

Review

Education as a tool for empowering women necessary for full participation in national development

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Education is an important tool for empowering the individual with abilities and capabilities necessary for full participation in national development. The education of the woman is a huge asset to her nation. However, women had played second fiddle to men and they have been relegated to the background in various fields of human endeavour. The important roles women play in nation building is currently receiving deserved attention. Many women do not participate fully in political activities either because the society frowns at it or they are not educationally sound. Although there have been some improvement over the years, majority of women still lag behind men in power, wealth and opportunity. Many factors such as traditional, socio-cultural, socioeconomic and religion constraints inhibit women education and political participation. Though history has recorded some notable Nigerian women's contribution to national development, much is still left undone. That the government should intensify the programmes for women education and ensure equitable representation of both sexes in political appointments were some recommendations proffered.

Keywords: Women Education, Participation in Politics, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the most important means of empowering human beings with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development of a nation. "It is an investment in human capital" according to Amanchukwu, (2003). Formal education takes care of these attributes listed above. This is because education is a dynamic instrument of change geared towards national development. It is, therefore, important to everyone but it is especially significant for girls and women because an educated woman is an asset to her community; training a woman is training a nation.

Enaibe and Imonivwerha (2007) noted that women education is "the process of sensitizing the girl-child on the need to possess basic skills, knowledge, ability and attitude to make her fit positively, comfortably and productively into the society. Provision of sound, general education and vocational training for women will go a long way to improve their political power.

Women in the African society have always played second fiddle hence they have been excluded from numerous socio-political activities, including decision-

making in the family and society. Moreover, they have been relegated to the background in almost all ramifications of human endeavour.

They are regarded as less intelligent than men and as weaker sex. As Chafetz (1979) observed:

The words used to describe the masculine role are quite positive: practical „logical „experimental brave „trustworthy". The tone of the words used to describe femininity is considerably different. Such terms as petty, fickle, frivolous, shallow" and vain are negatively charged in the society.

The Nigerian Political setting right from its inception has exhibited positive support for male dominance over female because the men believe that women are not expected to carry out any outstanding role except those roles affiliated with domestic matters alone. This traditional belief that woman's place is in the kitchen has, over the years, pushed the woman to the degrading, derogatory position in national affairs and had, in many ways, affected her ambitions and so her participation in political activities.

Women have seriously remained in the passive state

with its degradation consequences to such an extent that they are not having much freedom that would have allowed them to favourably compete with men. In Nigeria, female participation in education and politics had been neglected. Seminars and workshops organized on women often focus on lack of education as a constraint to women contribution to national development.

The important roles that women play in nation building is currently receiving what could be described as “deserved attention”. Many women have taken bold steps in the three tiers of government to demonstrate that they are co-labourers in the building process of the nation. Some of them have contested with the male folk and won political positions. The funding and governance of laudable programmes like Better Life for Rural Women, Family Support Programme, and Family Economic Advancement Programme are testimonies to the increasing emphasis on the role of women in educational and political development.

Women Education and Development

In times past, women were given inferior education to men. This, according to Kisekka (1981), was because “women education curricular emphasized Home Economics” which was tagged Domestic Science with sub-areas as laundry, needle work, embroidery, cookery and child care. In fact, the colonial education system was discriminatory against women.

Many women do not participate in political activities to the fullest either because the society frowns at it or because they are not educationally sound. Women should be given high priority for a balanced development in the country. For women to participate actively in economic development, they should not be neutral or sit on the fence. Rather, they should work hard to embrace functional education which will make them models in their various fields.

A three-day national workshop was inaugurated in Lagos in September, 1986 to study and come out with a blue print on women education in the country. There was a national launching of women education campaign on the 27th of November 1986. The objectives of the campaign were:

- a. To awaken the awareness of all citizens for equal educational opportunity.
- b. To bring a change of attitude toward women education progress and to embrace all professionals.
- c. To awaken the consciousness of all women in development.
- d. To make the Nigerian woman an indomitable force of reckoning, both in her country and the world over (Osiegbu, 1988).

According to the United Nations (1993), “women constitute a majority of the world’s population but they receive a small proportion of its opportunities and benefits”. The United Nations Report (1989) stated that “one out of three households in the world has a woman as its breadwinner”. This means that many households

depend solely on women with regards to their duties or tasks for the household — men, children and the elderly.

With sound education which is the greatest weapon of development, women can go places. They will gain knowledge that will allow them to look at the world more critically. Through education, some women have secured ministerial appointments at federal level.

Education, indeed, makes a man hence, women should seize that opportunity to excel in various areas of the educational sector. However, as Ohachenu (1997) put it, “although there have been some improvements for women over the past twenty years, the majority still lag behind men in power, wealth and opportunity”.

Obstacles to Women Education in Nigeria

Marginalization of the (Nigerian) women arising from traditional, socio-cultural, socio-economic, religious, etc. constraints deny them full access to political participation. In spite of the overwhelming contributions that women have made, are making and are expected to make to the socioeconomic development of the nation, they are still frustrated with many obstacles that tend to limit their activities, which cannot usher in national development.

Our cultural beliefs and practices have made it difficult for some women to stick out their necks in the midst of men. In Nigeria, the man is the head of the family and hence his decisions are always right, final and binding on the woman. He is the known leader in all occasions and situations and the woman, a mere follower. Knowing fully well the role of education in human building, the man feels that the educated woman will threaten his supremacy in the home. He does his best, therefore, to ensure that the woman under him is kept in ignorance.

In some cultures, it is a taboo or a waste of time and family financial resources to educate female children because they later discard the family name for their husbands”. Others believe that the education of the girl-children will delay their marriage.

Moreover, to the traditionalists, it is believed that in the formal school system, the girls become exposed to or are trained in sex and sexuality matters. They feel that such exposure or training will lead the girls to promiscuity which will rob them of their chastity, that being a highly valued moral quality of the girl-child and her parents” moral training disposition towards her to be rated at marriage.

Traditional prejudice against women is an inhibiting factor to women education and participation in politics. Traditionally, women are to be seen but not heard. Consequently, a woman who makes herself seen and heard at the same time is considered to be living the life of a man. The society would even ask whether such a woman is married. Disapprovingly, some women regard such a woman as being too daring because to them, it is against the societal norm and culture for a woman to be in the forefront or to be involved in any form of politics.

Women bear the brunt of educational discrimination in the face of parental poverty. The present-day harsh economic situation experienced by many Nigerian families has immersed many parents into untold financial hardship. The negative implication of such financial stress and strain is that the education of their children, especially the female ones, is neglected. The negative effect on the education of their daughters is manifest in the assumption that they can be sent to marriage (to raise the parents' financial status) or be engaged in different jobs, no matter how menial. In order to supplement the poor socio-economic status of parents, the female children are more accessible to approach to engage in street hawking, farming, house-help commercial activities (and in extreme situations, prostitution). Under such poverty-stricken circumstances, if such girl-children are sent to school at all, they do not go beyond the primary education level.

Religious practices also pose as stumbling block to women education and participation in politics; some religious beliefs equate politics to sin and an entrance ticket into hell and, therefore, forbid women from participating (actively) in it.

In the Muslim religion, women are confined to Purdah. There is no gainsaying that such women will not be exposed to formal education and participation in national politics. There are some extreme cases in which some parents who regard themselves as very holy Christians feel that if their female children are enrolled in school, they will be too exposed to knowledge that will make them disregard the doctrines and dressing patterns of the religion.

In the field of African Traditional Religion (ATR), it is the girl-child (especially the beautiful one) that is specially chosen by the gods to worship them. Such girls so chosen would not be able to abandon their entrenched shrines and followers to attend formal schools.

Early marriage is also a constraint because once some girls are married, further education becomes a difficult or an impossible task; the husbands may not agree to allow them to continue. The women on their part may also be struggling to have children, care for their children's and husband's needs. Such divided attention would bar them from coping with the desire or aspiration to further their education. A related barrier is untimely or unwanted pregnancy which causes many girls to drop out of school, prematurely.

Gender Awareness and Involvement in Political Struggle and Education for Development

Women have always been held to be less intelligent, less productive, less creative, less useful and by implication, less human than men. For these reasons, women have had fewer rights and a lower social status than men. Since Nigeria gained its independence in 1960, not a single one of the presidential leaders so far had been a

woman. Nigeria has not recorded any woman governor. A woman has never headed the Nigerian Army, Navy, Air Force or Police Force. Such discrimination may serve as adequate reason why many parents prefer to focus attention on the education of their male children instead of the female ones, since the male children will be in better/favourable positions or conditions to compete in the economic and political struggle in the society.

The nature of Nigeria politics is characterised by violence, bitterness, manipulation and falsification of figures, high class rigging, etc. This has made most women hate or shun participation in politics. However, with recent development, hope is rising in the conduct of elections.

In spite of all these, it should be put in mind that man is a political animal, whose knowledge of human rights derives from his sense of rationality. In general, education endows man with this knowledge. Politics cannot be severed from education or education from politics.

Though men have dominated the political scene in Nigeria at the expense of the women folk, women with exceptional qualities refuse to adhere to the dictates of the established tradition. Today, there are historical evidences to prove the contributions of women to national development in the political scene. One of such women is Late Mrs. Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, an activist who championed the course of women's liberation. („The Aba Women's Riot of 1929 is another example of involvement in political struggle. The women, for political and cultural reasons, demonstrated against the plans to make them pay taxes and their reactions yielded positive result. Other examples of notable Nigerian women in politics include Queen Amina of Zaria, Queen Emotan of Benin, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Senator Franca Afegbua to mention but few.

Women are becoming increasingly aware of their role in the political structure of the nation. Cases like that of Professor Dora Akunyuli (former Director General of NAFDAC), Dr. (Mrs.) Ngozi Okonjo Iweala (the former Minister of Finance) and other women politicians in the House of Representatives, House of Assembly and the Senate are clear indications that women are now becoming more prominent in Nigeria politics.

Professor Grace Alele Williams who was a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Benin is the first female to hold such a post in Nigeria. Many other women have excelled in various sectors of the economy. The Nigerian woman is gradually seeking, struggling and obtaining for her country a better and more promising future.

Today, many Nigerian women have risen above the prejudices of men and the society. They compete with men in all spheres of life. Women are now found in posts which were previously exclusively reserved for men. In fact, proper and adequate education, enlightenment and dynamism have blended to fortify them for the struggle for recognition. Presently, the women folk is recognised

as an indispensable part of the agents that are working for the good of Nigeria.

From the viewpoints of women education and political involvement as great assets to the nation, it should be remarked that women who are given posts of responsibility have been performing very well. The women's excellent performances have attracted changes in attitude toward them. In fact, the more effective, patient and transparent progress and success trends of women in politics lie on the policy that they do not have time and space for partial consideration or undue compromise which often buy men's conscience over or distract their male counterparts. Women are very principled as they solve issues in very subtle ways.

As Nwosu (2006) put it, "the tide of women agitation for significant representation in politics is gradually simmering down as most of them are beginning to pick up plum jobs both on the national and international scenes". Women are now aware that the quest for political independence in the country should not only aim at the liberation of the country from foreign dominance but also cut across all areas in which undue oppression and discrimination are rampant and dominant. Consequently, they are making conscious efforts to uproot all the thriving tap roots of oppression and its attendant evil from the society.

Conclusion

Generally, women education aims at improving women's social status and political awareness, making them develop love for economic development, national unity and reconstruction, instilling in them cultural values and realisation of the importance of child care. With the influence of education, women now possess positive attitude towards things and events that aid them in developing responsible behaviour to indulge in healthy competition with men for efficient and effective participation in politics.

The tripartite roles of the woman as a woman, wife and mother compliment one another and work toward national development and hence if you educate a man, you educate an individual but if you educate a woman, you educate a whole family in particular and the nation in general.

However, the few inserted cases of women who have made remarkable impact in education and politics are not effective enough to truly represent the population of women who have been integrated in the scheme of women education or equal representation in political appointments (as the government is propagating).

Women are waking up from their slumber to meet with the demands of the new world. It is only by bold confrontation of the contradictions and breaking free from the stem, antiquated beliefs and traditions which promote hierarchies, domination, dehumanisation and violence in daily life that women's desired freedom and recognition

can be guaranteed and attained.

Women are specially talented in the application of new approaches to new problems in new circumstances. These original talents combined with their highly, principled nature give them unique success in posts of responsibilities that they handle. Formal education ushers in enlightenment, self-confidence, self-discipline and capabilities. Hence if the Nigerian women are given every opportunity to exhibit their talents, they will excel, as some of them have done.

With the special attention paid to women education in government programmes and the upsurge of awareness in participation in politics, the future is bright for women, educationally and politically. Who knows if the next president of Nigeria would be a woman!

Recommendations

In the light of the write-up, the following recommendations are proffered:

- a. A fair ground should be created by the government for operations for all political competitors and for genuineness in fighting the women's course. Consequently, the government should invent better strategies to encourage women education and ensure equal distribution of political appointments between the sexes. More seminars and workshops should be organised for women by the government to sensitise them further.
- b. Women should take up the challenge and be involved in the struggle for functional education and active politics.
- c. The society should change positively toward women education and participation in politics.
- d. Women should strive higher to think of the progress of the nation in their capacity to develop political and cultural power with which they can contribute effectively to the society.

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