




THE ARCHIVES:

**MULTI-DISCIPLINARY JOURNAL
OF ARTS, HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
(MJAHS)**



No. 1, Vol. 2

Department of History
Emmanuel Alayande College of Education,
Oyo.

2010

TRENDS IN THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA

BY

OGUNBUNMI, O. A.

Department of History

Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Oyo.

Abstract

This paper examines the salient contributions of women towards the nation's development. It identifies the processes through which women are empowered and the efforts of various organizations such as the United Nations Agencies like UNICEF, World Bank, as well as Beijing Declaration of 1995 and other Non-Governmental Organizations. In the discussion, attention is drawn to the laudable achievements of women in the past, present and the challenges of the new Millennium. It further encourages women to awake and participate effectively in every sector of the economy be it education, agriculture or politics. The work further condemns the injustice faced by womenfolk from their male counterparts and attempts to expound various achievements made by women towards the growth and development of the country by mentioning their names and their positions. It concludes by recommending some measures needed to adopt towards ensuring full-participation in the politics and government of the country.

Introduction

For a number of decades and in all regions of the world, women have been emerging from their traditional roles into wider roles in their respective societies. They have become more sensitized to their own plights with the gradual collapse of ancient barriers of custom and superstition. Some progress have been made in their determination towards achieving equality for women and establishment of values of social justice, equity, democracy and respect for human rights. As part of the on-going progress globally, women have began to seek for their rights in all ramification of human endeavour. The roles of women in the workforce vary according to the structure, needs, customs and attitudes of the societies in which they live. In prehistoric times, women and men participated almost equally in hunting and gathering activities to obtain food. With the development of the agricultural communities, women's work revolved more around the home. They prepared food, made clothing and cared for children while also helping to plow fields, harvest crops and tend domestic animals. Some major changes are now occurring in industrial nations steadily increasing the proportion of women in the labour force and decreasing family responsibilities.

Since the 1979 constitution in Nigeria that legislated against discrimination on gender grounds, awareness has began to grow to the fact that circumstances were ripe for a campaign to improve the condition of women. The campaign was carried out through the organisation public enlightenment programmes, to encourage women's participation in national

development. This step was necessitated by the fact that there is a need for commitment to equal rights.

Within the last two decades 1975-1995, four conferences organized by United Nations on women have had as their theme Development, Equality and Peace (Amadu 1998). Nigeria has not been left out of this global discussion. Yet the situation of women in Nigeria has not really improved nor has their role in development increased as participants or beneficiaries of the process until recently. The on-going democratic government of Obasanjo administration included a number of women in his government among whom are Dr. (Mrs.) Dora Akinyuli NAFDAC Director whose laudable achievements have won the hearth of patriotic Nigerians and even the International world. Others are Mrs. Ngozi Okorji Nwenla, the Finance Minister, Alake Dabiri a journalist who won a senatorial seat at Abuja, Dr. Mrs. Ita Giwa, Ekpo Iyo personal Assistant to the President and many others even at the grass root level. If women would still be given more chances they will perform better and will continue to be active agents of development process in Nigeria.

Women Empowerment

The word empowerment has become prominent in the recent time. Oxford Dictionary explain empowerment as a "a means to give power and authority to act". Different scholars and authors have tried to give meaning to the word. Bernard (1986) conceived women empowerment as a concept of knowledge of the rights of women concerning their major roles, reproductive, productive and emancipative. Stromquist 1986

looked at Women Empowerment from a political perspective and opined that Empowerment of Women should not be considered merely as the capture of state power but should envisage a process of re-defining the whole concept and structure of politics with a view to empower the masses especially women. Empowering, to her is not a question of inheriting or securing power but re-creating it. They need empowerment to become better mother who would carry out their roles of nurturing with basic knowledge of child development and simple child psychology so as to reduce infant/mortality rate. Women are to be empowered to gain economic assets through income generating activities. It is also power to gain self-confidence, enhance self-concept and gain ability to communicate and participate in civil life at all levels, community and global levels (1999-2006). In this regard, education is one of the major weapons, the bedrock to assist women to perform their reproductive roles more comfortably. Based on these concepts women empowerment simply means supporting women to perform the process of providing the necessary tools, skills, and resources to function effectively. It also means as investing in women with moral and financial supports to enable them maximize their potentials.

The empowerment should also be linked to the quest for equal opportunities at all levels contrary to the ancient barriers of women relegation, de-centered and de-nature women. In fact, the culture harassed almost inevitably under the matrilineal message the male ego.

Various International Agencies such as UN, EC, UNICEF, IMF and World Bank have played increasingly significant roles in the empowerment of women. Sessary & Obebiyi (1998). Sessary and Obadare 1998 also critically explored the contributions of some of the major agencies of the world body to the welfare of women in Nigeria. Their conclusion is that bodies such as UNICEF have made and continue to make significant contributions in diverse ways to the empowerment of Nigeria women.

Arien and Ukeje (1999) also included important roles played by global actors in enhancing women rights.

Women Movement Towards Liberation:

The Nigerian women in born into a culture of male supremacy as exacerbated in the general preference for a male child. (Olabisi 1998). This was true in the past because sons were believed to provide more economic support for the parents while girls leave home at marriage and subsequently become their husband "Properties".

The women of today has moved from the tradition-bound, pre-literate society to an individualized one such that the nurturing of the ideal is part of the evolution and not as some argue that women liberation is a western inspired initiatives. Before the advent of the United Nation's decade for women (1976-1985) there had been formidable efforts by some indefatigable women to publicly address the issue of subordination, subjugation, exploitation of women and inequality between men and women. In 1948 five courageous women

spearheaded the first women's rights convention. They assembled over 300 women to discuss the social, civil and religious conditions and right of women (Anamah 1989).

This was the formal beginning of the women's rights movement which is still in progress today. It is in the spirit of the convention that women now echo and re-echo their rights not only in America, Europe, Asia or Africa but throughout the world.

As at 1970s only a few women occupied executive world positions, prominent among them were Late Indira Gandhi, Gold Meir, Bandarannaikē, Magret Thatcher, Benezir Ali Bluitto and Corazon Aquino. By 31st July, 1989 only eighty (80) out of one hundred and fifty-nine (159) members of the UN had women at the helm of affairs but today the story has largely changed. By the end of 1995 was the official conclusion of 10 years that the nations of the world allotted to the advancement of women and the real beginning of the challenge. The decade close with the world conference tagged NGO 95 (No-governmental Organization held in Nairobi between 15th and 26th July 1995. the conference hosted one hundred and fifty-seven countries including the representative of the United Nations agencies. The momentous discussions dealt fiercely with high political issues like scuffles arising from opposition to liberation, movements, and women rights, economic and cultural questions. Recommendations were set in motion with the imperative of empowering women throughout the developing countries. It was envisaged that by the end of the second decade a lot of achievement would have been recorded in bringing women to the fore-front in their various countries.

Empowerment Process In Nigeria:

A lot of concerns are now being expressed towards women rights all over the globe. In fact, Nigeria, for example, now lays much emphasis on it. It was once stated by Hillary Clinton that "human rights are women rights". (Beijing, 1995).

Hillary Clinton.

Beijing, 1995.

It needs to be stated here that the United Nations has insisted the Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) be established. The document of this programme seeks the prohibition of all retrogressive and obnoxious practices which could dehumanized women in single or multiple dimensions: either social, cultural, religious, educational, economic and political lives of the people. Efforts to check the discrimination against women have also received wide acceptance. So the goals of women development and empowerment are now negotiable.

Besides there were four world conferences on women development in which government institutions and Non-Governmental Organisation, the media and even the male columnists have lent their support. Nigeria gave its full support to Beijing declaration and in fact post Beijing support has led to the establishment of the organization "Women in Nigeria (WIN). Another body which is committed to the development of women in Nigeria is women Development Foundation. Shortly

before fourth conference on women was held, developments have taken a change for the better. This happened against the usual unfriendly atmosphere. Women received wider acceptance and acknowledgement on issues of gender in the past. The 1990s women participation in political affairs of the country had increased and since has continue to receive encouragement.

On the Nigerian scene, it was noted that some awareness had been created to redress some of the grievances of women. The 1979 constitution provides a legal framework which legislated against discrimination on the ground of sex. Women in the advance countries of Asian/Europe and America had long assumed leadership positions. Among them was Indira Gandhi – Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Golda Meir – Prime Minister of Israel and Mrs. Margret Thatcher of Britain as Prime Minister. Thatcher was able to win three consecutive elections. She had now been appointed to the upper House of Lords: as Baroness. Corazon Aquino on her part was one time Prime Minister of Philippines. She ruled the Asian country for six years.

In Nigeria, some positive changes are gradually coming up on the part of women leading to increase participation in political and economic sectors.

The table below shows the leading women activists who have contributed immensely to the growth and development of the country.

SN	Names	Position held/ function
1.	Dr. Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome Kuti (1900-1978)	A Nigerian activist who fought for the suffrage and equal rights for her country women long before the second wave of the women's movement in United States. She championed the causes of the poor and down trodden women and joined the anti colonial movement struggling for Nigeria's independence.
2.	Mrs. Magret Ekpo	She is from Eastern part of Nigeria she played crucial roles in the organization of women in Nigeria.
3.	Chief (Mrs.) Wuraola Esan	She is an educationist
4.	Professor (Mrs.) Jadesola Akande	A Professor of law who later became Vice Chancellor at Lagos State University she was commissioned by the Federal Ministry of information to identify various practices and customs inimical to women development.
5.	Professor (Mrs.) Grace Alele Williams	She was the first women to become a Vice Chancellor

		(V.C.) in Nigeria (University of Benin).
6.	Professor (Mrs.) Eiolanle Awe	A Professor of Cultural History Who Wrote A Lot Of Books On Women in National Development.
7.	Chief (Mrs.) Fola Ighodalo	First female Senior Advocate of Nigeria.
8.	Chief (Mrs.) Toyin Olakunrin	A Chartered Accountant of Long Standing.
9.	Chief (Mrs.) Bola Kuforiji-Olubi	A Captain of Industry.
10	Chief (Dr.) Mrs. Dora Akuyili	NAFDAC Director General who have used her position to turn the menace of fake drugs into oblivion. She was later appointed Minister for Communication more on her position and from there joined the World Bank. She was later appointed as Minister for information which she has recently resign and join UPGA Party in her state.
11.	Dr. Mrs. Okonjo Nweala	A Minister for Finance who supported Obasanjo Administration on Economic Recovery and Transformation.

SOURCE: Oyo State: Ministry of Women Affairs Secretariat Ibadan, 2005

There are many other eminent personality from the human world participate significantly towards the political development of Nigeria, evident in many ways but few example will suffice. Firstly a large section of the women in the vast Northern region of the country were denied political rights until the 1999 constitution was enacted whereby basic education was compulsory at all level.

In recent times, women from various geo-political ethnic groups in Nigeria have not only shown their interest in contesting for various posts but have actually contested from the Local Government level to the Presidential level.

In education, hitherto males were given preference while the female (younger girls) were offered in marriage. This custom or tradition was a manifestation of sheer ignorance. Education denied is ignorance accepted. Today's women are aware of the usefulness of education and thus have risen up to the challenges. The goal of this strategy (women empowerment campaign) is to make women aware of their rights so they can use their capabilities to enhance their own status, break every barrier that are inimical to development and participation actively in the developmental process of the nation.

Women And Empowerment In The Society

No nation can truly develop as long as women are pushed to the background and dis-empowered. During the visit of Harry Bush (The wife of George Bush) to Aso Rock in Abuja, she canvassed for women empowerment and established a 'Foundation' called Girls' Scholarship Programme. Hajja

Mariam what then the Minister for Women Affairs was among the people that received her. She emphasized that

“The hope of the world lies with the women
Give her the best and the world will be
A better place to live in”

Women are generally considered as defenders of the home front and have specific interest to protect in the society. In the agricultural sector, contributions towards food production cannot be overemphasized. Towards home building they function as mentors and teachers to their children. They hold a dominant position in commerce and trade, engage various productive activities, ensure greater and self reliance individually and collectively. They vacillate the mobilisation of agricultural resources, promote the health of their families, as well as aid educational opportunities as well as get involved in art and craft. According to Ms. Natalie Hahn (coordinator of Women in Development Programme) it is estimated that up to eighty percent (80%) of the farm work are used to be complete labour requirement. For example man does the initial clearing of the bush by selling trees, while the remaining farm routine work that follows planting, weeding and harvesting are majorly left to women. She also transport the harvest home and store it while marketing is majorly women's affairs.

Among the Nigeria government that promoted women empowerment was Babangida administration in 1986. He organized discussions and deliberations and accepted recommendations made on efforts to improve women's lot. It was reported that women constituted an oppressed, exploited

Trends in the Empowerment of Women... Ogunbunmi, O. A.

and underprivileged group and he recommended that their future involvement in agriculture, industry, education, health and labour should be intensified. His tenure formulated a policy on women. It was called Better Life Sn Rural Women. With the Better Life Programme, the lot of women were enhanced. More women occupied decision making position such as Director General (DG), Permanent Secretary and so on. Better Life Programme or Rural Women helped them to organize their potentials to the full.

The programme has used government organs to help the nation become sensitive to the immense contributions of women which hitherto had been relegated in economic and non-economic aspects. It helped mobilize women to participate in politics and now more than any other time it has helped women to be involved in the economic and decision making in the nation. Women now not only cast votes but also come out for elective offices. It helped in the area of agriculture through the granting of credit facilities, providing training to rural women and removal of social discrimination through enlightenment campaigns.

The programme dispelled the fear of women but encourage them to take giant strides towards national development.

Empirical research has shown that Better Life Programme became a victim in the hands of over-zealous chairpersons who were more interested in personal aggrandizement than in sincere concern for the plight of the rural women (Aria 1999). Nevertheless, whatever the shortcomings

of Better Life Programme might have been, it became notable for being one of the first national programmes that brought the women's question to the fore in Nigeria. There are other development initiatives undertaken by women in NGOS. The Family Support Programme (FSP) initiated by Mrs. Mariam Abacha in 1994 was introduced following the UN declaration of 1994 as the International Year, of the Family. Chief Mrs. Stella Obasanjo also introduced Child Care Trust Programme Purposely to help less privilege families.

Conclusion

It is counter productive for any nation to have her women folk in the shadows. Many International Organizations like the United Nations, World Bank and IMF, Organization of African Unity and Economic Commission for Africa, have been concerned with the woman's question. The Clarion call is now made to women in the society to awake to their responsibilities by making effort to participate actively on every sector of the nation. The reality is there that women are still very few in the political arena, and in policy positions. This situation is still consistently due to low education of women, lack of experience in public sector and in the operation of political system; problems of combining their multiplicity of roles that is, reproductive and productive role (Aina 1999).

Women of today should remember that Mrs Helen Johnson Sirleaf is a woman who fought tooth and nail towards Liberian liberation. Today she has made a name in the Guinness

Book of Record as the First African Woman to become a President. To retain the little progress made so far is to continue to forgot ahead and be relevant to the society at large.

REFERENCES

- Adepoju C. & Onibokun A. (Eds) 1995, *Women and Leadership in Nigeria*. Town; Center for African Settlement Studies and Development.
- Aina, I.O (1998) *Women, Culture and Society*, In Sessay and Odebiyi (Eds.) *Nigeria Women in Society and Development*. Ibadan: Dokun Publishing House.
- Alele – Williams G. (1988) *Education and Status of Nigerian Women in F.A*. Ogunseye et all (Eds) *Nigerian Women and Development* Ibadan IUP.
- Anamah, D; (1989) *Women Empowerment for Sustainable Development*. Town: Napex Publishing House.
- Awe B. 1994 *Awe Advocates Stronger Women Empowerment*. In Daily Times Feb. 10, 1994 P.3
- Ayanlola P. (1993) *Women and Development: A Perspective*, In Daily Times Jan. 18, 1993.
- Bamidele, C.O, (2004) *Women Empowerment vis-à-vis African Womanhood*, In *International Journal of Society and Policy Issues* Vol. 2 No 1 & 2.
- Friedland E (Ed.) (1995); *Look at the world Through Women's Eyes*. Plenary Speeches from the NiGO Forum on Women, Beijing 1995
- Manduangu Bene, *Female Empowerment is our Goal in Nigerian Tribune* 11th June, 2002.
- C' Fairell, Brigid "Employment of Women" Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2000.
- Sessary A. & Odebiyi A. (Eds) 1998, *Nigerian Women In Society and Development*, Ibadan: Dokun Publishing House.