

The Challenges of Rural Women Participation in Development in Delta State

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Abstract

The paper addressed the crucial roles played by women in community development process and the present subordinate position of women in Nigeria, exacerbated by patriarchy. It was also directed towards encouraging and stimulating the rural women towards improving their standards of living and inculcating in them, the spirit of self-development. Apart from raising the social consciousness of women about their rights, the study created awareness about the plights of women. The study which utilized the Marxian theory of female subordination and the secondary source of data revealed that women are veritable tools in community development in Nigeria. It further revealed that women in Nigeria are faced with hardships bordering on their gender. However, the paper recommended that appropriate laws be enacted to address the woman's question occasioned by penalties while the existing policies and laws on the rights and plights of the women should be vigorously implemented to the letter.

Keywords: Woman's Question, Community Development, Rights, Subordination, Impediments, Programmes etc.

Introduction

Rural change according to FAO (1995); Ugiagbe and Osunde (2006) cannot be effective without the recognition of the activities and contribution of rural women to agricultural productivity and their vital efforts in ensuring the availability of food and well being for the household. Prakash (2003) contended that irrespective of the development achieved, women play crucial roles in rural development in various countries of the world. Otite (2006) asserted that women's 50percent of the Nigerian population is not proportionate to the 36 percent of their total labour force. Otite (2006) and Aina (1995) noted that women dominate the rural agricultural economy and the informal sector where they account for about 60 percent of the labour force and generate 90 percent of the domestic food needs in households.

Ofuoku and Emuh (2009) observed that rural women are a great force in the business of moving agricultural and rural development forward. They further noted that it has come to a point where the women have taken-over the roles of men in agriculture in Nigeria which according to them constitutes a serious challenge to the encouragement of women in promoting rural development. While we recognize the work of men in urban and rural areas, the "wageless" or non-wage earning duties of women in the household are often ignored. They are not included in the statistics of working mothers (Otite, 2006).

The socio-economic problems in developing countries have encouraged different communities to evolve strategies which enable them to uplift their standards of living and promote their social functions. Ojukwu (2013) observed that in an attempt to address their community problems, women in particular engage in activities that facilitate the process of community development. He noted that traditionally, there has been a perception that community development was a male activity but however, the history of development efforts in most developing countries have shown that community development has always existed with women leading the way.

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The Woman's Question and Global Response

Over the years, complex issues for debate about women include: that of the contradictions inherent in African patriarchal social structures and the extent to which these are detrimental to women gaining social status and prestige. Secondly, is the problem of exogenous cultures and their impact on African social structures, particularly gender relations. Olabisi (1998) also identified another contention which revolves around giving greater priority to the education of women. This reasoning gave little recognition to the traditional economic and socio-political status of women. Since the jobs in modern industry, trade and offices are held predominantly by men, the "productivity" attitude and outlook of men and women begin to diverge. Thus, the division of sex roles with men holding the majority of the skilled and the supervisory work in towns and women in the unskilled and subservient jobs is often perceived by both men and women as "natural".

It is worthy of note that despite urbanization, women are still constrained in taking full advantage of urban opportunities (Olabisi, 1998). Apart from educational deficiencies and the structure of the family which circumscribes women's economic autonomy, Lloyd (1967) identified another restrictive factor. Men, Lloyd asserted, are faced with conflicting interests. On the one hand, the husbands may be jealous of the opportunities enjoyed by their wives when in contact with other men. The notion that a man's "personal prestige" is at stake is another extension of Lloyd's treatise. Similarly, Little and Price (1967) stated that in the economy where sex differences are much less important, a woman is potentially in a position in which she can earn as much as her husband and perhaps even occupy a job that will give her authority over men. The idea is that this increased female status may be threatening to men. This fear reaches back to traditional attitude towards women and a major obstacle to women success in the professional world.

In his contributions, Modo (2016) stated that women in Africa are valued and recognized for their role in the continuity of kinship groups. That Africans have their cultures which women are continually expected to uphold in order for the established social structure to continue undisturbed. Modo (2016) concluded however, that a woman is believed to be very close to nature and is therefore expected to uphold the norms and values of her group in order that natural forces and ancestral spirits might always look kindly to the group's request. Modo's thesis constitutes one of the restrictive factors about women development and empowerment in most parts of Africa. Pauline (1974) also observed that despite their caring nature, African women can respond to threats like any other group when occasion calls for it. She cited the Aba Riot of (1929-30) as a case in point.

In 'what keeps women in their places'. Laying (1989) suggested that the different beliefs and customs of societies placed women in their positions that are below the men. Such beliefs and customs include mythology and folklore used in the non-industrial societies to explain and justify the status quo. The pre-eminence of man is also emphasized in the Adam and Eve narratives in the Bible. Moonlight tales about when women used to marry men and life in such matriarchal ancient communities, are part of the conservative social learning for children. This reminds men to be ever vigilant to protect their favoured status of presently being the women's husbands.

In many cultural settings in Nigeria, the activities of women are regulated and restricted during their menstruation periods. Modo (2016) narrative had it that in some homes, women are confined to their rooms and are forbidden to cook food throughout the period because they were considered to be impure and polluted. Further narrations from Modo noted that since women are economically inactive during this period and yet life continues unobstructed, the children in the community might see their labour as secondary and that of the men as far too vital to be restricted by taboos.

In non-industrial societies where women excelled in businesses and literally dominated men, the men are likely to be antagonistic and unfriendly. Nadel (1952) in his ethnography of the Nupe and Gwari peoples of North Western Nigeria, gives a detailed account of this projected antagonism. Among the Nupe, only women are witches and witchcraft here was organized according to Modo (2016) as an invisible group likened to human associations and ironically the recognized head of this deadly and sinister women group was the official leader of Nupe Women Traders' Association. It was however believed that this woman leader was the only good female witch. The case studies on witchcraft victims in Nupe-land, showed that in the majority of the cases, the suspected witch was an older and usually domineering female who attacked younger men who were connected to her in-terms of property or other kinship linkages. Several International Organisations such as the United Nations, World Bank, Organization of African Unity and the Economic Commission for Africa have been concerned about the woman's question. Olabisi (1998) noted that for a long-time, efforts were geared towards the economic empowerment of women by sponsoring programmes that could increase their access to economic resources.

Ojukwu (2013) however observed that rural women's participation in the development process has been the focus of intensive debates. The plights of the women in the third world, participating in the development process, has been recognized by the 1995 Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the advancement of women held in Kenya, the Beijing Declaration and the United Nations Development Funds for women in 2000.

These meetings recognized the need for the empowerment of women and equality between women and men as prerequisites for achieving political, social economic, cultural and environmental security among the peoples of the world. However, world realities continue to show strong barriers to women's empowerment. It was not until the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985) that the woman's question started to enter the political agenda in Nigeria. Various national development plans (before and post independence), were gender blind and gave no specific place to gender issues. In response however to the woman's question, various African Governments, International Agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Activists became concerned according to Olabisi (1998) about the need to raise the socio-economic status of women through access to functional education, economic opportunities, and health facilities.

Theoretical Framework of Female Subordination

Marxian theory of female subordination

The subordination and restriction placed on women has been attributed by the Marxists to the emergence of private property; particularly private ownership of the forces of production. Man's economic dominance provides him with much wealth and the urge to bequeath one's money to an offspring and to no one else, bringing into existence monogamy. There is also the need to have control over the women to ensure there is no dispute over the paternity of the heir. Engels argued that the predominance of the man in marriage is simply the consequence of his economic predominance and will vanish with it automatically. Marx argued that despite the evils associated with capitalism, its industries created new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and a rotation between the sexes.

With time he argued further, female labour will free the women from economic dependence on their husbands and ultimately from male domination at home. For Marx and Engels however, true equality between the couples will finally be attained in a socialist society where all forces of production will be communally owned. The wife will no longer be a mere property for the production of the child or heir because private property will no longer exist for anyone to inherit. Finally, the coming together of a man and woman will be on mutual affection, Engels observed.

The Contribution of Women to Community Development in Nigeria

In Nigeria, women represent about 49percent of the population with their productive and reproductive functions cutting across such activities as performing household chores, income earning activities, community participation and community management roles. There are things which only the woman is expected to do in Nigeria. She alone may prepare the food, organize a dance group as well as sing to entertain a working party during community development activities. Although the man may give financial assistance, she alone selects the ingredients and prepares the meals suitable for the occasion (Otite, 2006).

Women groups contribute to the development of their communities by raising funds for their churches and other community development projects. Money accruing from such fund raising activities is used for revival meetings, payment of stipends to teachers in the schools owned by these churches, furnishing and helping the poor, sick and the bereaved in the community.

In their bid to contribute to the development of their communities, women groups embark on prayers for peace in times of wars. They refer to the fighting groups as "our children" hence the prayer for peace. Apart from praying for peaceful elections and quick resolution of crisis, there are instances where women have volunteered themselves as women of comfort to the soldiers. Little (2014) noted that prior to the development of formal social welfare system in West Africa, women voluntary organizations played extensive roles in catering for the sick, the poor and the disabled in Nigeria. Egboh (2007) narrated how women associations such as Umuade and the married wife association of various village groups in the Eastern part of Nigeria, organized various activities for the welfare of members of their natal and marital homes; apart from raising funds for community development.

Ojukwu (2013) explained why women in Igboland in Nigeria hold "August Meetings" every year. To him, it was a period of re-union for the home and abroad women who were married from outside the community to interact with and know more about their peoples, customs and traditions. The gatherings give the women the opportunities to be integrated into their community development projects as stakeholders which guaranteed their faith in the community and its activities. It is also an avenue for the women to discuss health matters, children welfare, marriages and family life, etc. From the foregoing, the August gathering was put in place to enhance women's contribution to the development of their communities and has become the rallying point for women in the service to their communities. Much has been said and written about the "Adazi-ani community in its quest for self-help in Aniocha Local Government Area of Anambra State. Women in their August gatherings have impacted tremendously on the development of this community. The August meetings according to Ojukwu (2013) have not been without some challenges.

Oguomu (2007); Ijere (2011); Okoli (2012); have identified areas of socio-economic development where women have contributed profoundly at the grassroots which include; agricultural development, health projects, establishment of vocational skill acquisition centers, award of scholarship to indigent students, care for orphans and the disabled etc.

Impediments to Effective Women Participation in Community Development

Current statistics continue to point to the fact that Nigeria women face untold hardships which are often linked to their gender while gender inequality continues to be rooted in traditional practices, values and norms; exemplified in women's productive and reproductive functions, especially those which underlie gender divisions of labour in the society.

Discriminatory customs and laws

The customary practices of many societies are biased by subjugating women to men and undermining their self-esteem. The consequences of these practices and overall impact of gender bias, has established a feeling of inferiority in women thus placing the women in disadvantaged positions and often times make women to over play their femininity by accepting that they are weaker sexes.

Illiteracy. There is a high rate of illiteracy among rural women in the less developed countries of the world particularly in Nigeria. Mutangadura (2005) noted that women are more likely to be less educated than men. This condition was predicated on the belief that the girl or woman would end up in another family; discarding the father's name for the would-be-husband. Some fathers therefore concentrated on giving formal education to their male children at the expense of the female child. Low level of education is one of the known hindrances to women development and active participation in community development. Ekong (2003) observed with dismay that most rural women do not understand even a display of instructions by line diagrams and are not capable of adopting improved agricultural practices. It is so complicated that rural women cannot understand innovations and contemporary trends in most human endeavours. Apart from their inability to access credit and extension messages, they are unable to know their rights and identify economic support mechanisms that are available (Ofuoku and Emuh, 2009).

In adequate access to credit and low income base

It is true that over 90percent of women live below the poverty line in Nigeria and cannot own or inherit property even though the subsistence farming in Nigeria is predominantly done by the women. Because of their financial base women in Nigeria cannot run for elected positions, set up businesses, further education and engage in self development that will enhance their participation in community affairs.

The role of the Nigeria woman in the economic sphere is largely inhibited because of the lack of access to family land, capital and control over her own time and the products of her labour. As Olabisi (1998) rightly noted, most of the time, husbands manage the family farm, keeping the proceeds of export crops under their control while wives use earnings from food crops and trading to meet the family's daily needs. The ability of the women to participate in independent economic activities is thus limited by social obligations to their husbands. Again, women have been confined to activities which were of secondary importance and spend a lot of effort on activities that aided household consumption rather than capital accumulation. Their products were mostly consumed within the household while they marketed the more important products for their husbands.

The question arising therefore according to Olabisi (1998) is with women's desire for economic independence as a result of the current growing financial pressures and how can they combine the burden of home-maker/worker roles? Other factors include: lack of affirmative action quota, patriarchal modes and practices, women's legal status, property rights and inheritance laws, HIV/AIDs pandemic, opportunities for women, etc.

Conclusion

The paper has dispassionately captured the present subordinate position of Nigeria women in the culture of male supremacy exacerbated by patriarchy capitalist ideology, foreign religions and the sex-biased legal structure. In addition, it also identified the crucial roles women played in the process of community development as well as the challenges impeding on their contributions. It is gratifying to note that at the individual level, the women in Nigeria are not only responding to changes around them but are also reshaping their own reality. For example, familial relations tend to be losing their hold on the individual life. Many women now marry for love and not because they are forced and freely go out of a relationship when it seems socially unbearable. Law reforms giving recognition to women's rights to land and property is the first step necessary to promote gender equality in land property rights. The law as an instrument of social change needs to be supported by an efficient law enforcement mechanism devoid of corruption. In addition to law reforms, the only way to meaningfully contribute to the emancipation of woman in Nigeria, is to broaden access to quality education which will in-turn advance their position in society. Attempts are also currently being made to expose girls to science education in addition to various empowerment programmes at all levels of government. Finally, although there is still much to be done in bridging the gap between the men and the women, it is cheering to note that the woman's question has come on-board the national and international agenda for appreciate attention.

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