

Gender Inequality: The Effect on National Development

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Abstract

Gender discrimination in developing world is an unfortunate reality. It reflects and manifests in various dimensions despite the fact that women play a vital role in the development of any nation. Nigerian women, like their counterparts around the world face a lot of discrimination that limits their opportunities to develop their full potentials and impact their world positively. The paper seeks to re-emphasize the need for gender equity in all spheres of life; the need to empower women with liberty to function uninhibited in various affairs of life, this will enhance their productivity in all fields and ultimately reflect positively in national development. The feminist conflict theory was adopted. The paper suggests among other things favorable government policy that promote social and economic equality between women and men as this will ensure rapid progress and development of the nation.

Keywords: discrimination, equality, gender, national development,

Introduction

In the last two decades, according to Olaleye (2008), debates on the status of women and the need to integrate them into development process of any nation have dominated the national and international workshops, seminars among others. The perspectives, various interests and focuses had been on human rights, women inequality, women empowerment, girl-child education, feminism, female educational opportunities etc. These relative gender issues are more prevalent and obvious in Nigeria.

The issue of gender inequality can be considered as a universal feature of developing countries. Harriet Martineau, who was considered to be the first female sociologist was a 19th century social thinker. She challenged the status quo and advocated for women's equality with men. And she was a revolutionary figure in this regard. She also advocated for female education so that women could have more to look forward to than being subservient to a man and just raising a child. In our schools, women continue to face gender-based disparities and biases. To this day, math and science are often thought to be, "male" fields, while subjects in the humanities are considered to be the more natural province of women. Of course, particular subjects are not

inherently "male" or "female." However, gender norms are often informally inculcated at an early age, when elementary school teachers may encourage boys to pursue math and science and not do the same for girls. Further, boys generally receive more positive and negative attention in the classroom than do girls; as a result, the school environment can unintentionally become male-centered. These economic and cultural factors, coupled with institutional factors dictate the gender-based division of labor, rights, responsibilities, opportunities, and access to and control over resources.

In Nigeria today, the women folk have come a long way in businesses, politics, education, sports, and other professions. They have made an indelible mark in their efforts to conquer the limitations of the past which have sought to place them permanently in the kitchen and bedroom. Olomukoro (2012) opines that the National Policy on women was approved and adopted in Nigeria in the year 2000, of which the goal of the policy is the full integration of women into the social and political status as a means of developing the nation's human resources for national, economic and human development. Its objective included the provision of gender mainstreaming into all policies and programmes.



However, majority of Nigerian women have not been fully mobilized and empowered to contribute to national development. Else, we would not still be talking about good health for women, educational, economic, social, cultural, and political empowerment of women.

UNESCO (2002) states that women form a high percentage of the population, and as such they need quality literacy education to be able to contribute their quota to the development of the nation. There is now the realisation that sustainable human development cannot be effective if half of the human race (the womenfolk) remain ignorant, marginalised and discriminated against. However, the provision of quality literacy to them will greatly improve lives and will no doubt have a great and sustainable social and economic impact on the womenfolk, and the nation in general.

Gender

Gender can be seen as synonymous with sex but viewed rather from the social and cultural perspective and not from the biological. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English* (8th edition), gender is defined as ‘the fact of being male or female, especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences, not differences in biology’.

Ocha Gender Toolkit (2012) defined gender as the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female. According to World Health Organization (WHO) gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. Gender in its narrowest sense means socially constructed sex, be it female or male. It was in the 1970’s that American and English feminists started using the term ‘gender’ and ‘gender relations’. Hence the transition was made from ‘the study of the differences between the sexes... to relations between the sexes both in the sense of relations and conceptual relations’ (Hurtig, Kail, and Rouch, 1991, p.1). The word ‘gender’ was to develop at a remarkable pace in the 1980’s (Nairobi Conference, 1985) in English speaking and Latin American countries and also

within all international organizations; its usage would be facilitated by the holding of a succession of important conferences such as the Cairo conference (1994) and the Beijing Conference (1995) during which the team definitively established itself.

National development

The concept of national development has been viewed from different angles; social, economic, political and cultural. From whatever angle it is however viewed, it depicts positive change and development in socio economic and political conditions or situations of the society. According to Akintayo and Oghenekohwo (2004), development is a process of economic, social, political and cultural change engineered in a given society by the efforts of all stakeholders both internal and external. Osokoya (2008) sees national development as the development of a nation’s human and material resources, and education is perhaps the only means to prepare individuals for participation in national development.

Fadeyi (1995), in Oyitso and Olomukoro (2012) views development in terms of human potentials and capabilities in the context of relations with other social groups. He further emphasises that development means greater understanding of social, economic and political process, enhanced competence to analyze and solve problems of day to day living, expansion of manual skills, and greater control over economic resources restoration of human dignity, self-respect and equality.

The 2001 Human Development Reports (HDR), in Okojie (2011), states that the most basic capabilities for human development are to lead long healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for the decent standard of living, and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Thus, from the HDR dimensions, gender equality relates to differences between women and men in education and health, labor participation, participation in political decision making, and access to and power over economic resources. Thus, national development is seen as a multi-dimensional process involving the transformation and improvement of the



economic social and political situations.

Equality and Equity

In a perfect world, all people are created equal in terms of opportunities to develop and reach their full potentials. That is equality, a goal to which we can aspire. However, in reality, we know that we are a long way from living in a world in which every person is given opportunity to achieve his or her potentials. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English* (8th edition) equality is the fact of being equal in rights, status, advantages etc. it is a situation whereby the law treats everyone the same whether female or male, rich or poor, literate or semi-literate etc. Equity means fairness, that is, finding ways to help the disadvantaged and disempowered “catch up” with their more actualised fellow humans through opportunities for development and control over their lives.

Inequality on the other hand is the unfair difference between groups of people in society, when some have more wealth, status or opportunities than others. Gender inequality therefore is the idea and situation that women and men are not equal. It refers to the unequal treatment or perception of individuals wholly or partly due to their gender. Gender inequality stems from distinctions whether empirically grounded or socially constructed.

Reasons/ causes of gender inequality

The unequal treatment given to the female gender in respect to the male gender has many causes. Why do men outnumber the female in the government of many countries? The simple answer is because the males are seen as superior to the females. What was the proportion of men to women in 2007 in Nigerian National Assembly? Out of 109 senators in the Senate House, there were only nine (9) women in their midst. This means that the proportion of the women in the senate was 8.26% and that of men was 91.74% in 2007. This is one of the major challenges in Nigeria as well as a problem in the general Africa continent. In that same year, there were about twenty-seven (27) women in the House of Representatives out of 360 members of the House (Nigeria). The truth remains that the

unfair treatment given to the female gender is more in African continent unlike Europe and these unfair treatment has many causes. They include:

Women: culture and tradition

Culture is often used to justify inequality or to act as a constraint to equality. It is important we know what culture and tradition is. Culture can simply be defined as the way of life of a particular society or ethnic group while tradition is the custom or belief of a society. These two words are one of the reasons females are regarded as less important than males in most African countries. To the male folk, it is an anomaly (not cultural or not according to tradition) for a female to rule a community when there are capable men in such community who can take up such leadership positions. This has become the way of life (culture) and the belief (tradition) of the society we find ourselves. Thus, in order to see both the female and male gender as equal, there should be a serious revival in some cultures and traditions because culture is a living thing created by people and therefore can be changed by people. Hence, if women and men push for more opportunities and choices for themselves, their culture will adapt accordingly. This is not to say that change will always be easy or conflict free but change can occur as women and men push for it together.

Ifedili and Ifedili (2012) asserts that Nigerian women are stalled by culture, which made them vulnerable to effectively join the workforce and contribute to economic, and thus national development. This means that the actual energy that should be put into national development is not completely utilised. Fasuba (2000) states that Nigerian women, like in other developing countries of the world suffer from undue discrimination, marginalisation, and exploitation by the men folk through the implementation of their traditional beliefs which placed men as super human beings.

Women and religion

Some religions are sources of situations where women are generally expected to show allegiance and total submission to the men. Some teachings in some religions have caused more



pains than peace to the world. It is good to belong to any religious group but the truth remains that some of these religions do not give freedom to the women folk. Taking the two major religious groups in Nigeria as instances, today Christianity has different attitudes to the role of women and men within the church. Christians who hold traditional views believe that men and women are created equal in the sight of God. They believe that whilst men and women are equally important, they are also created to be different with different roles in society and the Christian church. For example, the Roman Catholics does not allow women priests. This is based on the belief that all priests are successors of Jesus apostles and as he only appointed men, and therefore the role is not open to women. Majority of the protestant churches accept equality of both sexes many of whom have women priests that are making waves. The “parliament “of the church of England(called the General Synod) decided to allow women priests in November 1992. This was a momentous decision, the motion having been the root of much controversy for many years, fiercely debated and constantly defeated. The first women priests were ordained into the Church of England in 1994. The debate continues as to whether or not women should be allowed to become bishops, with the last vote in 2012 rejecting the proposal.

There are diverging opinions among experts in Islamic theology concerning gender segregation. Some Islamic theologians has said that segregation of the sexes is not a requirement in Islam, as men and women used to interact during Mohammed’s time without any partitions for there is no evidence from the Qu’ran that requires segregation. Sharia law conflicts with natural secular principles especially in relation to women’s rights, on which Nigeria is formally based. It places a lot of restrictions on the rights of women. In spite of all these, women are not allowed to lead prayers in Islam in the congregation of men and women but the Muslim women are fighting back, while despotic governments and extremists battle for power, Islamic scholars, community activists and ordinary Muslims are waging a peaceful jihad on

male authority, demanding what they say are God-given rights to gender equality and justice.

Women and violence

Over a decade now, numerous cases of women’s rights violation such as acid baths, murder of women, rape, widow abuse and physical assaults, have occurred in Nigeria. Unfortunately, it is only extreme cases of women’s rights violation which results in death or permanent disability that earns the media attention and the police interests. Critical cases like female circumcision or genital mutilation, wife battery, marital rape, sexual harassment, verbal and emotional abuse, incest, termination of employment as a result of pregnancy etc., are not considered problematic enough to be highlighted in the media as well to be taken seriously by the police.

More so, the victims of violence especially domestic violence and rape hardly report to the appropriate authorities. An example of wife battery is viewed as a private affair between husband and wife. Moreover the tradition or culture and religious beliefs in Nigeria as a typical patriarchal society see the wife as a property of her husband and as such he has the moral right to beat her as penalty for insubordination and or perceived wrong doing. Even law enforcement agents do not readily entertain complaints of domestic violence because for them it is a minor offence of “two people fighting” or they laugh it off and term it a “husband and wife” problem that needs to be settled by the parties involved. In the case of rape, some women will not voice it out because of the social stigma it will leave on them. Also in Nigeria, there are no adequate laws to protect women from violence. Example marital rape is not recognized as an offence in any system of law in Nigeria, even when the wife is wounded in the course of the forced sexual intercourse.

Women and education

Education, according to Fafunwa (1980) is a means of developing abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour that are of positive value to the society in which the individual lives. Daniel (2010) asserts that education remains an important means of making members of the



society advance in their thinking and ability in life that is, a means of leveling the pervading social inequality holding sway within the society. It is based on the above that we can conclude that education emancipates. Like literacy, it breaks the shackles of ignorance, poverty and sets one free to make appropriate decisions, conduct research, construct, invent, write and promote cultures as well as strive for the betterment of mankind.

Education thus, should be the right to which every child must have access because it is the most potent and valuable instrument for socioeconomic development. It is a vital tool for national development and integration. That may explain the UNICEF (2011) report which states that when children have access to a rights – based quality education rooted in gender equality, we create a ripple effect of opportunity that impacts generations to come. That is one reason education ought to be readily accessible to all. However, the access is not wide enough to absorb all because of socio-cultural, economic, religious and other constraints. These inequalities condemn thousands of children to a life without quality education, to a life of missed opportunities and aborted dreams. To eliminate gender disparity and reduce the gender gap in education, there is the need for a change in people’s mindsets, an educational system and structures that will take care of the constraints bedeviling it. In Nigeria, despite the free education, (FGN, 2004) at all levels, access to education for all remains so on paper. Though women and girls are seen to be the most affected by the disparity in access to education, there are very strong evidences to show that the males are also affected in the Igbo speaking states of the country. (Nnachi), 2010).

The importance of women education

The gains of education are endless. For instance, it provides opportunities for a better life. Fatimayin (2004) opines that education and by extension, literacy is of great value for personal emancipation and survival. This means living a quality life by meaningfully participating in politics, enjoying economic fairness, being socially acceptable and having personal fulfillment. To cap it all, Ofoegbu (2009) asserts

that education empowers citizens for sustainable development and increases their capacities to transform their visions of society into reality. According to her, it is an instrument not just for some or a few but for all. In a related vein, Onukogu (2002) argues that before independence, Nigeria had a workforce to be reckoned with because its citizens ranked among the most educated globally and that based on this, Nigeria was billed to provide the needed leadership to liberate Africa from colonialism as well as acquire the needed technology for development. However, he laments that education which enabled Nigeria attain that pre-independence feat has over the years been ignored. Based on the foregoing, both male and female children need equal access to quality education.

According to Nnachi (2010) equity in gender considerations refers to providing equal opportunities and treatment to all irrespective of their sex and that if more favorable consideration is tailored towards one of the sexes, it is inequity. Equity in education must therefore be a policy priority to drive national development. Nigeria must plan for the future by adopting the Chinese proverb- “*if you are planning for tomorrow, sow rice..., if you are planning for a lifetime, educate people*”. It is however ironic that the society which stands to benefit from education of all her citizens is the main hindrance to her own development. This is because the society is made up of parents who dictate, carry out socio-cultural norms, religious rules and make family decisions. It is these same parents who to a large extent deny their children and wards access to and retention in education.

Ways of sustaining women in education

Kester, Okemakinde and Ejeremwa (2005), are of the opinion that women can be empowered to sustain the economy through education by the under listed points:

1. The Nigerian government should emphasise the importance of education of female population not only in arts, the humanities and social sciences but also in science and technology.



2. There should be sensitisation of the parents and key stakeholders about the importance of female students in learning.
3. Teachers should assign female students to leadership positions, and use female educators and professionals as role models for career talks and guest lectures.
4. Teacher should encourage the female students to participate fully in action based learning, and male students should not continue to be allowed to dominate classroom or laboratory activities.
5. Educationists should avoid the exclusive use of male generic nouns or pronouns.

There should be positive motivation and reinforcement of female students by teachers. Akinsanya (2011) asserts that feminists have advanced the issue of empowerment of women through education as a means of challenging patriarchal ideology of male dominance and women subordination, transforming the structures and institutions that perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequity, as well as equal opportunity for women at all levels in all spheres of human endeavors.

Challenges to Nigerian women in contributing effectively to national development

In spite of the seemingly remarkable achievements recorded by women across the globe, Nigerian women remain severely constrained in their efforts to play a major and decisive role in the socio-political and economic development of the nation. Agu (2007) blames the colonial authorities for setting a dangerous stage and precedence for the weakening of the influence and role of women through what has been described as the “abrogation of the social stability” which the Nigerian society had enjoyed before the coming and intrusion of the British colonialists. The result of this dislocation was the relegation of the role and functions of women to the background in the Nigerian society, particularly in the areas of leadership and political responsibility.

Fasuba (2000) asserts that Nigerian women, like in other developing countries of the

world suffer from undue discrimination, marginalisation, and exploitation by the men folk through the implementation of their culture of religious and traditional beliefs which placed 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. Women on their part do not often see themselves as viable instruments of political participation and national development. The complacency of women in several aspects of national life not only reduces their capacity for maneuver in a male dominated society but helps in perpetuating the culture of reducing women to positions and roles of second fiddle. In business, most women do not often involve themselves in high profile ventures rather they prefer to engage in petty trading where the gains and losses are articulated at the end of the day.

Agu (2007) believes that women see politics as a dirty game, a business which involves intimidation, rigging, assassination, kidnapping of opponents and all sorts of electoral violence which are brought into play in order to gain an undue advantage over opponents.

Conclusion

There are many advocates of gender equality. Parents should train their children both male and female educationally and equally. Governments and individuals should organise women empowerment programmes in many countries to reduce the unfair treatment given to women. There are some traditions that really require re-branding to meet what the current society needs. Without this rebranding, gender inequality in many African countries will keep increasing instead of declining.

Recommendation

Empowering Nigerian women towards national development should be a matter of national priority which demands the attention and genuine commitment of every responsible member of the society. It is along this line that the paper feels inclined to put across some recommendations which could be brought into play for the realisation of the noble goals of women’s contributions to national development.



The Nigerian government has a crucial role to play in providing an enabling environment for Nigerian women to rekindle their hope and faith in the ability of the system to provide avenue for development for its people irrespective of sex, age, ability, religious inclination and other mundane considerations.

The Nigerian nation owes the women folk the responsibility of removing those artificial and institutional barriers based on religion, culture or traditional considerations which have incapacitated the ability of Nigerian women to participate effectively and freely in national affairs particularly at the political and economic levels. Women on their part should strive to break through developmental barriers with great determination, perseverance, unbreakable solidarity and genuine desires to conquer the natural challenges of their origin.

Women organisations and movements have important roles to play by seeking to protect the interest of women. These organizations and movements should shoulder the responsibility of seeing that institutions of society are not deliberately structured to place hindrances and constraints on the paths of women.

The Ministries of Women Affairs all over the Federation need to play a great role in bringing to focus the fundamental challenges of the women folk which the government and other institutions of state owe the responsibility to tackle. To achieve this, constant pressure should be brought to bear on the authorities to create positions of responsibility and advancement for the women folk. The nation needs to understand that laying a solid and stable foundation for the

girl child is a vital link in the overall development and advancement of the society. The girl child should not be denied exposure, socialisation and refinement of modern education as a fundamental prerequisite for tackling the numerous challenges of adult life.

There is need for workshops, seminars and conferences to highlight and showcase successful women leaders and unionists as models who are enlightened and are able to know their rights and obligation without undue confrontation with authorities. Federal, states and local government should work hand in hand to support the effective implementation of women education programmes in the country.

Educated women should work hard to ensure that they raise social awareness of large number of women in the rural area, through effective educative programmes, and mass communication as these will help to improve their self-confidence.

Every women forum, whether in the city or rural areas should be effectively utilized as an avenue to educate the illiterate ones among them on skills, knowledge and values that will help them to improve their social, economic and political life style. Parents, guardian, and the society as a whole must allow and encourage their female children to enroll in schools, overcome the paralysis of illiteracy and acquire a proper awareness of their potentials, rights and higher responsibilities in society. Literacy programmes should be incorporated with life skills components so that women can be well equipped to perform their roles more effectively.

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