

## WOMEN CAPACITY BUILDING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*Women are important agents of development in every human society. This is regardless of the fact that they are being discriminated against and seen as subordinate and inferior to the men in the society. Women capacity building is, no doubt, very important for their significant contribution to sustainable development in Nigeria. This paper, therefore, examines, among other things, women and Nigeria society; Nigerian women and national development; building women capacities for sustainable development; successive government in Nigeria and women capacity building and constraints to women capacity building in Nigeria. The paper highlights illiteracy, low self esteem, family challenges, child-marriage, corruption and poor programme implementation as parts of the factors impinging on women capacity building in Nigeria. It suggests, among other things, the need for the government to increase the number of skills acquisition centres for the women and ensure that persons of proven record of integrity are appointed to manage government skills acquisition centres for the women.*

**Keywords:** Women, Capacity building, sustainable development, constraints, Nigeria.

### Introduction

Observations, in the recent times, have shown that women when properly empowered, play significant role in the overall development of the society. They have been described as an integral part of nation building and sustainable development at all levels. In most societies, women assume five key roles – mothers, producers, home-managers, community organizers and socio-cultural and political activities (Amah, 2018). These key roles make women an indispensable force in the overall national growth and development, hence the

improvement of their status in the society would invariably affect the overall development of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Meleki & Osaji, 2016).

Women are powerful catalysts for improved standard of living and agents of poverty reduction in the society. The centrality of women to socio-economic wellbeing has been recognized as they actively support their households and communities in achieving food security and financial stability, maintain biodiversity, and preserve traditional norms and values (Meleki & Osaji, 2016). In line with the above, Ohazurike and Okoroafor (2016) observe that women constitute a key national resource whose ideas, creative solutions and concern for cohesiveness of the society can help enhance the quality of life and society. Any society that clamours for positive change, development, social justice, equity and democratic progress must of necessity ensure women's significant presence and participation in the high level public policy decision making positions (Lawal & Ojo, 2006).

It is however regrettable that although women who constitute more than 50% of adult population of most developing countries are victims of educational imbalances which manifest at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education (Sambo, 2000). In Nigerian society, women's potentials are being fettered by a lot biased cultural restrictions. For instance, women are regarded as inferior to men, second class citizens, weaker sex, those that are to be seen and not heard, child bearers and care-givers, among others (Kalu, 2016).

Nigerian women's capacities are needed to be developed in different functional areas such as improvement in educational skills, economic empowerment, managerial skills, environmental management, political empowerment among others (Meleki & Osaji, 2018). This will help them improve their chances of participating in decision making levels of the government and to brace up to overcome the social cultural and economic impediments that hold them down (Njoku, 2018). Women with developed capacities have continued to achieve remarkable feats in their various fields of endeavours thereby proving wrong the tradition and culture which describe women as intellectually weak and inferior to men. No, doubt, their capacity building is a significant factor in their meaningful contribution to societal well-being. It is against this backdrop that this paper sees the need to examine women capacity building for sustainable development in Nigeria.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **Capacity building:**

The concept of concept building denotes all efforts geared towards the development of human skills, intellectual abilities and behavioural skills for meaningful and fulfilled life in the society. Groot and Vander Molen in Meleki and Osaji (2016) define capacity building as the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes in individuals and groups of people relevant in the development and maintenance of institutional and operational infrastructure and processes that are locally meaningful. It is a programme of action aimed at facilitating among a group of people the acquisition of various skills necessary for active pursuit of income generating activities for the achievement of higher living standard.

### **Sustainable Development**

The term sustainable development is defined by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) as the type of development that meets the needs of the present without in any way compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. Ndu (2014) defines it as an organizing principle for human life found on earth planet that posits a desirable future state for human societies in which living conditions and resources use meet human needs without undermining the sustainability of natural systems so that future generations may also have their needs met. Sustainable development is thus able to handle developmental challenges of tomorrow based on today's experience and realities. It sees the future developmental needs clearly using the spectacle of development realities of the present times, which it is committed to face with every available natural and resources. Kendason in Obinzue, Ogidi and Ejim (2016) asserts that sustainable development entails that as we make effort to better the society today, we should also give consideration to how the next generation will benefit from our activities of today. This is the type of development that is not limited to a particular person or group of persons, rather, its central focus is the good of the entire human community. It cuts across all aspects of human life-cultures, ecology, politics, economy, education, employment among others (Obizue, Ogidi & Ejim, 2016). Sustainable development, thus, emphasizes the creation of an enduring quality of life of people through increase in real per-capital income, improvement in health and improvement resources (Meleki & Osaji, 2016).

## **Women and the Nigerian Society**

Environmental and cultural factors have continued to influence the way women are being perceived in Nigerian society. The Nigerian women have been disadvantaged by gender which makes them to be regarded as generally inferior to men. They are discriminated against in the society and as such are not permitted to eat certain food or to speak in the assembly of men. The customary practices of many contemporary societies such as Nigeria and other countries in Africa, are biased against women and serve to subjugate them to men and to undermine their self esteem (Enemuo, 1999).

Generally, women are seen as housewives who are only good for bearing and nurturing children, and for performance of different kinds of household chores (Ebisi, 2018). The society actually regards them as second class citizens who should not have right of inheritance in their fathers house, and as those who should not participate in the decision affecting the family, the society and the nation to which they belong.

The widows among them are subject to myriads of dehumanizing treatment. They are kept indoors for months, sitting or lying on bare floor, putting on dirty and tattered clothes with their hairs shaven. In extreme cases, they are forced to drink water used in washing corpses of their dead husbands to prove their innocence of their death (Okafor, Onwudufor & Nnoruga, 2013).

Women are often victims of gender-based violence which entails a host of harmful behaviours directed at women and girls because of their sex such as, wife battering, sexual abuse, marital rape, forced marriage, forced prostitution and genital mutilation of female children (Ezeabasili, 2018). Women are equally economically disadvantaged as they are deprived of ownership of the means of production such as land. They equally have low access to credit and income-earning opportunities. This situation has resulted to an increase in the level of poverty among them (Nwankwo, 2001).

In the area of politics, women still find it difficult to push through to the glasiatorial level. An insubstantial presence of women is found at the decision-making levels of the government as male politicians cow them out of politics by making it a rough and dirty game which only few courageous women can dare to play. The country keeps on suffering loss of women input in politics and other relevant areas of national life as a result of discrimination against women and girl-children. There is, therefore, the need for total removal of every society-

imposed restriction on women to enable them develop, as well as maximize their various potentials for meaningful contribution to sustainable national development.

### **Nigerian Women and National Development**

No country in the modern times, can easily or successfully achieve national development if the women folk are consciously or unconsciously sidelined. Women are catalysts of national development. Studies have shown that women have made significant contributions in the areas of human resources, social development and general economic reforms at various facets of national development striving (Okereke, 2001). In spite of a galaxy of socio-cultural, economic, political and educational impediments facing women in Nigerian society, they have continued to contribute immensely to national development in many ways.

Women play a leading role in rural community development. By active engagement in food production and presentation, family life, culture and value transmission, peace-making and more, women improve the quality of life in rural areas and ultimately in the nation at large. Observation has shown that women are the most economically active group in rural communities. Women farmers contribute enormously to national agricultural output through the cultivation of rice, beans, cowpea, soghum, millet mellon, potato, cassava, yam, cocoyam and other staple food (Obizue, Ogidi & Ejim, 2016).

Generally, Nigerian women, as a result of the prevailing cultural pattern in many parts of the country, have not really enjoyed equal economic participation with their male counterparts, yet they form 70% of food producers in the country (Okehi, 2016). They constitute about 49.7% of Nigerian population and the majority of them reside in the rural areas where they live mainly by exploiting natural resources (CBN, 2006). Women not only supply labour for agriculture, food items, agro-based products, and so on, they equally market and transport peasant farm surplus between rural and urban areas.

History of political development in Nigeria will remain incomplete without mention being made of the contributions of women such as Mrs. Fumuillayo Ramsome Kutu, Mrs. Margret Ekpo; Senator Franca Afegbuo, Senator Nenadi Usman, Senator Christe Ada Anyanwu, Senator Uche Ekwunife and Nkeiruka Onyejiocha. Others include Ngozi Okonji Iweala, the first woman Nigerian minister for foreign affairs, Professor Rufai Yahaya, former minister for

education, Stella Odua, former minister for Aviation, Mrs. Chinwe Obaji former minister for Education, Mrs. Kema Chikwe, former minister for Aviation, among others (Anyanwu, Ohanele & Dike, 2014). These women really left indelible imprints on sands of time when they served in Federal Executive Council (FEC) of various Nigerian government.

Moreso, women are very crucial during election periods because of their inherent potentials to determine possible outcomes of certain electoral processes. They do this through their numerical strength, coupled with being resolute in their choice of candidates for elective positions during election. Women influence a change in government through their voting power and through staging of protest, demonstration and criticisms against unpopular government. The incorporation of women in national development is an important element and a sure way to speedy development of the Nigerian state (Onwunyi, 2018).

### **Building Women Capacities for Sustainable Development**

There is no doubt that women are catalysts for development in every human society. It has, therefore become imperative for efforts to be intensified by both government and male folks in the society to help women develop their inherent potentials for more meaningful contribution to sustainable development in Nigeria. Women capacity building in these key areas of life is of great importance;

1. **Education:** There is presently an urgent need to increase the quality and quantity of education for Nigerian women. This is the basic tool that should be given to women in order to fulfill their roles as full members of the society. Education is the basis for the full promotion and enhancement of the status of women. It is particularly valuable as a strategic investment in human resource, as the social benefits are high (Meleki & Osaji, 2016). Education is a weapon of liberation of women from poverty, ignorance and disease. It is the key that opens the door of economic growth and prosperity for the women. Women education empowers, civilizes, refines, cultures and educates the women and girl-children. The extent and scope of capacity building among women in any society is a function of the quality or type of education they are given (Aju, Ibe & Echeta, 2014).

Functional type of education will indeed be of great relevance in equipping women and girl-children to function as optimally as possible, to survive and thrive in a complex, competitive and class conscious world (Okere, 2014). It

refers to the fitness and appropriateness of education for the needs of daily life, the hopes and aspirations or expectations including meeting up with future uncertainties and challenges. Functional education for women is expected to promote their welfare, advance their knowledge in technology, economic growth, and environmental management and empower them with the ability to nurture positive social, economic, political and cultural attributes in the country at the individual and corporate levels (Anyanwu, 2014). Women should, therefore be encouraged in science and technology education in order to develop and harness their science and technology potentials. Nigeria will develop faster when it gets adequate number of women medical doctors, pharmacists, geologists, engineers, (aeronautic, mechanical, civil, petroleum and gas, agricultural genetic, engineers etc.).

Similarly entrepreneurship education enables women and girl-children to acquire various skills which make them self-reliant. Entrepreneurship education will be beneficial to the women through the acquisition of skills and knowledge and creation of wealth as well as make them become employers of labour and ultimately contributors to national development (Orisa, 2013). It helps in no small measure in making women creative, innovative, resourceful, objective and confident and also develop in them the capacity for critical thinking required for effective handling of business opportunities and related matters.

Studies have shown that education enhances a woman's overall health, grants her access to paid employment and also enables her to make informed decision about herself and to assume a status and identity beyond those that are linked with child rearing and family. However, it is heart-rending to note that as important as education is to women capacity building, available statistics show that they lag behind men in all areas of education (Meleki & Osaji, 2016). UNESCO (2006) cited in Meleki and Osaji (2016) corroborates the above when it observes that in spite of the many declarations aiming at making gender parity in education a reality, gender disparities have continued to persist throughout the education system.

- ii. **Financial/Economic Capacity:** Women's financial/economic capacity when built will enable them have greater access and control over material resources, knowledge, attitude and skills for a better life. Government should allocate financial resources directly to the women folks to arm them with the economic tools for personal emancipation from the shackles of poverty. Unnecessary protocols that hinder women access to credit facilities, such as

collaterals, high interest rate, guarantors of reputable standing in the society etc. should be waived for them. This no doubt, will pave way for their easy access to investment capital in small and medium scale industrial productions, import and export businesses, retail and wholesale business outfits and so on (Iheanacho, 2016).

**iii. Training in Skills:** Though successive governments have made efforts in training women in various skills to enable them riggle out of the pawns of poverty, greater number of them are still without well-defined means of livelihood. They are unemployed and impoverished and therefore cannot contribute to societal development. Training them in skills such as soap-making, pomade-making, hair-dressing, fashion and design, bakery, cloth-weaving, snail rearing, rabbitry, poultry, use of computer and internet, interior decoration, GSM repairs, pottery, ceramics, art and craft and others, will reposition them in the society for meaningful contribution to sustainable development. Women socio-economic transformation and capacity building through skills acquisition will invariably impact on their families and the society at large.

#### **iv. Capacity for Political Participation/representation**

It is not enough to advocate for equal opportunities for participation of women and men in political and decision-making processes in the country, without serious efforts made to raise women's political consciousness and awareness. Most Nigerian women participate passively and partially in the political process with little or no interest in full political participation. Ignorance, illiteracy, fear, religious belief cultural burners and so on, have continued to hold women down, discouraging them from venturing into the gladiatorial level of political participation. Nigerian women at this time, need properly focused and well-structured political education, leadership training, seminars and workshops in order to raise their political consciousness, and enhance their opportunity for political participation.

Political education and leadership training will empower women with the knowledge, skills, courage, and self-confidence to fight their own fears, and go out in the world of politics fearless where they can snatch their own rights (political power) from the clutches of men because political power is not given but taken (Iloanya, 2018). This will make fruitful the sustained campaign by successive government in Nigeria for greater and effective women participation in polities in line with the Beijing conference declaration which advocates for

35% affirmative action. Affirmative action in the form of allocation of special seats for women and waving of the fees for obtaining the party nomination forms into elective positions would help elicit their interest in politics and address their poor representation (Kalu, 2018).

### **Successive Government in Nigeria and Women Capacity Building**

Several efforts were made by successive government in Nigeria towards women capacity building, though most of these efforts did not yield the expected result due to implementation problem. Until the ascension of Gen Ibrahim Babangida in 1985, the previous governments in Nigeria were not explicit on women capacity building. This is so, probably, because they did not see women empowerment and capacity building as one of the most effective and practical ways of reducing poverty in the rural areas (Obizue, Ogidi & Ejim, 2016). In 1985, Gen Ibrahim Babangida came up with a plan of rural development and poverty alleviation policy centred on the eradication of rural illiteracy and facilitating rural socio-economic transformation through encouragement of the role of women. His government established Better Life for Rural Women, in 1987, a programme that helped in no small measure in building capacities of rural women through skills acquisition and inculcation of knowledge of self-help enterprises and provision of credit facilities to them.

The regime of late Gen. Sani Abacha introduced Family Support Programme (FSP) in 1994. This is to help provide families in the rural areas, especially rural women, with health care delivery, child welfare, and capacity building. In 1997, Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) was established as a way of contending the soaring rate of poverty in Nigeria. Under FEAP, micro credit or soft loan was provided to rural people for the establishment of cottage industries and the improvement of their agricultural production. Some rural women benefited from the micro-credit scheme which served as investment promotion, poverty alleviation and capacity building of the less-privileged Nigerians (Iheanacho, 2016). The government of Olusegun Obasanjo set up Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) in 2000 with the aim of creating jobs for the unemployed individuals. The participants which included many poor women, engaged in labour activities such as environmental sanitation, vegetation control along high-ways, patching of potholes and maintenance of public building (Iheanacho, 2016). In order to make poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) more efficient and result-oriented, it was changed to National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) in 2001 MAREP was charged with the responsibility of

providing employment to diverse groups of unemployed Nigerians with the aim of mitigating the current state of socio-economic vices prevalent amongst the unemployed citizens of Nigeria, and to create a stable source of income for the participants to be economically empowered and thereby free from income poverty (Federal Ministry of Information and national Orientation, 2007).

President Obasanjo in 2004 joined other world leaders of the United Nations to key into the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), which sought to achieve wealth creation, employment generation, poverty reduction and value re-orientation by 2020. Consequently, his government produced a policy document called the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). At the state level was the State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS), while at the local government level was the Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (LEEDS). The focus was to meet some of the objectives of the MDGs, such as poverty alleviation among Nigeria citizens, especially women and girl-children (Iheanacho, 2016).

The government of President Umaru Musa Yar'adua (2007-2010) and President Goodluck Jonathan (2010 - 2015) also keyed into the above MDGs goals of poverty reduction by engaging in various programmes of action for socio-economic and educational empowerment of the less-privileged citizens, especially women and girl-children. Some of these programmes, however, did not yield the expected results due to corruption and poor implementation by Nigerian bureaucrats.

### **Constraints to Women Capacity Building in Nigeria**

Women capacity building in Nigeria is being constrained by a galaxy of factors, some of which include:

**Illiteracy:** Educational deficiency of the women in Nigeria has been the bane of their capacity building. Most women in the rural areas are illiterate and so find it difficult to respond positively to any programme, whether from the government or non governmental organisations (NGOs) aimed at building their various capacities for meaningful contribution to sustainable development. Osuala (1996) contends that some firms discriminate against women in their employment policy and female participation rate in the civil service is much lower than that of the males. While Osuala's view might be admitted to be true to some extent, one should also not ignore the fact that some women decide not to embark on certain types of studies both at secondary and tertiary education levels due to ignorance.

Some women in some communities in Nigeria prefer straying at home to do farm works and household chores to going to school. They still see education as a strenuous exercise not suitable for women but the men folks.

**Low self-esteem:** Most women have remained fettered to the erroneous belief that they are the weaker sex and as such nothing good can come from them. This notion and mentality keep on impinging on women's participation in some capacity building programmes of the government. Women look down on themselves due to the artificial status of second class citizens given to them by the society and menfolks and as such engage with cold feet, in skills acquisition programmes, entrepreneurship education and so on, and respond slowly to the use of credit facilities or micro-soft loan made available by the government for women financial empowerment (Onwunyi, 2018).

**Family Challenges:** Most women still do not find it easy and convenient to engage in certain occupation, trade, education and skills development programmes because of their preoccupation with family affairs such as pregnancy, child rearing, house care, cooking for the family and children-schooling, among other things. They often accord more priority attention to home-developing than their capacity building in various fields of endeavours.

**Inequality:** The unequal access to power and resources in the society between men and women has to a large extent hindered women capacity building in Nigeria (Onwunyi, 2018).

**Child-Marriage:** Child-marriage is still holding sway in some parts of Nigeria, especially in the North. This is a reflection of their emphasis on the virtue of virginity for women at marriage, hence little girls believed to be virgins are married off to men who most times are old enough to be their fathers (Onwunyi, 2018). This type of marriage gives the girl-children little or no time for their capacity building via education and related programmes.

**Corruption and poor programme implementation:** Most of the capacity building programmes for the women are run and managed by corrupt government officials who often divert the funds meant for the programmes to their personal accounts. The government sometimes do not effectively monitor and implement some poverty alleviation/skills acquisition programmes meant for women.

### **The Way Forward**

No doubt, the need to build women capacity for their significant contribution to sustainable development in Nigeria has continued to attract the attention of the government, some Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and well-meaning Nigerian citizens in the recent times. Some efforts made in this regard are being impeded by a host of factors which make them not to yield the necessary fruits. Hence this paper makes the following suggestions as the way forward.

The government at all levels (Federal, State and Local) should mount sensitization programmes for the women and girl-children to create awareness among them on the need to embrace education and various capacity building programmes provided by the government. Various religious bodies/organizations in Nigeria should also join hands with the government in this awareness campaign/women sensitization campaign. Women and girl-children should be made to understand that education and skills development are the keys that will unlock their potentials for self fulfillment and maximum contribution to societal development.

Men should support the women in various families by assisting them in certain household chores to enable them have time for education and skills acquisition programmes. The men should treat the women as equal and not as subordinate or weaker sex to them (Iloanya, 2018). Women should change their mentality and wrong belief foisted on them by the culture and tradition of the society, that they are second class-citizens incapable of lofty achievements. Nigerian women should understand that they are indispensable in any successful socio-economic and political development of the nation. God has made them helpers of the men and nation at large, without them things will rarely work smoothly.

The government should increase the number of skills acquisition centres for the women. This is to say, that more funds should be earmarked by the government for women capacity building and education of the girl-children in Nigeria. In the same vein, efforts should be made by various universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and other institutions higher learning to increase admission quota for female students.

The government should ensure that only those with proven record of integrity and excellent performance in their various fields of endeavour will be appointed

to manage government skills acquisition centres, poverty alleviation programmes and women development centres. Those who were charged with cases of diversion of funds meant for women skills acquisition and development in the past should be arrested by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and prosecuted accordingly. This will surely serve as a deterrent to others.

The government should enact laws that will stop child-marriage in its entirety in various parts of the country. This will enable girl-children to devote their time and interest to capacity building via education and skills acquisition.

### **Conclusion**

Women capacity building is indeed an important factor in the contemporary quest for the promotion of gender equality, women empowerment and active participation in decision-making processes of the society. Women have, over the years shown that they can contribute immensely to sustainable development of the nation if properly empowered and when given the opportunity. Women incorporated in the government of Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo, Umaru Musa Yar'adua and Goodluck Jonathan proved their mettle as catalysts for national development through quality representation.

It is however regrettable that majority of Nigerian women still wallow in illiteracy and poverty and hence cannot contribute anything to societal development. This makes women education and capacity building imperative in Nigeria. Women with fully developed capacities are economic reformers, peace builders, good child educators, good home-managers, and efficient political leaders. There is urgently the need to close the gender gap existing in all spheres of the nation's life in order to fast-track national development in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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