

ENHANCING NIGERIAN WOMEN'S PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH POVERTY ALLEVIATION: ISSUES AND EVALUATIONS

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Abstract

The problem of poverty remains one of the main challenges, which will continue to confront mankind even at the dawn of the 21st century. However the extent, severity and characteristics may vary greatly within and across countries of the world, and as they affect different social groups. In spite of the wide diversity of poverty amongst the countries of the world, gender remains a dividing line, a key determinant of vulnerability of poverty almost everywhere especially in developing countries. This has been a major source of concern for activist of the advancement of equal rights of man and woman and promotion of social justice in the society. This paper presents a critical evaluation of gender as a determinant of poverty especially among women in Nigeria. In a succinct form, practical approaches to major poverty eradication strategies are advanced. Thus, promotion of productive employment which constitutes a key strategy for sustainable poverty alleviation, deliberate and positive action by women organizations and participation in policy formulations are all imperative if an effective breakthrough is to be made in the fight to eradicate or reduce gender-based poverty in Nigeria. The paper finally argues for a recognition of the inter linkages between the social, economic, legal and political spheres of action for effective eradication of poverty and forcefully advocates the complementarities of all to enhance an improved well-being of women and equal opportunities of men and women in our society.

Introduction

The world has made impressive economic and technological progress during the second half of last century. Yet, the magnitude of poverty remains staggering especially in developing countries of the world, Nigeria inclusive.

Poverty eradication is therefore a top priority on the national and international agenda, the world over. As a legal obligation and to some extent, moral obligation, everyone has a right to a life of dignity where one is able to develop and realize one's potentials and capabilities to the fullest. This is the import of section 34(1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999. Another reason for the world attention on the issue of eradication of poverty is anchored on a development imperative. In other words, world progress could proceed on a sustained basis only if this ensures the well being of the majority.

Poverty is therefore a threat to political and social stability of any country. It imposes a heavy socio-economic burden on both the government and the society where it is dominant. In a nutshell, it robs the present and future generations of tremendous human resource potentials.

The question of which development paradigm and what policies will enhance growth and eradicate or reduce poverty has been much debated. At the same time, a great number of development programmes and projects have been carried out in Nigeria based on different strategies to address different dimensions of poverty. Prominent among these are Better Life For Rural Women, 1986; Family Support Programme, 1993; the National Directorate of Employment, 1995 and the National Poverty Eradication Programmes of the Obasanjo administration etc.

Our discussions will attempt to highlight the root cause of poverty, especially, of women in Nigeria and search for effective solutions to eradicate or alleviate it. The paper focuses on poverty and economic empowerment from the perspective of gender. It therefore tries to analyse factors and processes that explain the problems of poverty and unemployment, which are due to social differences between men and women as a group.

Historical Background

The agitation for the emancipation and total liberation of women across the world has attracted the interest of many scholars (Chafetz, 1981). In almost all societies of the world, there are some cultural traits, which were and are responsible for the subjugation of women as a group. Women activities all over the world have been circumscribed, the background of their lives have always been enormously diverse. Thus women are regarded as “objects”, misunderstood as “others” and dealt with as the second “sex” (Mill, 1970).

The sexist ideology justifies the inequality that governs the way the two sexes are treated in the society. The ideology is based on the assumption that men and women are destined to play different roles because it is so ordained in the natural order of things. Logically men and women are born with clear-cut differences- that biology dictates what roles they play and how they behave in the society.

Men on their own have not been helping matters, they have been acting as a group partly unconsciously to restrict the activities of women, and they have done this because it is in their interest as men to keep women as nearly as possible in their traditional place. It is certain that many men are quite unaware of their motives and indeed how sexist much of their behaviour is, the full entry of women into the public domain and the concomitant alteration of the domestic division of labour, would of course mean that the entire women life-style would have to be altered.

Moreover, it may not be historically unfair to describe woman inferiority as a product of many deliberate attempt to exploit her, the dependency relationship of women was in the past taken for granted as in our day, Law defended it, social tradition solidified it and educational partiality perpetuated (Alo, 1995).

The status of women as described in the preceding paragraphs has through the ages, been a cause for grave concern in every culture. In some areas of the world, it has passed the stage of sympathetic concern to the era of aggressive feminism. This is part of the democratic movement, which generally began with the French revolution, which altered the law of inheritance in favour of daughters. The global attention which women subjugation has attracted led the United Nations in her Declaration of Human Rights 1948 to state her commitment to the goal

of equal rights for men and women. When the United Nations General Assembly adopted the international strategy for her second development decade in 1970, it stated that one of its goal would be to ensure the full integration of women in the total development effort. And this led to the proclamation of the international women year in 1975.

In the Nigerian traditional society, roles were assigned to different people on the basis of sex. This seems to be a matter of cultural convention more that anything else. The fact that traditional sex assignments vary from one society to another indicates that sexual division of labour is not rooted in biology as the sexist ideologist want us to believe, but rather in custom and tradition. It is known for instance that the first serious socio-political revolution in Nigeria- the 'Aba riot' of 1929 was organised and led by women. The history of Nigeria liberation struggles had it that women contributed in no small measures than their male counterparts in the efforts at rescuing Nigeria from colonialism. Mention must be made of such formidable women as Emotan of Benin, Madam Tinubu of Lagos, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti etc. these women have always been and will continue to be source of inspirations for most contemporary women liberation movements in Nigeria.

It is not uncommon these days to find women contributing to the family income as much as the men, if not much more. In spite of this wonderful and breath-taking efforts of the Nigerian women in successfully penetrating hitherto positions exclusively dominated by men, the myth of women as a sexual domestic functionary still persists. With the wind of change blowing across the globe, which has affected the life of every human being, no group can still pretend not to recognize the women folk as an active agent of development in collaboration with men. However, societal norms and values concerning the supremacy of men over women has not made it possible in Nigeria to actualize their potentials for any meaningful development.

Development in the economic situation and social status of women is now a source of concern for most people. While aggregate estimates of poverty incidence are not broken down by gender, the fact that women need to be addressed deliberately and effectively by poverty alleviation strategies and policies is widely recognised at both international and national levels. There is wide consensus that the incidence of poverty among women is very high and that they account

for a great proportion of the population. Yet, there is still much reluctance among policy makers and planners at all levels to acknowledge that poverty among women is due, in part to their gender. There lies the problem of poverty among women.

Conceptual Framework

Definitional Problems

It is not an easy task attempting to define poverty. Thus, it has been stated that poverty, like an elephant, is more easily recognised than defined (Aduba, 1991:9). This means that poverty, though a tragic and socially unacceptable human experience is probably not a subject to be defined or measured. To be appreciated, it may have to be personally suffered or experienced.

Poverty, by Black's *Law Dictionary* (1990; 1169), is the state or condition of being poor. Poverty may be viewed as a synonym of indigency. An indigent, in a general sense, is one who is needy and poor or one who has not sufficient property to furnish him a living nor any one able to support him at whom he is entitled to look for support. The term is commonly used to refer to one's financial ability and ordinarily indicates one who is destitute of means and of comfortable subsistence so as to be in want.

In the words of Seebolm Rowntree, poverty is a state of households command over resources at a level, which is insufficient to obtain a basket of goods and facilities judged to be minimum necessities in the contemporary circumstances of the society under study (Haralambos, 1984;144).

Late Chief Obafemi Awolowo defines poverty as a condition, which exists when a person lacks the means to satisfy the necessities of life (Awolowo, 1981;76). He contended that the characteristics of poverty are well known. In his opinion they include under nourishment or malnutrition, wretched and degrading shelter, shabby clothing, total lack of any kind of comfort and luxury. In his words:

....because of his malfunction and his physical and psychologically degrading conditions of living he is inefficient, his productivity is hopelessly low, he is

technically ignorant, he succumbs readily to diseases, he has little enthusiasm for what he does and in consequence of all these, his poverty persist on an increasing scale.⁹

There is need to stress here that rather than limiting the concept of poverty to one of level of living, measured in terms of income and consumption, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has viewed poverty as a multi-faceted phenomenon or a multi-dimensional concept. One dimension to view poverty is in the area of economic insecurity and lack of control. The other dimension of poverty is social discrimination and exclusion. This dimension is in general linked to the marginalization of certain groups of the population from participation in the economic and political life of a society, on the basis of sex, creed or ethnic group. Such groups are marginalized through the lack of access to jobs, lack of social protection, lack of possibility for self-development or organization, lack of political representation and inability to influence decision-making processes at all levels; and in some cases, deprivation of political, civil and social rights.

It is on the backdrop of this dimension that the issue of enhancing women's productivity through poverty alleviation comes into focus.

Poverty: A Taxonomy

Poverty is a social problem. It can be both absolute and relative. Poverty can be absolute when it is defined in terms of access to minimum standards of basic services. Absolute poverty involves a judgement of basic human needs and is measured in terms of the resources required to maintain health and physical efficiency. Most measures of absolute poverty are concerned with establishing the quality and amount of food, clothing and shelter deemed necessary for a healthy life.

Relative poverty refers to the position of a household or an individual in relation to the distribution of average income or consumption in a particular locality. Relative poverty is therefore measured in terms of judgements by members of a particular society of what is considered a reasonable and acceptable standard of living and style of life according to the conventions of the day. In other words, individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty, in relative term, when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diets, participate in

the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies to which they belong. The resources of such people are so seriously below these commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities in the society.

In a rapidly changing world, the classifications of poverty based on absolute and relative terms will be constantly changing. To the classifications of poverty can be added another referred to as 'subjective poverty'- so called to show whether or not individuals or groups feel they are poor. Subjective poverty is measured in terms of the standard of the day. For example, a formerly wealthy individual reduced by circumstances to a modest lower-middle class income and life styles may feel poor but other members of the society may not regard him as such.

In the light of the foregoing, poverty can be both a temporary and permanent phenomenon. As a temporary phenomenon it is caused by old age, diseases or other of life's misfortunes or induced by natural disasters, war and civil strife. As a permanent phenomenon, it is due to structural factors, and transmitted from one generation to the other.

One of the causes of poverty is the rise in the number and proportion of women among the poor which is closely associated with increasing numbers of poor households headed by women. The percentage of women-headed households and families maintained by women has risen astronomically in both rural and urban life in Nigeria. This is attributable to several socio-economic and cultural factors.

In Nigeria, migration flows from rural to urban areas in the last decades have been female dominated, as young women are pushed by lack of job opportunities in rural areas and drawn by "assumed" better prospects in the cities. This has resulted in a demographic imbalance between sexes in urban areas and a surplus of females especially in the younger marriageable and older age groups.

This trend has been accompanied by increasing frequency of unpartnered adolescent parenthood. The erosion of extended family systems coupled with biological fathers' unwillingness to recognize children have left unpartnered women to fend for themselves and their children.

Premature parenthood among single women is also an increasing

frequent phenomenon in Nigeria. Studies indicate that early sexual experience and early childbearing as well as low educational attainment and remaining unmarried are key links in the inter-generational transmission of poverty between mothers and their children (ILO, Geneva, 1995).

At the rural end, impoverishment is almost always at the root of the rise in female headed households. Heavy male migration to the cities and towns leaves women for long periods of time to do the decision-making and support of family. Many women and children are being divorced and abandoned respectively because men can no longer support them.

Secondly, ethnic clashes and armed conflicts within and across state boundaries have been increasing in recent years, displacing people en-masse, disintegrating families, and leaving women alone or widowed to fend for their families. Thus most refugee house holds are headed by women. Conflicts and violence are largely related to deprivation, poverty and restricted access to economic and political opportunities. Most of the states suffering from internal strife in Nigeria are among those with high levels of poverty. Examples include Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba, Plateau, etc.

Thirdly, the poverty of women is very much linked to the pattern of their employment and to their disadvantaged position in the labour market. The high proportion of women among the poor is therefore explained by the fact that women workers in Nigeria are concentrated in jobs and economic activities which bring low earnings, are irregular and insecure, and are beyond the effective reach of labour and social protection laws where they are in existence.

In addition women's reproductive and domestic responsibilities are generally perceived to be their primary function. This perception reinforces structural barriers to women's access to education, training, land and productive assets, restricts women's time and mobility for productive work and limits their choice of income earning activities.

Furthermore, most part of women's productive work are carried out within the household subsistence production system and therefore often regarded as extension of women's household duties. The produce from these works is largely consumed directly by the household and thus never assigned a monetary value and infact, has been undervalued in a market oriented economy. Women's subsistence and intermittent

activities, though generating income, have therefore no social status of a real "Job".

Thus, although women are entering the labour market in increasing numbers, their employment is concentrated in a small number of 'female' areas and occupation, which tend to attract lower rewards and prestige. In Nigeria, by estimation women constitute 60-80 percent of the urban work force in trading and dominate the open market and petty trading. This is in contrast to what obtains in the newly industrialized and industrializing countries of the Southeast Asia where the industrialization process has been female led and a significant and growing number of women are employed in industry. Women provide up to 80 percent of the work force of export processing zones in southeast Asia (ILO, Geneva, 1995;12).

Poverty creates a feeling of marginality of helplessness, of dependence and inferiority and a sense of resignation and fatalism. The effects of poverty especially on women as a group include prostitution to sustain themselves, child labour, illiteracy due to lack of funds to send children to school, HIV/AIDS due to sex trading and general underdevelopment.

Women Empowerment and Poverty Alleviation Strategies

What is Empowerment?

Nigeria women must be empowered to participate in economic structures, policy formulation and production processes if their poverty is to be eliminated. What then, is empowerment?

Empowerment is the process of giving one authority or power to do something beneficial to him or her. Women empowerment is therefore the women's action to recognize development problems and take their own action to overcome these problems (UNICEF, 1994). In other words, women empowerment is a process of challenging dominant power structure in a society to gain recognition and control (Okeshola, 1995).

Empowerment may also be viewed as a means to overcome the obstacles to women equality with men. Thus Zuibaida stated that empowerment is a strategy that seeks to transform the structures of subordination through changes in legislation, property rights and all

those other institutions that reinforce and perpetuate total male dominance (Zuibaida, 1997).

To be effective, all the five elements or level of empowerment must be available and allowed to function to the fullest. These are control, participation, conscientisation, access and welfare. The control as the highest level of empowerment is a balance of power between women and men so that neither is in a position of dominance (Anyakoha, 1998). Participation involves women in decision-making alongside their men counterpart in any area of society life. The element of conscientisation is the recognition by women that their lower socio-economic position is not a natural order but an artificial arrangement by men to suit their position. It is the sensitization to such beliefs and practices of relegating women to the background, the rejection of them and the recognition that women's subordination is not part of the ordained programme for women by God. This element, in a nutshell, calls for gender awareness.

The access elements emphasize the need for equal access of women in all development process or the ability of women to gain access to their fair and equal share of different resources available in the society where they live. The welfare level addresses the basic needs of women. It involves the desire to understand women's problems. The identification of these problems can enhance attempts to tackle them at other levels of empowerment. The involvement of women at all these levels of empowerment requires that the individual be well informed and self-sufficient in order to meet up with the expectation of each level. 'Empowerment' therefore aims at empowering women through greater self-reliance (Momsen, 1991).

Poverty Alleviation Strategies

The fight against poverty cannot be total if there is no complete concern for promoting social justice and combating discrimination, especially, against women as a group.

At its basic level, the relationship between poverty and employment lies in the extent to which income generated from employment permits workers and their dependants to obtain goods and services necessary to meet minimum needs. Therefore, one step of breaking out of poverty is through productive employment.

The essence of productive employment is to assist the women-headed households who are particularly vulnerable to poverty. This is because only a small fraction of the women work force in Nigeria have regular, full-time wage jobs. Majority of workers are concentrated in those segments of the labour market where access to jobs is easier, but where returns to labour are low and employment is insecure and unprotected.

In the ILO's view productive employment is a basic right of an individual. It is not solely a means for earning an income and securing livelihood and access to social services but employment itself is necessary for an individual's dignity and self-esteem, and an essential element for social recognition and social integration (ILO, Geneva, 1995: 16). For women, access to paid productive employment has even a higher value, since it strengthens women's bargaining position within the household and the society.

Alleviating poverty through productive employment strategy calls for the creation of regular and good quality jobs in the labour market. It also calls for the general enhancement of the productivity of the working poor in the self-employment and home-based sectors (most of whom are women). It also means the creation of conditions for improved incomes, working conditions and protection of vulnerable sectors of the working population.

Another poverty alleviation strategy can be through the empowerment of the 'poor'. Under this limb, it is our argument that it is not sufficient that more jobs and improved income opportunities are generated, the women must equally have the capacity and the power to develop, protect and sustain their livelihood. In other words, it calls for the empowerment of women to have effective access to, and control over, the resources, bargaining strength to compete with other interest groups for a better share of resources and benefits and participation in the political processes which determine resource distribution in the country.

Thirdly, breaking out of poverty can also be effected through policy changes and direct actions in a number of inter-related areas. This can be in the form of the following:

- (a) We have stated above that strategies for development and structural change designed to generate productive employment and reduce

poverty ought to be a central concern of all government in this country (Federal, State and Local). Since women poverty arises from a combination of general mechanisms (social and cultural norms), policy changes that affect these areas could be helpful. Thus where socio-cultural norms hinder women, as a group, to land and other assets, efforts will be directed to make a policy to enable them (women) overcome the short-comings. The reason is that availability of land at the disposal of women will ultimately determine the returns to self-employment of women, especially in rural areas.

- (b) Policy changes must also be directed towards improving the human capital base of the poverty stricken women through training in order to enhance their ability to respond to market opportunities and to raise their productivity.
- (c) Access to financial resources for consumption to enhance women social status and for capital investment in productive venture should also be pursued vigorously by the policy makers.
- (d) We have emphasized the need to expand women's access to wages and employment opportunities. That alone will not help much since not all women are literate enough to seek white-collar wage employment opportunities. Thus, extending social protection and improving conditions of work in the unregulated and unprotected jobs should be the target of policy makers as well.
- (e) It is also our contentions that strengthening the organizational and negotiating capacity of the poor women, as a group, will go a long way to enable them defend their interests and secure lasting improvements in their situations.

Conclusion

In this work, we have seen that women are disproportionately represented among the poor in the world, especially in developing countries, Nigeria inclusive. The question then is, is gender a determinant of poverty among the poor population in Nigeria? To effectively provide an answer to this question, it needs to be stated that there is wide consensus that the incidence of poverty among women is very high and that they account for a great proportion of the poor population. That women need to be addressed deliberately and effectively by poverty

alleviation strategies and policies is therefore widely recognised at both international and national levels.

It is well established that women work longer hours than men. It is also widely admitted that they have greater difficulties in breaking out of poverty given their larger share of domestic and child-bearing responsibilities. Gender discrimination in access to new opportunities in the labour market is due, at least in part to their gender (Buvinic, 1995).

Favourable policy environment for positive action for equality of opportunity between men and women facilitates the introduction and effectiveness of gender-sensitive poverty eradication strategies. It also prepares the ground for reform of the legal framework, which often replicates underlying social discriminatory practices against women.

Conclusively therefore, empowering women is the only means by which they can be elevated from subordination and perception as inferior beings in so far as they become less dependent economically on the men as a group. Educating women for empowerment through self-reliance would enhance the overall role of women, as a group in the society. This will in the aggregate enhance their productivity in this decade.

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