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A large, abstract graphic made of many thin, golden lines that form a complex, wireframe-like structure. It starts as a dense, rounded shape on the left and tapers into a series of parallel lines extending towards the right. Below this graphic are several horizontal bands: a thick golden one, a thin white one, a thick black one, and another thick golden one.

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**ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMMES:
TOOLS FOR RURAL WOMEN
EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Literacy education has been identified as an important tool for meaningful development. A meaningful development can only take place where men and women are active participants. It appears that Nigerian women have been constrained by lack of literacy to play their role in the development of their communities. To really bring them to the lime-light, their empowerment is important. This paper therefore submits that rural women can be empowered if different adult literacy programmes such as basic literacy, post literacy, civic literacy, functional literacy and family literacy are made available to them. The paper recommends among other things that government at all levels should show more commitment to adult and non-formal education programmes through friendly legislation and proper funding to make adult literacy programmes available to rural women empowerment in Nigeria.

Keywords: Adult literacy tools, rural women, empowerment

Introduction

Empowerment of rural women has been a major concern to many women advocate groups and governments at local and international levels. It is as if everyone wants to discuss women, and what Umar (2005) calls women revolution features prominently in the history of the world. Attention on how to alleviate the disadvantaged condition of women has now been focused and stressed. There is no gain saying the fact that in most developed and developing countries including Nigeria women are being marginalized, vilified, dominated, discriminated, exploited and excluded from participating in major public policy formulation and development programmes (Ebirim, 2008). The 2006 Nigeria Census figure indicates that female constituted 48.7 % of the entire population. Many of them are illiterate, poor, disadvantaged politically, socially and culturally. In Nigeria, like other developing countries, majority of women live in rural areas. These areas are characterized by poverty, hunger, underdevelopment and lack of social amenities. The rural women are bogged down by the amount of work they have and so have had chances to be educated.

The implication of the above features for rural women in Nigeria is that they are bound to be backward compared to their male counterparts. For women to break these barriers, they need access to power over economic, social, psychological and cultural situations to enable them have knowledge to transform the world to their advantage. Knowledge gained, if put into profitable use, help in liberating people from the shackles of hunger, poverty and other vices that hinder one's proper existence. In an effort to attain liberation for women-folk, Roseline, Arikpo and Justina (2006) advocated empowering women

as a way of boosting their capacity to make choices and to transform the choices made into desired actions and outcomes.

The issue of women and empowerment came into forefront during the United Nations decade for women (1976-1985). The observed marginalization and discrimination against women all over the world compelled the United Nations to hold conferences, pronounced declarations and embark on programmes to redress the imbalance. The central theme of all the conferences has been the need to raise the status of women and bring them into the development process (Ike, 2006).

In most of these conferences, emphasis has been on education and literacy for women to alleviate their sufferings and empower them for rural transformation and sustainable development. The hope is that if rural women are given access to literacy education, this will invariably lead to collective action directed at the improvement of living standard of rural populace.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the women empowerment framework through conscientization by Paulo Freire. The origin of empowerment as a form of theory was traced to the Brazilian humanitarian and educator, Freire (1973). He suggested a plan for liberating the oppressed people of the world through education. He presented three progressive steps of empowerment: "conscientizing, inspiring, and liberating". According to Freire (1973), the oppressed or the disadvantaged can become empowered by learning about social inequality (i.e., conscientizing), encouraging others by making them feel confident about achieving social equality, and finally liberating them. His theory has been utilized in women's studies. In fact, the root of the feminist pedagogy lies in his work (Weiler, 1991).

The most important point to note in this framework is conscientization, which holds the key to women's empowerment. Conscientization implies acquisition of critical awareness about the structure of discrimination, exploitation and oppression in which one is placed. In the context of women's empowerment, conscientization has three aspects. In the first instance, it involves, awareness generation among women about gender gaps in respect of material welfare such as food availability, nutritional inputs, mortality rate, sex-ratio, etc, access to resources and benefits such as education, wage, employment, land, credit and services, participation in decision making process within the family as well as in public organization, such public organisation includes legislative assembly, parliament and development project among other things, etc. Secondly, conscientization involves debunking of the belief that these 'gender gaps' are 'God-given' or they are part of the 'natural order of things.' The third aspect of conscientization involves organization and mobilization of women to attain the end of gender equality. Parpart, Rai & Staudt (2003) argued that "empowerment must be understood as including both individual conscientization (power within) as well as the ability to work collectively which can lead to politicized power with others, which provides the power to bring about change". Their progressive steps of empowerment are identical to those of Freire. "Power within" is consistent with conscientizing, "power with" is compatible with inspiring, and "power to" is in accord with liberating.

The justification for using the women's empowerment framework through conscientization is premised on the fact that when women attend literacy programme, they will be able to read and write printed information. With these skills, they will get informed, aware, educated, conscientized, inspired, liberated and consequently empowered.

The Status of Rural Women

In most African societies, experiences have shown that women have been abused, marginalized, discriminated against and denied their rights in most spheres of human endeavour. The situation is worse for the rural women who have become mere tools at the hands of their husbands. The rural women work tirelessly from morning till late in the evening. They are either working on their farms or doing petty trading in the markets, a large quantity of which is transported to urban areas. Sometimes, these men are ungrateful to these enormous women's efforts. Rather, they expect the rural women to pay homage to them for keeping them under the roofs. Yet, women who have contributed a lot to the development of the nation and who constitute 50% of the labour force are to date, subjugated and oppressed (Ebirim, 2008). This is the scenario of women in Africa. They are perceived more as house hold property than as co-partner and operators in development efforts.

In addition to the above, Moda (1992) observed that it is very pathetic to note that the various statistics of the most developing countries like Nigeria, women especially those who live in the rural areas constitute the majority of illiterates. Illiteracy as we all know exposes such people to poverty, ignorance and diseases, which limit the possibility of human progress.

Similarly, in some communities in Nigeria, inhuman and obnoxious traditional practices are meted out to widows at the death of their husbands. Unfortunately, most women now resign themselves to the culture of silence as a result of ignorance of what constitutes their rights in the family and society at large (Ebirim, 2008). A typical example of the suppression of women can be illustrated with the Ayamba community in Dekina local government of Kogi State. Writing on the plight of women in this community, Momoh, Usman and Muhammed (2002) have observed that the women have been relegated to the background. They have little or no say in the community. They are only meant to be heard and not seen. They are regarded as second class citizens. Majority of them are poorly nourished and lack adequate health and social security. Some parents do deny their daughters education while some men do not see divorce as a serious issue.

In corroborating the above scenario, UNICEF (2002) reported that the level of education of women is low in Nigeria most especially in northern part of Nigeria. The national literacy rate for female is only 56% compared to 72% for male and in certain states, the female literacy, enrolment and achievement rates are much lower, for example, girls enrolment in Sokoto was 15% compared to 59% for boys. However, in Nigeria today, there is progress in woman education. Although Nigerian women still have a long way for achieving quality education compared to their male counterpart.

Adult Literacy and Women Empowerment

The term empowerment is derived from the word 'power'. To empower means to enable a person gain power. According to Okeke (1995), empowerment implies that the person or group of persons being empowered lack power or authority by circumstances of denial or default. Thus, empowerment can be either for the individual or for the group. It is collective if the enablement affects the group as a whole, for example, for women who have been identified as lacking power to control their lives and to participate fully in community decision-making.

The term empowerment came into popularity with the feminist movement whose major demand was for women to become empowered to take control of their own lives, especially with things that affect them. It is in pursuance of these objectives that the United Nations devoted the year 1985 popularly called the decade for women. The ultimate goal was to empower women to improve their potentials and contribute to the development of their societies. According to Longwe (1997), empowerment involves

the transformation of patriarchal societies through a process of enlightenment, conscientization and collective organization. Kam (1996) uses a community work perspective to define empowerment as a "process whereby social workers and other professionals engage in a set of activities with a client aimed at reducing the powerlessness stemming from an experience of discrimination or stigmatization" (p.230). In classifying this further, he states that empowerment emphasizes people, power and participation, the raising of people's consciousness and the changing of the environment to eliminate the social constraints acting on people's lives. Education has been recognised as an important weapon to attain empowerment. In fact there are ample evidences supporting the direct relationship between literacy education and positive health indicators, lower fertility rates, higher agricultural productivity, higher family income, and other social, political and economic indicators of empowerment. In cases where data can be analysed by gender, the education of women is usually a much stronger predictor of positive impact. The largest number of available studies examine the relationship between women's literacy level and positive health, family planning behaviour, political participation and economic status. This data will be used to establish that positive relationship exists between adult literacy programmes and women empowerment.

Research has identified a strong relationship among mothers' levels of literacy and lower morbidity, mortality, and fertility rates in families, even after controlling for socio-economic status (SES) and access to health services (Hobcraft, 1993). Both economic and social gains resulting from girls' education have clearly been documented in multi-country studies Subbarao and Laura(1993). In his own review of existing literature, Joshi (1994) pointed out that maternal literacy accounts for as much as half of the positive effects on children's "health while Socio-Economic Status(SES) is responsible for the other half. Joshi's research indicates that a mother's literacy is a predictor for her children's long term nutritional status. Schultz (1993), analysing aggregate data from 62 low-income countries to determine the factors affecting fertility decline, concludes that the literacy of women is the dominant empirical factor associated with the decline in fertility in the cross-section and over time. He later concludes that, growth in income alone lowers child mortality but has little total (reduced-form) effect on fertility.

Educated women acquire information such as voting in an election, seeking information about candidates or issues, participating in discussion of political party or social movement. Other things they are exposed to include; quality of government service, level of corruption, accountability, political freedom, and rule based governance, and extent of judicial unpredictability. The foregoing information can go a long way to educate and empower an individual towards his stand and position in democracy and good governance. Research findings have indicated positive relationship between literacy programme and change in attitude towards community participation. Stromquist (2005), reporting the study of four Adult Basic Education (ABE) programmes by Greenleigh Associates (1968), found that literacy participants reported an increase in community participation. A later study reported by (Ibid) in Becker et al (1976) was based on follow-up of participants after one to one year after completing their programmes. It found that 84 percent of the former learners reported no change in their voter registration status. Also, 84 of the participants reported no change in community participation. Two of the few qualitative studies of the literacy impacts in developing countries were conducted by Carron, Mwiria & Righ (1989), in Kenya and Kagitcibasi, Oksen, & Gulgoz (2005), in Turkey. The Kenyan study sampled 371 literacy graduates and 66 illiterates as a comparison group in five different rural locations in the country. Literacy graduates did better in a wide variety of behavioural and attitudinal indicators that included participation in elections and local associations. The Turkish study sampled 95 urban women in an assessment carried out immediately after programme participation and a subset of 50 women in a follow-up after one year of programme participation. It used various instruments, including a social participation scale and a self-efficacy scale. This study found that literacy programme participants in the social participation scale and that over time gains in self-efficiency increased considerably while gains in social participation increased

only slightly.

Burchfield, Hua, Baral, & Rocha's (2002) study of Nepali women shows that by the end of the second year of programme participation, more women in the literacy programme (across all levels of engagement in the literacy programme) than those not in literacy programme demonstrated political knowledge and thought they could serve as political representatives. More women literates also participated in community groups and were aware of women and girls experiences with trafficking and domestic violence.

In Nigeria, (2000) compared non-literate women to literate women. The study, focusing on 36 rural women through individual and focus group interviews, found that non-literate women felt their illiteracy had negative impact on their self-esteem and that it prevented them from full participation in community meetings because others assumed they were not very knowledgeable. In contrast, literate women reported being confident enough to participate in community meeting, considered that they knew their rights better than the non-literate women, and felt more confident to make autonomous decisions. The above scenario depicts powerful nature of literacy in political empowerment. This shows that women need to be educated to remove them from shackle of political marginalization and ignorance as well as culture of silence. Having established the positive relationship that exists between adult literacy and women empowerment, it is imperative to examine the adult literacy programmes available towards empowerment of rural women in Nigeria.

Adult Literacy Programmes for Empowering Rural Women in Nigeria

The concept of literacy means the acquisition of the skills of reading, writing and numeracy. Literacy is the ability to possess the basic skills of reading, writing (at least in the mother tongue), and to calculate. To be literate therefore is to be able to communicate with other persons through reading and writing. According to Stanford (1981) citing UNESCO (1962), a person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and the community's development.

In a related development, Haladu (2002) citing Indabawa (1995) defined "literacy as the ability to acquire the skills of reading, writing and numeration, in a given language (local or foreign) for effective and efficient pursuit of everyday activities involving individuals in the society" (p.17).

The important feature of this definition is that the ability to read and write is related to the whole of a person's experience. That is, the utilization of the skills of reading and writing and numeration by recipient in facilitating his or her societal activities. The focus at this point is to consider the various adult literacy programmes for women empowerment in Nigeria. These include basic literacy, post literacy, functional literacy, family health literacy and civic literacy.

Basic Literacy

Basic literacy gives the skills of reading, writing and numeracy to adults who have not had the opportunity of formal education in their childhood and those who had little formal education but dropped out before they could acquire sufficient literacy skills for their day-to-day activities. It appears that large number of rural women are either illiterates or dropped outs. According to Tsaku (2005) giving basic literacy to these groups of women will put 'life' in their existence (p.115). Basic literacy program will help reduce illiteracy and its accompanies in the lives of rural women and gives them a new pair of eyes with which they used to see their plights, their lives and how to improve on their plights. It is equally capable of affording women meaningful functional and access to information and knowledge to communicate

freely. The programme is normally taught in local or English language which will last for nine (9) months and the completers are neo-literates.

Post Literacy

Post literacy has been defined as an integrating learning process to assist literates to retain, improve and apply their basic knowledge, attitudes and skills for the satisfaction of their needs, and to permit them to combine education through a self-directed process for the improvement of their quality of life Dave, Quane & Perere (1988). The idea of post literacy for rural women is to enable them retain, use and sustain the learnt skills at the basic literacy programme. This view is consistent with an earlier view cited by Haladu (2006) in UNESCO (1977) that post literacy enables the neo-literate to put into practice skills acquired and increase the knowledge obtained. Successful learners are issued a certificate, which is the equivalent of the formal primary school leaving certificate. With this opportunity, the neo-literate can gain a deeper awareness of his environment, through a more meaningful and independent use of material and through more complex use of language.

Functional Literacy

Another popular literacy programme is the functional literacy. As against basic literacy, this is aimed at providing the skills of reading, writing and computation. Functional literacy combines with the said skills those of functionality or practicality. In other words, it is the application of reading, writing and computation to any activity in which the individual engages. That is using basic skills to be able to trade, tailor, farm, socialize, maintain positive family life or use a useful life. For example, it may be the application of the self-skills to carpentry, if the recipient was a carpenter. Functional literacy education deals with selective and intensive literacy education that is tailored to a particular need. There are two aspects of functional literacy education. The first aspect is known as work-oriented functional literacy. This deals with the teaching of literacy in the context of vocational knowledge and acquired their working efficiency and increases their productivity. Here, the technical language to be used and vocational knowledge to be included are tuned to the selected occupation. The second aspect according to Okedara (1981) is known as socio-cultural functional literacy in the context of socio-cultural matters, such as family life, sanitation, nutrition, religion and civics. Here, literacy skill is geared towards social matters. The two aspects of functional literacy education have to be integrated (literacy, vocational and social skills) in order to sustain the interest of the participants fully. Functional literacy leads to the acquisition of economic skills which gives the learners economic independence.

Family Health Literacy Programme

Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of diseases or infirmity Tsaku (2005). Women's health involves their emotional, social and physical wellbeing and is determined by the social, political and economic context of their lives, as well as by biology. However, health and wellbeing elude the majority of rural women in Nigeria because of lack of literacy. Through family health literacy women can improve on the health status of their family. Health literacy programme aims at inculcating in individuals, knowledge and useful behaviour, such as preventive health, personal hygiene, and environmental sanitation among others. This programme cares for women in areas like care of pregnant women, child care, nutrition and family planning which will be useful to women and their families.

Civic Literacy

The connection between literacy and civic engagement is predicated on the assumption that as individuals become more exposed to information about their environment, especially the public institutions and government, they will be more prepared to intervene to make such bodies more responsive to their needs. There is, the expectations also that as individuals are engaged in political decisions about myriad aspects of lives, an intimate connection emerges between literacy and democracy. Few people could deny that entering formal relations with state and other modern institutions today requires print communications. Therefore, attention to literacy defined as individual access to reading and writing is an inescapable preposition. There are some adult literacy programmes that focus on the development of citizenship and autonomous attitudes in adult learners. These programmes are usually based on the consciousness raising and dialogical approaches pioneered by Freire (1973). Literacy of this kind helps to build in individual the spirit of questioning the existing obstacles to one's life. With civic literacy, rural women will be able to understand and appreciate their rights and duties in their environment and act appropriately.

Conclusion

Development of our community is a responsibility of all; young and old; men and women. In fact, no meaningful development can take place where an important segment of our society especially rural women is left out in the scheme of development. To co-opt rural women in the scheme of development they need empowerment. This can be achieved through literacy education. With quality literacy education through its valuable programmes such as basic literacy, post literacy, functional literacy, family health literacy and civic literacy, rural women would be able to discharge their responsibilities effectively and serve as co-partners in attaining national and sustainable development of our communities.

Recommendations

Based on the opinions expressed in this paper, the following recommendations were made to make adult literacy programmes opportunities available to rural women in Nigeria for their empowerment:

- i. States agencies for mass education should extend their literacy programs to rural areas and where the programmes are in operation effort should be made to improve the quality of the programmes in order to bring out rural women from shackles of illiteracy.
- ii. Community Development Associations at the rural areas should be mobilized and encouraged to run literacy programmes for their people and agency for mass education should help the associations in the manner that the goal of making rural women literate for empowerment purposes are achieved.
- iii. Agency for Mass Literacy at different states should focus their literacy programmes on empowerment of their clients so that the programmes would have meaning in the life of the clients.
- iv. Government at all levels should show more commitment to adult and non-formal education enterprise through legislation and proper funding especially adult literacy programmes to help reduce the level of illiteracy among adult population in Nigeria. In this regard, non-formal education component of the Universal Basic Education programme should accord its rightful place in a bid to provide basic education for all in Nigeria.

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