

# Educational and Economic Empowerment of Women for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

This paper intended to explain how education may promote women empowerment and reduce the level of gender inequality in Nigerian society. Sustainable development is impossible in any country without the full and equitable mobilization of women who constitute more than half of the total world population. Research shows the activity rate of women is still inferior to that of men and argues that women are still relegated to the more traditional and mundane sectors as opposed to the modern socio-economic ones. Similarly, a spate of inequalities still exists between men and women in terms of education, economy and legal status in many countries at the expense of the latter. Related literature was reviewed to shed more light into the investigation and arguments. Economic barriers affecting women empowerment were also discussed. The study concluded that economic empowerment through education is a major key to women's total liberation, and a re-orientation is needed for the men to positively change their cultural values and practices in favour of women education.

**Keywords:** women education, empowerment, sustainable national development, gender equality, Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

Empowerment as a concept is to give power and authority to act. This has become prominent in recent times especially in discussing issues relating to women. This issue has become topical due largely, to glaring evidences that the female gender is discriminated against in all spheres of life and this limits the contribution of women to national development. Recent studies (UN, 2022; Amina, 2021) have shown that Nigerian women need to be both empowered economically and educationally to be integrated into the overall developmental process of the nation.

Empowerment of women should involve the removal of all forms of gender discrimination and creation of awareness through a new education, a new information system, and a new social orientation and culture re-evaluation especially of those attitudes and values relating to their educational and economical marginalization. In essence, it means that women would be well informed enough to be involved in making good and favorable policies that affect them and their children. Economic empowerment through education would therefore, be the best guarantee of a system that is gender-neutral and would raise women to a liberating level of thought and action.

At the Rio Conference, held between June 29<sup>th</sup> July 3<sup>rd</sup> in 1992, it was noted in chapter 24 of Agenda 21 that in twenty-two developing countries, including Nigeria the socio –economic condition of women had improved in relative terms, but at a low pace, vis-à-vis the objectives formulated at various international forum on women development. Besides, the reports passed the activity rate of women as still inferior to that of men and argued that women were still relegated to the more traditional and mundane sectors as opposed to the modern socio-economic ones. Similarly, they lamented that a spate of inequalities still exists between men and women in terms of education, economy and legal status in many countries at the expense of the latter.

The empowerment of women in any country in the world hinges critically on the question of poverty, power, policies, education, system and control. It is the power, policies and system that marginalize, oppress and

impoverish while it is the control over these elements that empower people everywhere in the world. One of the major sources of the relative economic powerlessness of women is lack of formal education (Maccoby, 2023). Economic empowerment through education is a major component of women's total empowerment and liberation. This is because political, social and cultural empowerments are often wild and incomplete without access to and control over resources. Thus, giving freedom of expression in English is meaningless to an illiterate who does not have educational opportunities, just as all human rights are rather empty without the right to life, food, safe drinking water and other basic necessities of life (UNICEF, 2017).

Although the principle of equality of men and women was recognized in both the United Nations chapter in 1945 and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the majority of development planners and executioners have not fully addressed the women's position in the process of development (Callaway, 2007, as cited in Stelmach, 2011, World Bank, 2018). Since the 1980s, more search light is beamed on women. The basis of this fortunate development is the advocacy by the United Nations since the 1970s, that women must be integrated in development.

The shackles and structures that hold down women who constitute more than 50% of our population are real impediments to the development of our nation. This is because when women are dispossessed, marginalized and backward, the children and youths will be backward and this will consequently lead to the backwardness of the nation. Mobilization of women for economy empowerment through education is imperative because it has been established through survey of poverty profile that, some 50% of Nigerian rural population that account for some 70% of the total population live in poverty and that more than 50% of this crusted poverty is among women (UNICEF, 2017). Some even insist that some 50% of the total national population live in poverty and that the majority of them are women. Worst still, as this national poverty has worsened since the mid- 1980s the proportion of poor women has increased in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Clark, 2015; Nnadi, Chikaire, Osuagwu., Ihenacho, & Egwuonwu, 2012). According to him, the number of illiterate in Africa has been on the increase since the 1980's and most of them are women. Indeed, Africa is said to harbor the largest proportion of illiterate women among all regions of the world.

Sustainable development is impossible in any country without the full and equitable mobilization of the women who constitute more than half of the total population. So, Nigeria has no credible existence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century without the full emancipation and empowerment of her women. It is on this background the paper is aiming to identify factors promoting women empowerment, barriers affecting women empowerment and discuss the roles of Nigerian women in development of modern 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

### **Education as a Factor for Promoting Women Empowerment**

A major instrument that prepares women for their role in social and economic development of the nation is education, which enhances the performance of the social and economic roles. The UN Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women of 1985, identified education as the basis for the full promotion and improvement of the status of women in paragraph 163. It is the basic tool that should be given to every woman in order to fulfill her roles as a full member of the society.

Education develops the totality of human being physically, mentally, morally, politically, socially, economically and technologically. Studies have shown that education is sine qua non to national development. Education is required for social change and enables women to have better social dignity, desired social behaviour and become aware of their civic rights and responsibilities. Education is a pivot upon which social change revolves. Both are inseparable and it is the most vital instrument of progress, development, peace and liberation of the mind. Education brings consciousness, the awareness of potentials and capabilities, which serve as motivation that lead to a positive response, and better development.

Laudable as education is, women have been at a disadvantage and have been discriminated against. Ajibade (2019) stated that the story of the education of girls and women was a chronicle of prolonged and sustained inequality, disadvantage and oppression. Plato as quoted Osinulu (2021) once lamented that "when women do not get the same education as men...the state, instead of being a whole is reduced to a half.

Unlike race or ethnicity, a students' gender is unrelated to class and background for the obvious reasons that the sexes are about equally distributed across socioeconomic strata. It has been observed that girls generally score high grades in both pre-primary and primary schools. They seldom play truancy or have problems associated with misbehaviour and require less remedial work than boys. Researchers such as Vanmeter (2009) and Dave (2018) observed that throughout most of the countries they studied, women have had greater success graduating from the junior school than men. However, a dramatic reversal takes place in the relative performance of males and females as the end of junior school approaches. After superior performance through all the lower classes, girls begin to fall behind as advance education approaches.

Women have, until recently, demonstrated lower aspiration towards higher institutions and if they do enroll, they have a higher tendency to drop out before graduation (Vanmeter, 2009). The explanation is not genetically based feminine predispositions, rather, an answer is to be found in traditional sex-role, socialization patterns which have made them to believe that they do not need to struggle to read like their male counterparts for the riches of their spouse would eventually come down to them. According to Blake (2011) and Margery (2007), as school progresses, males are encouraged to link education to career goals, whereas females are encouraged to value family over academic performance, females are taught to inhibit competitiveness, ambition and tenacity-traits that are associated with masculinity, instead females are encouraged to demonstrate obedience, nurturance and a desire to please.

There is a strong association between education and income. This is one area where education quite literally pays off though the rewards are not all the same for women as they are for men. Even with the same educational credentials, women make less than half the median income of men. The argument about whether or not the female anatomy shapes her destiny has by no means come to an end. It has taken a new dimension, albeit in different forms. One of its manifestations is the bias against women with a prior fixation of their roles in the society. The bias has slipped into many cultures and has become the norm in many parts of the world, the advent of modernization notwithstanding. This prejudice is demonstrated in the popular stereotypes whereby, boys are encouraged to be aggressive, competitive and independent while girls are socialized and rewarded for being passive and dependent. This sex role training of girls in passivity, dependence and inaction implies that while the boy-child can always bring out his potential by always aspiring to excel and move to greater heights, the girl-child cannot. Not only is she discouraged from excelling and asserting herself, she might be stigmatized if she does not heed the warning.

Under the African Traditional Religion, a woman is viewed as a fragile and weak sex who should be tolerated and directed or manipulated to play whatever role is assigned to her (Faseke, 2011). According to her, among the Yorubas, it was believed that a woman should not be made a head or a king. She can only be made a regent and thrown away as soon as a man suitable for the throne is found. In the southern part of Nigeria, a boy-child is preferred and has every advantage over the girl-child. In their opinion, a woman by nature is mischievous, frivolous and feeble-minded.

Cursory observations reveal that in the three major religions in Nigeria, women do not play prominent roles. There are no women Bishops in the churches neither are there female Imams in the mosques. In the traditional religion, a few women took part in some of the rituals. However, they are generally excluded from the Egungun cults, which often acted as an instrument of social control and this is used to keep women in subjection.

The National Policy on Women (2004) and the National Policy on Education (2013) clearly state that women's educational status in any nation correlates with its level of development. Consequently, the higher the level of women's educational status, the more developed the nation could be". However, observations show that women's educational statuses have been very low.

More work and time is required to change people's attitude and knowledge on equity and equality especially in the face of strong cultural and religious practices. In most developing countries like Nigeria, girls will need the support and motivation from their families and communities to help them attend and remain in school. In most cases, traditional norms and poverty in most developing countries have subjected girls to illiteracy and placed them second to their male siblings. These barriers represent the key factors to gender disparity in education

that girls are made to remain at home and help with house work and farming to prepare her for marriage and for others. It could be parental poverty (parent economic status resulting into lack of interest) and when they must send any of children to school, they prefer to spend their money on the male child who they believe will carry on the family name and take good care of them at old age.

### **Economic Barriers Affecting Women Empowerment**

Despite the crucial and basic contribution of women to the economy of the nation in production, processing, distribution in almost all fields of human endeavor, their indispensable labour is unacknowledged, unpaid for and poorly taken into account in national development plans. As a result of her educational and the social deprivation, the cycle of ignorance, oppression and indeed feminization and domestication, poverty is kept recurrent. According to Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA, 2016), women are oppressed by their double workload which is unappreciated and unremunerated.

The brunt of economic crisis is more punitive for women as they are faced with multiple demands and responsibilities. This is because a few of them are employed in the formal economy. As a result of low income and inability to buy essential commodities for the household, women have to exercise considerable ingenuity in an attempt to make ends meet. Women's time are mostly used for domestic chores and care of the nucleus and extended families, leaving little time for other areas of life, including education. Cutbacks in education support by the state left women who were responsible for children's fees and textbooks in very difficult situations. Nigeria women seem to be facing a variety of constraints many of which are gender specific and demonstrate the lowest development indicators in health, nutrition material mortality, fertility and education

Cursory observations show that most of Nigeria marriages are polygamous and the total fertility rate while declining still averages more than 6 births per women. This rate reflects prevailing attitude that value large families and base women's status primarily on their role as wives and mothers especially of male children. Nigeria UNICEF situational report on female adult literacy, listed lack of enrolment, finance and books among the problems affecting the Programme (UNICEF, 2017). According to it, female learners enrolled for class in large number. No sooner had they enrolled than they started absenting themselves from classes. The reason was that majority of the female were farmers and petty traders who fall out of classes immediately after the rains and on market days. They lacked the economic resources to take care of their needs and that of their children. Hence they absent themselves from classes and consequently at the time of graduation the enrolment would have dropped drastically.

In many communities in Nigeria, the birth of a girl – child is greeted with coldness. The girl – child is treated as an unwanted guest, especially, if the mother has given birth to two or three girls before her. The majority of women in Nigeria suffer from the exploitative and oppressive forms of behaviour towards them as member of subordinate class and as women. The ideology of patriarchy (defined as the belief in natural superiority of male gender) dominates the Nigeria society as in most other societies of the world. Thus everything else in the society is defines in relation to male interest, needs and concerns.

### **Women and Social Development**

Women, as mothers, play a great role in socialization process all over the world. They bear and nurture the children for the future of the nation. They pass on to them the values and culture of the community. The life of the nation and its continued survival therefore depend on the role played by its women. Acquisition of home management skills which enable them to have healthy happy and active families which would ensure a healthy viable population in the country and therefore contribute in no small measure to human resources and the survival of the nation is of paramount importance.

Generally, women are more readily available in the house than men. The children tend to confide in them more than the men folk. They assist a great deal in the education of their children and even engaged in home career counseling sessions. They perpetuate the benefits of education and ensure participation in the development process. In this way, women constitute a vital force in the development of the nation.



If a nation is to progress dramatically, women must be educated. This is important because they can only impart the knowledge they have acquired through education. When they have no formal education, the nation is adversely affected. The ideology of patriarchy (defined as the benefit in natural superiority of the male gender) dominates Nigerian society as in most other societies of the world and thus everything else in society is defined in relation to male interest needs and concerns.

Attempt to take care of women, even in politics are only demonstrated by a few appointments. Whenever they attempt to participate in politics, they are shielded from the decision making post only to be pushed to the women's wings of the political parties to continue to act as voter-catchers.

In the 1999 election, only four out of 475 aspirants who contested for senate seats at the primary level were women and none of them was successful. Only two women were elected to the federal house of representative. Then in year 2000, out of 206 Federal Board members, only 32 were females. Similarly, in the 2003 elections, out of 49 ministers, only six were women (about 12 %), no state had up to 3% representation of women with some states having no female in its Executive Council. In 2015, out of 109 senators, only 7 were women (12.5%). Between 2015 – 2019 there were only six women appointed as ministers out of the forty-two seats available. These tokenistic gestures are spurred by attempt to be seen to be in tune with the declaration of United Nations decade for women (1975-1985). Though there is slight improvement in the number of female appointees lately, the condition of Nigerian women has to change radically to move the nation forward.

Despite increasing urbanization, approximately 70% of the population still lives in rural areas, majority of whom are women, where they engage largely in agriculture and small – scale economic activities. Women are responsible for reproduction of labour force and production of over 70% of the nation's food supply but they have access to less than 20% of the resources available in the agricultural sector such as land, inputs (fertilizers, chemicals.) and credit.

## **CONCLUSION**

There are diverse groups championing the cause of women in Nigeria today. It is believed that if these groups cannot work properly, overcome divisive tendencies and ideology differences they can effectively serve as a pressure group that can ensure that government implement all the stipulation of international documents to which the government is a signatory.

Observations show that most Nigerian women live laborious lives with few possessions. Apart from the labour on their children, (feeding and clothing inclusive) they have to work hard in bearing burdens. They are the chief carriers of loads, grinding corn upon the millstone preparing tradition food much of which involves pounding, grinding and shopping all of which are time consuming. As a result of the multifarious claims on their time and little resources, few women manage to become major entrepreneurs.

The various demands on women may result in strain both physically and emotionally. Since women have the potentials to excel economically, like their male counterparts, harnessing these potentials could be of great benefit to the women themselves and the communities in which they live. Despite the recent increase in the wages of the Nigerian workers, many families still find it difficult to make ends meet. Men alone can no longer shoulder all the family responsibilities. The number of children should therefore no longer be seen as "given" by God. This is because the number of children plays a significant role in stress experienced by mothers. Logically, the more children there are in the family, the more money that will be required to take care of the family's needs.

Marriage and home related activities remain salient role for women. Therefore, women would only achieve spousal support for further education under the assumption that family and house hold roles would not be altered. Early marriage should therefore, be discouraged to enable the girl-child to obtain a good education before entering into the family life. Husbands' disagreement with women's role choice will always be associated with stress. Therefore, a re-orientation is needed for the men to positively change their cultural values and practices in favour of women education.

National and international organizations concerned with issues involving women education and development should take urgent measure towards correcting these gender inequalities and subsequently promote the role of women in sustainable development. The international laws on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, adopted in 1979 and ratified in 1992 by more than 100 member states of the United Nations including Nigeria should be implemented (UN, Women, 2015).

The girl-child must be properly socialized right from her early years and made to develop self-confidence and aspire to self-actualization. Awareness campaigns, workshops, lectures symposia, conferences and seminars should be organized to deliberate and brainstorm on strategies to be adopted to achieve in sustaining women education. Relentless effort should be made to sustain the awareness so that every woman can be drawn out of her traditional place in the kitchen and become a proper partner with her male counterpart in the nation's development.

There should be a public re-education for both men and women to positively change their cultural values and practices in favour of women education, elimination of prejudices, religion and customs that have negative effect on women education.

Nigeria as a United Nations member state should be actively involved in the implementation of various UN resolutions, calling for the integration of women into the mainstream of National development as a tool for sustainable development.

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