

FOCUS on NIGERIA

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by



THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND WOMEN ORGANISATION IN POPULATION CONTROL IN NIGERIA.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of insufficient and inadequate housing, food and means of transportation has continually starred governments in the face. This is often a direct result of over population. In India and China, the problem of over population has led to very drastic measures of birth control so as to alleviate suffering on the existing population. To be able to discuss the above topic with reference to Nigeria, it is necessary to define the concept "population control". Population refers to the number of people in a given location and in this case Nigeria (Hornby, 1974). Control denotes "management" or "guidance". Population control in Nigeria therefore refers to management and/or guidance of the number of people living in Nigeria. More importantly, population may not only refer to just "number", it implies the description of these people viz: how many men, women or children? How many are literate? What are their health status and the like. Population control measures are expected by implication to control toward improved and acceptable standards and not vice versa.

In Nigeria, the 1963 census placed the population at 55.3 million people. Since then there had not been any other agreed census figure nor projection until 1991. The situation was so vague that by 1989, there was a speculation that the population of Nigeria had exceeded 100 million. This alarming figure for Nigeria especially with the dwindling national income must have motivated the 1991 census exercise. Today an agreed census figure stands at 88.5 million with women constituting 49.6% of the figure. This figure is viewed as being too high for a nation whose gross earnings was N93.8m by 1992 and not improving substantially thereafter (CBN, 1992). Therefore, there is need for control towards a reduction in the number of people or at least towards making sure that population growth moves at a commensurate rate with the nation's earnings. It has also been realised that there is need to cut down from the present rate of 5.8 children (approximately 6 children) per woman. This probably informed the Babangida regime to suggest the rate of 4 children per women and the expanded mass campaign on family planning strategies.

Efforts have been concentrated massively on women during antinatal and child welfare clinics. Campaign on mass media is expected

to reach men as well as women. One cannot help asking some basic questions at this point: Despite the obvious reasons for the need for population control and despite the numerous campaigns, why has there not been a change in the right direction? Have Nigerians adhered to the 4-children-per-women control measure suggested for Nigeria? Who and what are responsible for non-observance of population control measure prescribed for Nigeria? Are there any roles that women and women organisations can play to bring about population control? This is the gist of this chapter. In trying to provide answers to the above questions, the paper shall address the status of women in Nigeria and the implication of their status for population control. Finally, strategies for population control would be recommended.

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA

Nigeria in almost all its diverse cultures, practices patriarchy which asserts a natural superiority of men over women. Women therefore are trained right from childhood, through the various childrearing practices to accept a comparatively subordinate and inferior position. This practice gives rise to various contemporary practices in the present Nigerian situation. Although women contribute more to economic, social and educational upliftment of individual families, they are not accorded social recognition commensurate to their contributions. They suffer more from political deprivations and subjugation owing to cultural and social organisation of the society.

Economically, while contributing to the reaslisation of individual families it is believed that women are contributing to economic realities of the society. Afonja (1990) and Okoji (1990) note that women outnumber men in agricultural and food production. WIN (1994) acknowledges women as contributing to 70% of the agricultural labour force thereby producing much of the country's food. Despite this, women do not own food source. They neither have rights to own land nor can they work for their private economic reasons. They only farm on husband's pieces of land and the proceeds are either used to feed the family or for husband's income. They do not own cash crops like cocoa, palm trees and the like, yet they perform more labour required in the processing of these cash crops.

In household chores, women completely forget about their very existence in order to meet up the sanitary condition of the house, feeding and health care of the household members. WIN (1994:5) puts it this way:

The imperatives of household and family responsibilities mean that women ignore their own needs for most part in order to take care of the needs of others.

It is worse for those who work outside the home, i.e. in public offices or in business enterprises, because it amounts to a combination of all the cases above and her outside engagement. Income generated from this outside engagement is only used to assist the woman in the discharge of her home maintenance assignment. The summary of the economic disposition of the Nigerian women is that although they constitute the major work force in the society, their work is often not paid for; for instance, work in form of family chores. When their work attracts any income, the proceeds are directly controlled by men (husbands, fathers or brothers). Even the little which occasionally comes to the woman in cash, if any, is recycled into family upbringing. This is however hardly enough for any meaningful maintenance of the family.

The status of the Nigerian woman is often defined in marriage and child bearing. It is often heard that one is not "responsible" if one is not married. This assertion makes one to wonder what extra responsibility quality marriage can attach to a newly-wedded couple, for an example, as against a self-chosen and long-standing celibate. One also notices the sadness more on the part of a woman who, after marriage does not give birth. Mockery and disgrace are often mutted to a childless woman for this occurrence. In several cultures also, sharing of the family estate is done on the basis of the number of male children. This is often observed in a polygamous family. These factors conspire to make woman get

interested in giving birth to children and many children.

It is obvious that the economic potential of an individual determines his social standing. In the family just as in the society, women are dominated. The qualities of a good wife (woman) includes obedience and submission to her husband even if the husband is very irresponsible. There is no wonder then why major family and reproductive decisions are still within the man's domain. A woman needs the husband's permission to embrace family planning. Many men however show open apathy to any of the artificial methods of birth control. In many cases, women are threatened with divorce if they show their desire to use family planning devices so as to limit the number of children they would have. No wonder, therefore, upon all the campaign, the Federal Office of Statistics (1992) reports that only 4% of Nigerian women are found using contraceptives. Use of condom by men in family sexual relationships is unpopular for the mere reason that they (men) do not enjoy the relationship. The above does not only expose men's opposition to family planning device but also exposes their unproductive attitude towards population control.

Comparatively also, women go into marriage earlier than men. Education which still tries to be an asset to status and provide livelihood is often disrupted. Only a negligible percentage have the opportunity of continuing their education after marriage but that does not have to be at

the expense of making babies or children's education. Where they continue with their education after marriage they owe the permission/credit to their husbands who may or may not have sponsored the education. For this further allegiance is expected to be paid to the husband. All these militate against women in their attempt to

acquire any high status in the society.

In contemporary Nigeria, women are becoming increasingly aware of the need for the Nigerian women to rise to the challenge of equality of humans, to fend for themselves individually and collectively and protect themselves from unnecessary embarrassments. As a result, many Nigerian women have formed non-governmental organisations geared towards mainstreaming women in the scheme of things in the country as a starting point to the restoration of human dignity and a higher status for Nigerian women. Today, a National Policy on Women in Development has been developed. This document provides for full integration of women into social economic and political life of Nigeria. This policy concentrates on the issues of equity, social order, resource allocation and social well-being for women. Unfortunately, the policy has not been adopted by government despite its laudable objectives.

So, Nigerian women are the species of humans who are devalued labourers for income neither used by them for their own exclusive interest. They have no right to self protection through independent decision making. They owe their very existence to subordination and even get sanctioned for refusing to be devalued. This trend culminates into a worse situation in contemporary times when women have realised to some extent that there is need to assert their worth and accord themselves some value. Intimidation and victimization have been resorted to in order to revert them to even more subjugated positions.

IMPLICATION OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN TO POPULATION AND POPULATION CONTROL

Women who do more work are exposed to health hazards. They are also burdened with the pangs of childbirth. They are placed at maternal mortality risk during childbirth and therefore deserve the right to reproduction decisions in the family. These decisions include when to have a baby depending on her health and her disposition and how many children she would be able to give birth to. Presently, the number of children and the spacing is quite often the husband's decision, no matter what the wife may prefer and regardless of her state of health. This results in 15 women per 1000 births maternal mortality rate for Nigeria deemed one of the highest in the world.

However, the woman in the family has an option. The family planning device is at her doorstep for use regardless of the opinion of her husband. She should however request his assistance and understanding but where there is any objective and her life is at risk, she has no other option than to use the family planning device of her choice. The implication of this decision is that there will be control on the number of children directly by women who are impacted more by childbirth and child rearing exercise. Moreover, the rate of maternal mortality would reduce as only those who feel strong in health would venture into childbirth.

When women who are the main source of food production take decisions on how many children they would have, the decision would be guided by realistic principles as they are the right people to assess how much food and other resources are available and how many children these resources can sustain as opposed to men (husbands) who

are often guided by the pleasure principles.

With the average marriage age for a woman at (16) in Nigeria (WIN, 1994), the child bearing age range becomes wide (16-45). The probability is that there would be more children given birth to during this wide range than if the range was narrower. On the one hand, women (girls) of below 20 scarcely can object the pressure of marriage and early child birth nor defend themselves especially when both parents have agreed to the marriage contract. From this time they need marriage guidance which is hardly obtained in Nigeria. The only available guidance is the husband's authority. From now, child bearing becomes her profession. Before she realises it, she has exceeded the number of children she can honestly cope with. Thus, frustration sets in and her mental health is affected. Women organisation and older women who have experience in these aspects have a role to play at this instance. Their role would be to guide and educate the young woman in matters concerning reproductive decisions, early marriage and family planning. Sufficient exposure, when given would guide the young woman to make adequate preparations and guard against over-population in her house.

Early marriage also reduces the quality in population as women who are given out in marriage hardly complete their education and can hardly continue after marriage. Bolarin (1989) observes an association between parents' level of education and the academic achievement of children. When education of the woman is interrupted, the quality of the population is adversely affected.

STRATEGIES FOR POPULATION CONTROL

- Women should assess their individual situation especially in matters relating to their reproductive health before accepting to go into reproduction contact.
- Women should have an idea of the number of children they would be able to cope with especially in relation to their income. They

should object to any moves to exceed the number since this would reduce their state of health and place both mother and children at risk.

- 3. Women should strive at all cost to elevate their status in the society. One sure way of doing this is to make sure that their education is not terminated prematurely on account of marriage and childbirth. Another is to belong to women and other organisations for the purpose of increased awareness. Already, women are working hard enough to earn sufficient income but making the income personal to them and used in their interest is the avenue where women organisations should come in to ensure that such policies are formulated and adopted.
- 4. Mass awareness of women on available family planning devices should be embarked upon by women organistions. These organisations should also be ready to defend any woman both legally and otherwise should she, be harassed for embracing and making use of family planning devices.
- 5. Women organisations should, above all, pressurize the government to adopt the 1993 National Policy on Women Development which provided for full integration of women into the scheme of things in Nigeria. Patriarchy which is the sole and major factor responsible for the present situation is adequately addressed by this policy. This singular effort, when achieved would go a long way to accord women in Nigeria a relatively better/higher status than what obtains at present.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has reviewed the Nigerian population and has shown clearly the need for population control. The status of women in Nigeria has also been expaused. Women are seen as possessing the wherewithal for controlling population in the desired direction. Strategies for this population control have been recommended for individual and organisational implementation. It is the belief that when women and women organisation rise to the challenge of population control, that the desired population where social services would be commensurate to the number of people and the right quality of population would be achieved.

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