

Gender Empowerment as a Strategy for National Development In Nigeria

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Abstract. Gender empowerment is currently the main focus of attention from researchers, governments, and other stakeholders. The concept of women's empowerment contains various meanings. This paper attempts to look into gender empowerment as a strategy for national development with more focus on women. The data for this study is generated through secondary sources of data collection from journals, textbooks, and materials from the internet. The study recommends that Nigerian government policy should always consider the female gender for necessary support, and upliftment, as this will help to improve their status and enhance national development in Nigeria. Across the country, there is an urgent need for women's development and self-employment training institutes. Empowerment programs initiated by successive governments should be sustained and not allowed to waste. In other words, there should be continuity of programs after each government has left office. The issue of maintenance culture should be revisited and imbibed by government agencies and all stakeholders in development so that the various empowerment programs will not be abandoned and resources invested in the programs wasted.

Keywords: Gender Empowerment, Women Empowerment, National Development.



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Introduction.

Promoting gender empowerment is now globally accepted as a development strategy for reducing poverty levels among women and men, improving health and living standards, and enhancing the efficiency of public investments. The attainment of gender empowerment is not only seen as an end in itself and a human rights issue but as a prerequisite for the achievement of development. Gender and women's empowerment continue to be central themes in global treaties, covenants, and declarations because they are now acknowledged as catalysts to people-centered development strategies that focus on poverty reduction, improved standard of living, and good governments that give men and women equal voices in decision-making and policy implementation.

Gender empowerment is the empowerment of people of any gender while conventionally, the aspect of it is mentioned for the empowerment of women, and the concept stresses the distinction between biological sex and gender as a role, also referring to other marginalized genders in a particular political or social context. This work will largely discuss women's empowerment as a strategy for national development.

Women empowerment is currently the main focus of international, national, and local governments, researchers, and other key players in development issues. The government is currently trying to realize the welfare of women's social, economic, political, and education through empowering women. Efforts made by the government to realize this goal, namely by fully committing to gender equality, to create equality of conditions for women and men in obtaining opportunities and rights, to play a role and participate in development activities, economics, politics, socio-culture, defense security and getting equal treatment in enjoying development. For this reason, efforts are needed to synergize gender equality and justice policies integrally in development.

Women's empowerment and development are two important concepts for developing countries. A strong appreciation for women's empowerment will contribute significantly to Nigeria's national development. Political and socioeconomic challenges in developing countries have encouraged communities to develop strategies to improve their status, social functions, and standard of living. According to Ojukwu (2013), as cited in Akpomovie (2018), women in particular engage in activities that facilitate the process of national development in an attempt to address their community problems. Obeta (2019) pointed out that if women folk are properly empowered, adequate management of development projects will be ensured. Change cannot be effective unless women's activities and contributions to national development, community project management, food availability, and household well-being are recognized. Women's empowerment entails improving the political, economic, and social conditions of women. Most women in Nigeria have been distinct victims of culture, religion, class, and sex oppression/suppression by customs and traditions that promote and uphold male chauvinism since the colonial era.

Method

The data for this study is generated through secondary sources of data collection from journals, textbooks, materials from the internet, etc and their content is qualitatively analyzed. This work which is purely content analysis shifts through the mass literature on gender, empowerment, and development. Inferences and recommendations will be made based on the findings of the study.

Results and Discussions

Gender

Gender is a term that is defined by society, hence it is a social construct. What we see as gender issues in one society may vary from what the other society sees as gender issues. Gender is multi-disciplinary, literarily, gender is seen as a word for classifying humans into male and female.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, gender is an individual self-conception as being male and female, as distinguished from actual biological or femininity, sex is what you are biologically, while gender is what you become socially. Mosse (1993) sees gender as a set of roles that communicate to people that we are either male or female, masculine or feminine in society. In the same vein, the World Health Organization (WHO) Gender Policy (2002) sees gender as a characteristic of men and women that is socially constructed, however when using it in the area of sex, it defines the biological constitution of the individual, this explains that people are born male or female, they also learn to be girls or boys, who grow up into women/men. So, the learned behavior constitutes the gender identity which eventually determines roles assigned to each gender.

Gender refers to the widely shared expectations and norms within a social system about appropriate male and female behavior, characteristics, and roles. It is a social and cultural construct that differentiates women from men and defines how women and men interact with each other.

Concept of Development

The word development usually connotes an improvement over a particular situation or condition, development in this sense, can be viewed from the perspective of economic factors, social, cultural, administrative factors, and technological factors. It means a step towards an improvement or a positive change. It could be a change from simple to complex, or from a low level to a higher one. It is a movement towards a more desirable state.

Development must not be limited to economic growth, because the gross domestic product, per capita income, etc. may experience progress but the people themselves may be living in abject poverty because of some other factors which may be political, social, or otherwise.

According to Todaro, (1977), development should not be limited to economics alone, even though the economic factors are for development, he maintains that development is a multidimensional process involving the re-organization and re-orientation of the entire economic and social system. He further maintains that development must be viewed from a holistic, this means that development involves radical changes in institution, social, and administrative structures as well as people's attitudes and sometimes even their customs and beliefs.

To Goulet (2002) development means obtaining the good life, he identified three elements, which he refers to as a core value of development;

- a. Life sustenance- the ability to provide basic needs such as housing, clothing, food, healthcare minimum education, etc. Development must have the objective of providing these basic needs.
- b. Self-esteem- this has to do with the feeling of self-respect and independence. To him, individuals and society must be able to relate on equal terms.
- c. Freedom-this has to do with freedom from servitude. According to him, development must eliminate all forms of servitude be it gender barriers or gender inequality, political, economic, social, etc and nations must be able to relate with each other on equal terms.

According to Walter Rodney (1972), for development to occur, the individual mind must be developed, because it is when you develop the mind of people that they will in turn develop the society at large.

Women's Empowerment

Empowerment is more than a concept that can be defined using some universally accepted parameter. Mandal (2015), defined empowerment as a multidimensional concept and approach that encompasses the construction of social relations in a specific cultural context. Each dimension of empowerment is described in terms of psychological, cultural, social, economic, organizational, political, and institutional aspects. Empowerment is described as a multifaceted, multidimensional, and multilayered concept (Vaid & Kumar, 2015). It is not something that could be given to those who we believe are in need in the form of a capsule. Empowerment is a process that includes the following components: equal access to opportunities for utilizing society's resources, prohibition of gender discrimination in thought and practice, freedom from violence, economic independence, participation in all decision-making bodies, and freedom of choice in personal matters. As a result, empowerment is defined as the result of a person's financially, socially, and emotionally strong status; it leads to happiness and satisfaction among a group of people" (Goel & Sah, 2015).

From the forgoing assertion, we can infer that empowerment is a process enabling individuals to understand the relationship between their actions and outcomes, allowing people to achieve the results they desire. It also means people have power and control over their own lives. That is to say, people get the support they need that is right for them.

Women's empowerment is a process by which women take ownership and control of their lives through the articulation of their aspirations and change strategies, as well as the expansion of choice as women are closely linked to their socially defined gender roles, responsibilities, and social structure (Urhibo and Urhero, 2023). Women's empowerment is defined as creating an environment in which women can make independent decisions about their personal development while also shining as equals in society (Khatai 2015). According to Enenuo, 2001, as cited in Obett, (2009), women empowerment entails the improvement of women's political, economic, and social conditions. Mandal (2015) defines women empowerment as the distribution of social power and control of resources in favor of women, particularly rural women. Women's empowerment is defined as a process in which women gain a greater share of control over resources – material, human, and intellectual resources such as knowledge, information, and ideas, as well as financial resources such as money, access to money, and control over decision-making in the home, community, society, and nation (Vaid & Kumar, 2015). Women empowerment is the distribution of political, economic, and social access to women to take part in national developments. It means the right to control their own lives, both within and outside the family premises; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a just social and economic order at regional, national, and international levels. The concept of women's empowerment was first introduced at the International Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985.

Women's Empowerment Strategies According to Social Perspective

The term empowerment is expressed by Sen (1999) in "Development as Freedom" emphasizes that development should not only be seen from mere economic measures but also to the extent to which society has many choices from various opportunities, namely by introducing the concept of 'human freedom' in five respects: economic empowerment, political freedom, social opportunities, security and transparency as the principles and ultimate goals of development, while economic measures are the way to achieve them. According to Suharto (2010) as cited in (Gusti and Utama 2019), empowerment not

only includes strengthening individual members of the community but also the institutions. Instilling modern cultural values, such as hard work, self-reliance, efficiency, openness, and a responsible attitude, are the main parts of empowerment. In addition, the purpose of empowerment is to strengthen the power of the community, especially the weak groups who have powerlessness, both because of internal conditions (such as their perceptions) or because of external conditions (such as being oppressed by unfair social structures). Empowerment of women is an effort to strengthen their helplessness to be able to help themselves, independently, and develop their self-reliance (Elizabeth, 2007).

Women's Empowerment Strategies According to the Economic Perspective

Efforts to women's empowerment can be said as an effort to increase women's ownership and control of economic and noneconomic resources. To realize the development program in the context of empowering women, the following can be done (Muhajir, 2005) as cited in (Gusti and Utama 2019): (1) Priority in rural women's groups because of their potential that has not been utilized optimally. This strategy is expected to be a stimulant for acceleration and economic recovery, namely the provision of capital facilities for women who manage both small and medium-sized businesses, especially in rural and coastal areas. Circulation of money in all corners of the country in sufficient quantities is expected to increase the economic activities of women and help women enter the market through exchange activities that use money. (2) The provision of capital for women's groups and the amount of accessible capital facilities are expected to be sufficient so that it does not rule out the use of technology that can increase the quantity and quality of products which is produced by women's business groups. (3) Improving rural communication facilities and infrastructure that support the expansion of access to new information that is more accurate for women of small and medium entrepreneurs. Current accurate information will help rural communities to direct the use of resources owned by commodity production businesses that can provide adequate and profitable benefits. (4) Optimizing the role of all female human resources is expected to further accelerate economic recovery. The increase of women in the market is expected to increase the contribution of women in the family economy to improve household economic resilience and the level of community welfare in addition to improving the quality of life for women.

Women's Empowerment Strategies According to the Political Perspective

The components of women's empowerment include the power of household decision-making, access to credit, participation, knowledge, and awareness, raising voices, freedom, mobility, respect, economic participation, and developing leadership qualities. The power of decision-making in the household means the ability to make and influence the process of fulfilling decisions. Access and control of credit means accessing credit for their livelihoods so that their level of income will change. Participation means the role of women's economic activities and financial decision-making

Strategies Employed by the Government to Empower Women in Nigeria

In Nigeria, like other developing countries of the world, different programs are embarked upon, sponsored by international organizations or national initiatives in collaboration with the state and local governments for the benefit of all women. In a bid to improve the welfare, civic, political, cultural, social, and economic development of women in Nigeria, Decree No. 30 of 1989, which established the National Commission for Women was promulgated to formulate a national policy on women and development. All programs for women are carried out by this Commission. The objectives of the Commission are to: promote the welfare of women in general; promote the full utilization of Women in the development of human resources and to bring about their acceptance as full participants in every phase of national development, with equal rights and corresponding obligations; promote responsible motherhood and maternal health of Women; stimulate actions to improve women's civic, political cultural, social and economic education; support the work of non - government organizations and to play a coordinating role between government and Nigerian Women organizations; encourage the sense and essence of cooperative societies and activities amongst women both in urban and rural areas and stimulate in them creative entrepreneurship in the field of cottage and small — scale industries; formulate and propagate moral values within the family unit and in the public generally and to establish programmes with institution and organizations to inculcate moral education in women and children; and work towards the total elimination of all social and cultural practices tending to discriminate against and dehumanize womanhood.

Blue Print on Women's Education in Nigeria

In 1986, the Blueprint on Women Education in Nigeria was launched, followed by the setting up of Women's education units of the Federal and State Ministry of Education. These units cater to both rural and urban women who desire to further their education. The overall aim of the blueprint is to avail all Women equal educational opportunities irrespective of their age, locality, creed, or social status. The women's education units also run women's vocational centers in all local government areas in the skills of cloth weaving, tie and dye, farming, food processing and preservation, dressmaking, cooking, cosmetology, secretarial, and computer studies.

Better Life for Rural Women Programme

Better Life for Rural Women Programme Launched in 1987 by Maryam Babangida. It is set up to enhance the quality of life of rural women. It harnessed the potential of rural women and impacted positively their economic activities and incomes.

The National Commission for Mass Literacy and Non-Formal Education (NMEC)

The National Commission for Mass Literacy and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) was set up in 1991 by the Federal Government, charging it with the task of eradicating illiteracy in the country. Women are specially targeted in the programmes of the Commission with mass literacy classes being conducted in all nooks and crannies of the country.

Family Support Programme

Family Support Programme Launched in September 1994 by Maryam Abacha. Established sequel to the United Nations declaration in 1994 as the International Year of Family. It focused on empowering women to take their proper place in the family.

Women Empowerment G-WIN Project

Women Empowerment G-WIN Project in Abuja, Launched by former President Jonathan on March 9, 2015. A Federal government initiative to empower women and girls in Nigeria. It reverses gender-specific gaps and also closes the digital gender.

Gender Issues and Development In Nigeria

Despite the numerous strategies and programs adopted by the government to empower women, women are still lacking in contributing to national development. Gender disparity is said to have penetrated all aspects of Nigerian society. Existing data show a consistent, extensive gulf between men and women employment opportunities and income-generating in nearly all Nigerian economies. On the Gender Equality Index, out of 134 nations, Nigeria has 184 (Olawale et al, 2012). For the educational, family, economic, governance, and all other social institutions, statistics reveal severe gender tension in Nigeria. The results showed an imbalance in education among the genders, such that few women are empowered and took part in the labor force, particularly in teaching and politics. In 1990, a headcount revealed that the number of male professors in the country was 1,500, with only 27 female professors representing only 1.8 percent of Nigerian professors. In 2022, the number of female-to-male lecturers will be significantly lower. Out of 72,443 academic staff in Nigerian universities, only 17,350 are female (Ode, 2022). At the National Assembly, of the total of 420 seats in the 9th Assembly, only 29 are occupied by women. That is a total of 6.18% of women in the chamber. Women's participation in the national economy is about 11 percent compared with 30 percent for men. As noted by World experts, any nation that prioritizes its women and girls' education is on a path of economic growth and sustainable development. Women have demonstrated some level of probity and proven to be better managers in the home and informal sectors of the economy and can play important management roles in several institutions worldwide. It was also shown that ignoring gender equity and continued unfair treatment of women and girls will only impede sustainable development in Nigeria Gender inequality is said to have penetrated all aspects of Nigerian society. In addition, 76% of Federal Civil Service workers are men, whereas women make up 24% of the workforce and occupy less than 14% of the overall management positions, despite the appointment of women to the position of permanent secretaries (beginning in 2000 and line with affirmative action initiatives). Additionally, approximately 17.5% of medical doctors are women whereas 82.5% are men. These disparities have a significant impact on the capacity of women and men to contribute to the economic growth of the country, the reform agenda, and efforts to reduce

dependency ratios within family units and achieve the desired value-re-orientation goal of government. Other indications of gender inequalities include disparities in participation within the formal sector which stands at 87% men with 11% women compared to 30% men engaged in the industrial sector. The extractive industry with an annual business volume of over US\$42m has almost zero level participation of women. (CIDA Nig. GSAA 2006). Despite the various international and national strategies such as Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), Gender and Development (GAD), and other policies adopted in improving gender and women empowerment, there is still a gender-biased structure that is negation to national development.

Barriers to the Participation of Women in Development

There are many hindrances or barriers to women's participation in development, some of which are; limitations on property and inheritance, education parity, lack of access to financial services, restrictions on women's freedom and mobility, discrimination by job type and sector, religious beliefs and values, entrenched cultural practices, women's multiples roles and time constraints, poverty, repressive nature of socialization and low self-esteem etc.

Limitation on property and inheritance.

Right from time immemorial, women all over the world have been marginalized in areas of decision-making, ownership of land, and inheritance. Women rarely own land and when they do, their holdings or portions are always smaller and less fertile than those of men (Tinuke F. and Tinuke M 2012.. In addition, only a few women in Africa have secure independent rights to land. In most places, women cannot legally or customarily inherit wealth and property including land. They obtain rights to land through men, for example through their husbands, brothers, and sons. In Nigeria, access to land is biased in favor of men and not women.

Education parity

Around the world, and even in Nigeria, women still have less access to education than men. Most women did not finish primary school. Of all the illiterate people in the world, two-thirds are women. Statistics from Nigeria's Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) show that males had higher enrollment numbers for basic education as of 2018. Also in 2019, only 48.3% of the total number of candidates who sat for the West Africa Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in Nigeria were females. When girls are not educated on the same level as boys, it has a huge effect on their future and the kind of opportunities they will get. This will in turn affect their impact on the economy and the development of the country. In addition, men often see women as people who are not prepared or under-prepared to participate, and their education is deemed insufficient. Yet, female education is often considered a waste of resources, and those women who do attain higher education are derided as intimidating

Lack of access to financial services.

Lack of financial access to financial services is one of the limitations that relegate women from contributing to national development. In Nigeria, men have more access to financial institutions, and physical, and social assets than men do. The financial institution in Nigeria mostly gives loans to the men than the women folks. Even if they give, there are criteria or conditions women have to meet before they are considered. Some of the conditions are presentations of their landed documents (most women in some parts of Nigeria do not have access to land due to customs and religious beliefs), guarantors, etc.

Socio-Cultural Factor

Socio-cultural factor constitutes an impediment to women's participation in development in Nigeria, leading to gender inequality. Various cultures restrict the role of women in domestic activities, such as keeping the home clean, bearing children, cooking food for the entire family members, etc. Society today sees these roles as less important as they require less extensive formal education for one to be able to perform them. This unfortunate misconception has been a major obstacle to women's empowerment and development in Nigeria.

Religious Belief

Various religious leaders perceive women in different ways, as some believe that women should be confined to their houses (a situation close to false imprisonment). This therefore makes it difficult for young girls to acquire basic formal education. However, there are religious groups that do not encourage discriminatory practices against women's education empowerment such as the Christian religion. Thus, the educational gap, though closing, is still too wide for comfort in today's world and its expectations, more so as there is parity in the population of males and females in Nigeria.

Early Marriage

According to Country Review Mission (CRM), early marriage for girls is sanctioned by cultural and religious beliefs that deprive girls of school to attain the skills needed for an empowering adult livelihood. The practice has contributed greatly to the lesser proportion of girls in school enrolments and the poor retention of girls in the school system, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels. In 2004, about 12 percent of girls between 10 and 14 years were married compared to 1 percent of boys of the same age. This situation contravenes the Federal government's Child's Rights Act 2003, which established 18 years as a minimum age for marriage. This shows that rights given in Federal Laws may not be adhered to at the level of the state (APRM, 2008:327).

Conclusion and Suggestion

There is no doubt that gender plays a significant role in promoting or retarding a society's development process. It is clear from the discussion that women's empowerment has a strong and positive relationship with national development, and that women's empowerment has a positive impact on national development in Nigeria. The study concludes that gender and women empowerment have a positive influence on national development based on the findings of this study.

The following recommendations were made: Nigerian government policy should always consider the female gender for necessary support, and upliftment, as this will help to improve their status and enhance national development in Nigeria. Across the country, there is an urgent need for women's development and self-employment training institutes. The Nigerian government should support and encourage girl child education, and adult education for women, particularly rural women, at all levels. Empowerment programs initiated by successive governments should be sustained and not allowed to waste because such a government is out of office. In other words, there should be continuity of programs after each government has left office. The issue of maintenance culture should be revisited and imbibed by government agencies and all stakeholders in development so that the various empowerment programs will not be abandoned and resources invested into the programs wasted

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