Women Empowerment for Community Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

The participation of women in development programmes is well documented in the last two decades in the developed world. In the developing countries, however, such studies are still very scanty and fragmented as the roles of women in development efforts are hardly acknowledged. This paper examines the participatory role of women in community development in the rural areas, using Ilaje in Ondo State, as an example. Based on a random sampling of 130 women selected from ten (10) communities in Ilaje local government area of Ondo State, Nigeria, the paper attributes the low participation of women in community development efforts to poor level of education and lack of role modeling among the women folk. The findings reveal that there is a significant relationship between the educational status of rural women and their participation in community development. To ensure effective participation in community development, the paper recommended that women in the rural areas should be given the necessary education in order to enhance their effectiveness in community development projects. They should also be given the right encouragement, moral and material supports because in the absence of these supports, any programmes being embarked upon would yield minimal impact.

Keywords: Empowerment, community development, participation, women’s education.

Introduction

Women did not attract a fertile ground for academic debate in Africa societies in terms of their limited role in the past. In view of this, they were not reckoned with when it comes to activities that could bring about sustainable development. The recognition of the significance of the place and roles of women in the society today is a current social preoccupation. Whether in politics, economics, and education or generally in current affairs, the place and the importance of women folk is deliberately being highlighted by both women themselves and a considerable number of men.

It was also on record that, in traditional African societies, a woman has no say or voice in societal issues and live in a state where they are not supposed to talk. According to Frier (1972) this was a ‘culture of silence’ where men take all decisions affecting women’s folk. This act of men has made women in the traditional African societies to have conditioned themselves not to care much about or having an opinion about them.

Furthermore, in most African societies women are regarded as the ‘weaker sex’ whose duties are to keep the home, raise children and minister to the needs of their husbands and society. The place of women is perceived in this sense to be in the kitchen and their major roles are that of child-bearing. The child-bearing role is therefore considered the most important of their roles because if a woman is unable to procreate, she is termed a failure.

In Ilaje Local Government Area, the non-participation of women in rural community development was attributed to some discriminatory cultural practices in the area. Through their cultural background women have been relegated into a lesser position which determines their status in all ramifications. Due to the cultural practices in the area, women have suffered a lot of set back in the past. Hence, little attention was paid to women’s education because they were expected to play a
secondary role that was essentially supportive of male efforts. Not only that, the cultural norm in Ilaje attaches more importance to the education of men who will carry on the family name and potentially earn money. The status of women in this regard has been conceived as inferior to that of their male counterparts which eventually determined their involvement in community development efforts. Hence, the involvement of Ilaje women in community development activities has been seriously jeopardized by traditional values, beliefs and practices in the past.

Basically, community development is a derivation of two main concepts: community organization and economic development. Although defined in varying ways, community development implies mutually related development activities and situations. It is geared towards solving the problems of the community in order to raise their standard of living as well as promoting social welfare and development (Sanders, 1968).

The process of community development involves various activities ranging from tackling of specific tasks on aspects of community welfare to multipurpose programmes aimed at the transformation of the social organization and values of the whole community. The rationale is to ginger up individuals and make them act as a group, and develop their talents in order to solve welfare problems. It is conceived as a process, a method, a programme or a movement. Actually, it is viewed as a process in the life of the community by which the people plan and act together for the satisfaction of their felt needs. In the process, individuals are assisted to acquire the attitude, skills and knowledge needed to effectively participate in programme designed to promote their well-being.

Community development strives to educate and motivate people for self help with a view to developing responsible local leadership among them, as well as inculcating in them a sense of citizenship and a spirit of civic consciousness (Anyanwu, 1981). According to Battern (1965), community development is a process during which people in a small community first thoroughly discuss and define their wants and their plans, and act together to satisfy them. In the rural areas, the components of community development includes agriculture, irrigation, rural industries, education (including literacy) health, housing, social welfare, youth programme, employment, cooperative and training of village leaders (Omoruyi, 2001).

Currently, women have risen to a higher profile in community development projects and likewise in decision making processes in the area. Their involvement was due to the fact that, some of the cultural values, beliefs and practices that determined the position of women in the past, have undergone drastic restructuring while others have been completely rendered obsolete. At the same time, new roles and values have also emerged.

One of the visible factors that have helped to bring about these changes in the traditional roles and values of women is female education. Education no doubt has been one of the enduring rural values which helped to restructure the women’s role in the area, unlike in the past when educational disparity acts as a barrier to women’s participation in developmental projects. Due to the liberating effects of education on the human mind, many women who have attained high levels in education began to question the basis of male’s dominance. It is not surprising therefore that the trend among women especially the educated ones is to reject domestic work as their primary responsibility. This further indicates that, the cultural values which defined the position of women in the communities in the past seem to be struggling against the tide of change since every aspects of the society are constantly going through a tremendous cultural diffusion. The massive involvement of women in decision making and the playing of active roles in some of the community projects in the area today is a clear evidence of the positive restructuring in the cultural values.

The idea of women participating in the development of their community is not new to Ilaje Local Government Area. The degree of that participation has, however, become a subject of contention. The purpose of this paper is to explore how women can be empowered to participate in community development that is exclusively done by men. It is believed that the participation of women in rural development efforts will accelerate the pace of rural transformation and self-reliance.

Statement of the problem

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Observations have shown that semi-rural extension and development projects have been created by the successive Nigerian military and the civilian governments. These programmes were to increase women’s knowledge, skills and participation in the area of agriculture, home economics, education and policies. All these programmes were aimed at breaking down social barriers that have prevented women from taking active part in community affairs and overall development. Such programmes, include Better Life for Rural Women, Family Support Programme, amongst others. Although, these programmes have impacted positively in integrating women into development activities, the involvement of women in these development activities was limited to the urban areas at the expense of the rural areas.

Even when women are at work and become partners in the development effort, there is no equality of treatment in certain vital areas and women suffer the negative effects. Integration of women into rural development as participants is, therefore still fraught with problems and poses a tremendous challenge to Nigerian rural women. This paper investigates whether educational disparity is still a barrier to women’s participation in community development in the rural areas.

The paper has attempted to investigate whether educational factor acts as a barrier to women’s participation in community development programmes in Ilaje Local Government Area, and to make appropriate recommendations on how the participation of women in community development programmes could be enhanced.

**Study area and research methodology**

Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State was the target population for the study. It involved the selection of communities from each of the four kingdoms that constituted the Local Government Area. Based on this approach, 3 communities each were chosen from both Ugbo and Mahin kingdoms; whereas 2 communities each were chosen from both Etikan and Aheri kingdoms respectively. In all, 10 communities were selected for investigation. These communities include Ugbonla, Ugbo, Ayetoro, Atijere, Zion-Pepe, Oke-Nla, Agege, Malintedo, Araromi Sea-side and Ori-Oke.

**Sample and sampling procedure**

The sample study consisted of 130 women selected from the 10 communities that were randomly selected for investigation. 15 women each were chosen to represent the 6 communities selected from both Ugbo and Mahin Kingdoms, whereas 10 respondents each are chosen to represent the 4 communities selected from both Etikan and Aheri kingdoms respectively.

**Instrument and data collection**

The instrument used for this paper was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire contained items that sought information from the respondents about their personal data and other information about their involvement in community development activities. The Likert scale was also used in constructing some of the questionnaire in order to elicit accurate information from the respondents. Another measuring device employed in the study was a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). This was conducted among some of the selected women to further enrich the data.

The instrument was standardized by using construct validity and subjected to criticisms by colleagues in the department, and professionals in the department. The instrument was as well tested for reliability. To this end, a pilot study was carried out among twenty women. Their responses were collected and recollected for five days.

The data collected were analyzed using simple percentage to analyze the respondents characteristics such as age, marital status, educational qualifications among others, and a statistical test applied.

**Results and discussion**

Of the 130 respondents investigated, (97) 74.6% fell within the age group of 30 – 40 years which constitutes the women most virile and energetic age. The rest of the respondents within the age group of 45 – 64 years make up about (33) 25.4% (see Table 1)
Table 1: Age distribution of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 – 34</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 – 39</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 - 44</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 – 49</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 – 54</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 – 59</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 – 64</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 130 100


With regard to marital status, 110 (84.6%) were married, while only 4 (3.1%) were still single. In terms of occupation, almost half of the sample population 60 (46.6%) were involved in the business of fishing followed by farming (35) 29.9% as shown in Table 2. The teaching profession was placed third with 15.4% revealing the neglect of female education beyond the primary school level. This finding was supported by their educational characteristics. Only 19 (14.6%) of them had above secondary school education as shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Occupation of Respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trading</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 130 100

Table 3: Education level of Respondant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCE/OND</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Six</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Primary Six</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


On the level of participation in community development projects, such as garri processing and petty trading, 107 (82.3%) indicated their participation for over 3 years; with two (2) women having participated for more than 6 years. Asked whether women should participate in community development project, 71 (54.6%) of them indicated “Yes”, while 59 (45.4%) said “No”.

Women participation in development projects

On women’s participation on community development projects, 57.6% agreed that women should be actively involved, 25.5% indicated that planning community development should be handled mainly by men. Furthermore, about 48.9%, agreed that the execution of community development projects should be relegated principally to the men folk.

With regard to women’s educational background and participation in community development projects in the areas, 41.5% agreed that a women’s level of education determined, to a large extent, her participation in community development effects. The level of literacy helped in creating the awareness of community development, and women’s consequent participation in such projects. Actually, participation in community development projects encouraged and promoted further participation in future projects. Those who participated agreed that they were enlightened also in self development as they could execute some personal projects for themselves.

To determine the importance of education of the rural women and their participation in community development, a chi-square analysis was explored. The statistic showed that the $X^2$ calculated of 14.86 exceeded the $X^2$ table of 3.841 at 0.05 level of significance. By implication, since the $X^2$ calculated in greater than the $X^2$ table, the null hypothesis was rejected which stated that there is no significant relationship between the educational status of women and their participation in community development (see Table 4) in preference for the alternative hypothesis which stated that there is a significant relationship.
Table 4: Observed table for relationship between educational status of women and their participation in community development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illiteracy</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The highly literate women in the study area helped to mobilize the less educated areas on issue concerning the community development effort. Based on the statistical analysis of this paper, there is the need to involve women in community development effort through their sustained education. It is envisaged that real changes within a community would occur when women team up with men to help find solutions to the problems of the community.

In Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State, it was observed that a majority of the women who participated fully in community development were within the reproductive age group of 30 – 34 and 35 – 39 years respectively. These groups of women who are still in their reproductive years believe in improving the quality of life in their communities through their participation in community development affairs.

In addition, the analysis revealed that despite the fact that some women are illiterate in the local government area, they still contributed their own quota to community development projects. This was made possible through the concerted effort of the literate women who guide the illiterate ones with little or no knowledge of community development activities. These women were mostly farmers, traders and fishermen. Through the guidance of the educated women, these women have become self-reliant; take care of their children financially, and have helped to reduce the high birth rate in the community.

Furthermore, they have been offered the opportunity to be more enlightened in political, social and economic matters, an indication that through participation in community development, self development can equally be enhanced. Through women’s involvement in community development activities, there have also been some improvements and changes in their farming techniques, trading activities, fish farming method, and nutrition. In addition, it has helped them to generate more revenue and be more self-reliant through the various skills acquired in the community development process.

Finally, it was deduced from the findings of the paper that through mobilization, proper education, encouragement, women at the grassroots level are capable of contributing substantially to the upliftment of life in their various communities socially, economically, and politically.

The paper showed that education is one of the values which helped to restructure the women’s roles and values in the area. Due to the liberating effects of education on the human mind, many women who have attained certain levels in education began to liberate themselves out of the boredom of the home. Many are also seeking for greater degrees of independence. These premises were in conformity with the expectation that: there is a significant relationship between the educational status of rural
women and their participation in community development projects. The paper also revealed that, in spite of women’s age and traditional roles in the area, their involvement in community development activities remains encouraging.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that: conferences, seminars and workshops should be organized for women in the rural areas so as to give them an in-depth knowledge about what participation in community development entails current trade in Computer Technology, such as computer appreciation should be introduced, while active participation in politics by women should be promoted.

The women in the area should be given the necessary education (they deserve) in order to enhance their effectiveness in community development projects. It will also promote the empowering of women towards achieving one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by 2015. (UNDP, 2003).

Women should be selected from the various communities for training as **trainee trainers**. These women should be appointed later as extension officers or community development officers so that they can as well train others and help them to solve their communal problems.

Women should be properly motivated through concerted encouragement, moral and material support because in the absence of these supports, any programmes embarked upon will be partially successful or would collapse.

**References**


