

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The promotion of gender equality has become universally recognized and acceptable. Issues about gender equality has also been acknowledged as critical to the achievement of national development goals. This paper carried out an evaluation of the level of attainment of gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria, using important pointers like educational enrolment and employment. The study used secondary sources of data, while the paper maintained that at the core of the problem of gender equality in Nigeria, is the inability of the Nigerian government to work toward the attainment of gender equality in Nigeria which is already time-bound in view of the sustainable development goals. The paper therefore concluded that an amiable climate, active participation and partnership by governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, political will and genuine commitment will lead to the achievement of gender equality in Nigeria.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Women, Empowerment, Sustainable Development Goals

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, the importance of gender equality has been recognized and accepted. The standard framework for human development (UNDP, 2000) is reflected in the broad vision advocated in the Millennium Development Goals, and presently the Sustainable Development Goals, the internationally agreed set of time-bound targeted goals for ensuring gender equality and advancing opportunities in diverse sectors of the global economy. The convention on the eliminations of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 by the United Nation General Assembly and accepted by 180 states, outlines the rights and equality of women, their freedom from discrimination and equality under the law [1].

Also, promoting gender equality, which is equivalent to the actualization of the protection of fundamental human rights, is essential to the entire concern for human development that focuses on allowing people to lead a life that they

value; that enables them to realize their potentials as human beings. Realizing the growing need for gender equality is also relevant to the survival and development of children and the building of healthy communities, societies and nations. The gap between the Sustainable Development Goal of promoting Gender Equality and its actualization in Nigeria, however, is the failure by the Nigerian government which is characterized by mis-governance, lack of political will, the male-dominated culture, and the absence of adequate productive capacity that will create the opportunities for women empowerment and development. This challenge explains the inevitability of practical approach that will translate gender equality into a reality. This is more because the task of achieving the target of gender equality in Nigeria by the year 2030 requires dynamic policies as well as an active process characterized by proper analysis, goal definition, and actionable programmes [2].

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment

Gender equality and women empowerment has become one of the dominant themes in global treaties,

covenants and declarations principally due to the understanding that it is a catalyst to clear-cut development

strategies which is targeted at poverty reduction, improved living standards, good governance and profitably productive investments that are critical to the creation of an enlarged capacity that provide men and women equal opportunity and unrestrained access to decision-making and policy implementation institutions and processes.

Basically, African countries have demonstrated some measures of concern on human development problems by initiating specific developmental goals and strategies and accepting the critical role of gender equality or equality in the developmental process. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) adopted in 1981; the Women Right Protocol of 2003; the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) adopted in 2001, are some of the initiatives that are linked to the Sustainability Development Goals and at the same time, a testimony to commendable response in the African continent.

Historically, women have comparatively been subjected to marginalization, oppression and injustice both in public and private life. Although, the Millennium Declaration underscores the importance of eliminating all forms of discrimination, exploitation, social harassment and gender bias as well as situations that encourage the infringement of the rights of women through government policies and decisions, traditional and customary practices, cultural prejudices and

GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria, some notable efforts have been made to place the necessary mechanisms required for the elimination of gender discrimination so as to ensure gender equality and human dignity. The National Gender Policy, which replaced the previous National Policy on Women, is particularly targeted at the gender inequality problem in Nigeria. Based on this, the history of developmental policies in Nigeria has somewhat been that of unresponsiveness to the gender concern. The first two decades of development

religious extremism, a lot more commitment and a pragmatic approach that will translate into concrete actions are desirable around the globe, particularly in Africa. Equality between boys and girls in primary school enrolment has, for example, been achieved in most regions of the world, except sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, which includes Nigeria. Gender difference in tertiary education is still lop-sided in favour of men in Africa and women access to paid employment that is secured in the light of income and social importance is still very low when compared with that of men in all sectors. However, women's access to political decision-making, especially in terms of their share of seats in the parliament has gradually increased world-wide.

Today, it is instructive to note that due to the realization of the gap created by the marginalization and social injustice against women and the missing link in the developmental agenda by the limited access to existing opportunities in virtually all sectors of the socio-political and economic setting, women are gradually assuming public offices. A possible explanation for this trend and development is the thinking that one of the indicators of the progress and development of any nation is the position of women in that society [3]. It therefore follows that, women are regarded as a tool for positive change, an end that depends on the level of access to the opportunity for actualizing their potentials and talents.

planning in Nigeria from 1963, for example, was largely characterized by gender-insensitive development policies. Similarly, Nigeria, particularly, since the wake of the 1980, embraced gender-biased economic policies where women's interests were subsumed within the national interest and gender sensitivity was almost inconsequential.

With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations, more interest has been generated and a better attention paid to the pursuit of

gender sensitive policies at both global and national levels. Precisely, the fifth goal, which is geared toward achieving gender equality, is of fundamental value and also at the core of the attainment of other goals [4]. This is mainly because the United Nations Millennium Declaration maintains that, if women are given due recognition, such a move and development will assist the process of effectively combating poverty, hunger, disease, and stimulating sustainable development. At least, until equal numbers of girls and boys are in school at all levels of education, it will be impossible to build the knowledge necessary to eradicate poverty and hunger, combat disease and ensure environmental sustainability [5].

Gender mainstreaming, which means the process of assessing the implications for women and men and any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes in all areas and levels is, therefore, inevitable. This is because it is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences, an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is gender equality [6]. The approach recognizes the need to take social and economic differences between men and women into account to ensure that proposed policies and programmes have intended and fair results for women and men, boys and girls. The benchmark for assessing the level of attainment of gender equality and women empowerment include enrolment in school, as well as employment opportunities available for women.

Employment Opportunities

Available data show that there is a persisting wide gap between the income generating and employment opportunities of women and men in virtually all sectors of the Nigerian society. Women involvement in the industrial sector is estimated as 11% compared with the 30% for men, while women's participation in

income generating activities that are predominantly characterized by intense manual labour like mining and quarrying is virtually non-existent mainly as a result of the gender-related perception concerning the social construction of labour and production-related activities [7]. Also, in the federal civil service, which is the largest single entity employer in Nigeria, 76% of civil servants are men and 24% are women. In the same vein, other indications of gender disparity suggest that men involved in the formal sector is approximately 87% against the 11% of women, while the extractive industry has virtually zero level of involvement by women [8]. As a matter of fact, regardless of the appointment of women to the cadre of permanent secretaries starting from the year 2000 owing to the affirmative action initiatives, the level of disparity between men and women in terms of employment in Nigeria has significantly impacted on the capacity of women to contribute to economic growth and development.

School Enrolment

Education is critical for development because everything we do depends on knowledge [9]. Meeting the educational goal will no doubt speed up progress towards every other goal because in order to raise the standard of living, there is transformation, a process that requires knowledge. Studies indicate that allowing girls to have full access to education is the single most effective policy of enhancing the overall level of economic productivity.

In Nigeria, the 2005 MDG report indicates that there is improvement in respect of attaining universal basic education and the primary six completion rate increased significantly from 65 percent in 1998 to 83 percent in 2001; it declined in 2002 and increased again to 94 percent in 2003 and 95 percent between 2004 and 2005 [10]. However, enrolment at the primary school level has consistently been higher for boys who have 56 percent compared to 44 percent for girls. Generally, literacy level in Nigeria has steadily declined, especially among those between 15 and 24 years. For instance, in 1999, the

overall literacy rate declined from 81.35% to 69.80 percent, while the literacy rate for male between 15 and 24 years declined from 81.35 percent in 1991 to 69.80 percent and 59.30 percent for female during the same period [11]. On the whole, there is evidence to show that gender education has not permeated all levels of the populace and the impression that gender issues negatively pose a challenge to accepted norms and values

of marriage, family and religion is also rife and evident. Arguably, while enrolment gaps between girls and boys are narrowing in Nigeria, large disparities still exist at the secondary and tertiary levels, which reflect structural and institutionalized discrimination that disadvantages women by restricting their choices and reducing opportunities for income and employment.

CHALLENGES OF GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

i. Male-dominant culture

The central culture that permeates the Nigerian society is male-controlled. This male-dominated culture accords women an inferior position in society. The patriarchal nature of male supremacy still remains embedded, obscured and protected within traditional institutions and structures held in abeyance and relative utmost sacredness. A major challenge to the task of executing gender-sensitive and gender-equality policies in Nigeria, therefore, is the patriarchal cultural norms, attitudes and practices, which have been accepted as the natural order of things. This culture is still in-grained in men and it is demonstrated both consciously and unconsciously, irrespective of the general drive for a meaningful change in gender relations through policy initiatives and actions as well as sundry international conventions and accords to which Nigeria is a signatory.

ii. Corruption, Mis-governance and False Public Investment

Corruption is the foundation of and the gateway to mis-governance. Corruption which is the misuse of entrusted power for private benefits, has become commonplace in Nigeria to the extent that it has become the culture. Corruption

has become so systemic, institutionalized and structural that it has a holistic effect on governance principally due to the fact that it pollutes politics, undermines economy, biases government spending away from socially valuable goods such as education, employment, and diverts public resources from infrastructure investments that are critical to the actualization of government programs and activities, particularly gender equality or balancing and women empowerment types. As a result, there are glaring distortions to the extent that clear discrepancies between government or public investments and actual government programme, and goods or services have become an enduring permanent feature and an integral part of the Nigerian culture.

iii. Inadequate capacity

Capacity building and utilisation has been trenchantly argued as the missing link in Nigeria's development [12]. The level of capacity building in any society can be measured or assessed using the financial, human, institutional and infrastructural criteria or indicators. Despite the huge financial resources in Nigeria, the quality of human, institutional and infrastructural capacity has been adjudged to

be grossly inadequate. The inadequate capacity has grossly affected the way public resources, programmes, projects are managed in Nigeria. as a consequence, the ability to formulate, analyse and implement policies for the accomplishment of national development goals and aspirations has been largely constrained. The poor capacity for dealing with socio-economic programme in Nigeria is therefore due to false public investment in institutions and processes for capacity building and the gradual dismantling of the enabling environmental for maintaining and enhancing the existing capacity.

Iv Absence of Political Will

Creating a gender-friendly, responsive, equitable and egalitarian society demands the full-blown support from all levels or tiers of governance,

The Way Forward

- i. Socio-cultural re-orientation
The pervasive socio-cultural trend that favours and encourages gender inequalities or disparities in Nigeria has created a climate of conservatism and resistance to the centrality of the role of gender equality in attaining national development. There is need therefore, to re-orient individuals, groups, institutions among others, on gender equality issues that will translate into attitudinal change and response, which is germane for the efficacy of gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria [14].
- ii. Political Will
There is need for all levels of government to be actively committed through involvement and participation in and identification with the

particularly the Federal government that frames general or macro-policies that are expected to provide the direction for the micro-policies and activities at the lower levels of governance, particularly the state. Accordingly, government must embrace gender equality principles and practices. Such commitment will be reflected in the level of participation, favourable climate and productive investment in terms of financial and time resources [13]. Once the above are in place, the commitment will not only be discerned by other stakeholders like private and civil society organizations and individuals alike, it will equally engender support and co-operation that are germane for the realization of the goal of gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria.

gender equality and women empowerment plans and concerns. Central to the commitment by government, is the exemplary action, which is indicative of their supportive attitude to the task and challenges of gender equality in Nigeria. Political will or genuine commitment here entails the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of gender policies, plans and programmes so as to assess their performance and progress for review, modification, enhancement and goal attachment [12]. This, envisaged true commitment that can be discerned and deduced by other stakeholders, will necessarily engender their support and co-operation.

- iii. Responsive Climate

This climate should encapsulate political will that connotes genuine commitment by government to action plans and policies, legal and administrative framework, adequate human, institutional and financial capacity, active partnership and participation

by government and non-governmental stakeholders, socio-cultural re-orientation as well as effective and systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanism has to be created by the Nigerian government at all levels.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The need to promote a gender friendly and gender sensitive society that is free of all vestiges of discrimination and inequality so as to harness the potentials of all social groups in the society is the core of the sustainable development goals. Achieving this goal is not only important in Nigeria, but it also calls for a pragmatic approach toward formulating appropriate policies, programme design, aimed at implementing fundamental human rights. Also, notwithstanding the fact that there is a serious challenge of

accurate data on the progress of the goal of gender equality and women empowerment, available evidence indicate that the country still lags behind in attaining this goal. Thus, government at all levels in partnership with other stakeholders should step up efforts in this direction, so that by 2030, the country can proudly identify with other countries of the world where gender equality and fundamental human rights are highly respected.

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