

Education for Sustainable Widows' Empowerment: Evidence from Southwest Nigeria

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Education is acknowledged as a vital tool for the attainment of sustainable transformation and inclusive societal development. Through acquisition of basic skills, knowledge formal/informal, various segments of the population especially widows (married women) who have lost their husband can be empowered to be self-reliant and economically independent in spite of the vacuum created by the loss of the supposedly "breadwinner". Education occupies a unique position in the national development programme of any nation. It is also acknowledged as the bedrock of socio-economic and political advancement of countries (Barro, 1991; National Bureau of Statistics-NBS, 2006). This is because education helps to unfetter and empowers people to economic and social freedom. It equally helps in transforming human capital for economic advancement. Thus, educated individuals are seen to be crucial catalyst for any economy (Schultz, 1960; Becker, 1962). A growing concern is the increasing number of widows in rural southwest Nigeria unable to read or write with lack of basic skills. The paper examines the role of education as a vital tool for widows' empowerment, other obstacles to widows' empowerment in Nigeria with a view to suggesting policy options for the way forward. The paper engages mainly secondary sources of data and utilizes relevant sociological theories to buttress the crucial role of education in widows' empowerment drive.

Key words: Education, formal/Informal, Widows, Empowerment, sustainable transformation, societal development.

Introduction

It is truism that education is a catalyst of change or development in any society. It is also the greatest investment a nation can make for quick development in all spheres of national life, economic, social, political and mental (Adebayo, 2006). Thus, education is the key to sustainable

development for any nation (Uwadia, 2010). It is observed that widows nationwide face discrimination in Nigeria. However, this subordination of women is more pronounced in rural areas than in urban areas. Women's education and empowerment have been important social, economic, and political issues in developing countries like Nigeria. In Nigeria, the problems which a widow experiences could be largely attributed to the fact that women generally depend more on their husband's earnings and so the death of the spouse marks the beginning of terrible crisis for the woman.

Women, irrespective of location, need information on family health, food and nutrition, family planning and child education, but rural women also need information regarding agriculture and animal husbandry for their involvement in socio-economic growth. However, the women who live in villages lack access to information resources. The rural women have remained as unexploited national resources and the whole nation would be benefited if they are properly involved in the development activities in a planned way (Agriculture Information Service [AIS], 2004).

According to Hamman (1997:10), "if you educate a man you educate an individual; if you educate a woman you educate a nation". Today, education is recognized all over the world as the main instrument for improving and promoting the status of women (Hamman, 2006), it is therefore pertinent to harness every human resource including widows for sustainable transformation and societal development. The well-being of any nation depends to a large extent on the quality of education given to both male and female genders. The only gateway to women self-reliance, empowerment and well-being is quality education. Quality education has been recognized as the key to both individual and national development (Mogbo, 2001). Through this, widows will not only be empowered to sustain their children and family, but also make major contribution to socio-economic progress of the nation. The creativity and talents of all women are an invaluable resource, which can and should be developed both for their own self-realization and for the benefit of society as a whole.

1. Conceptualizing Education

Education, in its broadest sense, refers to the ways in which people learn/acquire skills and gain knowledge and understanding about the world and about themselves. Education is concerned with the general acquisition of values, knowledge, skills and attitudes. It is designed to remove the chains of ignorance, superstition and diseases. Education is a precondition for progress in development and reduction of poverty. It helps people to earn more income and become more productive, it also leads to improvements in health, nutrition and people are empowered to transform their own lives and those of their communities through acquiring the basic skills of literacy and numeracy as well as the capacity to utilize knowledge and information (Hamman, 2006).

Education depicts individuals' involvement in formal training for the purpose of acquiring basic knowledge, skills and expertise necessary for living a meaningful and impactful life. It generally aims at the development of human abilities (Schaeffer 2005:375). Simply put, education is impacting of knowledge in people (Acker, 1994). Education in its widest form has been identified as a tool for freeing women from ignorance and backwardness and bringing them to a position of liberty and awareness (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1996). Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process.

Importantly, education is a gradual process of developing the hidden and manifest potentialities in an individual. In this sense, education goes beyond the examination system. It has to include every step taken by members of the society to impact the values, ethics, skills and aptitudes needed for the survival and growth of the society. In essence, every adult in the society should be a teacher to the younger generations who will eventually take over the responsibility of initiating and sustaining the cherished societal development (Niworu, 2004).

Moreover, education is the only avenue of entry into employment and involvement in the formal sector (Edewor, 2001). An educated individual is better positioned to contribute to societal development and generally enhance the level of progress in society. Importantly, education is first and foremost a social tool that is imperative for the continued survival and growth of the society (Hoare, 1976). Education derives from the social system and exists to mainly satisfy the demands of the system (Connor, 1957). Ojebode (2004) describes education as the surest tool for the full emancipation and development of the individual as well as the advancement of the society.

Education is the bedrock upon which self-reliance stands; it is the prime engine of human development. Education is a vital transformational tool, the fulcrum around which the economic growth of the individual and of course, a nation revolves. Education has proved to be the surest and most credible way to self-reliance. Although training involves a great deal of commitment and sacrifice, it certainly pays off in the long run with less stress. This is why the developed economies of the world such as USA, Japan, Britain etc. laid the foundation of their development on sound education. This is because the development of any other resources depends on human development, which can only be achieved through qualitative education (Ojebode, 2004).

Furthermore, education is generally seen as a necessary investment and an enabling factor opening up many vistas of personal, community and national development. It is very necessary for human in order to articulate self and achieve fullness. For the survival of human in any nation, education is a necessity. Education suggests development of valuable knowledge and skills in a society. This is why the educational system of any society has been seen as an elaborate social mechanism designed to bring about in the persons submitted to it,

certain skills and attitudes that are adjudged to be useful and desirable in the society (O'connor, 1957).

Thus, to educate the mind is to liberate it from the shackles of fear, prejudice, ignorance, superstition etc., and to develop a free, independent and responsible citizenry. Knowledge, attitude, skills and aspiration changes through education constitute blocks for human capacity building. Education is, however, loathed in primitive societies where it is believed that learning brings disobedience and heresy into the world (Ifenkwe, 2013).

Types of Education (Formal/ Informal)

There are four types of education namely—indigenous (traditional) education, formal education, informal education and non-formal and adult education. Indigenous education also referred to as traditional education practiced within the African context is the oral transmission of the people's statement of beliefs, rules and customs from one generation to another. Formal education is a consciously planned instructional process based on prescribed syllabus and carried on in the school. Informal education is educational set-up not based on fixed or prescribed rules, it is determined by the prevailing nature and content of what is to be learned. And non-formal and adult education is a remedial literacy program carried out to impart the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic to adults. Adult education is particularly geared towards

functional literacy, where the beneficiaries are expected to use the skills acquired to improve their daily living standards. Examples of non-formal education include skills acquisition programs, remedial programs and agricultural extension programs (Egbezor & Okanezi, 2008).

Education is very important since it affects or influences women's personal attitude. The importance of individual's attitudinal changes, both in their own right and in combination with other factors has been frequently emphasized in analyses of the channels through which formal education operates (Cochrane, Leslie and O'hara, 1982). The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme launched by the democratic regime of President Olusegun Obasanjo as a way of providing equity and access to education in Nigeria is a step in the right direction (Adebayo, 2006).

Nigeria adopts informal, non-formal, and formal methods of educating initiating, socializing and educating her citizens (Ifenkwe, 2013). These three types of education complement one another in bringing about permanent, positive changes in a society or in the life of an individual (Ojebode, 2004). The essence of education whether formal or informal, is to produce a person who will be a useful member of a society. It must engender in the individual a disposition of personal autonomy, responsibility and relevant forms of life thought and action. The word relevant as used by her is the matter of cultivating individual interest and potentialities while autonomy stands for a person who is able to judge, act and think accurately as well as rationally (Uwadia, 2010).

Formal Education

Formal education corresponds to a systematic, organized education model, structured and administered according to a given set of laws and norms, presenting a rather rigid curriculum as regards objectives, content and methodology (Dib, 1987). Formal education is what is adopted in our schools and universities. Formal education which is often called schooling involves planned and organized programmes. Liberal/functional education in terms of humanities, mathematics, the biological, social and physical sciences, aid in all ramifications, the development of the individuals and the society. It has been rightly observed that the most widespread and severe poverty occurs in nations with undeveloped human resources. No nation can develop above the level of its human development (Ojebode, 2004).

Informal Education

Informal education is quite diverse from formal education and, particularly, from non-formal education, although in certain cases it is capable of maintaining a close relationship with both. It does not correspond to an organized and systematic view of education; informal education does not necessarily include the objectives and subjects usually encompassed by the traditional curricula. It is aimed at students as much as at the public at large and imposes no obligations whatever their nature. There generally being no control over the performed activities, informal education does not of necessity regard the providing of degrees or diplomas; it merely supplements both formal and non-formal education (Dib, 1987).

Informal education is a process where learning is used for individual, community and global betterment. It is characterised by the integrated involvement of people of all ages, use of community learning resources and research to bring about community change and recognition that people can learn through, with and from each other to create a better world. It is an approach that enables individuals and groups develop their capabilities for a full and rich personal life (Jekayinfa, 2010). The informal education is locally based and relates to people in their local community. Informal education for instance comprises the following activities:

- (a) Listening to radio broadcasting or watching TV programmes on educational or scientific themes
- (b) Attending workshops and conferences.

Evaluation of Formal and Informal Education

The Western education otherwise known as schooling was introduced by the missionaries in the mid-19th century and accepted by most Nigerians. The general acceptance of the Western system of education led to the gradual decline of informal education and its benefits. The Western education however, has its shortcomings, some of which are massive unemployment, under-employment, poverty, high illiteracy and general economic backwardness (Akande, 2007).

Therefore, to redress these shortcomings of Western education, there was a craving for a system of education that would relate knowledge and community needs together. This brought about informal education to the fore as a recipe for learning in the society. Informal education goes beyond reading, writing and calculating. It touches all other areas of learning. It focuses on the adult as learner and the community as context. It is education for life in the society. It is education for people's empowerment to take control of their lives (Akande, 2007). There are many problems militating against informal education in Nigeria such as being too rigid and not easily adaptable to change; it tends to be a closed system; anti-scientific; and the vocational training component is time wasting because it takes unnecessarily long time to learn a particular trade like tie and dye (Jekayinfa, 2008).

Notwithstanding these problems, informal education has many prospects. One of this is that it can be used as a catalyst for creating employments, thus it can be a panacea for achieving the first seven of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which are mutually reinforcing and are directed at reducing poverty in all its forms (Onike, 2007). If informal education skills are properly developed, they will promote the apprenticeship system which will in turn reduce the age-long problem of unemployment, underemployment, poverty, robbery and corruption in Nigeria. It will thus be a panacea for achieving some of the MDGs (Akande, 2007).

Though, scholars have written extensively on the issue of poverty in Nigeria, however it remains pertinent to indicate that formal education system is one of the causes of unemployment and that informal education skills could be used to eradicate poverty and thereby achieve the objectives of the MDGs in Nigeria. Informal education skills, therefore, can eradicate poverty if properly implemented as enumerated in the National Policy of Education 2004.

According to Jekayinfa (2010), some of the informal education skills are categorised under mass literacy and adult education and it is defined by the Nigerian National Policy on Education (2004) as the equivalent of basic education given to adults, children and youths of formal school age, outside the formal school system. The goals of informal education according to the Federal Republic of Nigeria include:

- (i) Providing basic education for adults and youths who have never had the advantage of formal education or who left school too early. The target groups in Nigeria are migrant folks, illiterate and semi-literate adults, youths and adolescents; persons who left school system early and are willing to come back and continue schooling; and other categories of disadvantaged groups who are unable to have access to conventional educational system.

(ii) Providing in-service, vocational and professional trainings for different categories of workers and professionals in order to improve their skills.

The objectives are to:

- (a) Offer diversified curriculum to cater for the entrepreneurship needs of the people in particular and that of the society in general.
- (b) Provide entrepreneurial and job-specific skills for self-reliance and economic development.
- (c) Refocus education quality for the attainment of poverty eradication, wealth creation and employment generation.
- (d) Providing training that enables the people acquire specialised craftsman skills that would empower them to compete globally.

2. Situational Analysis of Widows' Education in Nigeria

The situation of Nigerian women and girls in the educational sector prior to the 1970s was characterised by gross gender discrimination. Gender inequalities, which were entrenched in the conservative educational policies of the colonial administration, and nurtured by the prevailing, socio-cultural norms that supported child marriage, female seclusion and other forms of subordination, provided minimal access to girls (Garba *et al*, 1997). Illiteracy has often been termed a cog-in-the-wheel of national development. People who are illiterate are derogatively described as 'chained in prison', 'disabled', 'caged' and blinded victims experiencing only 'death in life'. These images are often associated with women (Callwood, 1990:30).

The pattern of women's poverty in Nigeria has often been a consequence of unequal institutional gender-role ascriptions; accessibility to resources and institutions. Of more than 1 billion people living in poverty around the world, a greater percentage of them are women. Women's poverty is a violation of their human rights to life and well-being, food, adequate housing, a safe and healthy environment, social security, employment and development (INSTRAW Report, 2007).

That women are disadvantaged is a true fact the world over (United Nations Development Plan (UNDP), 1998). Consequently, any nation that fails to address the issue of gender equity will achieve only partial development. When women are denied full access to education, full access to and control of resources and right to leadership opportunities in government and social organization as well as by discouraging women access to quality higher education, only limited results are achieved in such a nation (Okohi and Amubode, 1995).

Historically, education in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia was initially available for males. Thus, women have been disadvantaged from formal employment since recruitment is based on acquisition of education and skills. Unlike women from developed nations, Nigerian women have a strictly limited number of marital careers. Many of them are housewives and petty traders, careers which do not adequately prepare them for the enormous burden and responsibilities of widowhood. Therefore, education is a means of sustaining widows and their children.

Importantly, women comprise more than one half of the world's human resources, Nigeria inclusive; they cannot but be the focus of human development paradigm. Sustainable human development goals will be difficult unless their full and effective participation is assured. Empowerment of women including widows has also been seen as a necessary condition for sustainable human development (Alonge, 2004).

It is acknowledged here that gender equality is a fundamental human right and a question of social justice. It is seen as crucial for development and social empowerment, necessary for the realization of the Millennium Development Goals' (MDGs) targets by 2015. Meanwhile, the nature of political

leadership in Nigeria, which essentially evolved from the colonial orientation, has been largely unhelpful to the course of women's educational empowerment.

Omolewa (2002:118) notes that a gross disparity exists between schools' enrolment of boys and girls in Nigeria due to political ineptness. Social determinants, such as cultural beliefs, wife-inheritance, early/forced marriage and widowhood practices - obtainable in most rural and semi-urban settlements, and narratives of religion have continued to impede educational accessibility by women in the country. Moreover, the denial of inheritance and property rights, dysfunctional and gender-skewed development policies have equally been constraining women from taking advantage of educational opportunities, and by implication, economic opportunities in the country.

The challenge of delivering long-term strong and sustainable economic growth that benefits all can only be met if best use is made of all available resources. Leaving women behind means not only forsaking the important contributions women make to the economy but also wasting years of investment in education of girls and young women. Making the most of the talent pool ensures that men and women have an equal chance to contribute both at home and in the workplace, thereby enhancing the well-being of both men and women, and more generally to society (Aderinto, 2000).

Majority of the women who bear the brunt of dehumanizing widowhood rites are low-income, uneducated/semi-educated and rural women. This is the group that cannot exercise its right under the laws of the land and lack the courage, self-confidence and wherewithal to forestall violation of its rights. This contrasts with the attitudes of sophisticated and educated career women. The degree to which widowhood rites is imposed depends on the age of the widow, level of education, parity status (with children or barren), nature of her relationships with her husband and in-laws, the cause of husband's death, the widow's occupation and the degree of mutual respect and cohesiveness among the family members (Odimegwu, 2000).

Aderinto (2000) reveals that education and civilization has been pervasive in eroding the practice of widowhood rites. In recent times, the mandatory forty days confinement of widow is being done with some flexibility. Widows are dis-empowered, maltreated and exposed to other injustices not experienced by widowers. Evidently, women who have little or no education do not question tradition. It appears that the gravity of the deprivation of widows depend on their social and personal attributes, namely, level of education obtained by widows, kin, in-laws and community of residence. Educated and enlightened widows experience less of the problems when compared to their less educated counterparts. Widows in rural areas are more prone to these problems than those in urban areas (Enang, 2000).

According to Edewor (2001), education can be fine-tuned to bring equal opportunities for the sexes and freedom of choice for uneducated and illiterate widows who suffer poor conditions of living. When widows get more schooling, they develop skills and acquire information that prepares them to thrive in a changing world. Empowerment of widows can only be achieved through proper education. Only then can widows hope to break the stranglehold of laws, culture and age-old tradition which combine to slow down their progress. The education of widows is a tool for their economic empowerment.

3. Theoretical Explanations

Repressive activities such as widowhood rites, wife inheritance and female genital mutilation are still practiced in African communities. The use of patriarchal power and socio-cultural norms reinforced by religious beliefs and injunctions to suppress, in particular, girls and women from the free expression of their sexuality. This is an attempt to sustain gender hierarchy in African societies

is by enshrouding it in secrecy and taboos (Madunagu, 2007). Therefore, this segment examines three relevant theoretical postulations to this study i.e.

- Social Development Theory
- Feminist Theory
- Weberian Analysis of Power

Social Development Theory

Social development theory attempts to explain qualitative changes in the structure and framework of society that help the society to better realize its aims and objectives. Development is a process of social change, not merely a set of policies and programmes instituted for some specific results. Development is the result of society's capacity to organize human energies and productive resources to meet challenges and opportunities. Development is a human process, in the sense that human beings, not material factors, drive development. (Jacobs, Garry & Asokan, 1999).

The energy and aspiration of people who seek development forms the motive force that drives development. People's awareness may decide the direction of development. Their efficiency, productivity, creativity, and organizational capacities determine the level of people's accomplishment and enjoyment. Development is the outer realization of latent inner potentials. The level of people's education, intensity of their aspiration and energies, quality of their attitudes and values, skills and information all affect the extent and pace of development. These factors come into play whether it is the development of the individual, family, community, nation, or the whole world (Jacobs, Garry & Asokan, 1999).

One of the most powerful means of propagating and sustaining new developments is the educational system in a society. Education transmits society's collective knowledge from one generation to the next. It equips each new generation to face future opportunities and challenges with knowledge gathered from the past. It shows the young generation the opportunities ahead for them, and thereby raises their aspiration to achieve more. Information imparted by education raises the level of expectations of widows, as well as aspirations for higher income. It also equips widows with the mental capacity to devise ways and means to improve productivity and enhance living standards.

Feminist Theory

Any theory that discusses relations of men and women in society is regarded as feminist theory. Thus, various feminist theories include cultural determinism, biological determinism, Marxian/radical feminism, liberal feminism and social feminism. It is unequivocal that women marginalization is mentioned in all feminist theories but different reasons are advanced for such marginalization in each strand of feminism (Okafor, Akinwale & Doyin –Hassan, 2007).

Haralambos and Holborn (2008) posit that feminism is a worldwide movement to end sexism (the belief that the status of female is inferior to the status of male) by empowering women. It embraces political goals that offer gender equality. The ultimate aim of feminism is to end men's domination and rid society of the exploitation of women. Just like Marxist theory, they tend to see society as divided into social groups. To the feminist theory, the division is between men and women and not between classes of people. They see society as characterized by exploitation. Contemporary societies mostly exhibit traits of patriarchal structures as they are often male dominated in the following systems;

- i. Men have more power in the family.
- ii. Men have better wages and employment opportunities.
- iii. Men often enjoy higher status jobs.
- iv. Men tend to have monopoly in positions of political power.

As Ban Kimoon, United Nations Secretary General rightly states “Investing in the education of women and girls anywhere brings huge returns for health and great benefits for society” (United Nations, 2010). Feminism is not a unified intellectual movement unlike its predecessors, having a number of different feminist perspectives; however, all feminists agree that the economic, social and cultural arrangements in society are such that men exercise power over women in both the public and the private spheres of social life (Clarke, 2001).

For instance, unlike the argument of biological feminists, who noted that nature and biological factors such as genes and hormones subordinated women to men, cultural feminists like Anne Oakley and Sherry Ortner emphasized that woman marginalization is rooted in the ways in which every culture defines and evaluates female biology (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). Radical feminism sees liberation of women as impossible in a social order shaped by men and founded upon patriarchy (Griffin 1978).

Radical feminists insist on the universality of women’s oppression irrespective of class and culture, and see the oppression of women as the root of all other oppressions - educational, social, economic and political. They focus in particular, on the interpersonal relations through which (individual) men dominate women, demonstrating this through an analysis of the private domain of patriarchal family. Radical feminism criticized the relegation of women to a socially and biologically grounded inferiority. Furthermore, by inverting these masculinist categories and the nature/culture dichotomy, radical feminists were able to claim that it is because of their very closeness to nature and nurturing that women should be seen as embodying all that is pure and humane and caring. Women’s proximity to nature – mediated through their bodily functions – became the basis of a superior feminine essence (Griffin 1978).

While these arguments cannot be wished away especially in the search for the rationale behind women marginalization, the argument of liberal feminists is considered more relevant to the discourse because it stipulated the modalities for incorporating women into development as active players and partners in progress. These modalities include a gender balanced access to life enriching opportunities such as quality education, income, health, power and information (Okafor, Akinwale & Doyin –Hassan, 2007).

Weberian Analysis of Power

This theory explains that an individual’s ‘class situation’ is dependent upon his/her ‘market situation’, on the measure of power he/she has to influence the workings of the market in his/her favour and on the rewards his/her skill and expertise can command in a competitive market (society). In actualizing oneself, the following power resources are, thus, necessary:

- (a) Economic resources: That is, control over land, labour, or capital, as well as the goods and services produced.

- (b) Social resources: Social status or standing based on social roles or on meeting socially valued criteria.
- (c) Political resources: Use of resources of state institutions to enforce authority and decisions.
- (d) Informational resources: This entails acquisition of knowledge by means of formal and informal educational training.
- (e) Moral resources: Legitimacy often accorded to decision makers, their roles or the decisions they make e.g. social approval given to non-state actors.

The Weberian Power Analysis that presented a more detailed explanation of how women's empowerment could be attained in any given society (i.e. through availability of necessary resources for women's utilization). Significantly, the Weberian Power Analysis theory believes in the social reality of women's empowerment as being facilitated by unrestricted accessibility to societal resources, especially education, economy and politics.

4. The Role of Education in Widows Empowerment

Majority of widows in rural areas are illiterate and education can help broaden their mind as well as enhance their confidence building tool (Erinosho, 2000). Education and media exposure can help empower widows by equipping them with the information and means to function effectively in the modern world; financial independence and exposure to and integration into power structures independent of kin networks (Dixon-Mueller, 1993).

One of the items in the agenda of the women summit held in Beijing in 1995 emphasized the need to improve women's access to education, health, political and economic power, thus considering the empowerment of women as a reliable means of achieving sustainable development (Okwori, 2004). Notably, the eminent and immediate task which would enable as many people as possible to contribute meaningfully to nation building is to fight the instance of high rate of illiteracy among widows in rural areas (Deshi, 2004).

According to Freire (1970), education is a form of power—namely the ability of an individual to be critical of his context, which by implication enhances people's empowerment through increased awareness. The self-concept development of the individual should be the primary purpose of education, which should involve the enablement and liberation of the individual from all forms of oppressions and inhibitions. Article 2 of the International Bill of Human Rights states that "Education... shall be directed to the full development of the human rights and fundamental freedoms..." The aim of liberal education is to enable man to be himself, to become himself. It is said that development has a purpose; that purpose is the liberation of man. But man can only liberate or develop himself. As an instrument of liberation, people's empowerment and social transformation, education means the ability to resolve contradictions. It should be a countervailing force applied for the purpose of checking the abuses of power by those who use it to oppress and hold the masses in bondage. By emphasizing independent and critical thinking, reflective analysis of events and openness to change, education can become a means of widows' empowerment. It is not the dull, maintenance learning that can bring about the empowerment of widows, but innovative learning which is person centred and equips them to make sound judgments and analysis of issues (Williams, 1981).

It is pertinent that widows develop the skill necessary to test contradictory values and situations, which exist in the society. Since these contradictions evolve within the context of

values, a sound education is not only one that recognizes what is right or wrong in a given context, but that which makes them to take the appropriate action when action is called for. Genuine development and education involve the moral strength to expose and speak against oppressive forces and falsehood. Misuse and the conceit of power are probably the greatest threat to the survival and dignity of man in developing societies today (Williams, 1981).

Moyo *et al.* (2012) points out that empowerment is a multidimensional and complex process that can be interpreted differently by different people. Kabeer (1999:437) views empowerment as “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them”. Empowerment refers broadly to the expansion of freedoms including those of choice and action to shape one’s life. It implies control over resources and decisions (Narayan 2005:4). The state of empowering widows in terms of access to resources, awareness creation, participation and control is critical.

Mosedale (2005:252) posits that women empowerment is the “process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted. Education serves as a medium through which widows can reflect on their situations and are made aware of their capabilities, after which they take corrective measures to improve their existing situations (Mosedale, 2005).

Empowerment is associated with personal control. Rappaport (1987) posits that empowerment is the ability to enhance the possibilities for people to control their own lives. Cochran (1986) believes that people understand their own needs far better than anyone else and as a result should have the power both to define and act upon them. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion notes that “people cannot achieve their fullest health potential unless they are able take control of those things which determine their health” (World Health Organization, 1986).

Increasingly, empowerment is being understood as a process of change (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989). McClelland (1975) has suggested that in order for people to take power, they need to gain information through education whether formal or informal about themselves and their environment and be willing to identify and work with others for change. In a similar vein, Whitmore (1988) defines empowerment as an interactive process through which people experience personal and social change, enabling them to take action to achieve influence over the organizations and institutions which affect their lives and the communities in which they live.

According to Wallerstein (1992), empowerment is a social-action process that promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities towards the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice. While Whitmore (1988) feels the concept of empowerment needs to be more clearly defined, she states that there are some common underlying assumptions:

- a) Individuals are assumed to understand their own needs better than anyone else and therefore should have the power both to define and act upon them.
- b) All people possess strengths upon which they can build.
- c) Empowerment is a lifelong endeavour.
- d) Personal knowledge and experience are valid and useful in coping effectively.

Ojebode (2004) harnesses the benefits of empowering widows through education;

- a. Decent education provides widows the necessary skill to survive in a complex society.

- b. Functional education is the only means through which widows can develop their skills, capacities or potentialities. Thereby, making them assets and not liabilities.
- c. Education is an investment that can enrich their lives and has a very high long-term rate of returns to the national economy.

Furthermore, investment in the skills and strength of widows will lead to a viable economy and a sustained national development. Evidently, nations with self-reliant citizens concentrate their national efforts on technological developments, research, inventions and discoveries that enrich everyone. On the contrary, countries with poor and uneducated citizens are dragged backwards in their bid to help in satisfying the basic needs of their people. This explains why such countries have greater part of their national expenditure on social/consumable goods leaving little or nothing for developmental projects. Education furnishes one with the skills, initiatives and capacities to liberate oneself from the shackles of poverty, and makes them depend on their own resources rather than on others. This invariably returns its cost many folds to the national economy, thus, leading to a sustainable and lasting national growth (Ojebode, 2004).

5. Cases and Lessons from Southwest, Nigeria

Nigerian women, through history, actively participate in the social, economic and political development of their societies as far back as the 19th century. This is particularly true of women in southern Nigeria, especially Yoruba women (Odejide, 1998). South-Western Nigeria consists of Yoruba people bounded with shared cultural values and spirituality. Currently, there are six states (Ekiti, Oyo, Ondo, Osun, Lagos and Ogun) in South-Western Nigeria which are predominantly dominated by Yoruba people. Generally, in Nigeria, widowhood practices are observed by almost all ethnic groups (Afolayan, 2011). In south west Ondo State, when a husband dies, the widow goes into confinement for seven days. During this period she is not allowed to go out, even to the toilet or take her bath. On the seventh day, her head is shaved to sever the bond between her and the dead husband. She also keeps vigil and appears very sorrowful by wailing and crying profusely. If she fails to mourn, it is believed that “she may become mentally deranged, or forfeit the right to any benefit”. After this, she goes into mourning proper, which is for a period of three months. During mourning, the widow is expected to be of impeccable character, she is not expected to court, leave the family, go away with the children, or look in the mirror for fear of seeing the deceased. Until recently, she was not allowed to sit on the bed.

In Africa, cultural myths contribute to relegating women to the background. The belief has been that we are living in “a man’s world” and men continue to take credit for creating wealth. It is noted that in the past, an Igbo wife was called “*Ori Aku*” that is, a ‘wealth consumer’; a derogatory term which did not take account of her contribution to the family’s fortune. Many of the society’s stereotypes about women especially in developing countries are culturally based (Sani, 2001). This could explain why widowhood rites continue to persist in many parts of Nigeria. According to Ahonsi (1997) the basis for the maltreatment of widows can be explained in the context of gender relation in which women occupy low status. The fact that widowers are not subjected to similar dehumanizing rites which their female counterparts undergo suggests gender-based discrimination. The plight of African women remains invisible and silent in literature in spite of the magnitude of challenges associated with widows when they loose their husbands. This is perhaps why an African scholar, Lasebikan (2001) captures the situation in her assertion that “what the African widow experiences is better imagined than real”. Similarly the statement by a Human Right Writer- Caroline Moorehead sums up the challenges of the African widow thus:

The widows of Africa are for their part the most neglected of the world's widows. Despite African literature and laws that almost carefully avoids the plight of these widowed women.

But again, it is not only the African culture that shuns the plight of the widow. The women's own agreements from the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women - the Global Platform for action, does not even mention them. Worse still, the Western literature on development, poverty, gender and human rights is a shadow of silence. "Even where violence against women is examined, the particular form it can take against widows is ignored,".

Emphatically she adds.

For these women, the death of a husband is a sentence to abject poverty, and laws whether modern, traditional or religious almost invariably discriminate against them.

These among other challenges have made women especially millions of widows in Africa disinherited, evicted, victims of violence, poverty, property grabbing, and marginalisation. The fact that widowers are not subjected to similar dehumanizing rites and property disinheritance which their female counterparts undergo suggests gender-based discrimination. The study therefore concludes that for the much needed development of Africa to be realized and sustained, gender, widowhood and property inheritance are socio-cultural issues that must be given more attention in developmental planning and programmes.

Consequently, women provide the backbone of the rural economy in most African countries. Food production and processing are the major activities of the rural women. Thus, their labour inputs often exceed those of men in most countries of Africa. Women also provide the labour for the cultivation of export crops in addition to their domestic and household chores. Women are responsible for 70% of food storage, 95% of food processing, 50% of animal husbandry and 60% of agricultural marketing (Sani, 2001).

The underlying motivations for widowhood rites are linked to cultural belief and local cosmology that the widow is a prime suspect of her spouse's death and that the widow would therefore need to prove her innocence to the family through these rituals. Another widowhood practice is that of levirate marriage where a sibling of the deceased husband re-marries the widow in order to maintain paternity for the widow's children. But educational attainment, children's approval, financial independence and religious beliefs of widows in Nigeria determine the acceptance of levirate marriage (Afolayan, 2011). Still, a number of widows condone these practices and seem complacent because any attempt of non-compliance can perhaps claim their lives or that of their children (United Nations, 2001: 11, 12). Even in the public sphere, institutions and community norms condone the practices. This makes the rites hardly debated publicly (Afolayan, 2011).

In an interview session, a widow from Lagos state reported that she dropped out from secondary school because of her poor performance in school, in those days, there was no encouragement from parents to improve or do well in school. She was advised to learn a trade or marry. She noted, 'I will like to go back to school if not for my two children that I have to fend for and train in school'.

6. Concluding Remarks

This paper has singled out identifiable institutional and contemporary prejudices as the impetus for sustained educational, and of course, socio-economic disparities among Nigerian widows, in spite of the claim of promoting gender parity and women empowerment at both national and regional levels by the respective authorities. Education should necessarily equip one to organise every reality into action and thought. It should make human act and reflect over his/her environment.

As USA President Barak Obama clearly pointed out that the development of a nation can be assessed by the way she treats her women. The reasons for the prevalence of widowhood rites are embedded in the culture of the people and the social structure. One, majority of the widows are either poor or have been pauperised owing to the denial by family members, of access to their late husbands' property and also low education (Aderinto, 2000). Most widows especially in the urban

centres would want widowhood rites to be abolished in contrast to their counterparts in the rural areas who are still in support (Aderinto, 2000).

Agricultural activities which are concentrated in the rural areas are in urgent need for rural transformation, redistribution, poverty alleviation and socio-economic development (Ogen, 2004). Rural development is vital in reducing rural-urban migration. It is pertinent that in formulating alternative development strategies and rural transformation in Nigeria, the education of illiterate widows cannot be left out. They are viable tools for sustainable transformation and societal development. Therefore, it is opined that the eradication of ignorance, poverty and social instability in our society demands that women and men be given equal opportunities in educational and socio-economic spheres, and have equal access to, and control, over the resources of the society. As such, our society would become a more habitable entity for both sexes to co-exist, progressively.

Education, which is a process of training and instruction designed to give knowledge and develop skills, is supposed to suit the ever-changing times of the 21st century through the combination of knowledge and skill acquisition. Hence, emphasis should be placed on technical and agricultural empowerment in the rural areas to ensure that widows are trained to cope with the changing times in the society. As a famous philosopher once said, 'the only thing constant is change itself.' For the betterment of widows both in economic, technological and agricultural development, they need to change in their way of thinking.

In addition to bridging gender gaps in education, employment, social security and leadership positions and for sustainable human development to be engendered, the Nigerian government should give women and men equitable priority in the present implementation of poverty alleviation programmes. For instance, it is not in doubt that better-educated women would be more able to make fundamental contributions to resources management and economically empowered women would be more interested in participating in decision making on development programmes. More importantly, the potentials of women as agent of change should be tapped and developed to improve upon the present level of socio-economic situations in Nigeria (Okafor, Akinwale, & Doyin-Hassan, 2007).

7. Recommendations

This paper is anchored on the attainment of sustainable transformation and societal development in our country through the education and empowerment of illiterate widows in rural south-west Nigeria. Clearly, the best hope for peace and prosperity in our world is the enlargement of the platforms of opportunity for women. Therefore, to empower the widows in south-west Nigeria, enhanced educational opportunities are considered expedient. Consequently, the following suggestions would be relevant in the process:

- The primary instrument to achieve socio-economic empowerment i.e. education mainstreaming should be used in a more effective and practical way so as to make real progress towards the attainment of the MDGs' education for all goal by 2015 realizable.

This view is corroborated thus: "We must not forget to invest in basic education. Nigeria needs to learn from Zambia. The illiteracy rate in the Nigerian adult population is 49 percent while that of Zambia is 27 percent. Yet Nigeria has far more universities than Zambia. Nigeria should learn from Zambia and focus on good quality basic education for the masses. With a high illiteracy rate and

millions of university graduates, Nigeria will end up with her feet in the Stone Age and her head in the computer Information Age” (Emeagwali, 2013).

- The secondary instrument i.e. specific, targeted actions such as abolition of school fees, free school uniforms, free feeding etc. should be utilized as a compliment of mainstreaming strategies as we currently have in the development agenda of some political office holders notably, Governor Rochas Okorocha of South east Imo State, Nigeria that offered free education to her citizens from Primary to Tertiary level. With this gesture in place, the future is bright for Imo citizens especially the widows who in past have had to grapple with survival and upkeep of children after the death of their husbands the supposedly “bread winner”.

- Imperialist male-gender privilege, biased traditional and religious myths impeding widows’ education should be de-emphasised in our society.

- An empowering educational approach, incorporating widows as invaluable participants for social development should be encouraged.

- Skills, capabilities and achievements should henceforth take pre-eminence over obnoxious gender stereotypes in classifying and rewarding people in our country.

- Since cultural and religious considerations are important factors in women empowerment, enlightenment programmes on radio and television should be embarked upon to reiterate the importance of education for women and children. In the words of Erinoshio (2000), there should be public enlightenment campaign to educate people about the plight of widows. These should include workshops, seminars, posters, handbills, radio and television jingles, health talks in clinics etc.

- Women who are usually used against their fellow women in times of bereavement should be educated. Such women do these to impress the men. Change actually lies in women’s hands. Therefore, rural women like men should be liberal and open to embrace change.

- Sex education should be provided at home and at schools to boys and girls as part of their socialization process. This will empower them to resist harmful widowhood rites and practices when they become adult.

- Relevant educational strategy should be employed in order to advance the cause of widows by influencing their conduct and knowledge about their predicament (Edewor, 2001).

- However, the formal system of education which was imported, is elitist, discriminatory, and cannot alone provide all the education one needs for self-fulfilment. It is therefore necessary to heighten efforts and support the Nigerian government in her efforts to develop some of the informal education skills in order to enable citizens achieves fulfilment and fullness during the twenty first century. Nyerere (1979) advocates education for self- reliance and that education develops human to transform the society.

-Widows represent the majority of the rural populace in Nigeria who are mainly engaged in agriculture as a means of livelihood. To ensure the full and active participation of widows in the agricultural Transformation agenda, the existing agriculture policies need to be assessed for gender sensitivity. In addition the way in which budget is formulated arising from the policies should mainstream the different socially determined roles, responsibilities and capabilities of widows as applies to extension system.

- Agriculture extension services should increase widows' access to information, technology, inputs and market. Research plan should ensure that time and labour saving devices, are included in the research agenda and design; focus some of the research attention on developing low cost, low labour, and low maintenance technologies that work under adverse growing conditions (taking account of women farmers' constraints in obtaining cash/credit), having easily accessible farms, and time commitments.

8. References

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