

# EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN: A CRITICAL FOUNDATION FOR ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper examined empowerment of rural women as the foundation for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria. The paper highlighted the eight Millennium Development Goals with their targets and indicators, the rate of illiteracy among women and stresses the need to empower the rural women through adult literacy education based on the fact that women empowerment is the central nerve for the achievement of all the MDGs. It was observed that many development strategies often focus on women in the urban centres, thereby neglecting the rural women who are more in number and vulnerable. The paper concludes that not until when the rural women are adequately empowered, achievement of the MDGs in Nigeria will be a mirage. Some suggestions were made so as to empower rural women for effective participation and delivery in all aspects of the MDGs.*

*KEY WORDS: Empowerment; rural women; Millennium Development Goals and illiteracy.*

## **Introduction**

Development issues at local, national, international and individual levels have occupied the minds and attention of scholars, activists, politicians, development practitioners and cynics over the years but reaching a crescendo in the year 2000. Although there are different perspectives to development, there is however a general agreement that development will lead to positive change manifested in an increased capacity of people to have adequate control over material assets, intellectual resource and obtain it. While some other people contended that the purpose of development is to improve people's lives by increasing their choices, freedom and dignity.

The quest for the development of people's lives became serious as the participants at the World Conference on Education for All (WEFA) in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 stated clearly in its Article 1 that every person, "child, youth, and adult shall be able to benefit from education opportunities designed to meet the basic needs of human life". This declaration was subsequently reaffirmed at the World Summit for Children in 1990 and 2000 with emphasis on raising the levels of female illiteracy.

In the same vein, the MDGS adopted in September, 2000 at the United Nations Millennium declaration devoted one of the eight goals to the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment (that is Goal 3). Nigeria, over the years, have expressed a policy statement of its commitment to education believing that overcoming illiteracy and ignorance will form a basis for accelerated national development.

To buttress its averred commitment to national development, the Nigeria National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004), states that "education in Nigeria is an instrument per excellence for national development". Education has witnessed tremendous active participation by non-governmental organizations (NGOS), international communities, individuals as well as government. However, despite these commitments and active participation, the rural areas in Nigeria are still backward in literacy capacity and are soaked with myriads of problems looking for a way of solving them. Majority, if not all the rural women are illiterate and have to be empowered so as to face and solve their own developmental problems.

The concentration on the rural women becomes important due to the fact that global peace and prosperity can only be achieved only when the entire world's people are empowered so as to order their own lives and provides for themselves and their families. The main thrust of this paper is to look into how rural women can be empowered for their active and effective participation in all the MDGs. Every single goal of the MDGs is directly related to women's rights and societies where women are not accorded equal rights as men cannot achieve development in a sustainable manner.

### **The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).**

The Millennium Development Goals could be designed as a human rights approach to development issues with emphasis on equality and non-discrimination. Biao (2005) asserts that the maintenance of a life-sustaining environment forms the main fulcrum around which this human development agenda (MDGs) revolves. Each goal has a definite target and indicators which are explicitly spelt out as a basis of evaluating the achievements of each of the Millennium Development Goals. The MDGs aims are designed to encourage development by improving the social and economic conditions in the world's poorest countries. The MDGs were developed out of the eight chapters of the United Nations Millennium Declaration signed in September 2000. There are eight goals with twenty one targets and a series of measurable indicators for each target to be achieved in the year 2015.

Fasokun (2006) and Biao (2005) clearly listed the Millennium Development Goals with their targets and indicators as follows:

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Target 1: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day.

Indicator 1: Proportion of population below \$ (one dollar) per day

- Indicator 2: Poverty gap ratio (income depth of poverty)  
 Indicator 3: Share of poorest quintile in national consumption  
 Target 2: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer hunger
- Indicator 4: Prevalence of underweight children under five years of age  
 Indicator 5: Proportion to population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption
- Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education  
 Target 3: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling
- Indicator 6: Net enrolment ratio in primary education  
 Indicator 7: Proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach grade 5  
 Indicator 8: Literacy rate of 15-24 years old.
- Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women  
 Target: 4 Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education not later than 2015
- Indicator 9: Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education
- Indicator 10: Ratio of literate females to males 15-24 years old.  
 Indicator 11: Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector
- Indicator 12: Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament
- Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
- Target 5: Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under five mortality rate
- Indicator 13: Under-five mortality rate  
 Indicator 14: Infant mortality rate  
 Indicator 15: Proportion of 1-year old children immunized against measles
- Goal 5: Improve maternal health  
 Target: 6 Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio
- Indicator 16: Maternal mortality ratio  
 Indicator 17: proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel.
- Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases  
 Target 7: Have halted by 2015 and began to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDs.
- Indicator 18: HIV prevalence among 15-24 years old pregnant women  
 Indicator 19: Condom use rate of the contraceptive prevalence rate  
 Indicator 20: Number of children orphaned by HIV/AIDs

- Target 8: Have halted by 2015 and began to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.
- Indicator 21: Prevalence and death rates associated with malaria
- Indicator 22: Proportion of population in malaria risk areas using effective malaria prevention and treatment measures
- Indicator 23: Prevalence and death rates associated with tuberculosis
- Indicator 24: Proportion of tuberculosis cases detected and cured under DOTS (Directly observed Treatment short course)
- Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
- Target 9: Integrate the principle of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources
- Indicator 25: Proportion of land area covered by forest
- Indicator 26: Ratio of area protected to maintain biological diversity to surface area
- Indicator 27: Energy use (metric ton oil equivalent) per \$ 1 GDP
- Indicator 28: Carbon dioxide emissions (per capital) and consumption of ozone-depleting CFCS (ODP tons)
- Indicator 29: Proportion of population using solid fuels.
- Target 10: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to drinking water.
- Indicator 30: Proportion of population with sustainable access to improved water source urban and rural.
- Target 11: By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.
- Indicator 31: Proportion of urban population with access to improved Sanitation
- Indicator 32: proportion of households with access to secure tenure (owned or rented)
- Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development
- Target 12: Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable non-discriminatory trading and financial system (includes a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction-both nationally and internationally)
- Target 13: Address the special needs of the least developed countries (LDC). (includes: tariff and quota free access for LDC exports, enhanced programme of debt relief for HIPC and cancellation of official bilateral debt, and more generous ODA (Overseas Development Assistance) for countries committed to poverty reduction.
- Indicator 34: Proportion of total bilateral sector allocable ODA of OECD/DAC donors to basic social services (basic education, primary health care, nutrition, safe water and sanitation)
- Indicator 35: Proportion of bilateral ODA of OECD/DAC donors that is untied.

- Target 14: Address the special needs of landlocked countries and small Island developing states (through the programme of action for the sustainable development of small Island Developing states and the outcome of the 22<sup>nd</sup> special session of the General Assembly).
- Indicator 36: ODA received in landlocked countries as proportion of their GNIS.
- Indicator 37: ODA received in small Island developing states as proportion of their GNIS.
- Target 15: Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term.
- Indicator 38: Proportion of total developed country imports (by value excluding arms) from developing countries and from LDCs, admitted free of duties.
- Indicator 39: Average tariffs imposed by developed countries on agricultural products and textiles and clothing from developing countries.
- Indicator 40: Agricultural support estimates for DECN countries as percentage of their GDP.
- Indicator 41: Proportion of ODA provided to help build trade capacity
- Indicator 42: Total number of countries that have reached their HIPC decision points and number that have reached their HIPC completion points (cumulative).
- Indicator 43: Debt relief committed under HIPC initiative, US\$
- Indicator 44: Debt service as a percentage of exports of goods and services.
- Target 16: In co-operation with developing countries, develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth.
- Indicator 45: Unemployment rate of 15 to 24 year-olds each sex and total
- Target 17: In co-operation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable, essential drugs in developing countries, provide access to affordable essential drugs on a sustainable basis
- Target 18: In co-operation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications.
- Indicator 47: Telephone lines and cellular subscribers per 100 population
- Indicator 48: Personal computers in use per 100 population and internet users per 100 populations.

As earlier said, every single goal of the Millennium Development Goals is directly related to women, thus the need for their empowerment so as to achieve these goals for the benefits of the society.

## **Empowering the Rural Women for the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals**

Looking through the MDGs, it is clear that majority, if not all the MDGs are directly having an effect on women development. The 2006 population census in Nigeria revealed that women constitute about 49% of the country's population and the majority of them reside in the rural communities. This means that women constitute a significant proportion of the nation's population whose participation in the process of development cannot be ignored if the desired result must be achieved. The educational situation of these women is not only low but pathetic and puts them at a disadvantage. Yet, education is the basis for full promotion and improvement of the status of women. It is the basic tool that should be given to women in order to fulfil their roles in achieving the noble objectives of MDGS in Nigeria. Education for empowering women does not imply just formal education for children and adolescents at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels; it implies also education on part-time basis given to adults of all educational backgrounds who are already working and participating in the development efforts.

Education is the basis for the full promotion and improvement of the status of women. It is the basic tool that should be given to women in order to fulfill their roles as full members of the society. The education of women is particularly valuable as a strategic investment in human resource, as the social returns are high. The education of women according to Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) (2005) has a tremendous impact not only on their development, but also on that of their families and communities. It acts as catalyst in virtually every dimension of development and poverty alleviation; with outcomes such as reduced fertility, reduced infant mortality, improved child survival, better family health, increased educational attainment, higher productivity, and generally improvement in the nation's economic situation. Studies have shown that education influences decisively a woman's overall health, and access to paid employment, and therefore enables her to make informed decision about herself and to assume a status and identity beyond those that are linked with child rearing and family. ESCAP further emphasized that literacy is not merely about basic skills of reading and writing; it is about providing individuals with the capabilities for understanding their lives and social environment as well as equipping them with problem-solving skills. Literacy therefore, is a foundation of human resource development and is critical to enhancing the general quality of the people's life.

As important as education is to women and national development, available statistics show that women lag behind men in all areas of education. For instance, UNESCO (2006) observed that in spite of the many declarations aiming at making gender parity and education a reality, gender disparities persist throughout the education system. It is observed from data on enrolment, retention and transmission that in many countries, girls and women lag behind boys in early childhood education, primary, secondary, and higher education and in non-formal and literacy education programmes as well.

In Nigeria, Oyebamiji (2006) observed that women make up more than 50% of the Nigerian population. By virtue of their physiology, women are the givers and nurturers of life. The social responsibilities that come with this biological function make women a peculiar force in the overall national growth and development; hence, their condition in the society would definitely affect the overall development of the country and achievement of the MDGs.



However, a very small fraction of the women are educated. Sixty seven percent (67%) of Nigeria women are illiterate. Based on the peculiar nature and position of women in the society, i.e. as mothers, wives, sisters and teachers in the home, mass education for women is critically needed to prepare them fully for their inevitable socialization roles. Such education is indeed fundamental to their preparation for contribution to national development. Literacy rate among adults between the year 2000 – 2004 stand at an average of 51.8% females and 68.2% for males.

These disparities in literacy rate between males and females had been attributed to many related factors. Such factors as UNESCO (2006) observed, could be economic, social, cultural or political. In the worst situation, they all act together to erect a wall that not only deprive females of education but the whole society of a better future.

### **Roles of adult literacy education in the empowerment of women for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.**

A critical perusal of the Millennium Development Goals shows that most of its goals are focused on the adult population especially women who must necessarily be relied upon for the actualization of the MDGs given the time-frame of 2015. For instance;

#### **Goal 1 focused on the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger**

The adult population of the society is the target for this goal. The adult women are expected to assist their husbands in harnessing available resources to conquer poverty and subsequently eradicate hunger. Therefore, through adult literacy education programmes such as education for living, education for skills up-grading, extension agricultural activities, and career programmes, adult women could be equipped with requisite knowledge and skills for the actualization of this goal.

#### **Goal 2 is on achieving Universal Primary Education**

To be achieve this goal which has to do with the education of children, parents and/or guardians especially mothers of these children must be sufficiently concretized and mobilized to financially and materially support these programmes. Thus, the need for literacy in family life education becomes relevant for them to participate effectively so as to achieve the goals of any education programme (Oyebamiji and Adekola 2008).

#### **Goal 3 seeks to promote gender equality and empower women**

The adult population is definitely the main target of this goal since unlike children adults can draw a functional distinction between the sexes (Biao, 2008). Through the medium of non-formal education programmes such as education for living, adults would be helped to be committed to providing resources and ample opportunities to ensure gender equality and empowerment of women. This strategy is important since according to Chambers (1998) women are caught in a deprivation trap consisting of five independent dimensions: lack of basics that support life, physical weakness, isolation, vulnerability, and powerlessness. Akin to these dimensions are unequal distribution of knowledge and unequal access to development assistance, power, status and wealth within individuals, gender groups, communities and religions. Adult literacy especially fundamental literacy has the potentials to democratize education and development (Anyanwu, 2002; Nwabuko, 2006; Labonte, 1998; Bopp, quoted in Adewale 1998).

#### **Goal 4 aims at reducing child mortality**

Adults who are adequately equipped with relevant information and skills can help reduce child mortality. Adult literacy education programmes such as child care education, nutritional education, and reproductive health education are relevant to enable women facilitate the actualization of this goal.

#### **Goal 5 advocates the improvement of maternal health**

Educating adult women through relevant literacy programmes like health education, family planning and reproductive health education can help women play requisite roles in the improvement of maternal health.

#### **Goal 6 is to combat HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases**

Awareness creation through adult literacy education on diseases has been found to be efficacious by most development agents. One of the most fundamental causes of HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases has been traced to lack of information by parents (Oyebamiji, 2000; United Nations, 2001; & Nwabuko, 2006) Educating parents especially women on issues which bother on diseases through adult literacy education programmes such as education for living and community health can help expedite the process of combating dreadful and deadly diseases like HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases. Knowledge of preventive rather than curation through adult literacy will go a long way in combating all these deadly diseases.

#### **Goal 7 aims at ensuring environmental sustainability**

Adults live, interact with and exploit the resources of the environment. Adults dictate how environmental resources are harnessed. There is urgent need to sensitize adults most especially women adults to the imperatives of sustainable utilization of our already endangered and over degraded environment. Education programmes such as environmental adult education could be relied on to educate adults whose roles are crucial for reversing the grave losses incurred as a result of our reckless use of the resources of nature.

#### **Goal 8 seeks to ensure development of global partnership**

This goal could be actualized by equipping adults with relevant information and tools since choice of development partners and tools for such development is the responsibility of adults. Adult literacy education on the issues of globalization and development partnership can help facilitate the actualization of this goal.

It is evident that adults who form the main target for the actualization of the Millennium Development Goals must be adequately equipped if they (adults) must serve as conduits for achieving these laudable millennium development goals within its set time frame of 2015. Streamlining of adult literacy education will help facilitate the speedy attainment of the Millennium Development Goals with adequate commitment from the three tiers of government and the NGOs.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Women have major roles to play in the achievement of the MDGs. For these roles to be properly played, the place of empowerment of this group of adults cannot be underplayed. Women need to be properly conscientized to perform their immediate role for a functional society to be established. Adult literacy programmes becomes germane to the process of empowering women to be able to play their roles and participate effectively in achieving the MDGs in the targeted year. It is therefore necessary for all the tiers of government to make



provision for all aspects of literacy that will facilitate this process. Based on the above, it is recommended that:

- (a) More adult education centres need to be established for women to be adequately conscientized for improved participation in MDGs.
- (b) Effective mobilization of the rural adult women cannot be understated if their participation will be guaranteed. Thus, all tiers of government, philanthropists, and non-government organizations hands must be on deck for this purpose.
- (c) The use of appropriate development approach that will guarantee success of women participation cannot be underplayed. Thus, integrated approach will be recommended so that all efforts will be properly coordinated.
- (d) The three tiers of government must as a matter of urgency provide all the needed facilities, finance and support for the empowerment of women in the rural area. This will be needed to avoid unnecessary rhetoric.

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