an improvement in their status which account for their active participation in societal activities. An educated woman is better equipped to increase family income and resolve family problems satisfactorily; her family's wellbeing thus gets a big boost to her career.

The community and Society: Education heightens women's awareness of the important role they can play in the community and society to find solutions to problems that impede development and social stability. Survival rates schooling and community productivity increase as a result of women's education with a corresponding decrease in another and infant mortality rates.

The community and society thus become more prosperous as nation with awareness of it citizen's role, an educated woman can play a more dynamic role in addressing the economic challenges faced by her country, in the areas of agricultural production, food, the fight against environmental degradation, the use and conservation of water and energy. Education alone is obviously not enough to solve the world's problems, but it remains an essential factor in any development activities.

Conclusion

Empowerment makes a person to choose and to demand. It makes the person able to choose her goals, generate opportunities to reach the goals and determine the overall direction of her life. This makes the notion of empowerment a fascinating and powerful one. In many communities, women have no possibility to choose their own life goals and this indicates a state of powerlessness. Empowerment enables a woman to gain relative strength as a result of having choices and bargaining power. The consequences being her ability to demand attention from those concerned, especially decision and policy makers, to generate the appropriate positive responses, reduction of vulnerability, elimination of exploitability, availability and the use of social services and resources. Ultimately, empowerment should lead to the improvement of women's socio-economic status, as women's education has become one of the key to development objectives of this country. The concept of empowerment has been tied to the range of activities undertaken by and for women in different areas, education included. It is the underlying assumption of this write up that if women understand their conditions, know their rights and learned skills traditionally denied them, by having access to education and training. Empowerment which will facilitate meaningful contribution to national development would follow.

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