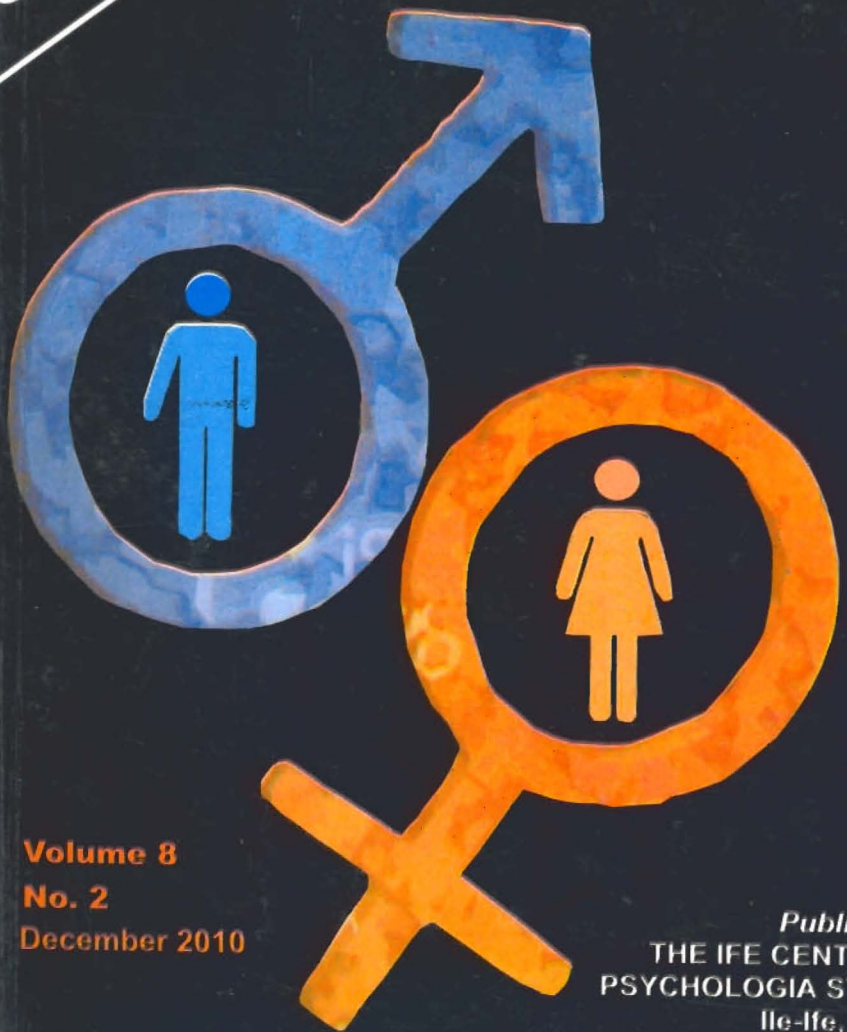


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THE POSITION AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN RURAL NIGERIA: THE GENDER IMPLICATION

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Nigeria's participation on issues that related to the position and empowerment of women has been a recurring phenomenon for the past two decades as gleaned from her involvement in national and international conferences on women development since the era of the 1995 Beijing conference. This fact clearly underscores the seriousness of the dilemma women suffer in terms of the promotion of their rights to equal participation and representation in decision making at all levels particularly in the rural society. The paper argued that the context for understanding the position and empowerment of women in rural Nigeria has its primary base on the continued entrenchment and perpetuation of traditional cultures as characteristic of the various stereotypes of women which permeate many ethnic groups in Nigeria. The paper further contend that many women have suffered varied traumatic experiences arising from this categorization which have manifested itself in gender inequality and discrimination that has far reaching implications for the empowerment of rural women in Nigeria. The paper concludes by examining the changes that women's status had undergone in the light of current socio-economic and political development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Women, Gender, Participation, Empowerment, Rural.

today, can not stand the test of time and a good growth to increase the desired macro economic level.

The effect of Structural Adjustment programme and the like had dealt a serious blow to the wealth creation and employment potentials of entrepreneurial activities in Nigeria.

This notwithstanding, the heterogeneous mix of the Nigerian informal sector where female entrepreneurship prevails is enough reasons for the government to expedite action on harnessing the growth and development potentials of female entrepreneurship. Government need to take active role in creating mechanisms for risk-taking and risk-sharing of small, medium and large scale entrepreneurial activities. This will help meet the socio-economic challenges shirked by past economic reforms. The researcher opined that meeting the potentials of female entrepreneurship requires a supportive legal and policy framework for stimulatory and sustaining activities and good market information.

Therefore, engendering rapidly growing companies, gazelles and the creation of new small companies unlike what we have now requires that policies should be directed towards enhancing a friendly risk-taking atmosphere so that the self-financing entrepreneurs will be dynamic and capable of acting, globally while taking risks that would lead to expansion and a good marketing atmosphere.

It is expected that female entrepreneurship will make living attractive in the provision of social amenities for the nation through education, health, housing, transport facilities, flow of information and social services as well as self independence and self sufficiency if supported through the provision of finance, women's property rights and worker's rights, community education for the promotion of equality in gender, transparency and monitoring of micro-financing institutions meant for entrepreneurs. Growth can only be effective if it is accompanied by redistribution policy. Female entrepreneurs also need to be proactive in forming organizations that will boost their businesses instead of the various weak organizations they engage in that only take care of their social networks.

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members of a society are not merely differentiated depending on their roles; such roles are hierarchically ranked such that some acts of behaviour are classified as either superior or inferior.

Generally, each society delineates between what men 'do', and what women 'do' and the reward that accrue to them respectively, in terms of power, wealth, and prestige. Men's role are generally more highly valued and rewarded than women's roles. In almost every culture, women bear the primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work, while men traditionally borne responsibility for providing the family livelihood. Although these responsibilities have experienced some alterations over the years, the prevailing division of labour between the sexes has led to men and women assuming unequal position in terms of power, prestige and wealth. In all, it is evident that the concept of gender as a socially created phenomenon attributes differing social roles and identities to men and women. Gender has become factor in structuring the types of opportunities and life chances individuals and group face, and strongly influences the roles they play within social institutions.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE FAMILY

The family institution is regarded as the bedrock and cornerstone of society from which every individual develop his or her self concept through the acquisition of a set of socially constructed norms and behaviour essential to our survival. The role that women play as mothers and wives in this aspect cannot be overemphasized. She is often regarded as the mother of all living. Women by nature are programmed to reproduce and care for children and she is very essential to the well being of the child. Thus, a woman's role and position in the family can be characterized as expressive in that they provide warmth, security and emotional support to the family. Her role is essential and effective in the socialization of the young children. Besides, the woman as a mother contributes to the stabilization of adult personalities, which include the husband. In this sense, the instrumental roles of the men and the expressive roles of women complement each other. Like a button and a buttonhole, they lock together to promote family solidarity. This close emotional bond between mother and child is a genetically based predisposition for both parties that is critical to the overall development of the child. Unless this close emotional bond obtains, the child will be unable to establish successful relationship in later life. This fact goes to justify the position that the learning a child will acquire in early life as provided by the mother is very crucial to the child's development.

This is why in most rural societies in Nigeria, a child's character whether positive or negative is always attributed to the home training given to him by his parents particularly the mother (Gilligan, 1989).

In many indigenous Africa societies including Nigeria, there is a close relationship between the social structures, settlement pattern and the roles and relationships involving persons in the rural communities. Here kinship and descent play a major role in defining the allocation of rights and social obligations such as those of residence, group membership and citizenship, succession to office and inheritance. Also, terms such as father and mother, son and daughter as defined by gender classification expresses the form of relationships among them that contribute to social order and to the prediction of behaviour in most societies. Thus, a major feature of most traditional society is the patriarchal structure, which is a system of social relation with a material base that enables men to dominate women.

Patriarchy, which is a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of gender, provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females. In such a setting, therefore, the rule of descent is patrilineal. Besides, patriarchy gives men control over female sexuality. In this context, there exists clearly defined sex roles coupled with various taboos to ensure conformity with specified activities (such as widowhood practices, early marriages, food taboos, and the belief in supernatural forces). For instance, among the Binis in the south-south zone of Nigeria, women kneel in front of their husbands as a visible sign of the wives' submission and subordinate position to their husbands. Even among the matrilineal societies of Africa, there are social taboos and behaviour which necessarily also reinforces female subordination. According to Brain (1977) study of the Lugur society of Tanzania (a matrilineal society), he found that even though the Luguru women were politically outspoken and had economic autonomy, there were still cultural factors such as long puberty rite which kept women in seclusion from the time of their first menstruation to their marriage.

Furthermore, in most rural communities in Nigeria such as the Urhobo, Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and other ethnic groups, descent is basically patrilineal with a strong male influence on virtually every sphere of life. By this structure, the rural woman is socialized into a culture of domination and subordination. She is not only subordinated to her husband, but also to the entire members of her husband's family. For instance, the kinship structures of most

rural societies in Nigeria put men in an advantage position over the women. Citing the Bini's and Yoruba's ethnic groups, membership in such a patrilineage is one of the primary determinants of an individual's social, economic and political roles. Also, seniority and sex are the principal dimensions that differentiate one's status within the kinship unit. As such, examining activities assigned to men and women which define their positioning in societies, Murdock (1949) observed that the biological differences, such as the greater physical strength of men and the fact that women bear children leads to gender role out of sheer practicality. In his cross - cultural survey of 224 societies from the hunting and gathering bands to modern nation state, he found out that tasks such as hunting, lumbering, mining are predominantly male roles while cooking, gathering wild vegetable products, making and mending clothes to be largely female roles. These structuring of roles among sexes as identified by Murdock's studies is vividly found in most rural communities in Nigeria.

Traditionally, for instance, the Bini's consider marriage as not only a contract between a husband and a wife, but as a symbolic union of the two families which is seen as sacred to the wider kinship group as it is to the two parties involved. A Bini man in a traditional polygynous arrangement is highly placed than the woman, for he controls the procreation ability of his wives as well as their labour. The number of wives and children a man has was an indication of success in life while the children were considered his primary assurance in old age. Men often show off their 'wealth' by the number of children and wives they have. In this regard, Olufumilayo Ransome - kuti, a foremost leading female activist in Nigeria, noted that "husband regard their wives as perpetual life-long slaves". In this regard, Olusanya (1970) in emphasizing the by-product of polygyny described it as pure and simple "the exploitation of females". Also the culture of female seclusion entrenched in the Islamic injunctions and intensified during the colonial and post colonial period as a form of resistance to external domination has further heightened the subordinate position of the women folk in the Nigerian rural society.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE ECONOMY

The social structure of most traditional society helps define the complement other social relations which permeate the political, economic, religious institutions. Within these social structures, the basic division of labour was often based on gender and age. Although, the specific roles of women vary from culture to culture,

there is an underlying common denominator. However, as we analyze the economic role of the rural woman, we begin to note that women as a social group are not homogenous as it relate to different ethnic groups in Nigeria. While majority of women could not own land, few others had access to land even in better ecological zones. Afonja (1986) observed a major disparity between wives of Yoruba Obas and wives of peasants with regard to cultivable land. While the Oba's wives had greater access to land and in better zones, the access of other women within a particular household depends on their marital status as a first wife or mother of the first male child.

Furthermore, even when lands were given to women to farm, they were rarely allowed to make decisions regarding what to grow. Boulding (1977) illustrated such familiar constraints on women's role by the triple role concept of breeder-feeder-producer. In the rural settings, farming was the major occupation in which women actively participated. The other occupations they were involved in include keeping livestock, trading, craft making, fetching of water and so on. Also, the access of women to resources like land, capital, tools and labour is most critical as it is defined and determined by their placement and position in the family and community. In most rural societies in Nigeria, it is the male that naturally have access to land from which the women benefit from and this access is often limited. While it has been observed that women in the rural Africa produce up to 80 percent of the staple foods which constitute the mainstay of agricultural production (Hartwig (2000), yet they are among the poorest groups of the populations having no access to land ownership, credit and education even though they make up more than 60 percent of the workforce in the informal sector and 70 percent of the agricultural production or farm labour (Ezeh and Okoli, 1993; Kanpmann, 1999). Besides, available data has showed that the position and empowerment of women in the rural areas are further undermined by lack of collateral to secure credit facilities from financial institutions, and this has created difficulties in their quest to boost food production and make positive contributions in other areas of development (Kwesiga, 1998).

Similarly, women's participation in other productive process apart from agriculture in rural Nigeria is well defined and this varies from the economically independent and aggressive Yoruba women traders to the dependent and often secluded Hausa women. Yoruba women are said to be fairly independent of their husbands than in most other ethnic groups (Lyold, 1968). This is so because

independent economic activity is a critical component in the conception of a complete woman and this in turn has had a strong influence on the nature of the Yoruba family structure. For instance, traditional Yoruba towns were based on internal economic specialization, represented by farmers, craftsmen, produce traders and non-producing middlemen/women of each town. Men generally cultivated the fields while women processed and marketed much of the food. In the same vein, women who have passed the child bearing age undertake long distance trade, while those within child bearing age remained active primarily in the local markets. However, the role that women plays in the economic sector, couples with their non-wage earning household and family activities in society has not been fully appreciated and tapped into by those in authorities at the local, state and federal levels. Thus with the advent of colonization, industrialization and urbanization, and the country's incorporation into the world capitalist economy, there has been a steady rise in the rate of female participation in the labour force, a feat which have increase women participation in a multiplicity of role both within and outside the home without any decrease in their reproductive tasks as well as enhance their desire for financial independence.

THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE POWER RELATIONS IN RURAL NIGERIA

Given the conceptual understanding of what gender engenders, it is obvious that it is a critical factor in structuring the types of opportunities and life chances that individuals or groups face, and strongly influences the roles they play within social institution particularly those that deal with the exercise of power, authority and leadership. Despite the advances that women have made in countries around the world, gender differences continue to serve as the basis for social inequalities. Besides, the prevailing division of labour between the sexes has led to men and women assuming unequal position in terms of power, prestige and wealth. The result of this occurrence is that in all but very few societies, power, prestige and property are unequally distributed on the basis of sex. It is a cultural universal that where men and women are known to do different things, men's work and wisdom is more highly valued than that of women. Gender, therefore plays a prominent role in determining women's participation in political activities in most rural areas in Nigeria and the amount of power they wield and exercises, including their placement in other bodies such as religion, business, and public governance.

The imperative of the nature of our rural societies is such that it supports patriarchy which places the man above the woman in terms of authority and headship of the household. This situation invariably has manifested a social categorization of women domination in all dimensions without providing them the opportunity to exercise their leadership potentials. This long held tradition has often created the misconceived perception within the context of most cultures in rural Nigeria that states that women do not project an image of leadership, cannot handle power and lacked the driving force to reach the top. These set of beliefs has over the years set the standard norms against which our rural women are being treated. However, in some rural Nigeria, women's positions have been visible in matter that deals with the religious life of the people.

Accordingly, Beier (1995) asserted that among the Yoruba people in the south west of Nigeria, women were admitted into the highest offices of the priesthood. For instance, among the important cults in areas such as the Ede, Osun and Obatala, Oshogbo and others, women played instrumental role in the religious functioning. Citing the case of Ede, the positions of the Shango (god of thunder) and the Iya Shango (mother of Shango) were held by a woman who is reverend for the prominent role she plays in the worship of the "Orisha Oko" (god of agriculture) for the fertility of their land and fruitful harvest. The same is also said among the Oshogbo people where a woman occupies the position of "Iya Osun", and the Oba consult with her before he takes decisions that affect the life of his people. Besides, with regard to the institution of witchcraft, women were often presented as powerful figures. Hence, elderly women may be approached by the community and asked to prevent misfortune, or to cause harm to an evil king (Henderson, 1969) However, concerning the activities of masquerade such as the Egungun, Oro, and the Ishan's Igbabonehimi (acrobatic) religious festival, women were not admitted. Thus in the cross-cultural comparison among the Onitsha, Afikpos, Ibo and Yoruba societies, Henderson came up with the following findings:

- A strong correlation between women's important economic functions and roles in religious functions
- Where women are economically independent, there will be an elaboration of their personal cults and invitation to those of men.
- A correlation between the relatively high social position of women and their control over personal destiny shrines. Thus the greater control women possess over these rituals and religious objects, the greater the degree of autonomy of action they exercise in

society.

In the same vein, it has also been observed that there appears to be a strange contrast between women's economic 'dynamism' in terms of independence and their political passivity. While market women in the rural areas of Nigeria are the most highly organized socially cohesive group, they however, rarely lobby for specific measures or directly attempt to initiate public policies of particular concern to themselves. This goes to buttress the belief which holds that political and legal matters were exclusively for the male as they are more involved in activities that deals with the public concern. Similarly, other studies have also pointed to the fact that both men and women shared the traditional political sphere in the rural areas. For instance, among the Igbos' in eastern Nigeria, political interest groups were defined and represented by sex, with each sex groups managing and controlling its own political structure, age grades and political cabinets. Each sex generally managed its own affairs and activities which were principally political. However, whereas Igbo women took on political roles that emerged directly from their roles as women, in some other societies, women were often regarded as 'men' when they acted in the public sphere. The same is also said of the Yorubas' in the south western Nigeria, the position of the 'Iyalode' provided the channel through which she participated in political activity. As such, in many of the Yoruba Kingdoms, the 'Iyalode' were powerful political figures who ably represented the interest of the women of the women as a group. Many also gained economic fame and became 'Iyaloja' (head of the market women), and she in many instances led the various market women's group to fight for their economic and political rights during the colonial administration. Today, the institution of the Iyalode remains a respected political office for women.

In other cases, women's participation in politics was rather indirect, either as the 'Iya Afin', the highest political office in palace administration often occupied by the most senior wife of the king). Others were the 'Iyioba', the king's mother in the Benin Kingdom and the royal princesses of the Kanuri in Borno area of Nigeria, whose offices have been linked with local governance and politics. In all these, one thing is evident which is that though women were accorded some distinct recognition, but such recognition is not always equal to that of men. Besides, most of the position held by women in political matters still had a connection and attachment with the social and economic status of their husbands. In all, men

still rule and dominate the rural society. Thus, in contemporary times, the fact still remain that women's active participation in politics in our rural communities is still at its lowest level, with the plausible reasons still attributable to our cultural norms that tend to portray women as one only to be seen and not heard. As such, most rural communities in this country seem to be contented with the in-built, male-held definitions of gender in their traditional culture. It is men not women who have the right to participate in public life and who monopolizes public affairs. The ideal woman and wife are viewed as obedient, submissive and contented. Many still see a woman's position as statutorily reserved for the kitchen as well as the rearing of children rather than being involved in political issues that require making important decisions pivotal to the development of their communities and the women folk in particular. This situation is very much at variance with the active role our rural women played during the colonial times in advancing the quest for the country's political independence as depicted by the incidence of Aba Women Riot in 1929.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The question of analyzing the challenge of women's empowerment and development in rural Nigeria centre around the issue of gender inequality which lays emphasis on the question of men's enduring dominance over women in the realm of economies, politics, the family and elsewhere. Gender inequality often manifest itself more in the rural societies than in the urban centres of Nigeria through the difference in the status, power and prestige women and men have in the family, groups and collectivities. This is significantly so with respect to Nigeria where the population is not only predominantly rural, but that two third of the populace live in the rural areas which are more dominated by women. Thus, the problematization of gender inequality does raise the question of women and men having equal access to valued societal resources—power, money, food, time, life options and whether women's and men's roles and activities are also valued similarly? Providing answers to these fundamental questions becomes critical given the interest that the gender question has attracted as a critical factor in structuring the types of opportunities and life chances which women in particular faces and how this influences the roles they play within social institutions.

Viewed within this context, it is imperative to state that the issue of gender inequality stems from systematic discrimination

which women suffer on the basis of their gender, and this invariably affects their right to equal participation and representation in leadership and decision making in every institutional sphere. Therefore, putting the problem of gender into context, the author argues that the question of gender inequality which undermines the status and empowerment of women is located in the context of the customs and social institutions of the people. Gender issues concerns relations between identities and behaviour of men and women. The fact gender is a socially created means that it is not a fixed category but a fluid one, exhibited in what people do rather than what they are. Thus, what we find in most rural societies is such that the tradition and culture of most ethnic groups have been deeply entrenched in the psyche of the people to create a distinction between women and men which goes a long way to define their access to status, power, prestige, wealth and privileges. This occurrence has over time engendered the condition where women have not been fully integrated into the social and political status of societies and seen as a vital means for the developing the nation's human resources for national economic growth and development. For instance, most cultures in Nigeria often see women as a form of 'private property' owned by the men in marriage. This belief has generated a false stereotype on the part of the men folk who now see themselves as superior to the women. As such, most men have come to assume that it is their exclusive rights to occupy positions of power and authority in society.

It is therefore this culture of conferring privileges more on men than women that has over the years defined the web of relationships that we have institutionalized to form the social structure of societies which guide people's behaviour, attitudes and motivations. Thus, it is the customs and institutions of each society that works together to maintain and justify gender inequality which invariably undermines the position and empowerment of women. This reality goes to buttress the reasons why men deny women access to positions of power and influence in society. Similarly, it has also engendered the situation of men's appropriation of women's bodies and sexuality, violence against women, sexual harassment and the 'objectification' of women through acts of trafficking and inhuman treatment of widows. Furthermore, the same scenario also plays itself out in terms of women being denied access to education, land, health services and information, segregation in the workplace, pay disparity, secure loans and other inhuman treatment. For instance, available statistics in core development indicators within the overall economy

and the private sector reveals obvious gender disparity against women which has disproportionate impact on their overall state of empowerment and development as shown in the following table:

GENDER DISPARITY IN CORE DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS

Development Issue/Sector	Men	Women
Below Poverty line	35%	65%
Informal Sector	13%	87%
Land Ownership	90%	10%
Agricultural Work	30%	70%
Food Processing	10%	90%
Marketing Inputs	40%	60%
Property Disposable at will	95%	5%

Source: National Bureau of Statistics 2006.

In the same vein, in many traditional societies, limiting female education to the minimum needed to run a household has also been used as a powerful form of social control. This has over the years heightened the rate of illiteracy and powerlessness on the part of women, thus making them more likely to live in abject poverty than the men. However, given the challenges which gender inequality has created in hampering women's capabilities and empowerment, addressing the question of discrimination against women has assumed a global dimension where it is seen as an act of injustice and human right violation that hinder greatly women's well-being and contribution to national development. As such, several international human rights treaties prohibiting all forms of discrimination against women have been developed by the United Nations, regional organizations like the African Union in collaboration with women's rights groups, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). These treaties which includes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA) of 1995, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of discrimination against Women (CEDAW), The African Union Declaration on Gender Equity and the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been signed and ratified by the Nigerian government with the commitment to promote women's rights and ensure gender equality in the Nigerian society.

However, the question that is often raised with regard to the Nigeria's government ratification of these treaties is whether the leaders at the three tiers of government can muster the needed political will to provide the requisite legislations, policy framework and adequate funding of project toward actualizing the goal of gender equality in the country. This is particularly so as measures earlier

put in place by previous government such as the Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW), Family Support Programme (FSP), Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) and others did not holistically address the core concerns of the rural women due to their elitist make-up which failed to incorporate the rural women as the main stakeholder and drivers of the empowerment process.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is clear that the gender question has played a critical role in defining the position and empowerment of rural women in Nigeria. We have also highlighted how the veneration of our customs which provides more privileges to men in terms of power and prestige has been politicised and manipulated in our society to justify gender inequality. Thus, to redress this trend, there is need for the government to see the issue of gender discrimination against women as a matter of seeking justice and equity for all. Also, a massive enlightenment campaign is required to educate the populace on the need to change their attitude, perceptions and stereotype toward discriminating against women and girls on the basis of their gender. In the same vein, gender equality can be realized when women are given the opportunity to participate in decision making process which affect them, their families, communities and ultimately their countries. Women, we must stress have a vital contribution to make to the economy, to better governance and to their households. In all, advancing the rights of women through providing them access to compulsory education at all levels must be seen as moral necessity required in effectively tackling the challenge of poverty in the country.

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