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WOMEN IN NIGERIA: TOWARDS IMPROVED INFORMATION
ACCESSIBILITY, CAPACITY BUILDING AND CONSTITUTIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The Nigerian women represent a powerful, creative and credible force that must be empowered to contribute to the constitutional development of the nation. Their involvement would be tantamount to catalyzing and releasing dormant but rich potentials to the benefit of all. The paper examines information as a veritable resource for capacity building necessary for principled participation in any polity. It concludes that awareness, confidence and participation of women in constitutional development of a country are a function of information at their disposal.

Introduction

Women have peculiar abilities, needs, feelings, rights and expectations that must be recognized and guaranteed by the constitution. It becomes imperative for them to be involved in any constitutional development in order for them to cater for and give expression to these peculiarities.

The Nigerian women need timely, accurate and relevant information to be empowered since lack of information acts as deterrent to meaningful participation and therefore cut short their capability of improving their quality of life and behavioral dispositions in the society.

Availability and accessibility to vital information about constitutionalism is therefore a must for Nigerian women to be involved adequately and to have competitive advantage in the affairs of nation building.

Constitutionalism, Capacity and Women Development

Constitutionalism is a means of affirming or declaring the ideals and fundamental objectives of a nation. It guarantees security of life, liberty and property of the individual against arbitrary governmental power. The constitution prescribes and entrenches the rights, treatment of persons, powers of governmental agencies in a polity. Given the omnibus and far reaching effect of constitution on the well-being or otherwise of the citizenry, its development demands the participation of varied groups the society. Constitutional development involves both technical and robust general knowledge. Persons charged with such responsibility must be versatile, intellectually sound, versed in the language and technical procedures of constitutional drafting. To this extent, Nigerian women must be empowered with requisite capacity building that makes for effective participation in this arduous task.

Capacity building according to Obadan (2003) can be defined as those deliberate and incidental endeavors through investments in people, institutions and practices, to enhance human abilities and institutional capacities in pursuit of development. Nigerian women capacity building therefore has to do with education in a given field, on the job training and development of relevant skills that enable them perform assigned roles creditably.

Information has been found to be very important in the well-being of man and his environment. According to Palmour (1981), human beings whether at home or place of work need information for survival. It is a powerful tool for personal, organizational and national development. Information like money gives economic, political and intellectual power to the possessor. It enables one to take better decisions, take advantages of opportunities and to control people.

Women's Involvement in Constitutional Development

It has been observed that there is an unacceptable degree of imbalance in gender representation in all facets of our national life. There is therefore the need to put women on the same platform with their male counterpart. The United Nation's Beijing Conference of 1995 emphasized the urgency of freeing women to become equal participants in development. It specifically called for increased participation of women in public affairs especially at the top level of decision-making.

Alele Williams (2002) contends that the exclusion of women in such responsibilities has resulted in the non-use of their talents and experiences in management and nation building. Their involvement

therefore would be tantamount to catalyzing and releasing dormant but rich potentials to the benefit of all.

Akunyili (2005) opines that such participation would provide an enabling opportunity for women to fault alleged prejudices against them by society as they will like to strive for excellent performance to justify their capability. Also it will definitely boost the self-esteem of the Nigerian women.

Aderanti Adepoju and Christine Oppong (1994) posit that there is increasing recognition of women's contributions in all spheres of life. That, issues related to women in development are now at the top of policy and research agendas. The development, social and political objectives of a nation cannot be attained unless the crucial role women play in that regard is taken into account.

According to Ihonvbere (2000), any constitution that does not emerge from widespread representation and consultation with all nationality and various segments cannot be regarded as legitimate. Participatory constitutional development is one of the panaceas to instability, public cynicism and alienation. It is equally the best way to cultivate a culture and tradition of reliance on dialogue and consensus rather the resort to violence in the political process.

As observed earlier, women have their own yearnings and aspirations which must be recognized for the democratic system to endure. The Nigerian women represent a powerful, creative and credible constituency that can only be ignored at the peril of the larger society.

Nigerian Women and Capacity Building: Barriers and Inhibiting Factors

In order to understand the way forward, it will be quite apposite to appreciate and identify institutional and cultural barriers that inhibit active participation of Nigerian women in developmental processes. Akunyili (2005) has highlighted some crucial factors in the Nigerian socio-political and cultural terrain that constitute serious barriers to the capacity building of Nigerian women. These include the traditional role of the Nigerian women and girl-child in carrying out household chores, which often leaves them with little or no time for formal and self-development, early marriages and low education levels for the girl-child which perpetuates ignorance, discrimination against young married women in employment by some organizations and denial of maternity leave or pay to women in some work place, crimes and corruption prevalent in emerging democracies, which do not promote a conducive environment for women leaders, ignorance on the part of many citizens on the rights

of women and abilities to aspire and assume leadership position and so on.

Capacity Building: Requisites for Effectiveness

Education is widely regarded as a powerful tool that can make possible the achievement of personal and societal development. It is an instrument for effecting social, economic, political, scientific and technological advancement as well as improving individual group well-being. Education actually spurs the outburst of daring initiative and constructive activity in people.

Intensified women education in Nigeria will invariably enhance healthy competition, self-actualization and empowerment. Education gingers people to aspire for greater benefits and exalted leadership positions in the society. Ebolie (1993) is of the view that women naturally possess certain sterling qualities, such as a more intuitive mindset, exceptional flexibility, calmer disposition and greater patience that can make them excel in all fields. At best, these potentials are raw materials that must be refined through the instrumentality of education.

Information literacy skill which is the ability to identify, access, assess, adopt and apply information to solve specific problems must be developed in Nigerian women since this is one of the requisite skills to engender and foster capacity for participation in constitutional development.

Analytical Skills are required for their effective involvement in constitutional development. An all rounded ability in gender and policy analysis as well as participatory methodologies. Such rich intellectual platform will definitely help develop legal framework beneficial to the Nigerian women.

Public relations capacity is a desideratum in persuading the male counterparts to accept their given proposed standpoints on issues. There is a need therefore to develop appropriate lobbying skills as an indispensable capacity in Nigerian women for the projection of their image and potentials.

Information and Capacity Building

The awareness, confidence and participation of women in constitutional development of our country are a function of information at their disposal. According to Katumoya (1992), people will not get their due as citizens of present day society unless they have a continuous access to the relevant information which will guide them into effective action. It behooves a vanguard group

among the women to create an atmosphere for them to reason together and share vital information necessary for their development. Okwilagwe and Vome (2002) aver that books have the potentials of being used to expand the human thought, modify and direct human behavior towards a predetermined direction. It therefore presupposes that one of the ways of enhancing the capacity of the women is to expose them to a planned literature which extols feminine prowess and achievements both in time and history. Such informational materials will provide insights, strategies and required knowledge base capable of stimulating action and confidence in them.

Workshops should be organized by women organizations to initiate, encourage and promote human rights awareness within the Nigerian women and the general public. Such interactive fora are useful in educating women that their vote is their power to elect candidates who will represent the interest of that group.

There are presently pockets of women in the Nigerian scene doing very well at the top leadership level. Creation of a network of such women to promote interaction and mentorship especially in a face to face sharing of their experiences will challenge and free the conservative folks to aspire high and maximize their potentials.

Aboyade (1987) posits that the library can assist even struggling people at the lowest rung of the ladder to realize their aspirations much more quickly than is possible without it. Setting up of libraries and information centres for dissemination of information about women is imperative. The rural women can be mobilized and empowered through this medium. Information should be repackaged in formats and languages that are intelligible to the illiterate women. Information for skills acquisition aimed towards sustainable self-employment, job creation and self-reliance among women must be made available and accessible to them.

Conclusion

Information is a vital resource in stimulating socio-economic and political development which is capable of provoking action and reaction in the recipients. The capacity building of the Nigerian women and the quality of constitutional development can only therefore be anchored and fostered on the availability and accessibility of qualitative information. Along this line of conclusion, Mazurui's (1999) statement that the distribution of real power is not based on "who owns what" but "who knows what" becomes relevant to the capacity building of women.

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