Women Empowerment And Rural Development In Nigeria: Critical Success Conditions For Sustainable National Development

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Abstract

Identification of the critical success conditions for sustainable national development usually generates engaging debates. This study identifies the variables of women empowerment and rural development for consideration. Hence, the general objective of the study was to examine the plausibility of positioning women empowerment and rural development as critical success conditions for sustainable national development in Nigeria. The specific objectives were to (i) identify methods of encouraging women empowerment in Nigeria and (ii) recommend measures for accelerating the pace of rural development in Nigeria. The research methodology is logical argumentation. The theoretical framework of the study is the empowerment theory framework. In general terms, findings of the study suggest linkages among women empowerment, rural development and sustainable national development. Findings of the study further show that the subject of women empowerment in Nigeria is still filled with rhetoric and also indicate an assumption that urban settlement is preferred to rural dwelling in Nigeria. In positioning the place of peace in sustainable national development, the study recommends as a concrete evidence of women empowerment, the recognition by official pronouncement, of the National Council of Women Societies, as a national peace ambassador. The study also recommends the convocation on regional bases, national stakeholders' forums, having evidently true rural dwellers in attendance, to examine the attitude of the rural dwellers, to the effects of modernization, which government has concluded the rural dwellers

desire. The outcome of such forums would provide roadmaps for rural development in the Nigerian state.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Rural Development, Sustainable National Development

INTRODUCTION

Identification of the critical success conditions for sustainable national development usually generates engaging debates (Azikiwe, 1978; Okoli, 2003; Nnadozie, 2004; Onyukwu, 2004; Okoli, 2007; Anya, 2008). Indeed, the identification of these conditions forms part of the inherent debates of development and underdevelopment. Thus, irrespective of the discipline, there is no consensus on the most critical factors for national development. However, the occasioning debates naturally seem more pronounced in the social sciences, particularly development studies. In this study, the variables of women empowerment and rural development are identified for consideration. Onah (1999:50) cites Vickers (1991), Egonwam (1991) and Okwuosa (1992) to highlight that women globally, are underprivileged, suppressed and underrepresented in positions of power and authority. Onah (2011:133) also cites Uchem (2001:12), Agbro (2005:57), Nwangwu and Ifeacho (2009:135), Agbasiere (2000:38-39) and Fayomi (2009:97), to argue that women in most cultures are accorded low status. They are marginalized in the society, including the Nigerian society.

FGN (2006: xvi) posits however that Nigeria, like many other nations in the world, is responding to the clarion calls made variously by the United Nations, to rid societies of all forms of discrimination, especially gender-based discrimination and violence against women - who are half of human resource waiting to be tapped for development. Following years of uncoordinated national response to the women's question, Nigeria took a bold step in the Year 2000 when it adopted and passed into law the National Policy on Women, guided by the global instrument on the Convention of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its optional protocols and the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Despite past efforts of government at integrating the women's question into the development agenda, gender inequalities remain pervasive within most Nigerian spaces. Hence, the current push for a different approach which would not only ensure

women empowerment but a sustainable development for the country (FGN, 2006: xvi).

In the absence of Equal Opportunity Commission in the country, and weak legislative structures to protect the rights of women, development opportunities continue to elude women. Worst still, the existing policy documents, including the extant National Policy on Women failed to challenge the structure, which continues to reproduce gender inequality and the overall disempowerment of women (FGN, 2006: xvi/xvii). Gender equality and women's empowerment continue to be central themes in global treaties, covenants, and declarations because they are now seen as catalysts to people-centered development strategies which focus on poverty reduction, improved standard of living, and good governments that give men and women equal voices in decision-making and policy implementation (FGN, 2006:xvii).

The fact remains that indisputable national development is still elusive in Nigeria. Women empowerment is also still illusory. It is also largely true that rural development is still a far cry from what it ought to be. In Nigeria and elsewhere, despite many international agreements affirming their human rights, women are still much more likely than men to be poor and illiterate. They usually have less access than men to medical care, property ownership, credit, training and employment. They are far less likely than men to be politically active and far more likely to be victims of domestic violence (Srivastava, 2009:1). In nearly every country, continues (Srivastava, 2009:1), women work longer hours than men but are usually paid less and are more likely to live in poverty. In subsistence economies, women spend much of the day performing tasks to maintain the household, such as carrying water and collecting fuel wood. In many countries, women are also responsible for agricultural production and selling. Often they take on paid work or entrepreneurial enterprises as well. Unpaid domestic work – from food preparation to care giving – directly affects the health and overall well being and quality of life of children and other household members. The need for women's unpaid labour often increases with economic shocks, such as those associated with the AIDS pandemic or economic restructuring. Yet women's voices and lived experiences – whether as workers (paid and unpaid), citizens, or consumers – are still largely missing from debates on finance and development. Poor women do more unpaid work, work longer hours and may accept degrading working conditions during times of crisis, just to ensure that their families survive (Srivastava, 2009:2).

According to Srivastava (2009:1) therefore, empowering women is an indispensable tool for advancing development. In the context of this paper, this means advancing rural development. This paper therefore is an effort at establishing a theoretical linkage between the variables of women empowerment and rural development, principally for development purposes in Nigeria. Hence, the general objective of the study is to examine the plausibility of positioning women empowerment and rural development as critical success conditions for sustainable national development in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to (i) identify methods of encouraging women empowerment in Nigeria and (ii) recommend measures for accelerating the pace of rural development in Nigeria. The research methodology is logical argumentation. The theoretical framework of the study is the empowerment theory framework, which situates the study under a perspective that it is empowerment which engenders the changes in the social, cultural and institutional order that create the necessary condition which usher in national development (Okereke and Ekpe, 2002:47).

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICAATION
Women Empowerment
On women empowerment as concept, Onah (2011:132) cites two other sources as follows: Women empowerment is the development of the mental and physical capacity, power or skills in women, for them to operate meaningfully in their social milieu, thereby experiencing a more favourable level of social recognition and subsequently enhance their economic status (Akomolafe, 2006). Women empowerment is the process through which women, who are currently most discriminated against, achieve gender equity (Mayoux, 2005). What one immediately notices from these definitions is that women empowerment has not been referred to as the extension of public appointments to undoubtedly highly qualified women
Rural Development
This paper agrees with the views of Abada (2012:177) that rural development is a calculated and deliberate effort by individuals, groups and government agencies towards providing basic infrastructural facilities like water, roads, hospitals and electricity, for the rural dwellers and the training, harnessing and empowering of the rural masses, for their self-actualization and comfort. Again, it is easily noticed for instance, that to open up the rural areas for campaigns by politicians,

during general elections or for massive road construction or industrialization, were not mentioned in this definition. Rural development is therefore centrally about people (the rural dwellers) and their well-being. It is not principally about projects or political sophistication.

Sustainable National Development

The term "development" as used in contemporary social science literature is not only vague and nebulous but also polemical (Okereke and Ekpe, 2002:1). Furthermore, argues Okereke and Ekpe (2002:1), the use of such terms as "growth", "change", and in some instances, "industrialization"; interchangeably with development, tends to complicate the problem of arriving at a universally acceptable definition for the term. Besides, they contend, the disputations by radical scholars of the various liberal theorizing, have complicated the problem more and more, as this in part explains why Meier (1989:5) observes that it is difficult to advance one precise meaning for the term "development" and perhaps easier to say what it is not than what it is. In collaboration, Hettne (1995), cited in Onyukwu (2004:240) argues that there can be no fixed and final definition of development, only suggestions of what development should imply in particular contexts. Furthermore, the United Nations Development Programme cited in Onah (2011:133) defines sustainable development as development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably, that regenerates the environment rather than destroying it and that empowers people rather than marginalizing them. It is development that gives priority to the poor, enlarging their choices and opportunities and providing for their participation in decisions that affect their lives (United Nations, 1997, cited in Onah, 2011:133). Particularly noteworthy in this definition is the idea that such development regenerates the environment rather than destroying it. Hence, to destroy farmlands and pull down all trees at sight, to make way for dual carriage ways that would soon become decrepit, must not be part of sustainable development. Indeed, when sustainable development is replicated nationally, the sum of the replications translates to sustainable national development.

TENETS OF THE EMPOWERMENT THEORY

Citing Rappaport (1981) and Rappaport (1984), Perkins and Zimmerman (1995:569), posit that empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies to social policy and social change. Hence,

empowerment theory, research and intervention, link individual well-being with the larger social and political environment (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995:569). Thus, empowerment research focuses on identifying capabilities instead of cataloging risk factors and exploring environmental influences of social problems, instead of blaming victims (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995:569). Therefore, Rappaport (1987), cited in Perkins and Zimmerman (1995:570) simply sees empowerment as a process by which people gain control over their lives and democratic participation in the life of their community. Women empowerment is not different, particularly when related to both rural and national development. It is essentially about the process by which people (women) gain control over their lives and over democratic participation in the life of their community.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT TENDENCIES IN THE NIGERIAN STATE

According to Gusim (2012:2), the Nigerian woman has proved to be more than a mere bench-warming spectator even in the midst of the male-dominated congregation. Women have proved their strength and competence in all spheres even in male dominated professions and the rise of women to lead several professional male-dominated environments gives hope, as their achievement is a pointer to the capability of the Nigerian woman. Three of such male dominated professions, argues Gusim (2012:2); the Nigerian Medical Association, the Nigerian Bar Association and the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria, have been led by female presidents. Hence, the steady advancement of women in contributing to the nation's socio-economic development and their progressive prominence in the national scheme of affairs have, to a large extent, impacted on the Federal Government and the Government has responded positively in many ways (Gusim, 2012:2). The subsequent creation of the National Commission for Women and a ministerial portfolio for Women Affairs provides additional avenues for the promotion of women-related issues and the enhancement of the role of women in national development by way of a statutory body and a Ministry (Gusim, 2012:3).

Despite the above positive picture, the truth is that the subject of women empowerment in Nigeria is still filled with rhetoric; characterized by immense motion, without movement. In the first place, the Nigerian

worldview is still largely patriarchal. Hassan (2006:152), cited in Onah (2011:134) explains that patriarchal societies ensure that the woman is under the control of some men in the image of her father, brother or husband. If a woman is not ruled as daughter or sister, she is of necessity, governed as wife (Hassan, 2006:152). Hence, marriages are still male-propelled in Nigeria. In fact in some cases, even when due to some unfortunate circumstances that may border on "rightsizing or downsizing"; the man is no longer the breadwinner of the family, he still acts as boss in the family and still expects to be so recognized. In any case, nobody wants him not to be respected, but reality and exigencies have combined to demand that the role of the earnestly struggling woman, who has become the new breadwinner, be also properly recognized.

Furthermore, the impression is also created that women are increasingly being empowered in the public space in Nigeria. Hence, Iheuwa (2013:1) cited in Idike (2013:3) further posits that in the spirit of its expressed policy, in support of 30% Affirmative Action for the benefit of women, the Federal Government under President Jonathan, made conscious and positive efforts to take appropriate measures, to reflect a good percentage of women in governance. For instance, the administration took off in 2011 with the appointment of 13 female Cabinet Ministers, 5 female Special Advisers, 10 female Ambassadors, 16 female Judges of the Court of Appeal; 11 female Permanent Secretaries, 16 female Judges of the Federal High Court, 3 female Judges of the Supreme Court, 6 female Judges of the National Industrial Court; a female Acting President, Court of Appeal and The Chief Justice of the Federation as female. By this, the President has made good his campaign promises by raising the number of women in decision-making positions to an unprecedented level (Iheuwa 2013:1). Obi (2007:236) also cited in Idike (2013:3) equally opines that the Obasanjo Administration did a marvelous job in the area of women empowerment. However, the truth of the claim of gender tolerance and women empowerment in these appointments is neither here nor there. To appoint women into positions as if the women are recipients of acts of benevolence is not women empowerment. Are the women not Nigerians? Actually, women empowerment entails that men (and also women) accept to freely elect a woman into public office.

In Nigeria, the ruling party is the People's Democratic Party (PDP), alias the largest party in Africa. In the party's primaries for the 2011 Presidential Election, Mrs. Sarah Jibril was one of the Presidential

aspirants on the platform of the largest party in Africa. She got only one vote in the primaries (She must have voted for herself) and when the party subsequently won the main presidential election and became the party in power in Nigeria; as an act of the Nigerian system's women empowerment (and an act of male benevolence also) she was appointed Special Adviser to the President on Ethics and Values. This was in the government of Goodluck Jonathan, one of the then presidential aspirants, against whom Mrs. Jibril ran for the president-position (see Idonor, 2011). It was not a great appointment for the Nigerian woman, neither does this suggest women empowerment which government's apologists would want it to suggest. Yet, every major political party in the Nigerian political system parades as part of its structure, intimidating numbers of women that operate under the alias of "women wing". Are these wings not meant for flying? Or are they merely created for male-gender flying? Indeed, empowerment suggests participation with others to achieve goals (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995:571), not exploitation by others in the process of achieving goals.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT CONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
FGN (2006: xviii) acknowledges as follows: the current link between gender relations and the economy has led to a paradigm shift, especially in development economics. To help locate the woman's question in development paradigm, the following concepts have emerged in succession - Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), Gender in Development (GID) and more recently, Gender and Development (GAD). WID and WAD focus on women as the centre of the problem of development, that is, the exclusion of women from the development process; hence the main strategies are women-focus programmes and projects and a primary focus on women empowerment. Whereas GID and GAD frameworks focus on the relations between women and men and present the unequal relations of power that prevent equitable development and women's full participation as the problem, the goal of GID/GAD framework is equitable and sustainable development, with women and men playing active roles as decision makers. For the latter therefore, solution to underdevelopment is the empowerment of the disadvantaged, especially women and the transforming of unequal relations in society (FGN, 2006: xviii).

Women's empowerment is vital to sustainable development and the realization of human rights for all. Where women's status is low, family size tends to be large, which makes it more difficult for families to thrive. Population and development and reproductive health programmes are more effective when they address the educational opportunities, status and empowerment of women. When women are empowered, whole families benefit, and these benefits often have ripple effects to future generations (Srivastava, 2009:1). This is how sustainable national development is achieved. The roles that men and women play in society are not biologically determined -- they are socially determined, changing and changeable. Although they may be justified as being required by culture or religion, these roles vary widely by locality and change over time (Srivastava, 2009:1). Throughout much of the world, women's equality is undermined by historical imbalances in decision-making power and access to resources, rights, and entitlements for women. Either by law or by custom, women in many countries still lack rights to: own land and to inherit property, obtain access to credit, attend and stay in school, earn income and move up in their work, free from job discrimination. Moreover, women are still widely under-represented in decision-making at all levels, in the household and in the public sphere (Srivastava, 2009:4). This is still true about Nigeria, particularly in the rural areas. For sustainable national development to manifest, gender tolerance has to be recognized as critical aspect of empowerment.

Indeed, in terms of policy framework and ambition, the existing National Gender Policy (FGN, 2006) is a total package. However, the problem is the implementation of the beautiful contents. In the first place, how many Nigerians are aware of the existence of this document? Secondly, are the provisions justiciable? If they are not, what purpose does the document serve? In the context of the rural dwellers seeing that rural roads are maintained by Local Government Councils for instance; to facilitate the movement of rural women to the local markets to sell their farm produce and make their legitimate income for further purchases, how does the National Gender Policy become of help? The truth is that rural women are not asking for elitist documents as in the National Gender Policy. They are not even interested in abandoning their rural dwellings for the vulgar lifestyles of their urban brothers and sisters.

Furthermore, the ability of women to control their own fertility is absolutely fundamental to women's empowerment and equality. When a woman can plan her family, she can plan the rest of her life. When she is

healthy, she can be more productive. And when her reproductive rights— including the right to decide the number, timing and spacing of her children, and to make decisions regarding reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence—are promoted and protected, she has freedom to participate more fully and equally in society (Srivastava, 2009:1). Nigerian women need empowerment to control their own fertility and not for their husbands to control it for them. Srivastava (2009:4) further argues: mother's education is usually more influential than the father's. An educated mother's greater influence in household negotiations may allow her to secure more resources for her children. Educated mothers are more likely to be in the labour force, allowing them to pay some of the costs of schooling, and may be more aware of returns to schooling. And educated mothers, averaging fewer children, can concentrate more attention on each child and besides having fewer children mothers with schooling are less likely to have mistimed or unintended births. This has implications for schooling, because poor parents often must choose which of their children to educate. Closing the gender gap in education is a development priority. The 1994 Cairo Consensus recognized education, especially for women, as a force for social and economic development. Universal completion of primary education was set as a 20-year goal, as was wider access to secondary and higher education among girls and women. Closing the gender gap in education by 2015 is also one of the benchmarks for the Millennium Development Goals (Srivastava, 2009:4). For rural women also, functional and relevant education is critical in integrating their activities to mainstream national productivity. They are not to be taught quadratic equation but for instance, necessary healthy living habits which is fundamentally educative.

Ezeibe (2011:35) highlights that conventional wisdom taught that rural development deals with improving the environment and the people in the rural areas. According to the 1991 census, he argues, more than 70% of Nigeria's population dwells in rural areas. Despite the poor standard of living in these areas and the massive exodus of people from rural to urban areas in search of white or blue collar jobs, the rural population, according to the 2006 census figure still dominates urban population (Ezeibe, 2011:35). Hence, sustainable national development in Nigeria must accommodate sustainable rural development, as distinct from the urbanization of the rural space. Obi and Nweke (2010:149) see sustainable rural development as the continued improvement of the

socio-economic conditions of the rural people. In Nigeria, rural women represent 76 per cent of the entire population in the rural areas (David-Adewole, 2012). Sustainable rural development therefore, has to incorporate the empowerment of the rural woman.

Nwachukwu (2004:175) had earlier opined that Nigerian women were making their own contributions, towards national peace and development. This of course includes the rural woman. Furthermore, the study of Alade and Eniola (2012) in South-West Nigeria, indicate that women contribute more to household food security than men. To achieve a national goal of food security, such women efforts need encouragement. Such women need empowerment. Bringing of healthy-living education to their door steps in the rural areas would be a better form of education for such women than to teach them the plot of Achebe's Things Fall Apart, as a form of adult education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that Nigerian women be empowered to intervene in crisis situations, to settle the numerous disputes that currently characterize the Nigerian socio-political space, as these crises negatively affect national development. If for instance, a dispute arises, tearing a major political party in the country apart, the women wing of the party can be empowered to intervene and settle such a dispute. Indeed, there are innumerable numbers of Nigerian women that can unassailably adjudicate over such matters, in alternative dispute resolution paradigms. Of course, part of the expectations of women empowerment in this case, is that the warring factions would abide by the outcome of the intervention of the women. As argued by Perkins and Zimmerman (1995:570), theories of empowerment are fundamentally concerned with both processes and outcomes. In this dimension still, it is recommended that the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS) be officially pronounced by government as a National Peace Ambassador. This paper considers this recommendation, a practical demonstration of empowerment. For now, the other consideration of whether the NCWS is a peaceful body is outside the focus of the paper. It suffices that if the members were not hitherto peaceful, the new status will now compel us to become peace-makers.

The study condemns the devastation of Nigeria's rural settings, under the guise of development and recommends that rural roads for instance,

should be graded and maintained under natural ambiences, to enable the rural woman freely take her farm produce to the central market and peacefully return to her home, without following the route of a newly constructed, fatality-prone highway that has intruded into her socio-economic lifestyle. Finally, the study recommends the convocation on regional bases, national stakeholders' forums, having evidently true rural dwellers in attendance; to examine the true attitude of the rural dwellers to the effects of urbanization, which government has concluded that the rural dwellers desire. The outcome of such forums would provide roadmaps for relevant rural development in the Nigerian state.

CONCLUSION

Women empowerment, additionally connotes "Economic Empowerment" which implies a better quality of material life through sustainable livelihoods owned and managed by women, "social empowerment" which means a more equitable social status for women in society, "Legal Empowerment" that suggests the provision of an effective legal structure, which is supportive of women's empowerment and "Political Empowerment" which means a political system favouring the participation in, and control by women of the political decision-making process (Srivastava, 2009:4). Eneh (1999) has already adequately highlighted the critical importance of women in peace processes. Many Nigerians (women and men) hold rigidly to ethnic based cultures, especially those which cushion traditional gender role relations and women's subordinate position in the Nigeria society. Significantly, a culture amenable to sustainable development must be dynamic and responsive to qualitative change (FGN, 2006: xix/xx). Such a culture encourages participation. Okoli (1995:135) highlights that participation is a critical measure of rural development. Such a culture of participation therefore, is a sine qua non for women empowerment, rural development and sustainable national development in Nigeria. In other words, women empowerment and rural development in Nigeria are indeed, critical success conditions for sustainable national development

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