

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

There is no gainsaying that women are the heartbeat of men's strength and success and therefore engine room for development in the society. Women empowerment can be described as the provision of adequate opportunities to women to develop their potentials and contribute to the development of the nation in particular and the world in general. It has been observed that women have been disempowered since creation. Efforts made so far towards women empowerment has yielded little fruits. This study examined women empowerment and participation in national development with reference to Ahiazu Mbaise LGA, Imo State. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design and in depth interview. 250 copies of questionnaire were administered to 250 respondents from the five sampled communities in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA. The paper is therefore an attempt to ascertain available empowerment initiatives for women and challenges hindering the effective contributions of women to national development. The paper recommends that since the role of women in national development is very important in the development of any country, the Nigerian government owes it as a duty to remove those artificial and institutional barriers based on religion, culture, or traditional considerations which have incapacitated Nigeria women in participating effectively and freely in national affairs particularly, at the political and economic levels so that women will contribute their quota to National development.

KeyWords: Women, Empowerment, Participation, National Development, Equality.

Introduction

Women are homemakers and centre of the family, they are also custodian of social, cultural and fundamental values of society and permanent change are often best achieved through them, in fact full community development is not possible without their outstanding cooperation and effective participation (Omoruyi, 2008). No doubt, the participation and contributions of women to the political and socio-economic development of any democratic state is immeasurable, women have not taken their rightful place in the political and national life of Nigeria. Though, Nigerian women have shown to be homemakers, custodians of family values, they have also exhibited and demonstrated competence in managing public affairs and leadership positions. Nigerian women have been faced with numerous constraints, militating against their

participation in development processes. The Nigerian government has evolved strategies and programmes to empower women politically, educationally and economically. Indeed, many states and local government areas in Nigeria have also benefited from these initiatives. Some of these programmes are organized by women themselves, government and non-governmental bodies at community levels to support other programmes at state, national and international levels. These initiatives include, formation of women organizations that engage in development-oriented activities to tackle social problems such as inequality in political, economic and education sectors, maternal and child health, child marriage, illiteracy and other related problems. Other approaches to these initiatives include economic empowerment which focuses on improving women's control over material resource. This could be achieved by organizing women for savings and increasing women's access to credits, income generation, skills training and other related activities. These empowerment initiatives also involve consciousness raising and accumulation of knowledge and ideas, for it is acknowledged that women empowerment requires awareness of complex factors causing women's subordination. This is achieved through education and other literacy related activities. Although some empowerment initiatives exist in the study area, the effectiveness of the initiatives has not been examined. This study will therefore examine the availability of women empowerment initiatives, evaluate their roles in promoting women's participation in development processes and also identify factors that constrain women's successful empowerment and participation in development processes in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA.

Statement of the Problem

Empowering women is an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty. There is no doubt that empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of their families, communities and the nation. In Africa, women are politically underrepresented, with little or no decision-making power accorded them. Nigeria stands as one of the countries in the continent lagging behind on this issue. Just like women in other patriarchal societies, the subordinate position which Nigerian women are subjected to, predisposes them to various acts of gender-based discrimination. Being a patriarchal society, male dominance is reflected in the marriage, political and religious institutions, and other public and private institutions existing in the country. Very few women in the country occupy leadership positions and participate equitably with their male counterparts in decision-making. Disparities still exist between men and women in education, employment and income opportunities, control over assets, personal security and participation in the development process (Rahman & Naoroze, 2007). The Nigerian society is bedeviled with various socio-cultural practices which portends danger to women empowerment. In some societies like the Igbo society of Nigeria, women are deprived of all land inheritance at the death of her husband especially where a male child is absent. Women are denied access to bank facilities and made to pay tax even when her male counterpart is given some waiver based on his dependence. Women are frowned at when they seek for legal redress against their husbands for battery and other domestic violence. Women are discriminated at the work place on the basis of her gender even when she is well and over qualified and more competent than her male counterpart. Women are prevented from free movement and association and sometimes fair hearing and expression. These prevent women from contributing meaningfully to the development of the family and society or even having control over their own resources and wealth. Under-representation of Nigerian women in educational, economic and political programmes could lead to a serious setback in development and, thus, the need for women empowerment. Many programmes have been put in place at local, state, national and international levels. These programmes and initiatives aim at widening women's access to education, encouraging women's full participation in cash economy and politics and reviewing laws on status of women. These initiatives are organized by both women themselves and governmental and non-governmental organizations and include the provision of micro-credit facilities, educational programmes, skill acquisition, political participation, and related activities. Though some of these empowerment initiatives exist, the effectiveness of these initiatives in promoting the participation of women in development processes in Ahiazu Mbaise has not been empirically examined and documented. This dearth of research has created the need for this study. This research will therefore assess the empowerment initiatives available to women in Ahiazu Mbaise and evaluate the role of these initiatives in promoting the participation of women in

development processes and identify the factors that limit empowerment and participation of women in development.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to assess women empowerment and participation in development processes in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA. The specific objectives are:

- 1) To ascertain empowerment initiatives available for women in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA?
- 2) To ascertain the ways in which women have been empowered politically in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA.
- 3) To assess the ways in which women have been empowered educationally.
- 4) To ascertain the ways in which women have been empowered economically.
- 5) To identify the factors that may militate against women empowerment and participation in development processes in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- 1) What are the empowerment initiatives available for women in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA?
- 2) In what ways have Ahiazu Mbaise women been empowered economically?
- 3) In what ways have Ahiazu Mbaise women been empowered politically?
- 4) In what ways have Ahiazu Mbaise women been empowered educationally?
- 5) What are the factors that may militate against women empowerment and participation in development processes in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA?

Literature Review

Concept of Development

The concept of development has been viewed from different angles; social, economic, political and cultural. Okemakinde (2014) viewed development to depict positive change and development in socio-economic and political conditions or situations of the society. Olomukoro (2012), views development in terms of human potentials and capabilities in the context of relations with other social groups. He further emphasized that development means greater understanding of social, economic and political process, enhanced competence to analyze and solve problems of day-to-day living, expansion of manual skills, greater control over economic resources, restoration of human dignity, self respect and equality.

Concept of Empowerment

Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2014) defined empowerment as giving somebody power or authority to do something; to give somebody more control over their own life or the situation they are in. Empowerment according to Okereke (2010) is a process of giving strength, push or enablement to do something to make it perform the desired or expected task. He further explained that empowerment in relation to human being is a mental, spiritual, intellectual moral and physical re-awakening. It is a way of strengthening the feeble or weak-minded person(s) and helping them rise up and be part of the political and economic revolution going on in the nations of the world. It is stirring up the spirit of a person to do the extraordinary or seemingly impossible thing. Okemakinde (2014) see women empowerment as a veritable mechanism to increase women skills and abilities, their control over the resources and decisions affecting their lives. Woman empowerment is therefore, regarded as the breaking of barriers that limit women from doing certain things men do in the society. It is setting women free from cultural and traditional bondages that militate against their productive powers and development.

Theoretical Framework

This study is be guided by the Stromquist (1995) and Batliwala (1994) models of empowerment. The core assumption of Stromquist model is that cognitive, psychological, political and economic components of empowerment are needed to advance the status of women and increase their participation in development processes. This empowerment model was chosen because it applies to areas or communities where denial of

right due to patriarchal ideology and values are inherent. Women's access to both material and non-material resources is limited. Women therefore need cognitive, psychological, political, and economic empowerment to advance their status and contribute meaningfully to the development of their community, and the society at large. Batliwala (1994) in her own perspective outlined three approaches to empowerment which include integrated development, economic empowerment, and consciousness raising. The integrated approach proceeds by forming women organizations and coalitions among women that engage in development activities and tackle social problems such as inequality, child marriage, violence against women, and other factors limiting women's potentials, using healthy programmes. The economic empowerment approach attributes women's subordination to lack of economic power. This approach focuses on improving women's control over material resources. This is done through organizing women for savings and exposure to credit facilities, income generating and skill training activities to give them some degree of independence. The third approach is consciousness raising which argues that women empowerment requires awareness of complex factors causing women's subordination. This is accomplished through education and other awareness programmes. This perspective is relevant in this study for if these approaches are fully adopted, women would be able to gain economic, political and educational empowerment that will enable them participate significantly in development processes.

Materials and Methods

Study Instrument

The research adopted a cross-sectional survey design. The survey research method according to Stark (2004) has two identifying features. First, it is based on a sample of the population. Second, the data are collected by personal interviews or by having each individual complete a questionnaire. Data for this study were collected using a structured questionnaire and in-depth interview schedule and were validated using face and content validity. The questionnaire sought information about the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents and their knowledge about available empowerment initiatives and constraints to their participation in development processes.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Ahiazu Mbaise local government area of Imo State, Nigeria. The population of Ahiazu Mbaise local government area is about 96,170 (NPC, 2006). It has a land area of about 87.179 square kilometres. There are (14) fourteen communities in Ahiazu Mbaise local government area. It is bounded in the north by Ehime Mbano local government, in the south by Aboh Mbaise local government, in the east by Obowo local government area and in the west by Mbaitoli local government area.

Data Analysis

This study adopted a multi-stage sampling procedure. In stage one Owerri senatorial zone was randomly selected. In the second stage, Ahiazu-Mbaise Local Government area was randomly selected. There are 14 communities in Ahiazu-Mbaise Local Government Area. Five communities (Agunaeze, Ekwereazu, Amuzi, Nnarambia and Ogbe) were randomly selected through a process of random sampling. In stage three, 50 respondents from each of the 5 communities were then selected, making up a total of 250 respondents. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. Descriptive statistical tools were used for data analysis. 240 copies of the questionnaire were duly completed and collected. An in-depth interview (IDI) which involved 15 women (3 from each sampled community) was also conducted to complement the survey instrument (questionnaire).

Discussion of Findings

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents show that majority of the women who participated in the study are married representing 44.5% (107) of the sample. Out of the 240 respondents, 68 (28.3%) are single, 55 (22.9%) are widows while 10 (4.6%) are divorced or separated. The analysis also revealed that 53.3% of the respondents fell within the age range of 20- 30 years old. This suggests that majority of the respondents are in their active years and can contribute meaningfully to national development if empowered.

The findings show that majority of the respondents (39.5%) have secondary school certificate. 40.5 % of the respondents are self-employed. The findings show that majority of the respondents (79.5%) are Christians with minority traditional African religious worshippers. None of the respondent is a Muslim.

Empowerment Initiatives Available For Women in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA

Respondents were asked to indicate the availability of several empowerment initiatives for women. The respondents were asked to tick as many as possible, the initiatives they have benefited from. The results of their responses show that the most available initiative in the LGA is the existence of women organizations with 203 respondents indicating their availability. Frequency of the respondents on the availability of other initiatives follows in this order: cooperative societies, right to use land and other cash crops, micro credit programme, provision of agricultural facilities, awareness programme, access to skill and capacity building centres and adult literacy programme. Majority of the respondents who were interviewed agreed that some of the empowerment initiatives were sponsored by government, non-governmental organizations and individuals.

Economic Empowerment of Women in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA

With regard to the level of economic empowerment of the respondents, 99 (41.2%) of the respondents indicated that they have access to land and cash crops, 40 (16.6%) indicated that they have been involved in cooperative societies, 34(14.1%) respondents indicated that they have been provided with agricultural production facilities. 32 (13.3%) indicated that they have access to micro credit facilities while 35(14.5%) indicated that they have benefited from skill acquisition training. The sustainability of socio-economic development of any society depends so much on the opportunities that are given to women to function with men without any inhibitions (Eke & Arop, 2018).

Educational Empowerment of Women in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA

The findings show that 96(40.0%) respondents have access to media and other awareness campaigns, 58 (24.1%) respondents stated that they have benefited from formal education, 51(21.2%) benefited from adult literacy programmes, while 35(14.5%) have benefited from lectures and workshops organized by extension workers. It must be recognized that education is an investment in the human capital, thus empowerment of women through education is like empowerment of the nation's human capital for meaningful national development and sustenance (Eke & Arop, 2018).

Political Empowerment of Women in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA

Majority of the respondents 99 (41.2%) indicated that they are members of women organizations, 58 (24.1%) stated that they are involved in decision-making processes in the community, 51(21.2%) stated that they have been empowered politically by voting and be voted for in elections, while 32(13.3%) indicated that they have benefited from political awareness campaigns.

Those interviewed also indicated that women participate actively in political development processes in the study area. One of the male IDI participants summarized women's involvement in political processes in the following words: Women in this community came out in multitude to exercise their rights by voting on all the election days during the last election. (IDI respondent, a politician in Nnarambia: 70 years). The finding is in conformity with Panday (2008) the purpose of gender equality, development and peace cannot be proficiently and successfully accomplished without the vigorous involvement of women and the integration of their views at all stages of decision-making organs in the political democratic processes of the states and governments. Similarly, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2008) argues that "without greater representation of women in parliamentary and executive positions as well as in the judiciary, it is difficult to achieve participatory, accountable, and transparent governance which can ensure political, cultural, social and economic priority goals of the wider society" (Okumo& Asfaw, 2014).

Factors that Limit the Empowerment and Participation of Women in Development Processes in Ahiazu Mbaise LGA

The findings show that among the major limiting factors indicated by the respondents, lack of time due to domestic and reproductive roles of women ranked the highest 44.5% (107). This was followed by the discriminatory attitude of men 68 (28.3%). 55 (22.9%) respondents indicated that poor economic base of women limits women empowerment and participation in development, while 10 (4.6%) respondents indicated that illiteracy is also a limiting factor. Those interviewed listed the following as limiting factors: patriarchy, lack of group coalition among women, inadequate credible women's groups, lack of sustained process of empowerment, rivalry among women, cultural/religious belief, and nonchalant attitude of women. This finding conforms to Nwokocha (2007) that the general perception of women's social role is care giver of the home while men are seen as head and chief bread winner of the household; this indirectly restrains women playing active role in politics and other empowerment initiatives. In providing the fulcrum for women's empowerment and gender equality (USAID Policy, 2012) highlighted three basic strategies which include: reduction in gender disparities, reduction of gender based violence and increased opportunity for women to participate in political governance.

Conclusion

Women are known to have been completely or partially excluded from socio-political and economic decisions even when their contributions have been overwhelmingly acknowledged by the society. Women can be described as an indispensable group in the development of any nation. Therefore, for meaningful sustainable national development the empowerment and participation of women in all strata of socio-economic and political decisions is imperative. Women empowerment transcends women development and gender equality; it brings about peace, unity and sustainable development in the society. It involves meeting the social needs of women translating to family progress to improved quality of life of members of the society. Thus, women empowerment can be seen as a vital strategy for any development effort. Although some empowerment initiatives have been established by government, non-governmental organizations and individuals, some factors have constituted constraints to women's involvement in these initiatives. Ignorance of the existence of these initiatives, cultural belief, lack of interest among women and restriction from husbands have denied women access to these initiatives. There is need for government, non-governmental organizations and individuals to work hand in hand in eliminating or reducing these constraints in order to create a conducive environment for women to actively participate in the development process. This will lead to sustainable development in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- ❖ There should be coalition among women organizations and groups. This will help them share experiences and be able to tackle problems facing women.
- ❖ Women groups could be used as an effective mechanism for information dissemination, social and mutual learning, institutionalized process for capacity building and empowerment.
- ❖ Educating the men folk through seminars, training and workshops on the need to empower women and allow them participate actively in development processes.
- ❖ All traditional and religious practices affecting women and girls should be abolished by the appropriate authorities.
- ❖ Government should make education at the basic and secondary level free and compulsory for the girl child.
- ❖ Political parties can also encourage women participation by making party nomination forms free for women seeking elective positions.
- ❖ Women organizations should open day care centres in their communities to give women ample opportunity to participate in the available empowerment programmes.
- ❖ Finally, women leaders and other highly educated women should make effort to sensitize and educate their fellow women. They should write about women achievers and their achievements in order to educate the public on the immense contributions of women to the socio-political and economic development of Nigeria.

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