

STATE AND SOCIETY

Volume 1 - NO 1

March, 2009

**An Interdisciplinary Journal of the
Nigerian Sociological Society**

Article 9

RURAL WOMEN AND THE DEVELOPMENT QUESTION: ANY HOPE FOR NIGERIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

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Abstract

Nigeria's detachment from the apron's strings of the British government and her gallant entry into independence on October 1st 1960 has much been celebrated. The aftermath of this epoch making event has no doubt birthed several reforms, policies and programmes aimed at transforming the lives of the citizenry. It is worrisome however that, nearly fifty (50) years after, there seem not to be any remarkable progress and desired transformations in view especially for the rural women who constitute a greater proportion of the population. Hunger, poverty, disease, ignorance and gender violence constitute the lot of these women. Against this backdrop, this paper appraises the plight of Nigeria's rural women, their strategic roles in development and the militating factors impeding their economic empowerment from independence till date. It examines a few post-independence programmes targeted at uplifting women and why remarkable progress has not been achieved. The theoretical perspective adopted for article is the political economy theory, while data from secondary sources mainly, content analysis was utilized. The paper concludes with suggestions on urgent pragmatic steps and lessons for the way forward.

Keywords: Rural women, Post-Independence programmes, Development, Poverty.

Introduction

One aspect of rural women's life which has attracted an exciting study is their role in agriculture. In terms of food production, processing and marketing, the women's role cannot be overlooked. Despite women's contribution to the viable sector of the economy, a wide gap in the level of income and consequent impoverishment of majority of these

women is predominant. Barely fifty years after independence, Nigerian women especially, the bulk residing in the rural areas seemed not to be better for it. In spite of their huge contributions to the agricultural and domestic sector, poverty, hunger, diseases, ignorance and gender violence constitute their lot. It is a paradox that, despite the abundant mineral and human resources the country is blessed with, this segment of the population are far from being direct beneficiaries of neither development nor its dividends. The various policies and programmes by successive governments in the country notwithstanding, the condition of the rural women leaves much to be desired.

Rural Women in perspective

According to Chiebowska (1990), "women living in rural areas represent sixty (60) per cent of the world's female population with as much as seventy (70) per cent of them in the developing countries, constituting two-fifths of the active population in agriculture". The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), *Statistical Bulletin* (1994), reported that, in Nigeria, "women constitute 49.7 per cent of the national population, and majority of these reside in the rural areas where they live mainly by exploiting the resources of nature". Despite their contributions in the agricultural sector as well as other developmental processes, their role in promoting economic and social change continues to be undervalued due to a number of challenges as reported by Oluwemimo (2001):

1. The male dominated cultures in Nigeria like most developing nations which give women inferior position in society;
2. Customs, taboos and the sexual division of labour which keeps women subordinate to men;
3. The failure to value unpaid work performed by women at the domestic front, and in the agricultural sector.

Women's Contributions and Constraints to Development

World Bank (1994) report that, women in Africa are prominent in agricultural activities especially food processing and marketing, cash crops and animal husbandry. The contribution of rural women to the agricultural sector no doubt replicates the above World Bank report. In spite of the huge presence of women, this category of the population ought to be better for it. However, the rate of squalor, poverty and gross income inequality is no doubt alarming and worrisome. The bane of this paper is to access the various challenges militating against rural women in development especially in the agricultural sector. In addition, past and present government policies targeted at enhancing the development of the women will be examined with a view to suggest the way forward.

Ownership and Access to Land

Land, the principal resource for food production is neither owned nor controlled by the women. The patriarchal society in which the women found themselves further contributes to this discrimination. Consequently, the women have no direct access to land for agricultural purposes as they do not own the land they till. At best, women co-own land with their husbands but lack credit facilities to boost their effort in maximizing their potentials. The available land is negotiated with foreign-based oil companies by the powers that be for oil exploration activities while the left-over for agriculture is threatened by various environmental and man-made hazards perpetuated by oil exploration activities in the region. Again, the women have no say in these issues which directly affect their total wellbeing. Wanyeki (2003) captures this when he states, the woman do not have the exclusive right to produce what she desires without the due permission from her husband, son, brother and/or male relations because, she neither owns nor inherit land.

Co-ownership of land causes difficulties especially where a wife may have different priorities from her husband. Consequently, women are handicapped in making decisions on the acquisition, use and disposal of very important piece of real estate. (Igube, 2007)

Lack of ownership rights has tended to compromise women's access to credit facilities due to lack of required collateral usually (land/real estate) often required by banks for granting such credits. With the current global economic crisis, the huge interest rates and the 1978, land Act of Nigeria gave access to all Nigerians (male and female) to own land after obtaining Certificate of Occupancy (C of O) from authorized persons or constituted authority. The extent to which this provision of the law has been adhered to is questionable especially when one considers the marginalization of women in land issues and the flagrant discrimination encountered by this disadvantaged group in most African societies. This problem tends to reduce the scale of operation of women in agriculture and exacerbates their poverty.

In his contribution on "*Women and Property in a Male Dominated Society*", Alliyu (2007:6) notes, the greater the access, of both sexes, to property equitably in the society, the more they are likely to contribute to development almost equitably. He stressed that any imbalance in access to property by either sex would definitely lead to power imbalance, imbalance relations and less contribution to development from the less powerful. This no doubt is the lot of women in the food sector in the rural areas.

Patriarchal Attitudes and Impediments to Women Development

Culturally, Nigeria is a patriarchal society, a factor which affects the inheritance rights of women negatively. Patriarchy is largely reflected in the land tenure system that exists all over the country. Okeyo's (1980) assertion that indigenous land tenure ensures that women produce food crops for the family without any right to land ownership. Despite legal provisions, smaller families and improved educational employment opportunities over the last century or so, marked inequalities remain between the social and economic roles of men and women. (Oakley, 1974).

The legal system in a given society ought to ensure the supremacy and sovereignty of the constitution, equity and fairness. In cases where a will is available to dictate the rights of the woman on land ownership, the culture of the people overtakes the legal provision thus rendering the legal system subservient. This vulnerable group of the society are not only unjustly treated but are rendered penniless in most cases.

Low Capacity Building

Essentially, Capacity building refers to "a person's ability to define and realize his/her goals or to do his/her job more effectively. Capacity also refers to the skills and capabilities of individuals.

Philbin (1996) defined capacity building as "the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in the fast-changing world". United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1991 defined capacity building as the creation of an enabling environment with appropriate legal frameworks, institutional development, including community participation (of women in particular), human resources development and strengthening of managerial systems.

The low status accorded women in traditional African society has denied them access to basic social and economic opportunities capable of enhancing their productivity. Consequently, the low levels of female education compared to their male counterparts have limited their access to skill acquisition compounded by a culture of early marriage predominant in the rural areas.

For instance, Erinoshio (1997) identified reasons for unequal educational access: they include cultural beliefs and some religious practices which are retrogressive and discriminatory against women such as early/forced marriage and the practice of Purdah in Northern Nigeria where Islamic religion is most predominant.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The Political Economy Theory

This theory has been found to be very useful in explaining the realities of the specific political, economic and social matrix of colonial and post-colonial Africa. The theory exposes the interaction between indigenous social framework and foreign political and economic institutions which generated many changes within the social structure of African Society. The theory of political economy derive its origin from the Marxist hypothesis "economy determines political attitudes". Thus, this theory gives primacy to the material conditions, particularly economic factors in the explanation of social life.

It assumes a dialectical relationship between and among different elements of social life including economic, social, and political structure and the belief system. Broadly as a macro structural theory of economic, political and social structures, it has successfully provided the conceptual framework for explaining different structures of exploitations and dominations exemplified in gender relations in most part of sub-Saharan Africa. Theorists argue that the rise in economic inequality is accompanied by political relations of domination and subordination which are often achieved by the development of institutionalized repression necessary to control the demand of the economically disadvantaged for redistribution (Afonja 1979, Ladipo, 1981).

Adherents of political economy perspective believe that the inter-connections between and among various elements of the society, economics, politics, ideology and other institutional factors of change must be thoroughly understood for women to be adequately integrated into development (Afonja, 1980).

The African political economy can be seen in the light of feminist studies which incorporate both the achievements made by women through history, and ways of overcoming the oppression that developed during the capitalist era. As Mueller (1987) stated, far from liberating women in the Third World, development efforts continue to foster the international capitalist order, thereby contributing to the maintenance of the same oppressive order. The above theoretical perspective is no doubt useful in explaining the situation of rural women especially those involved in food production in most Nigerian societies. Beyond patriarchy and other socio-cultural barriers: early marriage, obnoxious widowhood practices, women trafficking, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) to include the global exploitation of men and women within the capitalist system.

Rural Development Approach (RDA) This approach sees the rural sector as a unique sector in terms of poverty reduction. This is because majority of the poor in developing

countries live in this sector. In addition, the level of paid employment in this sector is very minimal. Hence, traditional measures of alleviating poverty may not easily work in the rural sector without radical changes in the assets ownership structure, credit structure, etc. Poverty reduction in the rural areas will be fully achieved if there is a change in societal values towards assets and land ownership pattern currently the exclusive right of men and not women in most Nigerian societies. RDA is of the view that, when women have direct access and ownership of a vital economic resource land and the freedom to cultivate whatever food crop without any restriction or cultural barrier, rural development once viewed as an elusive task becomes a problem solved. A total restructuring of the credit system devoid of unnecessary bottlenecks and bureaucracies, coupled with unrealistic collateral demands from money lenders etc will remove the age long barriers that hinder rural women especially the farmers from accessing credits. Emphasis in this approach to development focused on the integrated Approach to Rural development. This approach recognizes that poverty is multidimensional and therefore, requires a multipronged approach. The approach aims at the provision of basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, safe drinking water, education, health care, employment and income generating opportunities to the rural dwellers in general and the poor in particular. One basic problem with this approach to poverty reduction is that, it is difficult to focus attention on the real poor given that poverty in the rural area is pervasive. In other words, it makes targeting of poverty reduction programmes very difficult.

Table 1: Brief Review of Rural Programmes in Nigeria (1986-2004)

Programme	Year Established	Target Group	Nature of Intervention
Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI)	1986	Rural Areas	Feeder Roads, rural water supply and rural electrification.
National Directorate of Employment (NDE)	1986	The Unemployed youths	Training, finance and guidance
Better Life Programme (BLP)	1987	Rural women	Self help and rural development Programmes, skill acquisition and health care.
People's Bank of Nigeria (PBN) Programme	1989	Underprivileged in the rural and urban areas	Encouraging savings and credit facilities
Community Banks (CB)	1990	Rural Residents, micro enterprises in urban areas	Banking facilities
Family Support Programme (FSP)	1994	Families in Rural Areas	Health care delivery, Child welfare, Youth Development etc.
Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP)	1997	Rural Areas	Credit facilities to support the Establishment of cottage industries.
Poverty Alleviation Programme(PAP)	1999	The Unemployed youth	Credit facilities for micro business
National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP)	2001	The Unemployed youth	Employment creation and micro credit for small businesses
National Economic and Empowerment Strategy (NEEDS)	2004	General Economic development,	Value re-orientation, poverty reduction, wealth creation and employment generation

Source: Compiled from literature by Researcher (2009).

The Way forward

From the foregoing discourse, concerted efforts have been made to bring to the fore women's contributions and major constraints to development. In this paper, particular attention was paid to the challenges of rural women in the agricultural sector. Similarly, various programmes geared at alleviating the challenges were identified. The crux of the matter is, how much results have been achieved till date in spite of the lofty goals of these programmes. Nevertheless, the following lessons are derivable:

- Empowerment of rural women can be achieved through proper education this is because 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).
- When women acquire more education (formal and informal), they develop skills and acquire up to date information that can enable them thrive in the ever changing world. So much so that the various programmes targeted at alleviating the suffering of this disadvantaged group can be better appreciated.
- Government through the Central Bank should formulate and implement financial/credit policy which will compel financial institutions to extend certain percentage of loans to women involved in food production and other economic activities. Such soft loans will assist to increase their yields and expand their scope.
- Periodic workshop/seminars and conferences to acquaint women with environmental and non-environmental issues that infringe upon their economic activities are crucial. In this way, government efforts and other Non- governmental agencies will be complimented.
- Intensification of aggressive public enlightenment programmes to create awareness on the roles of women in food production and the need to compliment women's efforts will yield much results.

Conclusion

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According to a Human Development report:

The basic objective of human development is to enlarge the range of people's choices to make development more democratic and participatory. These choices should include access to income and employment opportunities, education and health, a clean and safe physical environment. Each individual should also have the opportunity to participate fully in community decisions and to enjoy human, economic and political freedoms. (UNDP, 1991:9).

Finally, the author shares the view expressed by another UNDP's Report (2004) that, "development that is not engendered is endangered". Essentially, development is a human right that should be enjoyed by all irrespective of gender, age and colour. The United Nations Declaration on the right to development adopted on December 4, 1986 by resolution 41/128 in Article 1 (i&ii) clearly makes the human person the central subject of development.

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