Women and Socio – Economic Development: The Nigerian Question

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Introduction

United Nations declared 1985 – 1995 the decade for women and organised women conferences that have put women issues on the front burner. Since then, increasing attention has been given to women issues not only in Nigeria but the world over. These conferences have as their goals gender equality, development and peace. Several conferences have also been held in Nigeria to strategize on how to integrate women into development processes. Notable among them is the Women’s Mastermind Conference, Women for Women Conference, Dabira Women Conference etc.

Yet, not much has changed regarding the plight of Nigerian women. These efforts have largely been limited by women’s unequal and subservient positions in the family and the society at large. Another reason is the culture of the Nigerian state which is discriminatory to the women folk and has permeated every fabric of the society. The non-remuneration of house chores which women perform at home is partly the reason for the feminization of poverty not only in Nigeria but the world over. Women perform a lot of work at home that is burdensome and time wasting, and at the same time unrecognized, unacknowledged and unremunerated. They invest so much time on house chores and domestic duties, leaving little time to be invested in activities that could yield money. Indeed, Carthorne (2008) aptly summarized the reasons for feminized poverty as follows:

- Women are often relegated into low paying occupation or the occupation they predominate are usually lowly paid
- Women are usually left to bear more burden in raising children especially if the women are widowed, separated or divorced
- Women spend more time in attending to house chores and in taking care of the aged and the children (care giving) than men
- Women’s work and educational pursuit are usually affected by pregnancy unlike the menfolk

It is against this background, that this study attempts to interrogate the socio – economic situation of the Nigerian women. The study also examines the roles of the Nigerian government to integrate women into development processes. Data was derived through primary and secondary means of data collection. The primary data was derived through objective and unbiased direct observation of the activities of Nigerian women. Secondary data was gotten through textbooks, newspapers, official bulletins, magazines and internet services.

Keywords: gender, women empowerment, development, domestic violence

Nigerian Women and Socio – economic imbalance

Nigerian women constitute about 49% of the Nigerian population according to the last census, 2006 census (National Bureau of Statistics). They produce about 60% of the food crops, are involved in about 90% of the food processing and are also largely involved in marketing of food crops (Mtsor and Idisi, 2014) cited in Arum and Babatola, (2018). Despite their huge contributions to the national economy, their contributions are unrecognized and undervalued. Credit facilities are hardly given to them and they are usually by - passed by the extension workers. Nigerian women are noted to be good managers of the home, farm and church. They easily adapt to situations in time of plenty and in scarcity. But sadly, only 5% of managers in the formal sectors are women (Oyekanmi, 2004). Nigerian women predominate in the informal sectors as petty traders, craftsmen and managers of mini-businesses. This is partly because it requires flexible time table, whereby women can operate...
near their homes and combine it with house chores. It also requires little or no education. These women enterprises are usually characterized by low capital output, low capital return and low income. Politically, Nigerian women are noted to be active during elections as “cheerleaders” but where power is, they are conspicuously absent. Since the return of democracy in 1999, statistics reveal that women are disproportionately represented in electoral offices. Oloyede (2017) observes that in 1999, out of 109 seats in the House of Senate, women got only 3 seats representing 2.8%. In 2007, 8 women were elected representing 7.3%. In 2011, 7 women were elected, representing 6.4%. In 2015, only 8 women won the seats, representing 7.3%. In 2019, only 6.4% of women were elected. In the House of Representatives, in 1999, out of 360 seats, women got only 12, representing 3.3%. In 2003, 21 women were elected, representing 5.8%. In 2011, 26 women were elected representing 7.2%. In 2015, women got only 19 seats representing 5.3%. In 2019, 11 women were elected, representing 3.05%. Many reasons have been adduced for women’s poor performance in election. The reasons include, lack of education, lack of economic resources, thuggery and violence during elections, discriminatory roles assigned to women, the culture of the Nigerian State that perceive women as people who should be seen and not heard.

Women’s subservient position also manifests in their inability to negotiate sexual relations which can at times result to forced marriage, sexual abuse and spousal rape. Women are also more susceptible to HIV/AIDS than men through rape or among the network of partners in polygamous marital union. Male violence against their spouse also depicts the unequal power relations in the home and in the society. Arum and Adesioye (2018) maintain that domestic violence affects women most, it is pervasive, yet the most unrecognized human right abuse. Indeed, Fortin (2012) cited in Arum and Adesioye (2018) submits that domestic violence has become the biggest security threat affecting women globally and that it affects 1 in 3 women worldwide. Women go through physical, emotional and psychological scars as a result of domestic violence. It affects women mental agility at work, self-confidence and even their overall health. But sadly, domestic violence is usually perceived as a domestic or private affair which the police or outsiders should not interfere in. The Nigerian police only interfere when it leads to the death of the women, which shouldn’t be so. Parents would rather invest in their male children even at the expense of their female children, if the family does not have enough funds to train them all. Even where female children are sent to school, they are always overburdened with house chores, while the male children have enough time to study. This results in the female children performing poorly at school and may lead to their dropping out of school as a result of poor performance. Arguing in the same vein, Detoro (2018) observes that globally girls between the ages of 5 – 14 years invest 550 million hours in house chores, 160 million more hours than boys of the same age.

Women are usually not found in formal job sectors. The few that are in the formal sector predominate at the lowest rung of the occupation ladder. This is due to their low education when compared with men and the prevailing discriminatory practices against women. Employers are at times reluctant to employ women because they might seek for maternity leave when they put to bed. They also perceive women as being less mobile due to family commitments and may be absent from work due to ill health of the spouse or the children. Many women in Africa are also faced with discrimination in inheritance by law or by custom. Women are denied their right to inherit properties as a widow, heir or a childless wife. This has further exacerbated their economic situation and encouraged gender gap in economic inequalities. Childless women and even women with children are usually sent out of their house by the in - laws when they lose their husbands. Even when the women had labored with their men to acquire the properties. She is rendered homeless and with nothing to fend for herself and her children. The female child is also denied the right to inherit properties from her family in some parts of the country, especially in the South East Nigeria. According to their custom, female children do not have the right to inherit properties, because the properties can be transferred to another family, when the female child eventually marries. This is not the case with men or male children, as they enjoy the right to inherit properties from either their late spouse or their parents. As aforementioned, Nigerian women make huge contributions to agriculture. Yet, they face severe challenges in their quest to access productive resources. This has increased their vulnerability to poverty. Steinzor (2003) cited in Arum and Babatola (2018) rightly maintains that globally
women hold title of approximately 2% of land and are oftentimes withheld from inheriting properties. Credit markets are also known to be gender bias.

Despite women’s active involvement in national economy and development, they do not have equal access with men to financial services. Eddleton, Ladge, Mitteness, Balachandra (2016) corroborate this stance, they argue and rightly too, that women face discrimination in their quest to access credit facilities. According to them, this is due to gender stereotypes, whereby people perceive men as beings that are brave, bold, ambitious and risk takers. Whereas they perceive women as beings that are not ambitious and are also adverse to risk taking. Due to this erroneous belief, people are reluctant to give credit facilities to women because they perceive that they may not be able to pay back. Robino, Trivelli, Villanueva, Sachetti, Walbey, Martinez and Marincioni (2018) succinctly summarized the problems that debar women from assessing financial services. They are:

- Lack of time
- Lack of collaterals
- Lack of formal ID to identify them
- Illiteracy or lack of adequate enlightenment on financial services

Women are not properly acquainted to financial and banking services. They suggest that this can be bridged through public policies. Arguing further, they aver that this can be bridged through government’s social intervention programmes that target women. They can mandate women to open accounts with banks, from where they can assess whatever government wants to give them. In that way, they argue, these women can familiarize themselves with banking procedures and will begin to patronize banks. The economic inclusion of women could promote or entrench an egalitarian and just society. Financial inclusion of women can encourage women’s easy access to loans, transaction services and also increase their propensity to save in a safe environment. Savings culture can encourage acquisition of assets and translate to political, economic and social empowerment of women and invariably to their relevance in all spheres. Women financial inclusion can lead to economic growth, business evolution, reduce their vulnerability to poverty and indeed improve the overall national economy. Shroff (2016) corroborate this stance, they note that closing the global gender gap in economic participation can lead to a 26% rise in GDP, that is additional 5.3 trillion dollars could be added to their national purse.

Many international and regional instruments have accentuated the need to give women equal opportunities with men to acquire wealth and to enjoy their basic human rights which includes economic rights. They have also put in place law courts and monitoring bodies to adjudicate cases of human rights abuse and to monitor the progress of these treaties in countries that are signatories to them. Notable among them are United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, Human Rights treaty bodies, independent experts (Special Procedures) and the Universal Periodic Review. In the regional bodies, there is the African Court on Human Rights and African Commission on Human and Peoples Right. These treaties aptly specify that the vulnerable group should be protected from economic exclusion. Women should exercise the right to own property of any kind. When women are given the conducive environment to acquire assets through their labour, it will improve their social standing in the family and in the public sphere. This will invariably translate to their economic, social and political empowerment.

**Nigerian Government Response to Integrating Women in Development Processes**

United Nations (UN) ratified Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. CEDAW is the most comprehensive human rights treaty on women. Nigeria ratified it in 1985 without reservations, signed the optional protocol in 2000 and ratified it in 2004. About 185 countries ratified CEDAW, making it one of the highest ratified international human rights conventions (Leadership, 2008). CEDAW aims among other objectives to draw special attention to the disadvantages suffered by women over the years.
Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1979 and was ratified by 189 countries. It however became effective on 3rd September, 1981. It is also known as the International bill of womens’ rights. It was set among other things, to abolish all forms of discrimination against women through member states enacting all manner of laws to abolish discriminating practices against women. It was also set to ensure that women enjoy equal opportunities with men in all spheres of the society. Nigeria ratified CEDAW in 1985 but has refused to domesticate it. According to Article 12 of the Nigeria’s constitution, an international treaty must be domesticated or signed into law by the national assemblies’ members before it can be enforceable (Igbinovia, 2013). As laudable and promising as this treaty is, the Nigerian government has refused to domesticate it. They argue that some of the provisions of CEDAW are not in tandem with our customs and traditions and that signing it into law can erode Nigeria’s sovereignty (Heinrich Boll Stiftung 2013). They cited CEDAW’s provisions seeking that all laws discriminatory to women should be abolished as a way of undermining our culture and eroding the country’s sovereignty. They also argue that the Congress of USA has also refused to sign it into law, also citing it as an infringement of their sovereignty. They also see CEDAW’s support for abortion, as a crime against humanity which should be condemned by all means. Nigeria’s Senate President from 2007 – 2015, Senator David Mark, reiterated that the country cannot support abortion because it is harsh and brutal not only to the unborn baby but to the woman as well. CEDAW in Article 1, 5a and 10c, harped the need for States to ensure equality of sexes. They also reiterated that States should abolish all forms of gender stereotyping. Again, this has been viewed as a way of encouraging or even institutionalizing gay and lesbian relations. They also argue that Nigeria believe in equality not sameness of sex.

Creation of Federal Ministry of Women Affairs

Nigeria’s former First Lady between 1985 – 1993, Dr. (Mrs.) Maryam Babanginda institutionalized the Office of the First Lady. She made the office to be visible through the establishment of a pet project known as the Better Life Programme for Rural Women in September 1987. The objectives of the programme include engaging women in activities that can empower the rural women economically. It also seeks to provide basic health care systems to women. Through the efforts of this pet project, the National Commission on Women was established in 1989. Its goals include the enhancement of the status of women through making of policies that are in line with the national development plans. It also seeks to empower rural women economically and socially. In 1995, the commission was raised to a full - fledged ministry as the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development. This was in response to the United Nations agreement to create an institution that will coordinate activities geared towards women empowerment and womens’ well-being in general. This ministry is known not to be at par with other ministries in the country. Its budgetary allocation is too low when compared with other ministries whereas its tasks and objectives are enormous. This has affected their service delivery. The ministry has therefore not been able to do much to uplift or integrate Nigerian women into development process. What it has offered has been best described as “tokenism”, as it has not really changed the status of Nigerian women. It has only succeeded in solving womens’ immediate needs by mainly establishing vocational training centers to train them in skills that could empower them economically. The ministry has failed to tackle the issues that have led to womens’ disempowerment.

National Policy on Women

This programme was flagged off by Nigeria’s former President, President Obasanjo’s administration in 2000. The policy was created among other things to integrate Nigerian women into development processes. It was also set to advance women’s overall status and to mainstream gender perspective in all governments’ policies.
The policy also aims to ensure that government provides free and compulsory primary and secondary education and to provide incentives for girls willing to go into science (Sokerun, 2010). The policy also seeks to remove all forms of discrimination against women’s employment. This policy was later replaced in 2007 with National Gender Policy.

**National Gender Policy**

The programme was introduced in 2007. Its key objectives include cultural re-orientation, canvass for the change of gender stereotypes, advancement of women’s rights, eradication of gender based violence. It also seeks to encourage women empowerment and mainstreaming gender dimension within the key sectors of the economy (Masajura, 2012).

**Violence against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP)**

Violence against Women is endemic and has become one of the problems against Nigeria’s women progress. It is the most unrecognized human rights abuse which has led to the decimation of women, contributed to their low self esteem and has also affected their mental agility. In 2001, some groups working on different types of women’s rights came together and formed a group known as the Legislative Advocacy Coalition on Violence Against Women (LACVAW). In 2002, LACVAW submitted a bill to the National Assembly titled Violence Against Women Prohibition Act. This bill was criticized and dumped by the male dominated National Assembly. It was not until 2008, that some women group repackaged and re-presented the bill to the National Assembly. After much consultation and lobbying, the bill was finally signed 12 years after its first presentation. It was signed by former President Goodluck Jonathan in May 2015 as Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP).

The main thrust of the law is to eliminate all forms of violence against people both in the private and public sphere. It also seeks among other things to provide maximum protection and effective remedies for victims and proscribed punishment for offenders. NAPTIP was mandated to administer the provisions of the Act, by virtue of section 44 of the Act. The bill also introduced a trust fund for victims of domestic violence. Only the High Court in Abuja has the sole jurisdiction to hear and grant any application brought under the Act by virtue of section 27 of the Act.

**Conclusion**

Despite the efforts of the Nigerian government to integrate women to development process, there is still not much to show for it. Nigerian women have not been integrated into the mainstream of the economy. This is evident in their limited access to formal jobs, credit facilities and productive assets in general. This has resulted to high maternal mortality rate, high illiteracy rate, their low status, low earning and their low visibility in politics. This has grievous implication for the country. A situation where about half of the country’s population are stagnated and underutilized does not augur well for the country. The country has for too long paid lip service to the issue of women empowerment, it lacked the political will and the courage to fully implement women empowerment programmes. This is partly because women are not well represented in the law making bodies or national assemblies. It is usually very difficult to pass laws that will favour Nigerian women in the national assemblies because of the low number of women even when there is need for it to be signed. When they are eventually signed, they will still not release the needed money for the smooth realization of their objectives. Arising from the scenario, there is need to fully integrate women into development process and thus utilize the potentials of all to the benefit of the country in general.

**Recommendations**

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• Government should introduce quota system in elective posts. This will encourage women to contest for elective positions. If women are well represented in the national assemblies, passing gender sensitive bills will not be difficult for them. Laws that could uplift women from their present situation could be signed and the resources needed to fully implement them could be approved and utilized for the proposed objectives.

• Women should be encouraged to take up fields that are traditionally dominated by men

• Perpetuators of domestic violence should be punished; this will serve as a deterrent to people who may want to tow that line. Though the government signed VAPP, it is on record that nobody has been jailed for this offense and it has continued unabated.

• Cultural practices that are discriminatory to women like land laws and widowhood rites should be discouraged

• Programmes that target women economic empowerment should be vigorously pursued. Womens’ economic empowerment will definitely lead to their all round empowerment.

• There is need to put some measures in place to ensure smooth monitoring of women developmental programmes. This will ensure that their problems are identified and tackled

References


