

Women As Agents Of Sustainable Development In Nigeria: Bridging The Yawning Gender Gap

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Abstract: The last two decades have witnessed the desecration of the pride of womanhood mostly in the rural communities in Africa at large, and Nigeria in particular. The trend has subjected the womenfolk in several communities as second class human beings. Women in Nigeria play very important roles in the economy, yet many of them are among the poorest of the population and live on less than one dollar a day. There is no doubt, that women daily face many challenges in the society when it comes to matching to their male counter parts in the society, in terms of government appointments, social and cultural deprivation of assets and wealth. This paper examines the social, economic and legal problems of discrimination against women and argues that public perception and treatment of women should reflect what they truly are: agents of sustainable development in the society. It shows that women contribute meaningfully to their environment, politically, socially and economically in ways that are advantageous both to their families and the society at large. Therefore, empowering women is integral and tantamount to the success and advancement of natural development. It advocates the elimination of discriminatory policies which go beyond the natural order of life thereby bridging the yawning gap between the Nigerian Woman and her male counterpart.

Keyword: Women, Sustainable Development, Gender Gap

I. INTRODUCTION

Globally the issue of gender equality and women empowerment has become of utmost concern. One of the goals of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) focuses on gender equality and women empowerment to coordinate global and national efforts, to integrate gender equality and women's empowerment into democratic governance, crisis prevention and recovery and environmental and sustainable development.

In Africa, cultural models and practices often render women totally invisible or to a lesser degree, below their male counterparts. While men continue to dominate political activities and enjoy economic power, women are relegated to the role of homemakers and child bearers and are predominantly engaged in farming activities (Cornwall, 2007). It is now recognized internationally that promoting gender equality is an important development strategy for combating poverty and ill health in the society.

Nigeria is blessed with a rich cultural heritage, but not all the cultural practices favors women. Some of its culture has a perverse influence on how women are treated. For example, certain cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, and wife inheritance issues continue to fuel gender inequality. In the northern Nigeria women are faced with traditional patriarchal and cultural barriers that limit their involvement in educational and economic activities. These cultural practices hold down these women from realizing their full potentials. Women in Nigeria make up the largest share of the poor, unemployed and marginalized. Poverty is also a factor that disproportionately affects women, more than men. Poor women of Nigeria, usually have poor nutrition, inadequate access to clean water, and inadequate access to medical care. Women are also seen as low income earners.

This paper will examine the social, economic and legal problems of discrimination against women proffer solutions that will reflect on what the women are truly are: agents of sustainable development in the society.

II. GENDER AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

According to Fatai Omisade, Akeem, (2016), Sustainable development is often considered as varied interaction between social, economic and ecological dimensions of development. It is more importantly being perceived primarily as environmental sustainability with gender concerns often neglected. Achieving sustainability depends on paying equal attention to social, economic, and environmental factors and their harmonisation through sustainable development strategies. Green economy initiatives, a sustainable development strategy aimed at creating more environmentally-sound economies may not fully include basic and essential social requirements such as job quality, income equity, and gender equality. The Brundtland Report, (2012) provides the most quoted definition of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own need". According to World Bank, 2001 cited in Tchouassi 2012, Fatai *et al* (2016), development is concerned with societal well-being (in terms of access to safe water, rate of poverty, access to health care services, access to sanitation, life expectancy at birth, infant and maternal mortality rate, population estimate, and the process of achieving transformation of the society, adult illiteracy, population estimates, and gross domestic product. More succinctly, sustainable development is conceptualised as lying on three inter-related pillars: social development, environmental protection, and social development, with a fourth pillar – the preservation of cultural diversity (UNECE, 2012). As further highlighted by UNECE (2012), a key objective of sustainable development is the need to satisfy the present, while calling for impartial distribution of resources amongst those living today. This is without undermining the strategic perspective to give account for what men and women are bequeathing for the next generation.

Sharma, (2016) cited in Fatai *et al*, (2016) opined that in many countries, the pillars of sustainable development are not sympathetic to the plight of the female party from the perspective of the society where an individual inhabits, propagates and practices culture on the following grounds, thus not projecting the tenets of sustainable development:

- ✓ Global data reveals that 35% per cent of women worldwide have experienced violence either physically and/or sexually more than once in their life.
- ✓ Women are far low in education, economic participation, physical safety and health.

The prevailing patterns and forms of production, consumption and distribution worldwide are heading towards unsustainable direction. The significant diminution of vital habitats and biodiversity occasioned by pollution of land, seas, and the atmosphere, floods, droughts and other forms of natural disasters add to poverty and inequality for people that depend on natural resources for their well-being and also a threat to future generations (UN-Women, 2014). Also human interaction with the agitated environment, producing extraordinary stresses and shocks (due to devastated rural and urban landscapes) creates unsustainable patterns of development with girls and women often affected disproportionately economically, socially and

environmentally. Thus, the raving international debate now focuses on the need to move societies and economies by enabling prosperity through green economies or avert catastrophe and crisis (Fatai *et al* 2016).

III. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

It is widely acknowledged that there is active participation of women as economic agents in Africa than anywhere in the world with their involvement in significant contribution to agriculture, with the ownership of one third of firms, and in some countries constituting up to 70% of employees (AGI, 2015). This is without prejudice to the fact that women often face a barrage of challenges ranging from restrictive practices, to discriminatory laws and extensively segmented labour markets. Various researchers (Agbola 1990, 1996; Okoro 1996; Mivanyi 1996; Ekong 2006) had reported on the contributions of women in agriculture, community development and physical development. For instance, Ekong (2006) asserts that women are the real engine driving the economy of this country and are the keys to development and therefore crucial to the goal of sustainable development. In 1975, FAO reported that 70% of all the work in food processing and almost 100% of all domestic and households' chores are performed by women. This trend has not changed except that women now take additional burden of extra-domestic affairs. Agbola (1990) confirmed this assertion by concluding that women are the operators of the economy and constitute a major arm of the labour force, and that Nigerian women are dynamic, industrious and resourceful (Faith, 2008).

Women play an important role in African economies with high presence in the micro and small business subsector with majority of them engaging in low income generating self-employment especially non-agricultural and agricultural activities with low growth prospect. Women have been shown to demonstrate the propensity to demonstrate eco-conscious attitude in their household purchases. Within the context of the environment, studies of household behaviour carried out by OECD, (2008) revealed the more inclination of women to buy eco-labelled, recyclable and energy-efficient products than men with women now responsible for buying some 80% of household items in developed countries. According to Stevens (2010), quite a number of studies based on Sweden emphasize that women devote more time than men looking for information on sustainable consumption lifestyle options such as purchasing green, eating organic foods, and recycling at a higher rate than men. In the same vein, studies show that Japanese women are more eager to pay more for sustainable products, thus showing more concern than men on environmental issues.

The contribution of Women entrepreneurship to income generation and poverty alleviation is quite significant in both least developed and most developed economies. Women play a powerful role in educating and socializing their children in addition to teaching them responsibility and care with respect to the use and protection of natural resources. Thus adequate recognition must be accorded their contribution to sustainable

development with the deployment of their skills and knowledge (Fatai *et al* 2016).

IV. DISCRIMINATIONS AGAINST AND VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA

The vulnerability of the Nigerian woman is an incontestable fact despite the ratification by Nigeria on a number of international standards which sanction gender discrimination and inequality (UNEP, 2012, AU, 2010). Women and the girl-child still have unequal access to education, healthcare, adequate housing and employment. Gender imbalance permeates every facet of Nigerian society and comes in several forms. Onyeukwu (2004) outlined some of the gender discriminatory practices and violence against women and female children. Violence against women is the most acute form of gender inequality in Nigeria. A great majority of the violence against women can be described as Harmful Traditional Practices against Women (HTPs). Some of the common Harmful Traditional Practices against Women in our communities include female genital mutilation, male-child preference, child marriage, ritualistic widowhood practices, nutritional taboos, cult prostitution, domestic violence, and sexual freedom for husbands. Other discriminatory practices include traditional land tenure systems and patterns of inheritance, lack of access to credit, family preference for sons, lack of participation in public decision-making, discrimination in housing and employment, discriminatory legislation, and discriminatory religious practices, as well as rape, battery, trafficking in women, murder, kidnapping, and induced prostitution. Women are entitled to freedom of rights, freedom from violence and entitlements pertaining to human beings without discrimination or deprivation. Even though some laws have been passed to proscribe some of these practices, the gap between the law and cultural practices remains wide. One can allude to the Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 (VAPPA) and other state laws prohibiting some forms of gender-based violence. (see for example, Ebonyi State Protection Against Domestic Violence and Related Matters Law 2005 No. 003 of 2005; Lagos Protection Against Domestic Violence Law 2007; Cross Rivers State Prohibition of Girl-Child Marriages and Female Circumcision or Genital Mutilation Law 2000; Cross Rivers State Domestic Violence and Maltreatment of Widows (Prohibition) Law 2004 No. 10 of 2004; Rivers State Reproductive Health Law 2003; Edo State Female Genital Mutilation (Prohibition) Law 1999; Edo State Maternity Mortality Monitoring Law 2001; Edo State Inhuman Treatment of Widows Prohibition Law 2004; Enugu State Prohibition of Infringement of a Widow's or Widower's Fundamental Rights Law 2001; Ekiti State Gender-Based Violence (Prohibition) Law 2011.) The shortcomings of these laws include the fact that they are limited in scope; many of them target only specific forms of violence and so are incomprehensive. Furthermore their territorial application is restricted to the state where they are enacted. Even the VAPPA applies only to the Federal Capital Territory. Ironically, the Federal Capital Territory may not be affected by some of the practices provided for in the Act as it is a

melting pot of several cultures and nationalities within the country. It is therefore a more secularized part of the country where the major gender-related abuses may not occur.

Away from discriminatory cultural and abusive practices, political power in Nigeria is heavily skewed in favour of the men and against the women. This is a well-known fact and yawning reality even though the fact that this continues to be a big problem for women, democracy and good governance does not appear to be shared by many in the polity. Politically, women are just under the ladder with which the men climb to positions of authority and from their new positions; they (men) begin to oppress the women that made them what they are through discriminatory policies, bad leadership and corruption. No doubt, women, especially the rural women constitute over 70 percent of the Nigerian electorate. They troop out in their thousands to the polling stations and wait patiently to vote for their oppressors. Even during electioneering campaigns, they are easily mobilized by politicians, some of whom only show appreciation by giving out bags of salt and bags of rice to share and when the politician wins, the rural woman and her political contribution to the sustenance of democracy becomes garbage to be confined to the vehicle of historical oblivion. Presently out of the 109 senators of Nigeria only 3 persons are female, what an imbalance!

Economically, the rural woman in Nigeria is used in the farm to produce the food that Nigerians eat every day. The cheapest labour in agriculture is the one provided by the Nigerian woman. In all facets of agriculture they are there, including poultry and animal husbandry. Women supply 70 per cent of agricultural labour; 50 per cent of animal husbandry related activities, and 60 per cent of food processing, yet they have access to only 20 per cent of available agricultural resources. Despite these challenges, women remain the cornerstone of agricultural production, processing, marketing and utilization.

V. EFFECTS OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION ON NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A complete picture of how discrimination against women is affecting National development is stated below:

- ✓ Due to the general absence of women in decision-making positions, there is low investment in such sectors as health and education that are crucial to human development outcomes.
- ✓ The limitation in women's economic choices and options is hampering the achievement of economic growth and development.
- ✓ Women generally remain reluctant to take responsibilities in politics due to lack of economic empowerment to actualize their ambitions
- ✓ The increasing incidence of insecurity, violence and crime such as armed banditry, kidnapping, prostitution, child trafficking, cultism, increasing culture of begging are due to poverty in the society which women empowerment can ameliorate.

VI. RIGHTS OF THE WOMAN IN NIGERIA

Women in Nigeria face various versions of human rights violations despite the provisions granted unto them in the 1999 Constitution. Sadly, a good deal of Nigerian women, especially in rural areas is not aware of their rights. They are discriminated against in all the spheres of the society, whether in education or employment. Women are expected to be aware of their rights. Their socio-economic capacities would be strengthened. They would be able to play a bigger role in the society. The promotion of rights in favour of women is essential for sustainable development. International institutions emphasize that the respect for women's rights and the reduction of the gender gap are key factors for reduction of poverty. Under the 1999 Constitution, Nigerian women are guaranteed the right to dignity (section 34); the right to life (section 33); integrity and security of persons (section 14(2)); freedom from harmful practices which negatively affect the human rights of women (sections 17(2)(f) and 34); equal rights in marriage and in cases of separation, divorce and annulment; the right to equal protection and benefit of the law (section 17(2)(a)); the right to participate in political and decision making process (section 15); the right to a peaceful existence and participation in the promotion and maintenance of peace (section 24); the right to education and training (section 18); equal opportunity in work and career advancement (section 17(3)(a)); the right to health, including sexual and reproductive rights (section 17(3)(c) & (d)); the right to food security; the right to adequate housing (section 16(2)(d)); the right to a positive cultural context (section 15(3)(c)); the right to a healthy and sustainable environment (section 20); the right to sustainable development; the right to equitable share in inheritance; the right of elderly women to special protection and freedom from violence (section 17(2)(f)); the right of women with disabilities to special protection and freedom from violence (section 17(2)(g)); the right of women in distress to special protection; and a right of remedy to any woman whose right or freedom has been violated.

There is no doubt that the rights of women in Nigeria are clearly spelt out in the nation's Constitution and they are consistent with the ideals of humanism. Unfortunately, the rights and ideals have remained paper tigers, mere theoretical postulations without any practical bearing on the lives and conditions of the Nigerian woman. In practice, the Nigerian society is replete with anti-humanist ideals. Women are systematically relegated to inferior positions. Despite all the provisions in the law and ratification of protocols, charters and conventions, Nigerian women suffer violations of their human rights. A cogent example may be given regarding the woman's right to property. Many women approach the courts at the end of marriage to protect their rights to a proprietary interest in properties acquired either directly or indirectly during marriage by the couple. Court always insists that the woman provide tangible evidence of such direct contribution which must be in financial form. Mostly courts insist that the evidence should be documentary as well. This discriminatory approach of the court occurs despite clear and specific provision under section 72 of Matrimonial Causes Act 1970 urging the courts to exercise their discretion to readjust

property rights equitably (Rivilin, 2013, Awid, 2012, Uzodike, 1989).

VII. EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES AVAILABLE TO WOMEN IN NIGERIA

Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to building stronger economy, achieving internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improving the quality of life for women, men, families and communities. Women empowerment is an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty. There is no doubt that empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families, communities and the nation. A critical aspect of gender equality is the equal participation of women and men in decision-making about societal priorities and development directions. Investment in women empowerment is rather vital for securing sustainable economic growth and other developmental objectives. We believe that the way forward for the empowerment of the Nigerian woman is as follows:

- ✓ Providing access to resources
- ✓ Reducing labour time
- ✓ Ensuring the health, safety and well-being of all women
- ✓ Promoting education, training and professional development of the woman
- ✓ Promoting equality through community initiatives and advocacy
- ✓ Measuring and publicly reporting on progress to achieve gender equality
- ✓ Implementing enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women
- ✓ Encouraging women in leadership
- ✓ Promoting women organizations
- ✓ Providing long term support
- ✓ Offering business training and small loans

VIII. BRIDGING THE YAWNING GENDER GAP

Despite decades of efforts to promote gender equality, most leadership positions in business, politics, education, and even NGOs are occupied by men, and most people still work in occupations dominated by one sex. Gender imbalances in leadership and occupations are not simply a moral issue or an economic issue, but a governance issue. Gender imbalances persist in large part because the very people with the authority and influence to do something about them know very little about the gender issue and how it works in their organizations and in society at large. Gender imbalanced governance is an expression of entrenched ideas about masculinity and femininity that lead to poor decision making. Improving the quality of governance requires action to counteract the main justifications for the status quo. In addition to the government, the people need to move with the time, by doing away with inherited unproductive and visionless tradition of discrimination and subjugation of women. We need to set up schemes and projects to grow a gender conscious population

without any form of discrimination. The following are workable suggestions.

- ✓ Parents should treat and raise children on the basis of equity and equality;
- ✓ Our societal quest for social stratification or prestige on the basis of gender or sex should give way to equal opportunity for all citizens.
- ✓ The Nigerian constitutional provisions of equality for all citizens should be enforced to the letter.
- ✓ In pursuance of the affirmative action for gender equality the Federal Government should institute a gender audit to identify where gender equity can be strengthened in terms of recruitment, promotion and pay for all public servants.
- ✓ The Federal Government should also fashion out an educational policy that can influence parental decisions about the need to educate the girl child.
- ✓ Schools and universities should develop curriculum for gender studies in tandem with our cultural policy objective of promoting an egalitarian society where all citizens without any discrimination on the basis of gender or creed shall be encouraged to participate in nation building.
- ✓ Cultural parastatals and institutions should be proactive in the development of policy papers and guidelines on how to mainstream all genders and enlist their participation in community and nation building
- ✓ Faith groups and movements should eschew the parochial view of women as inferior.
- ✓ The Mass media should contribute in the search for a new lease of life by projecting programmes and views that support equality for all Nigerians. They should assist in educating and enlightening all Nigerians that investment in girls and women is an investment in Nigeria's future development
- ✓ The women advocacy groups and initiatives should be forth coming with facts and concrete suggestions in their campaigns for social justice. In their conduct and speech they should avoid confrontation and contentions.
- ✓ More states should enact and enforce laws that foster gender equality and prohibit all forms of gender-based discrimination as soon as possible.

IX. CONCLUSION

Gender equality and economic empowerment of women are important for sustainable development and our common future. Equal rights for women should be guaranteed. They should be given equal access and opportunity for participation and leadership in the economy, society and political decision making. There is therefore no doubt that Nigerian women have the potential to contribute to Nigeria's transformation, given gender equity in harnessing available resources. In the short term, there is a need to create full, decent productive employment opportunities for women and access to finance, as well as continue to provide social protection, and more importantly promote and value women as 'good with money'. Key for economic growth is the promotion of women's economic rights which entails promoting a range of women's rights: their sexual and reproductive rights and rights to

education, to mobility, to voice, to ownership, and to live free from violence.

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