

# Enhancing Women Participation in National Development through a Change in the Gender System of Nigeria

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## Abstract

In recent times, there has been an increase in the level of participation of women in national development. This is because individuals, governments and the society have come to the realization of the role women (especially educated ones) can play in the sustainability of the developmental efforts being made in the society. This paper however posits that the gender system in the society which includes the patriarchal nature of the society and inheritance rights are still inhibiting factors to women's full participation in national development. It was recommended among other things that laws on women's inheritance right should not only be promulgated. They should be enforced adequately. Other forms of gender stereotypes manifesting in the school should also be discouraged.

**Keywords:** Women, Participation, National development change, Gender system

## 1. Introduction

Education is one of the main mechanisms for promoting social change, and adjusting the roles of individuals to meet the demands of social and economic change. Any nation that strives for a sustainable democracy and development therefore makes effort to provide an equitable education to all her citizens. However, the argument about gender inequities especially in education has perhaps been the most fierce (Olurode & Soyombo, 2001), especially in recent times. This is because the female had been the most shortchanged.

Education does not only give meaning to life, it is life itself. Denying girls and women in the society education is therefore synonymous to denying them the right to existence. Similarly, it is important to note that understanding women's roles, status and their aspirations is a key element in the matrix of social revival, in all fields of current national development strategies, in both rural and urban areas of any society (Abodomore, 1989). To this effect, it is important to give the education of women its rightful place in the society. This will ensure that sustainable development which is a product of social revival will occur in our societies.

The importance of women education cannot be over emphasized. This is why the government of different countries makes conscious effort to raise the level of literacy among their female citizens. The Federal Government of Nigeria understood the importance of education both to the development of the society. Hence it was stated in the National policy on Education section 1, subsections 4b & c that:

*Education fosters the worth and development of the individual, for each individual's sake, and for the general development of the society. Every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities each according to his or her ability (p.6 & 7).*

The Federal Government of Nigeria has therefore made several efforts to encourage the education of women in order to give them the opportunity to contribute to nation building. Among these efforts made by the Nigeria

government to encourage women education was the establishment of twenty all female colleges in 1984. This was done to bridge the gap between boys and girls (Fabinu, 2003).

The international community has also contributed immensely to the campaign for women education and emancipation. One of these contributions was the Beijing declaration and platform of action held in 1995. The summary of the recommendations of the conference is:

- Increase in women's participation and access to expression and decision making through the media and new technologies of communication.
- That government should aim at gender balance through the appointment of men and women to all advisory, management regulatory and management bodies.
- The promotion in media balance and non-stereotyped portrayal of women.
- That media organization, the NGO's and the private sector should promote activities and materials that show shared family responsibilities.
- Development within mass media and advertising organizations, professional guidelines and other forms of self-regulation to promote the presentation of non-stereotyped images of women.

This shows that the education of women and the need to eradicate or at least minimize all hindrances to their full participation in nation building is of global importance. The World Bank has also made girls' education their priority and in particular eliminating "gender disparity in primary and secondary education". They therefore recognized that education girls is an instrument par excellence for achieving national and international development goals ( World Bank, 2006:1).

Developing countries such as Nigeria need not only understand and emphasize the importance of gender equity in national development, they also need to ensure that the society is recognized at all levels to ensure that the females are given the opportunity to harness their in-built potentials and therefore be able to contribute immensely to national development.

A review of the gender system of Nigeria is therefore necessary because it will reveal some of the areas in which the system hinders women full participation in national development. The effort being made to educate women and also give them full opportunity to contribute to national development may not yield much result if the traditional notions about women and the hardy gender system in Nigeria which relegates women to the position of second class citizens is still allowed to thrive. A change is therefore necessary in the gender system of Nigeria.

## **2. Women Participation in National Development**

Education of women gives them the opportunity to participate and contribute to national development. This is because girls' education increases economic growth (Abu and Klassen, 2004).

Benwari & Igwesi (2009) also outlined some areas where female education can contribute to national development as:

1. Increased participation in the labour force and earning power.
2. Creating intergenerational education benefits
3. Reducing women's fertility rate
4. Lowering maternal mortality rates
5. Protecting against HIV/AIDS infection
6. Lowering infant and child mortality rates

Most educated women earn more income than the uneducated ones. This increases the level of their contributions to the maintenance and development of themselves, their family members and the society at large. A study by Plewis, Mooney & Creeser (1990) also revealed that mothers' education has significant positive relationship with children's educational attainment and opportunities.

Over population is a social problem that slows down development. The education of women contributes to national development because educate women give birth to fewer healthier children than the uneducated ones. This is because their marriage is likely to be delayed because of formal education. Lowering of maternal mortality rates, protection against HIV/AIDS infection and lowering of infant and child mortality rates are all linked to women education because educated women not only know the importance of pre and post-natal care, seeking medical care for their children and accessing information about HIV/AIDS infection, they also utilize

this knowledge because they understand how to translate it into practice. This ensures that they and their family members enjoy good health.

Subsequent to the understanding of the role of educated women in national development, the Federal Government of Nigeria made conscious effort to ensure that women are given opportunities to participate in decision making in the country. This was done by appointing women into important positions in the society.

Many educated women have therefore contributed immensely to the development of their society. Some have become politicians, leaders of different organizations, professionals and bread winners. In Nigeria, we have many of such women as Professor Alele Williams, a former Vice Chancellor of University of Benin and former Minister of foreign affairs Dr. (Mrs.) Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, who contributed immensely to the economic development of Nigeria. A former Director of NAFDAC and minister of information and communication, Professor (Mrs.) Dora Akunyili also made marks in the history of development in Nigeria especially in the fight against fake drugs and the rebranding of Nigeria's image. This is just to mention a few of Nigerian women who have contributed immensely to the development of Nigeria. Other serving women ministers include the Minister of petroleum resources, Mrs. Deziani Alison-Madueke and the Minister of Education, Professor (Mrs.) Ruqayyatu Rufai. Some of the women are in the House of Representatives while some are in the National Assembly contributing useful ideas that will ensure the smooth running of national affairs.

In other African countries too, educated women are making impact in the national development of their countries. For instance, Dr. (Mrs.) Erlen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia has become the first African Women President.

As an economist, she is out to raise from the dust the economy of Liberia. Mrs. Alice Zomukunda also served as the Vice President of Burundi. The Prospects for women education in Nigeria today are very high. Although, observation shows that there are still differences in the Western type education of women along religious, social, ethnic and geographical lines, it could be argued that education of the females and their

participation in nation building has improved tremendously. There is no gain saying that the education of women, if effectively carried out, will lead to the social, political, mental and moral emancipation of the society.

### **3. The Gender System of Nigeria**

The term gender, as stated by Enemu, (1996) is not the same thing as sex because while sex refers to physical difference between males and females, gender concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between a man and a woman. He expatiated further that while the differences between male and female sexes are natural, universal and largely constant, gender differences are created and sustained by society through its traditions, customs, conventions, mores and regulations.

The gender system is therefore how the society is organized with respect to the creation of differences between males and females through its customs, traditions, and even the legal institutions which are all components of the culture of the society.

People's decision for living is described as their culture. Culture determines the values of objects found within the society. It also determines the entire life style of the people including the gender role expectations, initiate and sustain the actions of human beings (whether covert or overt, implicit or explicit) in a society (Ezike, 2006)

Gender role expectations approved by the society for its members has therefore resulted in gender stereotype where females are portrayed to be doing house work and caring for babies while the males are presented to be professionals in different of fields of endeavour. Though the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria gives equal right to all citizens, yet women are practically made to play the second fiddle in most spheres of life in the society.

Many feminist theories had been used to explain gender inequity and the position of women in the society. The radical feminists see the society as patriarchal, that is dominated by men. They gave this as the reason why there is gender inequity in most African societies.

The Marxist and Socialist feminism also linked the exploitation of women in the society to not just men but to capitalists in the society. The Black Feminism focused on the problem of black women which should be studied separately and not explained using the experiences of white women. The post modernism theory denies that there is any single, unitary essence to the concept "woman". They believe that there are different groups of women for example, black, lesbian, white and disabled women who experience different types and levels of exploitations, violence and disregard in the society. While radical feminism gives revolutionary change as the solution to male domination, liberal feminism aims for a gradual change in the political, economic and social systems in the society as a solution to male domination.

Feminists therefore see the society as divided into different social groups and the major division being between men and women. They see the exploitation of women by men as the most important source of exploitation (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008). Feminists also maintain that contemporary societies are patriarchal, therefore they have most of the power in families. This is the feature of most African societies including Nigeria.

The gender system in the society encourages both structural and legal or legislative discrimination against women. Structural discrimination is based on cultural and traditional practices which dictate gender roles that marginalize or exclude women while legal discrimination is the lack of appropriate legislation or failure to enforce it. (Candide-Johnson, 2005).

The patriarchal nature of the African society in general had in so many ways affected the status of women and their participation in national development.

In addition to this, the original sin committed in the Garden of Eden and the punishment given to Eve has been widely used mythologically to justify the position of women in society. This has described women as producers of children, mothers and wives, those to do the cooking, cleaning and washing, caretakers of their husbands, subordinate to male authority and those to be excluded from positions of power and high status occupations.

Adoniyi (2002) cited in Abdullahi (2003) stated that thirteenth century Franciscan Monks had called women the head of sin, a weapon of the devil, mother of guilt and corruption of the ancient. The female gender (both educated and uneducated ones) had been perceived in different negative ways by men. Okeowo (2002) noted that both educated men and prosperous men in large towns and cities only seek sexual relations with educated women because they only admire their wits and charms but regard them as good time girls who will not make good wives. These misconceptions stem up from the gender system of the society.

It is also generally believed that men should dominate women in family discussions and decision making. One crucial area where male dominance manifests is in their being aggressive and misogynist. Tradition sees it as an abomination for a woman to beat or even insult her husband or any other man but the man can be excused for being aggressive to his wife or any other woman. He is allowed because he is considered to be of "more intelligence", "has better brain" than the wife who has little sense as that of a child and sometimes need to be shouted at or beaten to make her "sensible".

China & Macaulay (2009) stated that violence against women is accepted as the norm in many parts of the world. It is seen as a private business, normal occurrence in the relationship between a man and a woman, where the state, community or family should not interfere. There is a global picture of violence against women and this includes genital mutilation, violence associated with prostitution and pornography, dowry-related murder, and corporate crimes affecting women in their roles as child bearers and house workers.

The society need to be reorganized in the area of decision making. Decision making about the type of job a woman should take up, the dowry to be paid on a woman's daughter, the type of car to be bought or house to live in is mostly dominated by men and the woman is seldom given any opportunity to make contributions. A change is needed in this area for the educated woman to contribute effectively to the development of her family in particular and the society at large.

Female children has always been socialized into domestic roles such as sweeping the house, washing plates and clothes and cooking while the male children are allowed to cut grasses and wash parents' cars. The result is that the male child may grow up not being able to cook well, wash his clothes and take care of his siblings.

With the education of woman and their becoming busy in their official assignments, the men (their husbands or brothers) may not be able to assist them in any domestic chores. Some of the married men also keep their wives from going into postgraduate studies until they are done with child rearing. This gender system does not encourage the full participation of women in national development.

The contribution of educated women in recent times have shown that if girls and woman are given the opportunity to get educated to their highest level of ability, their reasoning ability is improved and they can contribute to national development more meaningfully.

Oakley (2002) believed that the gender system can turn men into "alienated beasts and women into scared outsiders". She maintained that unless the system is changed, humans will miss the opportunity to make the next few billion years inhabitation of planet earth a better time for the planet and for both men and women.

Similarly, men generally have been socialized from childhood to regard women as weak and inferior in almost all areas of human endeavour except child rearing. Remarks such as "how could you, a girl talk to me a boy"? "Don't you know that you don't have to fight your brother because you are a girl"?, are still common in many

families and in many parts of our society. These remarks are made without the slightest considerations of the age differences between the children. Among the adults too, it is common to hear drivers make comments about a female driver “No wonder she is a woman”, “I know it’s woman that would drive this way”, (as if women would naturally not know how to drive a car).

Patriarchy works against justice and equity. Adebayo (2007:1) defined patriarchy as:

*“Rule by the father or a male authority. ...it refers to the political power and authority of males in a society as well as the power of fathers within families. A society is considered patriarchal when men establish or inherit a social order where they dominate positions of power and authority or when important achievements and historical events are attributed to the actions of men”.*

In the Igbo society for instance whatever a woman has traditionally belongs to the husband. Even if she has money to build a house or buy a car, she is expected to give the money to her husband to execute the project in his own name. He takes the honor while the one who labored to make the money (the wife) is kept underground. The social class of a woman is most times determined by her husbands’ occupation since the family is the unit of stratification. In Nigeria for instance, a woman’s position is tied to her marital status. An unmarried lady is therefore not given equal respect as one that is married.

Reporting Parkin (1972), Haralambos & Holborn (2008) stated that the social and economic rewards of women are largely determined by their marital and family relationships and in particular, by the status of the male breadwinner. Apart from different forms of structural discrimination outlined so far, the gender system also encourages legislative gender discrimination. For instance women’s equal access to land and other inheritance rights has not been ensured in all parts of Nigerian society. Inheritance laws and women’s property rights in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular are therefore a show piece for gender discrimination (Candide-Johnson 2005). In many parts of the sub-saharan Africa, women obtain land right through their husbands losing these rights when they are divorced, or widowed (Kalu & Amini-Philips, 2009). An exception to this may be where a statutory marriage which most African men ignore is contracted.

Candide-Johnson (2005) explained that the exogamous system of marriage removes daughters from their parents into the husband’s families, and the result is that daughters are not regarded as permanent members of their father’s family and are for that reason denied rights of succession. In the case of an unmarried daughter, the possibility of a future marriage subjects her to the same treatment. In her husband’s family, the possibility of a divorce and the fact that she is not a blood descendant deprives her of rights in that family too.

He described the situation as a vicious cycle and noted that attempts at including provisions that completely and unequivocally abhor the imposition of any form of traditional or cultural practices on women have not been very successful. For instance, he noted that an attempt was made to include the following provisions in the 1999 constitution of Nigeria to no avail.

“No person shall be subjected to any laws, cultures, customs, traditions, and general practices which undermines his or her dignity, welfare and interests.

Custom itself has therefore come under critical re-examination and if not found wanting in its past exercise, has been found to fail the human rights and needs of women in a modern world.

The writer quite agrees with Candide –Johnson (2005) because in most African countries, which are patriarchal, men decide the traditions and customs of the society. These are therefore always to their advantage and to the disadvantage of women. The literature reviewed all agreed to the importance of women education. They all pointed out several efforts or attempts that have been made both globally and locally to improve the lots of women. This study tends to contribute to this knowledge by reviewing some of the areas in the gender system of Nigeria (originating from the customs and traditions) which hampers women’s participation in National development.

#### 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Women education is being encouraged today because people believe that a total transformation of the society could be achieved through it (Molagun, Taiwo & Ajere, 2000). Educated mothers could make useful contributions to the development of the society. Obi (2001) opined that one of the ways they do this is through their ability to keep neat homes and environments, produce smart and healthy children and also cook neatly. She further expatiated on this by saying that educated women can contribute to the developmental effort of their country, improve their families' health, diet, productive ability, socio-cultural status and also be able to discharge responsibilities as mothers, wives and members of the society effectively.

The education of women is important because it will enable them to adapt themselves to society, development pride in human achievements and be good citizens. It will also broaden their minds, development self discipline, and prepare them to cope with domestic work and family life. This paper has shown that many educated women have contributed immensely to the development of the society. Some have become politicians, leaders of different organizations and professionals.

Improvement in the attitude of the society to women education has therefore become evident. However in a highly patriarchal society where the gender system favours male dominance, much still need to be done to involve the men in the fight against equity in the society. The understanding and support of men is needed for the situation of women to change in the families in particular and in the society in general. There is need to re-orient the society about the misconception they have about women.

Most educated women in Nigeria and beyond have proved that they are intelligent, trustworthy, and humble and can adequately manage both their domestic and official responsibilities. The status of women in the society should therefore not be tied to that of their husbands alone. Goldthorpe (1983) in Haralambos & Holborn (2008:83) does not believe that a male where present should automatically be considered head of a household. He believes that the head should be defined as "the family member who has the greatest commitment to, and continuity in the labour market". Therefore husbands and wives should be allocated to classes as individuals rather than as part of a family unit.

Women's inheritance rights should be promulgated and enforced. This will give women the opportunity to acquire land and inherit property either from their fathers' and husband's side on which they labour or at least from their husbands' side. Other already existing laws on violence against women, women trafficking and other acts which negate the dignity of the woman should be adequately enforced in the society. Customs and practices that encourage gender stereotype should also be discouraged in the society because it hinders women's full emancipation and contribution to national development.

It is equally important to carry out enlightenment campaigns among men both in the rural and urban areas on the need for a change in their perception of the woman and also gender roles in this ever changing and dynamic society. They need to be educated on the need to support their wives, daughters and sisters in their struggle for self-fulfillment, intellectual, social, economic and political emancipation. Women should be encouraged to participate fully in national development.

Other forms of gender stereotypes manifesting in the school system for instance in the production of textbooks, use of examples by teachers, differential attitudes of teachers to male and female students should also be discouraged in the education industry.

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