

# THE POSITION OF NIGERIAN WOMEN IN THE NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT

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## Abstract

*In terms of employment opportunities, women are marginalized and discriminated almost in every society which raised a number of issues for development. It is a common knowledge that in the Nigerian context till date, the development of the male and female population has been grossly uneven with the female population at a disadvantage. Therefore the focus of this paper is to tackle this through the issue of women in employment.*

## Introduction

It has been observed that women in virtually every society are marginalized and discriminated against in terms of employment opportunities to the advantage of their male counterparts. This and other forms of discrimination against female folk have raised a number of issues for development.

In Nigeria, most of the women are known to be engaged in the formal sector as well as agriculture in addition to their traditional roles of mother and housewife. It is noted however that the number of women entering into the formal sector is increasing for the simple reason that there is a greater recognition of their potentials for development and hence are given greater opportunity and incentive for more formal education and totally they are found in virtually every profession in Nigeria.

If development in Nigeria must be further enhanced, it is expedient that any traditional or cultural practice that inhibits the full participation of women in the labour force must be checked. In other words, all the legal, political, cultural constraints that tend to segment labour markets and in so doing, limits women access to the high productivity sectors and therefore direct them to low-paid sectors, must be checked if the women are to exact their expected impact on development through employment.

Indeed, to have a more meaningful achievement, the problems of development in nation should necessarily be looked at on non-biological basis. In other words, it should be looked at generally and all the inhabitants (of the nation) should be adjusted to be able to become prospective participants on the basis of equality (Obasanjo et al, 1995:53).

However, it is a common knowledge that in Nigerian context till date, the development of the male and female population has been grossly uneven with the female population at a disadvantage. This then makes it expedient for us to focus our efforts at the contributors which the female folks make in the development of our nation and the focus of this study is to tackle this through the issue of women in employment.

## **Role of women in the development process**

### **What is development?**

In the past, development was conceived rather narrowly to mean mere (annual) growth in volume of quantity of goods and services or simply an increase in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a country. However, over time, a lot of developing countries were noticed to achieve a considerable increase in their GDP levels (especially with the declaration of the United Nations Development decade 1960-1970) but there were no improvements in the living standards of most of the population in these countries. This then called for a rethink on the appropriate definition of development.

Today, development is seen as an anthropocentric concept. It is defined qualitatively as a process of improvements in the general welfare of the entire society usually manifested in desirable changes in the various aspects of life of the society (Akpakpan, 1987:4). Emphasis is now placed on the content of the GDP as well as on the social indicators such as employment opportunities, shifts in social status, infant mortality, material mortality, life expectancy, housing, nutrition, literacy level, level of absolute poverty, self reliance etc (Ibid; see also Obasanjo Op.cit :3).

It is the duty of the entire population of a country to cause development to occur. This is succinctly stated by Obasanjo et al (1991) thus: "if it is about people, then the people constitute a repository of energy for development and it is the careful release of this energy that constitutes development".

### **Role of women**

Given the old adage that "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world", it is easy to see that the role of women in the development process cannot be ignored. The woman by her nature is the number one life and hence the very beginning of the development process. It is observed that the woman is equally endowed to foster a meaningful and wholesome political social and economic development in the society. The woman is a producer as well as consumer (ibid).

The role of women in every society is seen as being multidimensional. This is in spite of their culturally assigned role of child bearing and rearing, agriculture and general housekeeping. It is argued that it is women that can really bring about sustainable development in our society where key components have been identified as education, health, environmental sustenance, family planning and active participation in popular democracy.

It is noted however that the global economic crisis with its attendant macro-economic and policy reforms such as the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) tend to impact more negatively on women than men. An example here is the issue of elaborate retrenchment. Again, there is the issue of the impact of the heavy domestic and non paid productive activities on the women's ability to enter the labour market and to create their own business.

Indeed, there is a serious under estimation of women's contribution to national economic activities (the World Bank, 1995:2). All these tend to reduce the role of women in national development. In some instances, the women are said to have placed themselves in such disadvantageous positions. Women before this time were known to go mostly to such occupations as teaching in nursery and primary schools, nursing and the like which were like extensions of their domestic duties of house-keeping and caring. Hence, Shonekan (1992) in Nwabah (1995) cautioned that:

*Much as it is necessary for men to encourage women to get to management positions. It is equally important for women to re-examine themselves and resolutely aim for prime seats in the organization. They must abandon the almost imaginary belief women leadership is the exception rather than the rule in our society.*

### **Women participation in economic activities**

#### **Current status**

According to the state of the world's report (1995), women the world over are making a vast and unacknowledged contribution to the wealth and welfare of their communities in unpaid domestic work and in small scale business and trading activities. Often, these women are household's heads with sole responsibility for their families. In Africa, it has been observed that women are responsible for three quarters of all substance agriculture in addition to their domestic responsibilities.

Despite the primacy of the mother-housewife role, women are entering the labour market in ever increasing numbers. In spite of this, however, it has been observed that they are subjected to one form of discrimination or the other especially as they are not employed evenly throughout the occupational structure. Even when employed, the women are concentrated in low paid, low status jobs and sometimes may have to work twice as hard as their male counterparts before they get promoted (Obasanjo, 1991:67). In the present situation of mass unemployment, employees prefer to employ men rather than women. The reasons always advanced are that women take too many (maternity) leaves and that the men are bread winners whereas the number of households headed by women has been increasing in recent times.

Given the above scenario, it is easy again to see why most women especially in the developing countries are engaged in the informal sector of their countries. They are involved in small scale trade in goods and services which are usually not counted in general economic statistics. Yet in many third world cities, the informal sector is said to generate up to a third of local wealth.

According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, women in Africa do up to three quarters of all agricultural work in addition to their domestic responsibilities but many of them have lost their traditional rights to the land they work because colonial laws, some societal norms and values such as religious and superstitious beliefs as well as development policies have tended to allocate land only to men. More pathetic is the fact that those engaged especially in producing and selling agricultural commodities become immiserized especially during the harvest times of these commodities. This results from the fact that they lack proper

storage, transport and marketing facilities especially for the perishables. This situation perhaps lends credence to the perceived view that there is the feminization of poverty which had taken place on a global scale. The United Nations on its part frequently says that 70% of the world's billion poor are women and that poverty has a female face (The World Bank, 1995).

Despite the stated fact that most women in Africa are engaged in the informal sector, there is yet an increasing number of women going into the formal sector. This is made possible by the fact that more women are getting more educated even at higher levels today than before. For instance, the World Development report of 1992 states that the number of females per 100 males enrolled in the primary and secondary schools in Nigeria rose from 63 and 43 in the 1965 to 1982 and 75 in 1989 respectively. Though the ratio is still low, there is a marked improvement from what it used to be.

In Nigeria today, women are virtually in every profession as workers, entrepreneurs as well as professionals and no more just home keepers. Gbosi (1996) for instance opined that:

Traditionally, women were seen as home keepers. Today, Nigerian women are no longer engaged in traditional farming and excluded from certain occupations. They are now in every profession. We now have women judges, lawyers, engineers, accountants, bankers, doctor, pharmacists, just to mention a few of them. There are in fact only few areas of human endeavor where women are not competing keenly with men. (p.46).

Women actually constitute a growing proportion of wage earners in Nigeria. Though there is a deafening dearth of data, the scary ones available and our observations point to this fact. For instance, Nigerian women accounted for 2.1 percent, 5.1 percent and 7.2 percent of labour force in 1956 and 1960 respectively (ibid).

This percentage is said to have increased phenomenally since after the civil war and the fact that some families lost their bread winners in the war which turned the onus of breadwinning to the women. In Nigeria today, the percentage of economically active women has increased significantly. They are known to have specially risen to exclusively reserve for men. According to Agaga (1991) quoted in Gbosi (1996: 49), Nigeria women have served in reputable positions such as Vice- Chancellors of universities, Senior Advocates of Nigeria, deputy Inspector General, Director of Police and Commercial Aircraft Pilots and lately as Federal Ministers.

It must be observed however that though women are moving up, there is still a yawning gap between them and their male counterparts. For instance as at 1985, out of 17,000 registered lawyers in Nigeria, only 4,000 were women and in the same year, out of 2,885 fellows and associates of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN), only 900 were women. (News watch, December 10, 1990). This situation applies to several other positions of responsibility in the country. This pathetic situation becomes even more glaring when we note that the women in Nigeria constitute about 50 percent of the entire population of the country.

**Factors explaining the current status**

Several factors have been identified as responsible for the rising trends in women participation in the Nigeria labour force. For instance, Gbosi (1996) has identified four major factors namely economic hardship, expansion on educational facilities, rising number of female family heads and the availability of day care facilities. It is argued that the world economic crises which made expedient the introduction of the SAP have brought a lot of hardship on families. This then has made a lot of women to participate in the labour force so as to augment the salaries and wages of their husbands. The expansion of educational facilities in recent times has particularly served as an inducement to women to acquire formal (higher) education which then prepares them more for work. Before the creation of the very new states in Nigeria in 1996, there used to be one female unity school in every state in addition to the co-educational ones. Women are even known to enjoy a discriminatory cut-off university matriculation examination scores. In Nigeria also, there is an increasing number of female family heads. The reasons include death of husbands, increasing divorce rate and even the emigration of the husbands to the city in search of greener pastures. The availability of day care facilities at some centers now enables women to quickly get back to work after delivery.

To balance this sub section of this work, there is need for us to now look at the factors which have tended to inhibit the employment of women. For instance, there is a feeling that even during times of economic prosperity and revival, there are not sufficient economic opportunities generated to absorb the woman in the labour force into the formal sector (The World Bank, 1995:2). This calls for means and attention to be focused on the role of the informal sector in generating employment opportunities for women.

In Nigerian society today, several cultural norms and traditional practices still impede active women participation in economic activities. Some of these practices include preference of the education of male children to the education of female children as well as early marriage. Other issues are land acquisition and ownership, land inheritance, property ownership (including money) especially for the married women as these are supposedly the husbands. It should be noted however that these issues differ in terms of their degree of effect as one move from one society to another. Nevertheless, they are all very potent factors that inhibit women economic development in Nigeria.

As already observed, women's ability to develop micro enterprise is often affected legal and cultural constraints on women's right to own property and accumulate assets. This perhaps again explains why most women are poor and hence lack the necessary credit to carry any meaningful economic activity whether formally or informally. We caution here however that credit should not be considered as the magic wand which will solve all the economic problems of women. There is also a need to consider time allocation and resources which must be invested to ensure the sustainability and financial viability of these programmes (ibid).

In conclusion, we note that whatever progress has been made in enhancing the role of women in the modern sector of our economy is attributable to the crucial education is playing in the life of women. A number of researchers force in the formal sector is directly related to their educational level (Ballara, 1991:14). Education is equally helping some to participate more effectively in the informal sector.

### **Efforts at enhancing women participating in economic activities**

The United Nations Organization as well as several non- governmental organization (NGOs) have been at the forefront of ensuring that the subjugation and discrimination that women normally suffer in terms of participating in economic activities (and indeed in other spheres of human endeavor) are reduced to the barest minimum if not completely eliminated.

In 1975, for instance the United Nations inter-governmental conference was held in Mexico. The aim was to discuss the situation of women and how to improve it. This culminated in declaring the year 1975, the International Women's year (IWY) and a world plan of action was adopted for the advancement of women, some of whose objectives include:-

- i. Eliminating of discrimination against women
- ii. Solving the problems which place women in an inferior position
- iii. Integrating women in development
- iv. Increasing the involvement of women in political life an in international co-operation and the maintenance of peace.

So many bodies have been formed to deal with the problems of women on a global scale. Some of these include United Nations Development fund for Women (UNIFEM), Women's World Banking (WWB), ACCION International, Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), Development Alternative with women for a New Era (DAWN), International Alliance of Women, International Council of Women among others.

The most current effort which has on global scale, touched on the lives of women all around the world in the most moving manner is the September 4-15, 1995 UN fourth world conference of women held in Beijing, China simply called the Beijing conference. So many issues were raised at the conference to the international institutions and donor agencies were the need to pay more attention to strengthening the economic opportunities for enhancing the status of women. Another issue was concerned with women's access to labour markets and to the new employment opportunities generated through economic growth. Yet, another issue tabled at the conference was that of the impact of heavy domestic and non-paid productive activities on women's ability to enter the labour market and to ginger a lot of government to promoting women's welfare and participation in economic actives in their respective countries.

### **Local efforts**

In general, several efforts had been made in the past to enhance status of women. In the present, efforts are still continuing in this direction and are if anything becoming even more far-reaching. In 1989, the national women commission was established by decree number 30. Some of its major objectives are:-

- i. To promote the welfare of women in general.
- ii. To promote the full utilization of women in the development of human resources and to bring about the acceptance as full participants in every phase of national development with equal rights and corresponding obligations.

The better life for the rural women programme was established during a workshop that held between September 13 and 16, 1987 by the then military president's wife, Mrs. Maryam Babangida. The programme was born out of a deep concern for the betterment of the lots of the rural women. Apart from creating an awareness of the importance of women to the economic development of the nation, it further exposed them to the vital issues of active participation in economic activities, health, family planning, education and so on. With the programme came the establishment of women co-operative societies all over the country, granting of loans to women for agriculture and small business etc.

A separate ministry for women, the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development has also been created to further advance the cause of women. The ministry has particularly carried the women forward through two related programmes established by the wife of the former Head of State, Dr. (Mrs.) Maryam Abacha, namely the Family Support Programme (FSP) and the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP).

The FEAP fashioned after the better life programme was introduced by the wife of the former Head of State, Dr. (Mrs.) Maryam Abacha. The programme has promised quite a lot in the alleviation of the burden of women for instance, easy credit will be made available to the women (especially, the poor urban and rural) under the programme. The trading of women in various trades will be undertaken. There will also be a vigorous education of the womenfolk among others. All these are geared towards women economic enhancement as most of them will be able to overcome some of the socio-cultural practices that had tended to inhibit their full participation in the past.

The FEAP can however only be really successful in advancing the cause of women if it is taken to the grassroots where the women really in need will be identified. Otherwise, it will be hijacked by the middle income, urban women (as was the case with the Better Life Programme of Maryam Babangida). The FEAP should really strive at the education of women as they would go a long way in helping to cut short some of the socio-cultural practices which have been a stumbling block to the women. In some areas, the FEAP should acquire land for agricultural for the women while forming them into co-operatives.

In River state, the present military administrator Col. Musa Sheikh Shehu and the wife, Mrs. Sa'adatu Shehu as well as the State Commissioner for Women Affairs and Social Development, Mrs. Nuka Julie Wika has all done much to alleviate the lots of the women in the state. Among the various projects established include several women development centers, nursery and primary schools for low income earners, drug abuse and widowhood rehabilitation centers, rural community health projects and centres among others.

The people's bank of Nigeria and the various community banks are meant to advance the economic status of women in Nigeria as well. The people's bank has women constituting a significant proportion of its constituency. This is more so as it was fashioned after a similar

scheme in Bangladesh, the Grameen bank which is meant for the landless poor, majority of whom are women.

In Nigeria, there are several women pressure groups. According to Alabi (1990), the development of various women special and pressure groups is a health none if the problem of increasing women participation in the mainstream of economic activities in the country is to be effectively and adequately tackled.

Some of these associations include National Association of Women Association (NAOWA), Association of Women Chartered Accountants and Association of Market Women among others.

### **Towards improving women participation in economic activities**

The discussion above has basically focused on the role of women in the development of the society through their participation in economic activities. But we note that even though there has been some improvement in their participation rate in the labour force, some more effort needs to be put in to further enhance their participation. Hence, we make the following recommendations.

There is a need to further increase the literacy level of women as this is paramount in not just making them more employable in the formal sector but will also enable them to overcome their inability to have access to bank credit, given that one of the desirable objectives of development is that of a fairer distribution of income, there is a need to have a more equitable distribution of job opportunities among the sexes. This will help to reduce the gender inequality in the country in terms of income distribution.

The government should get more interested in the informal sector activities especially given that majority of the participants are the women. This will help to further break down the various constraints legal and cultural which have tended to inhibit women's rights to own property and accumulate assets.

In conclusion, we note the women are at the centre stage of any meaningful efforts at sustainable development and if development in n Nigeria must be further enhanced, it is expedient that any legal, traditional or cultural practice that inhibits the full participation of women in the labour force must be properly put under check

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