

Empowering the rural women through adult education for development:

The Nigerian experience

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Abstract

This paper focused on empowering the rural women through Adult Education for development: the Nigerian experience. It notes that in spite of the advancement man has made to conquer his environment through education, the rural woman still wallows in ignorance, disempowerment and low self-esteem because of male domination. It takes a critical look at the situation of the women in general and the rural woman in particular with Nigeria as a reference point. It notes that Nigerian women, particularly rural women are wallowing in ignorance, abject poverty, total illiteracy, political bankruptcy and disempowerment. The paper discusses the concept of empowerment, what empowering education involves and also highlights the manifestation of female lack of power in Nigeria.

The Better Life Programme (BLP) and its empowerment of women through non-formal education which was implemented in all States of Nigeria, is discussed and its benefits and successes highlighted. Since BLP was discontinued following a change of government, recommendations which will enable Nigeria to institute and enhance the empowerment of women, particularly the rural women in Nigeria, are proffered.

INTRODUCTION

In most African traditional societies, experience shows that women have been abused, marginalized, discriminated against and denied their rights in most spheres of human endeavours. The situation is worse for the rural women who have low literacy level and consequently, 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 in their farms or doing petty trading in the markets in the bid to make ends meet in their families. The rural women produce most of the agricultural products, which they sell at the rural markets, a large quantity of which are transported to urban areas. Sometimes, these men are thankless of these numerous women's efforts. Rather, they expect the rural women to pay homage to them for keeping them under their roofs. Yet, women who have contributed a lot to the development of the nation and constitute 50% of the labour force are till date, subjugated and oppressed. This is the scenario of women in Africa. They are perceived more as household property than as co-partners and co-operators in development efforts.

In most rural 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 the society at large. A typical example of the suppression of women can be illustrated with the Ayamgba Community in Dekina Local Government of Kogi State. Writing on the plight of women in this community, Momoh, Uman and Mohammed (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 poor financially and educationally. They are poorly nourished, lack

adequate health care and social security. They are even marginalized in decision-making. Their contribution to national development especially in the field of agriculture are not appreciated. They are predominantly illiterates.

In many instances, in the traditional African society, especially the rural areas, women are deemed to be responsible for the death of their husbands and are consequently subjected to serious inhuman treatment. Women have been accused of responsibility for their husbands' death. When this is suspected, the woman is forced to drink the water used in bathing the corpse of her husband. If she survives from drinking the water she is declared innocent. Never has any man been subjected to such dehumanizing and agonizing treatment. These abuses have thrived basically because of the dependency of the rural women on their husbands for virtually everything; food, clothing, shelter and life-sustenance. Thus, disempowered, the rural woman finds herself helpless and abandoned to the whims and caprices of their male counterparts. This takes us to the analysis of the concept of empowerment, which is at the core of the discussion.

The Concept of Empowerment

The term empowerment is derived from the word power. To empower therefore means to give authority to, to enable a person gain power. According to Okeke (1995), empowerment implies that the person or group of persons being empowered lacks 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 having 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.

For Longwe (1997), empowerment involves the transformation of patriarchal societies through a “process of enlightenment, conscientization and collective organization. According to Medel-Anonuevo (1997), the definition and goals of empowerment vis-à-vis the concept of power, are that:

Empowerment is the process – and the result of the process – whereby the powerless or less powerful members of a society gain greater access and control over material and knowledge resources, challenges and ideologies of discrimination and subordination and transform the institutions and structure through which unequal access and control over resources is sustained and perpetuated.

Medel-Anonuevo (1997) indicates that the goals of empowerment are:

- i) to challenge, transform the ideology and practice of women’s subordination;
- ii) to transform the structures and institutions which have upheld and reinforced this discrimination – namely; family, caste, class, ethnicity, social, economic, political structures and institutions including religion, education systems, the media, the law, top-down development models, etc; and
- iii) to gain access and control over material and knowledge resources.

For this work, therefore, empowerment is seen in a composite manner as the process whereby the marginalized rural women adopt the knowledge they acquire from non-formal Adult Education programmes to enable them influence changes in their socio-economic status; and to

use their capabilities to harness the hidden potentials in material and human resources, which will contribute to the development of their communities and increase their standard of living.

Manifestation of Women's Lack of Power in Nigeria

Since Nigeria became independent in 1960, the government has been under male domination. Compared to the numerical strength of women in the country, Adeyewo (1991) has pointed out that their representation and/or participation in politics and the art of governance has been very negligible. In substantiating the above facts, the following information by Ude (1990) may be noteworthy:

- Women constituted 49.7% of the Nigerian population, according to Nigerian 1991 population census report;
- During the first republic, there was only 1 (one) woman out of 36 Senate members, none in the 312 members of House of Representatives and none in the Federal Cabinet;
- There were only 5 (five) women out of 150 members of the Constituent Assembly that debated the draft constitution in 1989;
- Women constituted 60% of the electorate;
- Women were often discriminated against in the family. Widows were maltreated at the death of their husbands;
- Of the four women who contested position in the 57-member Senate in 1979 none won.
- In 1983, there was only one female member amongst the 57 members of Senate.
- In 1992, there was only one woman in the 91-member Senate and only 12 women out of 638 in the House of Representatives.

The situation has not really changed even now as the table below proves:

Table: August '95 – February '99 Election

Type	Seats	Number Of Female Contestants	Number Of Female Winners
LGA Chairmanship	774	46	9
Councillorship	8810	510	143
State Assembly	990	39	12
Governorship	72	6	1 (Deputy Governor)
Senate	109	5	3 (one nullified)
House of Representatives	360	29	13 (one nullified)

Source: Gada Report (1999)

Apart from low participation in politics, the socio-economic roles which women play in Nigeria have been grossly underestimated, under-valued and often, not even acknowledged in the development process. Following this, Adeyemo (1992) notes that women have traditionally been the invisible work force, the unacknowledged backbone of the family and the national economy.

EMPOWERING THE RURAL WOMEN THROUGH ADULT EDUCATION (NON-FORMAL EDUCATION)

Efforts aimed at empowering women through non-formal education in Nigeria and in most other third world countries is a recent development. This is so because according to Odaga and Ward (1995) right from the colonial times, the education of women was not considered an important issue. Even when women's education was finally considered as necessary, it was not considered as an instrument of empowerment but of women's domesticity – to make them good housewives and mothers but completely dependent on their husbands for virtually everything.

Fortunately, in recent years, various efforts have been made and are still being made to empower women so that according to Okeke (1995), they can run their own lives and be part and parcel of the socio-economic and political agenda in their countries. But perhaps, the major Objective of seeking to empower women is to make them less dependent on their husbands. This dependence had gone on for a long time because according to her the Nigerian women's income is generally very low relative to that of the men.

Among the major efforts so far made to empower the totality of Nigeria women, particularly, the overburdened rural women in Nigeria, the efforts of the Better Life Programme (BLP) for the rural women has remained the most effective. This position is buttressed by Odi (1993) who has asserted that at no time in the history of Nigeria before now had women in Nigeria been so socio-politically motivated as by any programme as much as the Better Life Programme (BLP) for rural women launched by Merriam Babangida on September 18, 1987.

THE BETTER LIFE PROGRAMME AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

Writing on Literacy skills as a means of empowerment, Chlebowska (1990) stated that literacy training should contribute to higher earnings and improvement in the living conditions of rural women by helping them to escape from poverty, marginalization and inferiority complex. Prior to the launching of the Better Life Programme in Nigeria, the plight of many Nigerian rural women was nothing to write home about. They were predominantly illiterate and generally illiteracy goes with disease and poverty. They had passed school age and did not have the free hours to invest in education in the conventional adult literacy centers. Thus, despite the obvious limitations which their state of illiteracy imposed on them, they still lived with this burden.

The Better Life Programme was organized bearing in mind these limitations of women.

The women were organized in productive units in their different communities. The units were all functional units that had elected leaders. Each productive unit engaged in an income generating activity which would yield some income to the women. Literacy teaching was then woven around the income generating activity which the women engaged in.

This was well planned because the function of need for the women to become producers of marketable products now created in the women, the need to calculate. This desire was borne out of the need for the women to be able to keep accounts and records on income and expenditure in order to avoid being swindled in the markets where they sold their products. Reading, writing and calculating materials used by the women centered on the income generating activities which they worked on. Consequently, the usual dropping out phenomenon arising from irrelevant curriculum used in conventional Adult literacy centers, was avoided. The fact that, the women learnt literacy skills and applied them immediately in their economic activities which they were working on motivated them to apply these new skills in their daily activities. Through this non formal education approach many members of the Better Life Programme in many rural communities learnt to read, write and calculate by themselves, what they could not have achieved in Conventional Adult Literacy Centers. The women achieved success in mastering the skills of literacy because the teaching was not the usual talk/chalk method located in bare school halls.

It may not be wrong therefore, to say that Literacy could be one of the first steps in a process of enabling women to take control over their lives, to participate on more equal basis in society and eventually to free themselves from economic exploitation and patriarchal oppression. Odi (1993) agrees that Literacy skills empowered the women because the skills gave the women a new pair of eyes with which they used to see their plight, their lives and how to

improve on their present plight. Literacy skills empowered the women to organize themselves to fight for their rights and privileges. By establishing literacy centres near enough to the women and choosing time schedules, which accommodated women's daily schedules, a good number of women were able to avail themselves of the opportunity to read, write and calculate. The joy of these women at being able to sign their names instead of thumb printing on documents can scarcely be measured (Okeke, 1995).

OTHER NON-FORMAL EDUCATION STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY BETTER LIFE PROGRAMME

Apart from directly teaching the women, reading, writing and calculation, there were other non-formal education strategies which the Better Life Programme adopted with success. These included periodic skill acquisition in which different products of various States' Better Life Programme units were displayed and talks given on how they were produced, their uses and marketability. These skill acquisition helped to teach women new skills, which ultimately helped to empower the women. There were also periodic seminars in which women were taught different topics which were aimed at empowering them. These seminars often took the pattern of train the trainers workshop. In this case, delegates were sent to these seminars. They were then trained and then they went back to train their members at the grassroots. There were as well various trade fairs in which members of the Better Life Programme displayed their finished products which were generally of high standards and which sold well. Through these various non-formal education programmes, rural women became empowered. Azikiwe (1992) after discussing the influence of the Better Life Programme on Nigerian women has concluded that the rural women have been recognized as producers and providers of food to their families and the nation at large.

Problems

The Better Life Programme for rural women used various non-formal education strategies to mobilize the Nigerian rural women during and within the period of Mrs. Maryam Babangida as the first lady of the country. Indeed, it can be said that most of the present women in non-governmental organizations, which are found in most Nigerian states today, emerged after having been very much influenced by the Better Life Programme. Indeed, only very few, if any of the non-governmental organizations, predated the Better Life Programme. Even among these ones, none has the spread which the Better Life Programme enjoyed. However, the Better Life Programme did not last. Like every politically motivated project, it enjoyed abundant political will and made its impact for as long as the government, which established it, was at the top. This is because in 1993 the military President, Ibrahim Babangida “Stepped aside” and Maryam ceased to be the first lady, the programme ceased to exist and it was quickly replaced by the family support programme which had a different philosophy.

Although, a few women became empowered and remained empowered. Many of the rural women who had not quite imbibed the philosophy, could not remain empowered when the programme ceased to function. While a vast majority of the rural women who were yet to benefit from BLP have continued to remain disempowered. However, whatever has happened to the Better Life Programme, there is the joy that as a result of its influence, some non-governmental organizations have emerged which seek to empower women through other strategies including non-formal education.

CONCLUSION

This paper has taken a look at the situation of the Nigerian woman – especially the rural woman. Her disempowered state is reflected in her abject condition of low self-esteem, male

domination and low socio-economic conditions. She merely serves as a tool at the hands of male counterparts. She does the work but is not acknowledged as an effective contributor to national development. This paper has therefore taken a look at the concept of empowerment, giving various definitional and perceptions by experts. The Nigerian women have not been accepted into the Nigerian national political process. Very poor percentage of women are in governance, thus lending some credence to the view that women in Nigeria are grossly disempowered. The Better Life Programme (BLP) which made positive attempt to empower rural women through Non-Formal Education programmes was discontinued by the Government that succeeded the one that introduced BLP. This cut short the progress being made then on the issue of empowerment of rural women and raises the issue of discontinuation of laudable programmes by successive Governments.

Women constitute a large percentage of Nigerian population. A situation in which women, particularly the rural women, are not in a position to make adequate contributions to national development, is not good for the country.

This paper therefore recommends that the Better Life Programme (BLP) be revived even if with a new name or Better still, that a new national programme comparable to BLP be introduced for the purpose of empowering rural women to enable them make meaningful contribution to national development. It is further recommended that, Nigerian elite the Private Sector and Government should come together to evolve and enforce policies that will empower women particularly rural women to position them to contribute their quota to national development.

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