CHALLENGES TO GENDER EQUITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Gender equity, the situation of fairness and equality of opportunity to all is crucial in any developmental process if the goals stated for sustainable development are to be achieved. For a nation(s) development to be sustainable the nation amongst other things must take into consideration the human resources which is the focal point of any meaningful developmental process. Her ability to give every individual irrespective of gender equal opportunity to participate is what counts. This paper identified some challenges facing the Nigerian women they include: culture and traditions, education, politics, poor self concept, poverty amongst other and concluded that a paradigm shift from gender centered to human resource(s) centered is crucial for gender equality to be achieved. The paper suggested the way forward.
INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that contemporary societies in the world are dominated by man’s power while women are relegated, dominated, suppressed and oppressed. Despite conferences, campaigns, new initiatives and commitments to gender equity, the sad reality is that the situation of women in Nigeria is not approving as expected. One of the issues of concern that has caught the attention of the press, the government, religious bodies and scholars is the issue of gender difference. As noted by Oke, Obanisolo & Adebisi, (2009), this problem is not peculiar to African countries alone but, it is all over the world and is a perennial problem which has come a long way. However, people have tried to put an end to the social issue, it seems that no remarkable impact has been made.

The campaign to raise the status of women to equal partnership with men for development process reached a crescendo shortly before the turn of the 21st century at the Beijing conference. Although, a lot of successes were recorded as found in the declarations, conventions, and initiative to enforce the right of women.

The sad reality according to Okoli (2011), is that there are complaints of female oppression, inequity suppression and domination, women are not given a voice and opportunity to make decisions on matters affecting their families, community and ultimately their countries. Lack of gender specific information and statistics makes it difficult to measure progress and identify polices and the consequent
glaring challenges (Okoli, 2011). It is in line with this that certain fundamental questions come to our mind. Is man equal to woman? Does God create woman to be inferior to man? If the answer is no, what then accounts for the inequity, disparity, discrimination, injustice victimization, unfairness and male chauvinism being experienced today in our society? In order to provide adequate answers to these questions and for the purpose of proper understanding of the subject matter, this paper therefore, seeks to identify the glaring challenges to gender equity and suggest the way forward.

The Concept of Gender

Gender is used to explain the socially prescribed roles for each of the sexes. Ezekiel-Hart & Ogbondah, (2009) viewed gender as a cultural construct that distinguishes the roles, behaviour, mental and emotional characteristics between males and females developed by a society. Umoh, (2004) stated that gender is a psychological term used to describe behaviour and attributes expected of individual on the basis of being either male or female. Gender is a broad analytic concept that highlights women’s role and responsibilities in relation to those of men. Ezekiel-Hart and Ogbondah, 2009). Gender refers to many socially and/or culturally constructed characteristics qualities, behaviours and roles which different societies ascribe to females and males (Okeke, 2002). Gender is a relational term that is used to complement the emphasis on women, it is indicative
of growing concern with the broader implication between man and woman’s economic roles.

Gender refers to specific central pattern attributed to both males and females in terms of behaviour and mannerisms (Okoro, 2011). Nnachi, (2008) opined that, gender is a set of assumption about the nature and character of biological differences between males and females, assumption that manifest in a number of ideas and practices that have a determinant influence on identity, social opportunities and life experience of the human.

Gender differences in Nigeria tend to be exaggerated to limit development and utilization of one’s potentials, women for instance, have become victims of gender stereotyping of roles and behaviour attributes, hence have become marginalized.

Women are generally associated with the kitchen and other domestic chores, Oke et al (2009) defined gender as the act of making a line demarcation between male and female or the act of segregation, discrimination, sub-ordination, victimization, oppression, suppression intolerance, partiality, unfairness, maltreatment and injustice (Oke et al, 2009). In the light of this, one important thing to note is that the act is performed by a gender (usually men) probably with reasons known to them against women.

Equity on other hand is related to impartiality. This requires that all equals be treated equally under the same circumstances. Hornby, (2006) defined equity as a
situation in which every one is treated equally. Osaat, (2011) defined equity as giving to each man his due. Equity according to Okoli (2011) is fairness and justice.

Equity involves applying principles of fairness and justice to correct or supplement a situation, it is about care and fairness. Thus recognizing difference and accommodates it in prevention of the continuation of inequitable status quo (Benwari & Igwesi, 2009).

Gender equity therefore has to do with applying principles of fairness and justice to correct the gender imbalance that has created gender inequality.

*Gender equity has to do with fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women and men. The concept recognizes that, the women and men have different needs and power. These differences should be identified and addressed in a manner that rectifies the imbalance between the sexes (Benwari & Igwesi 2009).*

According to Kanguru, (2008), gender equity is the condition of fairness and equality of opportunity which is not a basis for allocation of privileges or right to individual. Gender inequity has posed a lot of problems especially when the women are brought into focus.

Osaat, (2011), rightly revealed that as a result of negative gender stereotyping constructed with reference to their role-behaviour, Nigeria women have not effectively participated in the national development. In the view of Osaat, women make up a substantial proportion of the population of Nigeria, in most of the
communities, women constitute more than half of the total population. Women are characterized by widespread illiteracy especially in the rural areas where they are mostly petty traders and subsistence farmers. No doubt, the result is reflected on the social injustices that afflict Nigerian womanhood. Some of which include; early marriages, high bride price, domestic and rural drudgery, discriminatory, old age insanity, low social and economic status and marital instability. Gender differentiation has major effects and implication for spread of development, it affect human resources availability both qualitative and quantitatively (Umoh, 2004).

**Implication of Gender Inequity to Development**

Umoh, (2004). enumerated them as follow:

i. Overwhelming domination of a single sex in a particular job area as seen in Anto-mechanic that is dominated by male.

ii. Shortage of manpower in carpentry where it is believed to be reserved field for males.

iii. More number of unemployed women who have resorted to become housewives because of lack of job.

iv. Little concern for women education which limits the quality of human resources

v. Under-utilization of the potentials of both man and women in certain professional field.

vi. Uneven distribution of the entire labour force for development efforts to be successful.
Gender equity have been defined in a number of ways by different persons, the emphasis however, in spite of the variation is on fair sharing of resources and positions.

Gender equity has become a very sensitive issue in education in Nigeria and other developing countries (Rober-Okah, 2011). This is not surprising since the educational system has been shaped by gender considerations. Specifically, gender has influenced to a large extent and will continue to influence the educational system in Nigeria in the follow ways as enumerated by Robert-Okah, (2011).

- Gradual gendering of educational opportunities and specialties: Some disciplines are associated with a particular sex. As a result, any individual of the opposite sex found in any of such discipline, becomes an odd person. For instance, it is rare to find a male pursuing a career in catering or home economics. Specialties such as Mechanical/Automobile Engineering and other core science courses have been stereotyped as being ideal for males, while secretarial education is popularly perceived as a female territory.

- Influence of gender on the perception of educated individuals. The author observed that people perceived education differently as it affects males and females especially as found in marital issues. For a man, a lot of encouragement and motivations stand for him if he is educated. In the view of the author; the more educated a man is, the brighter chances of getting married to his ideal woman. On the other hand, his female counterpart is not that lucky. Education sometimes becomes an obstacle for advancement of opportunities. An educated woman may be associated with arrogance,
inability to succumb to the overbearing dominance of the man who is the “hand” of the family, and whose command is supposed to be the last order. A female university graduate, to some men attained her status in the academic through fair or foul means.

- Organizing the school environment in favour of one sex:

There is continuous gendering of opportunities in the educational system. Robert Okah, (2011), noted that many sensitive positions and ranks in the system are presently occupied by the male sex. It appears that if every important positions such as executive secretaries, permanent secretaries and leadership of higher education institutions are exclusive rights of men. There are many opportunities that have eluded women in the school system simply for reasons that are not unconnected with gender bias. However, appointment of women as cabinet ministers and vice chancellors are recent developments.

Okili, (2011) affirmed to this and stated that, in Africa, education is assumed to be the prerogative of the male because the girl-child will be given out in marriage, hence is meant to contribute to the training of the male. Okoli reiterated that at a glance, it is trivialized and treated as non-issue, women’s right in education, healthcare, legal status, political representation and fair play are given little or no attention. In the view of the author, the number of illiterate women all over the world is staggering. Particularly in Africa parents prefer sending their males to school with the belief that it is a waste to train female, since the girl-child will eventually get married. Gender discrimination in income and wealth makes women vulnerable to poverty.
Women Empowerment

Empowering women through suitable education is important, if they must contribute to national development. Empowerment involves getting the woman to understand, recognize and further the power within her for the improvement of her life and situation. Women empowerment according to Garuba, (2000) is a process which is both on-going and dynamic and which enhances their ability to effect changes in those structures, practices and cultural elements which tends to relegate them to subordinate status.

Women empowerment assists women to gain more access to resources, become more active in the social process, especially participating in decision-making in areas that affect their lives as members of the human community, gain more control over their own lives. Ezekiel-Hart and Ogbondah (2009); and Okeshida,(1995) in Robert-Okah (2011), perceived empowerment as a process through which women seek to have control of their lives in all spheres of human endeavour. It is the process of challenging dominant power structures in society to gain recognition and control.

Empowerment in essence, is aimed at equipping individual with skills that are basic to their survival in life. Empowerment may take varied dimensions to include such activities as individual self-assertion, collective bargaining or ability to challenge existing relation in the society (Dagama, 2003).
Challenges to Gender Equity

Culture and Traditions

Culture and traditions and environmental factor prevalent in Africa continue to favour men to the detriment and subjugation of women since the position of culture in Africa including Nigeria is supreme and unquestionable, it implies that the cultural role and functions assigned to girls and women remain unquestionable. Consequently, this variation in the role and functions assigned to both males and females naturally leads to and promotes gender inequality. According to Akporherhe, (2009), noticeable areas of gender inequality under cultural inhibition include obnoxious norms and traditions prevailing in some communities such as polygamy, son preferences, economic dependence, oppressive, patriarchal family structure, confinement, property rights, inter alia.

No doubt, Africans have a lot of attachment to their cultural heritage and traditions, this influences to a large extent the development of education in the continent. In many parts of Africa including Nigeria, the place of women and girls in the society is mainly traditional. In some culture as found in the Northern parts of Nigeria, women are not supposed to be seen or heard, they are better considered for household and domestic chores than sending them to school. This results to early/teenage marriage which consequently affects their status later in life.
Religion

Most religions and customary practices across Nigeria generally hold that the man is the head of the family and has greater control and decision-making powers. Religion teaches that woman is a ‘weaker vessel’ and secondary in marriage partnership, as such women is taught to be subservient to man. This line of thinking has subjected women to absorption of violence as part of what they should endure from their husband. (Akporhere, (2009) affirmed to this and stated that, religion has been a major vehicle of gender ideologies that oppression, deprives and subjugates women. Feminist are of the view that all major religious texts provide justification for the oppression of women and the assertions of male superiority. An aspect of giving more dominance to one sex over another as identified by the author is in Christendom, this is exemplified in the Holy Bible (King James Version) as contained in 1st Corinthians (14:34) which states:

*Let you woman keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak: but they are commanded to be under obedience... And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for a woman to speak in the church* (Akporherhe, 2009).

The Islamic tenants of the veiling of women (a form of seclusion and controlling of the potency of Muslim women in the society) provide another example of religious restriction on women. The Holy Quran (Sura, 23:31). Say to the believing women to turn their eyes away and to preserve their chastity: to cover their adornments except such as are normally displayed: to draw their veil over their bosoms and not to reveal their finery except to their husband .... And let
them not stamp their feet in walking so as not to reveal their hidden trinkets (Akporherhe, 2009).

**Education**

Low literacy level has been a major hindrance in the struggle for gender equity. Most women are not motivated and their general attitude to education is negative, as a result, reading and comprehending materials necessary for their welfare become difficult and impossible, sometimes (Obi & Ezeoba, 2011). In the view of the author, education is meant to quip them with necessary tools with which to explore and utilize their potentials. It is also an important tool for achieving social justice and equity. Unfortunately most women are exposed to danger of illiteracy.

**Politics**

Politics has to do with exercise of power as well as competition for access and control of power. It is a process of governance. Many counties including Nigeria that are members of United Nations (UN) have signed the treaty of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, yet in, Nigeria the percentage of women elected into various position from local government council to national level is not up to 30% required in the policy statement (Obi & Ezeoba, 2011). Women politicians are hardly given opportunity to contest for leadership positions within their parties or in the large societies. There is a large scale discrimination from the male counterparts both in voting for candidates and in allocating political offices. In the view of Obi & Ezeoba, (2011), the men think
that the only adequate responsibilities for women are the roles of ushers, praise singers and sometimes, women leaders at political events. Men usually constitute the majority in the political party setup; in most cases, women are relegated to the background.

According to the authors, only very few men, even among the educated allow their wives to participate in politics. In northern Nigeria, Purda system (house-seclusion of women) inhibit women participation in politics, family responsibilities, child bearing and child rearing also hinder women from participating effectively in partisan political activities (Obi & Ezeoba, 2011) consequently, important party programmes, strategies and practices are drawn without women. The women are not consulted in planning campaigns because they are seen as those that are incapable of making sound decision. On the other hand the men believe that women can hardly involve themselves in violence, recruitment of thugs and the like, all of which are strategies for achieving electoral victories. This attitude tends to side track women and inhibit their progress in politics. If these ideas are not discarded, women will not be recognized. Fear of marginalization also discourages many women, apart from the socio-cultural nature of the country which is not supportive of women participation in governance. (Obi & Ezeoba, 2011).
Poor Self-Concept

Women have a very poor self-concept about themselves. They are unduly influenced by the negative impressions the society has for them, hence, regarding themselves as incapable of coping with the demand of modern learning. They therefore become a very serious obstacle to their own development.

Poverty

Today due to poverty, many Nigerian children, especially girls have dropped out of school, thereby being under-empowered, while some have been forced into early marriage to enable their parents educate the male children. Others have been forced into prostitution, child labour or adopted by richer families who use them as house-helps, maltreat and abuse them (Kalu & Aminiphilips, 2009:164). The economic situation in the country has made it extremely difficult for most homes to meet the essentials of life, including sending the girl children to school. In Nigeria today, many people talk of alternative means of making ends meet, here, the girl-child becomes the object of sustenance to her family. She is made to hawk; and sometimes she is contracted out as a house-girl to other homes. As noted by Robert-Okan, in a period of economic depression, the girl-children are the first to be withdrawn from school, because it is judged to be more beneficial to train the boy – child than the girls.
Summary and Conclusion

For any nation to develop, she needs the services of her human resources irrespective of the gender.

Any nation that, oppresses, suppresses, marginalizes and discriminates against her females is like a person standing on one foot. There are glaring evidences that females in Nigeria have not been fully incorporated in the developmental policies and implementation, cultures and traditions, religion, education, politics, poor self-concept, poverty among others were identified as the challenges facing the Nigerian women.

It is also a fact that religion especially the Christian religion does not favour discrimination and favouratism in any form. God is a being of justice and his blessings are for all his children irrespective of their gender. It is therefore, the opinion of this paper that, gender equality should be given the urgent attention it deserves. Each individual irrespective of gender should be given the opportunity to realize his/her potentials.

Recommendations

1. The poor self-concept among women should be managed through concerted effort of various women professional associations, such as the National Association of Female Lawyers.

2. Equal access to education irrespective of sex.

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3. Involvement of women is governance and decision-making

4. Overhauling of cultural norms and traditions that encourage gender discriminations.

5. Eradication of poverty among women through soft loan and equipping them with skills that are basic to their survival in life.

REFERENCES


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