

Women Empowerment for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Abstract

Development by implication implies the general growth and well being of every individual and all sectors in the society. These involve the efforts of every individual and organ in the society. Any development which does not carry every citizen along is yet to be a development but a process towards it. The main thrust of this paper is the empowerment of the female gender and its impact on national sustainable development in Nigeria. The paper attempts to conceptualize key terms, namely, gender, and women empowerment and the role of education toward empowering women was examined. The paper further makes it clear that no meaningful development is possible if the process of development is one-sided. The paper recommends that the education of girls and women should be provided the much needed attention it deserves, since sustainable development in the society requires the role of both men and women.

Introduction

The issue of women and their empowerment has become important and remains an integral part of, and subject of interest whenever we are considering social equality, poverty eradication and the general socio-economic and political development. The consideration for women, as an integral part of societal development, is doubtless an important subject in this age of globalisation. This is particularly important in developing nations, where women are increasingly gaining recognition and support in their bid to prepare themselves to be able to face the challenges of life. The conventional factors that hinder women development are culture bound. To empower women, means to provide for everybody the chance to utilize the worth of life

for general development. Development is not gender based nor is it regionally pre-occupied; it is a universal factor and it accommodates everybody irrespective of sex, colour and creed.

In recent times women have asserted their status, and challenged their male counterparts in the society in various ways. They have realised that the major reason why they remained relegated was, and still is, as a result of some cultural beliefs and practices as well as lack of education.

The Concept of Gender

The term, gender is a socio-cultural variable, its ever changing nature makes it flexible and applicable to other socio-cultural variables such as race, class, age, ethnic group and so on. In the view of Mahuta (2007) gender roles are learned through the socialization processes; they are not fixed, but changeable. Giddens (2006) states that, gender systems are institutionalized through educational, political and economic systems as well as through legislation, culture and traditions. However, approaches to gender issues are not on individual, women or men, but on the systems, which determine gender roles and responsibilities, and such factors that determine access to and control over resources and decision-making potentials based on gender. Giddens (2006, p. 1017) maintains that, gender refers to social expectations about behaviour regarded as appropriate for the members of each sex. Gender does not refer to the physical attributes in terms of which men and women differ, but to socially formed traits of masculinity and femininity.

Gender refers to both men and women and the relationship between them. The promotion of gender equality should concern and engage men as well as women. As far as development is concerned, both sexes need to be empowered. First, there is the need to accept that development, socio-economic and political empowerment is not restricted to one particular sex.

Women Empowerment

Women empowerment refers to the ability to equip women with knowledge and skills for self social defence, improved health, socio-economic and active political participation (Williams, 1994). Empowerment of women can only be achieved when both men and women come together in the process of change. Empowerment should be seen as a factor that carries two gains; namely, gain for men is equally gain for women. As a result of this, increasing empowerment of women as a strategy means involving women and making them actively participate in the development process of the state, nation or society. Empowerment focuses on utilising individual and collective strength to work towards the common goal without coercion or domination. According to the United Nations (1995) empowerment initiatives, implies women gaining power and control over their own lives. By so doing, women will be able to involve themselves in building self-confidence, expansion of choices, awareness-raising and access to social institutions and social policies, which are still holding on to or have properties of gender inequality.

The term gender equality is a preferred terminology within the United Nations, rather than gender equity (UNDP 1995). Gender equity denotes an element of explanation of social justice; this is usually based on tradition, customary factors, religion or culture which often serves as a hindrance to women empowerment, most often to the detriment of women. In 1995 it was generally agreed by the United Nations that the term equality would be utilised.

According to Haralambos and Holborn (2004) equality means that the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are male or female. The important factor about equality is the consideration of its quantitative and qualitative aspects. The quantitative aspect is the desire to have equitable representation of women, recognise the amount of balance and a fair policy devoid of parity. On the other hand, the qualitative aspect views women to have equitable influence on the process of establishing development programmes. In this respect, equality is the general perception given to the activities that involve interests, plans and needs, of both men and women on an equal footing such as in planning and decision-making. However, gender equality focuses on the appropriate social justice provided for both men and women with regards to the execution of talents and their active participation in socio-economic and political programmes of the society. Gender equality, therefore, is a stepping stone towards social development and sustainable development in the society.

According to Dawn (1995) gender mainstreaming does not mean initiating separate projects for women within any work project. It requires that attention should be given to gender issues, as an integral part of all activities across the programme initiated. This is making women and men have access to the same central policy in terms of decision making and programme initiation. The United Nations (1995) states that, gender mainstreaming was established as an intergovernmental mandate in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995. However, gender mainstreaming does not stop the project for women or project that is specifically for women, but it equally promotes particular project and partnership association with governmental agencies. Projects are still needed as they help to bridge the gap of gender inequality in societies.

Ingredients for Empowerment

Empowerment is often envisaged as individual, rather than collective. Thus, it focuses on entrepreneurship and individual self reliance. Some of the pre-requisites for empowerment are:

- Availability of resources, such as finance, knowledge, information and technology.
- Skills, training and leadership capacity for empowerment for all irrespective of their gender.
- Practical democratic process, dialogue, participation in policy and decision making.

- At organisational level, to have open and democratic process as a way of empowering women and to stand or cope with the social and family pressures.
- The autonomy and full control of their lives and property should be given to all women; without bias or discrimination on the basis of gender.

Women Empowerment for Sustainable Development

Empowerment is particularly described as the ability to make choices, it must involve the ability to shape, direct and make choices related to national interest. In some cases empowerment is seen as a channel for women to challenge the existing power structures which subordinate women. With this, empowering women is seen to have different outlook in different contextual frameworks.

Education, according to the functionalists' perspective of sociology, is viewed as a means for the acquisition of skills for effective productivity in the society. Education itself is a means of acquiring socio-economic and political empowerment in every community. It is in view of the importance of education that Mahuta (2007) states that, the institution of education is a vital instrument for the socio-cultural and economic development of the individual and the society at large. Education is not gender pre-occupied; it is sensitive and is provided to cater for both women and men. To educate an individual is to empower that individual. This means that giving women the basic

knowledge and information through schooling is the first step toward gender empowerment. This is necessary if we are to meet and equip individuals for various demands of development in Nigeria.

To empower women is to expose them to the public policies of social security; this is to empower them with education. Emile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) in Mahuta (2007) sees educational institution as a means of transmitting knowledge and skills that enable both male and female to fit into the social system. This means that education should provide individuals with the basic ingredients for a better and acceptable life.

Education is a major tool for socio-economic and political sustainability. For the simple fact that the concept of sustainability is not easy to define, it is still obvious that education, economic development and training are fundamental factors that are capable of moving the society towards sustainable development. In an effort to bring stability in the development of the society, every nation must work towards education for Sustainable Development.

According to the United Nations (1995) in spite of the fact that sustainable economy or development is difficult to define, the common feature of sustainability is the ability to maintain some crucial factors of existence in a particular country. However, it is pertinent to provide efficient use of energy, adequate conservative water and decrease in pollution, respect for human rights, provision of public transportation for the public, increase in

production and distribution of social amenities as well as social and economic security.

The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) is of the view that, sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. This pattern of development is said to have three components, namely, environment, society and economy. The well-being of these three is intertwined. The paradigm of sustainability argues that, the entire social system works for one another and without one another, the goal of sustainable development will be fragile. Sustainability deals with the consideration of balanced environmental, societal and economic development.

However, education affects and improves plans for sustainable development in the following ways:

- Education can improve agricultural productivity, enhance the status of women, reduce population growth rates, enhance physical and social environmental protection and improve the living standard of the people.
- Literacy and numeracy help farmers to adapt to new agricultural methods, cope with risks and respond to market signals.
- Basic education allows knowledge for credit facilities. The impact of education becomes greater when the proportion of females' education is equal to that of males.

- Implementing an effective sustainable plan requires the value of education; an educated citizenry is vital in national sustainability. The level of education in the country contributes to the development of the citizens.
- Positive community based decision, which will have direct effect on economic and environmental well being is based on the educational provision meant to improve the manpower of the community.
- Education is very important with regards to the improvement of the quality of life of people. Also, education raises the economic status of families and it reduces social risks in the family, infant mortality and improves the educational chances of the next generation.

Recommendations

In view of the various issues raised and examined in this paper, the following recommendations are made:

The education of girls and women should be provided the much needed attention it deserves, since sustainable development in the society requires the role of both men and women.

Government and the general society should tackle with some degree of seriousness the problems created by gender inequality in educational life chances or who gets what?

More schools and centres for girls and women who drop out of schools should be established with a view to provide a second chance opportunity for girls and women to continue their education.

Girls and women should be encouraged to learn vocational trades so as to enable them become self reliant and thus, contribute to national sustainable development.

Conclusion

The educational provision for women means complete empowerment and liberation from all the socio-economic, educational and political barriers instituted on them in the society. An educated woman gains higher status and much more enhanced sense of efficacy. This helps women to be able to contribute their own portion to development. Empowering women means enlightening them about the importance of family life and the means to manage the household properly. An educated woman is an empowered woman; she has a high educational and career expectation for her children, both boys and girls. Empowering women implies total empowerment; in politics, economic, education and the social endeavours of life. The most important factor for empowerment is education. Thus, with education, development in society will have an equitable balance. Sustainable development is only feasible in a society where people enjoy their rights and exercise them to the fullest for the general growth and development of the nation.

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