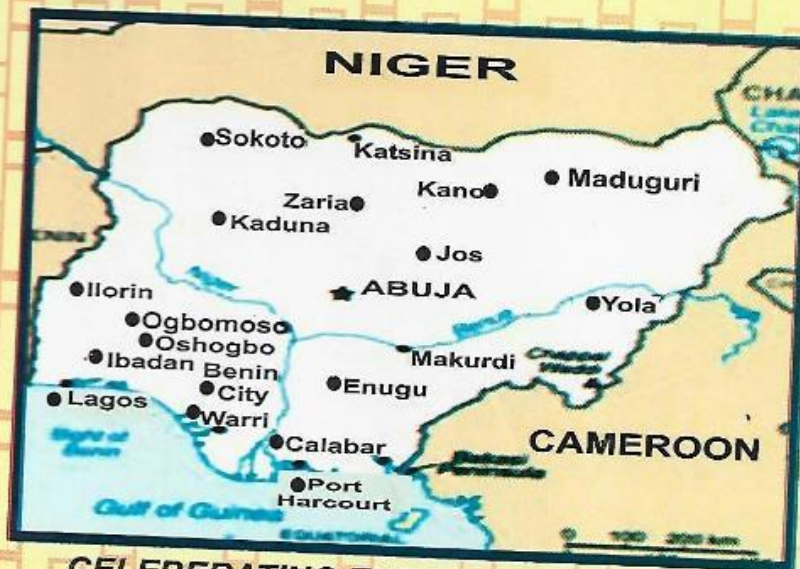




**CENTRE FOR HUMAN RESOURCE  
AND  
GENDER SERVICES**  
(A Division of Rural Linkage Network)



# **ENGENDERING POLICY FOR ATTAINMENT OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN NIGERIA**



**CELEBRATING THE NIGERIAN WOMAN**

*Editor*

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**VOLUME 2 - MARCH 2010**

## Chapter 23

### WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT

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#### Abstract

*This paper examined the concept of women empowerment and why it is necessary for women to be empowered. In the World over, there is a realisation that women have been disadvantaged in several ways. These areas include economic and educational opportunities, political representation and routine processes of decision-making within the community. This realisation has led to the convening of series of conferences leading to the formulation of platforms for the implementation strategies for the betterment of women. Since 1995, when the Beijing Conference was held so many other conferences have been held all geared towards improving the lot of women. Three areas were specifically discussed in this paper namely, economic empowerment, educational empowerment and the right to participate in society and other decision-making situations. In Nigeria, not much progress has been achieved in the area of women empowerment in spite of the fact that Nigeria has been a participant in all the conferences. No enduring policies have been put in place to ensure successful implementation. Ad-hoc strategies such as the "First Lady" programmes have hardly addressed the real issues concerning women. Besides, the temporary nature of such programmes has made it impossible for follow-up actions to be taken. Also, the Federal character policies of governments have not been far-reaching enough to address issues of women empowerment. Until Nigerian women are able to identify, articulate and create awareness about the discrimination they suffer and take positive steps to demand for correction as women in many other countries have done, they will continue to be disadvantaged.*

#### Introduction

There is an adage that says, "The strength of a chain depends on the strength of the weakest link". The weak link in our society in terms of empowerment is made up of our women and children. These form the weak link because they have not been sufficiently empowered by the society. Incidentally and unarguably, these groups constitute a

veritable resource pool of energy needed for growth and development. Ironically, they are highly neglected. This phenomenon is not peculiar to the Nigerian society: it is, in fact, universal although, the degree of neglect varies from one society to another and from one country to another. Whenever there is crisis, such as social, political or economic crisis, women and children are often the principal victims. Whereas, children may be helpless, women on the other hand even though mature and have the ability to protect themselves, are not able to do so as a result of inhibitive environment in which they operate. In most cases, the environments are not "women friendly". Women suffer from so many discriminations culturally, socially, politically and economically.

The past three decades have witnessed the introduction of several measures to empower women through increased social, economic and political equity as well as broader access to fundamental human rights. This has been brought about as a result of the increased awareness of the positive impact of empowering women. This has largely been to the activities of the United Nations (UN), which has organised series of conventions on the empowering of women as well as ensuring their fundamental human rights. For example, in 1979, the general assembly of the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In 1984, it went further to establish the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) as a separate fund within the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In 1995, it sponsored the Beijing World Conference on Women. There was a follow up in Beijing in 2000 and since then, there have been five other conferences. The essence of these steps has been to ensure gender (women) equity and empowerment.

Nigeria has been part and parcel of these several steps to ensure that Nigerian women are empowered in all facets. Since the first Beijing conference and now, some fifteen years have passed. Within this period also, Nigeria has witnessed very many political changes which in turn have contributed to so many economic and social changes. In May 1999, the sixteen years of arbitrary rule of the military came to an end and a new civilian government took off. Since then, political power has remained in the hands of the politicians. This work sets out to examine how far the Nigerian woman has been empowered since the world's awareness of the need for women empowerment began.

### **Women Empowerment**

The term 'empowerment' has a positive connotation. According to Alsop and Heinsohn (2005), empowerment refers to "a person's capacity to make effective choices and to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes". This is in line with an earlier definition of the term by Malhotra, et al (2002). According to them, empowerment is the "ability of people to make strategic choices in the areas that affect their lives". From these definitions, it is very clear that irrespective of gender, everyone, men and women,

must be equipped with the capacity to fully realise themselves. This could also be referred to as "gender equity". According to Lopez- Carlos and Zahidi (2005), gender equality refers "to the stage of human social development at which the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not be determined by the fact of being born male or female. In other words, it is a stage when both men and women realise their full potentials". This implies that all the links of the chain in the adage used in the introduction to this write-up must be strong. The reality however is the opposite. This is despite the statistical proof that women represent over 50 percent of the world's population.

There is not much difference in the case of Nigeria too which had a total population of 140 million in 2003, according to the National Population Census (NPC) out of which the greater percentage is women. If this large proportion of the population must realise their productivity and contribute towards the development of their society, it therefore becomes expedient to protect and empower them. To do this, actions need to be taken to encourage them to pursue and realise their rights, which will eventually lead to empowerment. These rights are the rights to economic empowerment, political participation, educational opportunities, as well as health care and well being. These, of course, form the major issues of the Millennium Goals. These opportunities have to be created and sustained because according to the World Economic Forum (2005), "countries that do not capitalise on the full potential of one half of their societies are misallocating their human resources and are undermining their competitive potential".

As noted by former President Olusegun Obasanjo, "women in the West African sub-region were dominating the informal and service sectors,... but such contributions were hardly recognized because they (women) still had gender barriers". Nigerian women continue to face various forms of discrimination, which limit their opportunities to develop to their full potentials on the basis of equality with men. Article eleven(11) of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women(CEDAW) states that " women shall have equal rights as men with respect to employment opportunities, choices of professions, promotions and remunerations". Also, the Nigerian constitution outlaws discrimination on the basis of sex and women's empowerment rights. The Labour Act, sections 51-58 stipulates, for example, that a pregnant woman is entitled to stay away from work for up to twelve weeks - six weeks before and six weeks after delivery. The law also states that no pregnant worker may be given notice of termination of her employment during pregnancy or when nursing the baby (Yesufu, 2000). The reality, however, is that Nigerian women are far from enjoying equal rights in the labour market. It is necessary to share some experience here:

A young man and young woman met as staff of the same communication company in Lagos. They fell in love and agreed to marry. The company was represented during the wedding ceremony. Shortly after the ceremony the company terminated the employment of the boy on the ground that a man and his wife cannot work in the same company. Shortly after, the woman became pregnant, her employment was terminated on the ground that pregnant women cannot work in the company. So the man and his wife were both thrown into the labour market while still expecting a baby.

In effect, the legal protections contained in the act noted above have little or no effect in the private sector. Incidentally, most of the working women are employed in the private and informal sectors - in agriculture and domestic services. Much of the discriminating practices that take place in these places are hardly reported. Women too are hardly empowered enough to pursue their rights when they are infringed upon. Because of low levels of educational attainment and heavy burden of domestic labour, women hardly gain employment in the more organized sectors of the economy. When they gain employment, they are often in the lower cadres either as clerical officers, cleaners and messengers. According to a report on the implementation of the Beijing platform of action submitted to the UN by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development, women account for only 8% of the formal sector workforce and only 3% of administrative and managerial positions in the country (FMWAYD 1999). Data show that as at 1995, the federal government employed 47, 908 women in the federal civil service, which accounts for 24% of its total work force. Of the 784 women in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as at 1996, 609 were support staff and only 73 were diplomats.

The gender disparity is far greater in the professions such as medicine, engineering, architecture and law, which remain heavily dominated by men. For example, statistics shows that as at 1999, only 15.6% of the academic staff in Nigerian universities and 17.5% of medical practitioners are females (UNICEF 2001). Advancement within the professions is also low. Only a negligible number of women in such positions reach managerial positions.

Another glaring phenomenon is that women are concentrated in "feminine professions" such as nursing, teaching, office work and as care-givers of the elderly and the disabled. This is what Lopez (2005) referred to as "horizontal occupational segregation". In the lower level of the occupational pyramid in Nigeria are to be found the young girls as workers in cell-phone booths. Most of them earn between N2000-N3000 as monthly wages. This is living on less than US \$1 a day. This, in essence, proves that a large

proportion of the women are engaged in poorly paid jobs. This has led to what is referred to as "ghettoisation of female job" and "feminization of poverty".

The main essence of empowerment through economic opportunities should actually be to make sure that women are dynamic contributors to economic progress and social transformation. This can only be achieved through not only the number but remunerations on equal basis.

Despite the important contribution of women in the agricultural sector, in food processing, in petty trading and other energy-involving tasks, they lack title to land and have limited access to agricultural inputs such as improved seedlings and agricultural extension services. In their petty trading, they hardly expand because they have less capital to invest and cannot easily obtain credit.

As noted by former President Olusegun Obasanjo, at the ECOWAS Gender and Regional Integration Forum, "In spite of their contributions to overall economic development, they(women ) continue to face gender specific barriers in accessing financial services including, in some cases, lack of collateral in the form of land". This is one of the major factors of economic disempowerment. Women continue to generate low levels of income due to the "Feminization" of poverty as they have little or no access to capital. Women very rarely own land despite their involvement in agriculture. The land they use for agriculture is often the land held in trust for their male siblings as a result of inheritance (women do not inherit land in the traditional culture) or the ones provided to them for temporary use by generous relatives. Such land cannot be used as collaterals.

However, article 13 of the CEDAW provides that states are required to take appropriate measures to eliminate discriminations in economic and social life. This involves rights in respects of family benefits, bank loans, mortgages and other forms of financial credit, In addition, they are expected to have equal rights to conclude contracts and administer property. Article 14 of CEDAW stipulates that rural women should have right to obtain agricultural credits and loans and have equal treatment in land and agrarian reforms. However, in spite of all these provisions, women still suffer discriminatory practices, often under customary laws in matters pertaining to ownership of property and inheritance. As a consequence, they are disadvantaged with respect to access to bank loans and other forms of credit.

In the year 2000, the Federal government created the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development but has now been renamed "Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development". At the state level are the state counterparts of the ministry. These ministries, whether at the Federal or State levels, are charged with child and family welfare services of which economic empowerment is one of them. However, the

ministries, whether at the Federal or the State level, receive very little budgetary allocations and have no operational programmes. The duties expected of these ministries have, however, now been abandoned to the office of the "First Ladies" both at the Federal and the State levels.

Initiatives or programmes of the "First Ladies" such as the Better Life for Rural Dwellers (BLD), the Family Support Programme (FSP) and the Family Economic Advancement Programme, were geared towards helping the women to form co-operatives and other types of self-help organisations. All of these programmes are under the auspices of the "first lady". However, these programmes achieved little or no success. In the first place, they all lacked continuity and could as well be referred to as ad-hoc programmes because they terminate with the exit of the head of state and his "first lady". They all failed to provide the micro-credit for local cottage industries which they advertised. In addition to lacking careful planning, they were bedevilled with allegations of corruption. They were highly politicised and overtly centralised under the complete control of the initiator of the programme. The only success of these ad-hoc programmes is that they drew attention to the fact that women are economically disempowered. Presently, some Non-Governmental Organisations [NGOs] and Community Based Organisations [CBOs] take the initiative of empowering women economically through organising them into co-operative societies through which loans are disbursed to individual members. But then, these are in the hands of private individuals and these have limited resources at their disposal. For as long as the Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development either at the Federal and State levels continue to be marginalised, receive very little budgetary allocation, lack operational programmes for the delivery of social welfare, a great percentage of Nigeria women will continue to be economically disempowered. The high level of poverty in the country has further disempowered women. As at 1996, according to the Federal Office of Statistics, (FOS), 66 percent of the population in Nigeria live below the poverty line. Between then and now, infrastructural decay and collapse has been on the increase, for example, the major highways connecting the West and the East, as well as the Niger-Delta regions, have all but failed. This has worsened economic activities which have negatively impacted on the women folk who are mostly traders. The Power Holding Company of Nigeria producing electricity very far below what is required has further economically disempowered women. All of these are in addition to the embargo on employment; the sum total of all of this is that women in Nigeria are economically worse-off, more than ever before.

### **Education**

Unarguably, education is a major tool for social change. Unfortunately, however, there are several barriers towards the acquisition of education in Nigeria. Some of these barriers are poverty, socio-economic impediments and gender bias.

Poverty prevents many families from enrolling all or some of their children in schools. Poverty also forces parents to withdraw their children from school prematurely because of the cost of education or the need to put children to work either within or outside the home. Where such withdrawals occur it is often the girl child that is withdrawn while the boy child remains. According to "The Situation Assessment and Analysis 2001 of UNICEF in Nigeria," poverty has become increasingly widespread since the collapse of the Oil boom in the early 1980s and this has affected children enrolment in schools. With about two-thirds of the population living below poverty line, it is easy to imagine how difficult it is for many families to afford the cost of sending their children to school and to provide the home environment and psychological support needed for progress in learning. Cost factors have been seen to account for 36 percent of children's dropout of school at the primary level of education. This percentage is higher at the secondary and tertiary levels (Okeke et al, 1996), (Falayajo, 1997).

In 1989, the decree No 41 was specifically promulgated to care for the education of disadvantaged groups in Nigeria. Identified among the disadvantaged groups were, the nomads, women, physically challenged, street children, as well as the exceptionally gifted children. As regards women education, Ministries of Education both at the Federal and State levels created Women Education departments. It is sad to note that the end result of this is the establishment of vocational centres for women in very few urban centres which is just an aspect on Women Education. Other provisions in this section include providing equal opportunities for all Nigerians irrespective of gender; and encouraging the education of girls in the field of Science and Technology. These aspects have been latent - not fully addressed. No specific agency was established to handle the education of women as was done for the nomads when the National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) was created. The provisions of that decree as regards women education need to be revisited and implemented so that a specific agency can be established to handle women education.

Another issue that exists in girl - child education is gender stereo-typing. Both the home, the society and the school encourage boys to study Mathematics, Sciences and Engineering while the girls are expected to study Home Economics and Secretarial Studies. This approach denies both sexes the opportunity to benefit from exposure to all subject areas. It also limits girl's aspirations. In the school, some teachers transfer the gender bias from the larger society to the classroom by setting higher expectation for boys and expressing surprise if a girl achieves highly. This situation creates room for academic segregation. So, if education is to act as a catalyst for change, it is appropriate to give attention to curriculum content and the retraining of those who deliver it.



### **Right to Participate in Society and other Decision - Making Situations**

Women in Nigeria face a lot of barriers to their full participation in various aspects of social life due to entrenched cultural attitudes, which put the girl - child at a disadvantage in education and discourage or hinder women's participation in various types of empowerment as well as in politics and public life.

At the family level, women and girls have suffered a lot of marginalisation due to the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society. It is expected that women should be included in the decision-making processes on issues that affect them. At the community level, they are equally excluded from community meetings. However, there are signs of change as women's community-based organisations, such as the Country Women's Association of Nigeria, point to new forms of involvement by women in community affairs.

In politics and government at the traditional level, rarely do women hold political office because they are considered too weak and emotional to exercise responsible leadership. So they are continuously excluded from decision-making situations. However, since colonial rule and beyond, there has been a gradual inclusion of women in decision-making situations in society. The general women suffrage, that is the right to vote, is one of such steps. Right from the oil boom period and its related societal changes in the 1970's, there began a change on the horizon for women. The rapid expansion of education, including higher education, brought about the emergence of a new generation of highly educated women and the entry of a large number of them into the professions and the Senior Civil Service cadre. Gradually, more women have begun to enter elective politics and to stand for elective positions, though; politics and public life remain overwhelmingly dominated by men. For example, female representation in the national assembly, that is both the Senate and House of Representatives, was just 3.4 percent after the 1999 elections [UNICEF2001]. At the local government level, there were 5 women out 301 local government chairpersons in 1979. By 1999, 20 years later, there were 9 women out of 744 local government chairpersons. In effect, the percentage has dropped in the number of local government chairpersons from 1.7 to 1.2 percent. In the state houses of assembly, the figures are not very different as men greatly dominate the State Houses of Assembly. Between 1999/2000, the Federal government cabinet has only 13% of the ministerial posts held by women. The low level of women participation in all three tiers of government shows not only the resilience of patriarchal attitudes, but also, the limited impact of efforts to promote gender equality in Nigeria.

The initiatives so far put in place have not yet brought about a significant cultural shift in attitudes regarding gender roles. With low levels of education, skills, communication

resources and self-esteem. women are in a poor position to assert them-selves in the political arena and challenge the cultural biases.

### **The Way Forward**

This paper has so far examined the factors that are germane in women empowerment. In Nigeria, provisions of International Conventions do not automatically become part of the National domestic law. For as long as Article 12 of the current Nigerian Constitution which states that "no treaty between the Federation and any other Country shall have the force of law except to the extent to which any such treaty has been enacted into law by the National Assembly" remains in force, the country cannot be obligated to accept, implement and enforce any policy that will ensure the economic empowerment of women. Until this is done, ad-hoc programmes of "First Ladies" which are temporary in nature and of little benefit to the women in general will continue to be the order of the day. The Federal character as contained in the Constitution which has been interpreted and implemented in such ways as the quota system in admission to schools, employment and funding of education, has not been far reaching enough. The quota system has merely removed disparity in the areas just mentioned. It has not solved the problem of gender discrimination suffered by women in Nigeria. The fervour with which the Federal character is being pursued should be extended to such areas as admission and scholarship for women in the professions such as Medicine, Engineering and Architecture. Women empowerment should also be extended to areas of Legislative representation in the National and State Assemblies. Women empowerment would be enhanced if women are involved in the decision-making process. Just as research findings of the studies carried out in Bolivia, Cameroon, and Malaysia have indicated, women are more interested in poverty eradication, improvement in health-care, education, and development in community infra-structural facilities if allowed greater say in spending priorities.

In the light of the above, there is need for women themselves to identify and articulate their problems, increase awareness concerning the discrimination they suffer and take positive steps to demand for correction. Women in other countries, such as Brazil, have benefitted from taking these steps; women in Nigeria can equally benefit from taking the same steps.

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