

## **FEMALE GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF AKWA IBOM STATE**

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### ***Abstract***

*Human resources (whether men or women) is the focus of economic development. It is unfortunate that most societies are gender bias, leaving room for the underutilization of female resources. Africa is highly hit and especially the West African Countries where it becomes extremely difficult to allow women to assume positions of men preserves. Women's great potentials for development is demonstrated in female members of the recent American Astronaut disaster, mission commander Kalpan Chawla an Indian and Laurel B. Clerk, an American. Other women have also featured in other fields of endeavour the world over. Previously, such area as astronaut adventure was deemed to exclusively male preserve. There are countless women architects, medical doctors, academic doctors and professors in various fields of endeavour. The establishment of women organizations by the state and women non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have further strengthened women development strategies. The arrival of Better Life for Rural Women in Nigeria and the subsequent women development programmes have portrayed the Nigeria women as effective agents of developments in spite of their shortcomings. However, the women contribution to national development has been quite insignificant because of gender bias. Women have found it difficult to acquire loans in large amounts, acquire landed property or get to policy-making positions. This work has highlighted the programmes and projects initiated and successfully implemented by women in Akwa Ibom State, and the problems preventing them from contributing significantly are also highlighted. Solutions have also been proffered.*

### **Introduction**

Women, according to the 1992 provisional census figure constitute a significant proportion (49.6%) of the Nigerian population (Oruwari, 1996). Women in developing countries do 70% of all the work in food production, 50% in animal husbandry; 100% in food processing and almost 100% of all domestic or household (FA, 1975). In Nigeria women constitute about 90% of the work force and most Nigerian women are fast becoming aware of the extent to which women do contribute to the national development in spite of the fact that they are marginalized, disoriented, and displaced in the modern society. It is a matter of much concern that in spite of the great number of educated women in Nigeria very few are given opportunities to contribute significantly to nation development. Most African rural traditions,

servicing religious cults and extinct political institutions, all attest to the significant positions when occupies in the social, economic, and political evolution of the different African communities (Balenle 1992).

It is a practical situation that women contributions to development are never recognized appreciably, Olaniyan (1995) shares this view when he said, "that where women need most to be integrated is in development planning, but such integration does not readily come their way". Women today assume more complex roles than in the past but they need to be encouraged to do better by perfecting their modes of production and the products themselves. Women's role in economic development before and during the colonial period is inevitable (Akpan 1988, Ezeigbo 1996, Enabulele, 1985, Mba, 1982).

### **Women and Women Organization in Nigeria: Their Roles in Economic Development**

Before the advent of colonialism, the Ibibio's lives in settlement, which favoured their farming occupation. The Marshy souls and the basically flat area coupes with the two men seasons-the rainy and the dry season favoured farming in Ibibio land. The women organization that was very strong and popular, the "Ebre", was used both as a political and economic organ of development. Women in Ibibio land, Annang, Oron and Eket were engaged in craft, trading and mostly in farm work. Because the Ibibio, Annang, Oron and Eket live in the oil palm belt, the women in these areas engaged in palm oil and palm kernel production. With the coming of the colonialist, men also engaged in palm fruit production (Ukegbu, 1974). Also, in the early twentieth century the Yoruba lived in large urban-like settlement with farmland some distance beyond the walls of the town (Mba 1982). As this area was not very safe for the dwellers, only those who could defend themselves and the society from incessant attacks were farm settlers, the women were entirely not left out of farming work because they were highly involved in harvesting process. Marketing of the products were also the women's job. As for old Oyo in 1983, on hundred wives of the Alaafin of Old Oyo traded at Iloro (Hallet, 1965). As observed by Johnson, the "women of those days were as hard as the men and often went in a body – as Ikire and Apomu for corn and foodstuffs (Johnson 1921, Mba, 1982). Craftwork such as pottery, bead making waving etc. was also an economic activity undertaken by women. As reported by Mba (1982), the Yoruba women largely controlled their own economic activities.

Women in the Benin economy were involved in almost the same kind of trading ventures like Yoruba women. Women belonged to their own craft guilds. Since the control of the markets was the men's prerogative, the women had few market associations.

The majority of the women in Lagos in 1921 were indigenes who were illiterate engaging in trading (Mba, 1982). In 1950, there were

60,000 women in Lagos, of whom 27,600 were traders with 8,000 holding permits for stalls (Comhair-Sylvian, 1959).

Even in the early times women often come together in groups to tackle their problems. In 1938, the Lakoro Women's Union limited was registered as a company. The Calabar women were less engaged in farm work, while their main occupation was petty trading. The ruling house in Calabar had the privilege of owning slaves who did the farm work and most of the house work.

Women's voices are better heard when they come together in groups. (Ezeigbo (1996) is of the opinion that post-independent Nigeria has witnessed formation of more women groups, which had helped in articulating interests of women as well as encourage them to participate in nation building. Since the inception of Better Life for Rural Women, Nigeria has experienced an increase in the number women organizations directed at rural/national developments. According to a report presented by Agbola Tunde (Oruwari, 1996), over 80% of women belong to one organization or the other 40.3% belong to the traditional age grade types of organization, Religious (2.5%) trade union (13.2%) while others form (7.1%). In Nigeria, the most pronounced women programmes since 1985 directed towards women and development are:-

1. The Better Life for The Rural Women
2. The Family Support Programme
3. The Doorstep Health
4. The Life Enhancement Programme (Which is popularly operated in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria)

There are numerous women development organs in the form of cooperative societies. There are also several cooperative societies consisting of only women, which are formed and directed towards rural development in Nigeria.

### **Programmed Initiated and Successfully Implemented by Women in Akwa Ibom State**

#### **Geographical Location of the State**

Located in the Southeast Nigeria, Akwa Ibom State occupies a total area of 7, 245,935 sq km. In the southern zone of Nigeria's territorial expanse, lying between latitudes 4<sup>o</sup> 33' and 5<sup>o</sup> 33' North and longitudes 7<sup>o</sup> 35' and 8<sup>o</sup> 25' East. It is bounded on the north by Abia and Cross Rivers State of Nigeria and on the South by Atlantic Ocean. On the east, the state shares its boundary with Cross River and Abia States (The Land of Promise: Vol. 1, No. 4, 1999). Akwa Ibom State was created out of the present Cross River State, which evolved from former Southeastern State of Nigeria.

As already stated, the Akwa Ibom State falls within the tropical zone. Its dominant vegetation is the green foliage of trees and shrubs and the oil palm tree belt, which holds the highest density of the cash crop in the world.

The state has basically two main seasons – the rainy and dry seasons, from November to April. The harmattan accompanies the northeast winds in December and early January. In the coastal areas, rain falls all year round.

The physical nature of the state, which is basically flat, has some areas which are as high as 200 feet above sea level. There are also some areas that are classified as valleys. This area are found in Ikot Abasi and Ukanafun Local Government Areas. Marshy soils also do exist around the banks of the Qua Iboe River in Eket, the Crooks of Ikot Abasi. Others include those of Cross River and the estuaries in Oron, (The Land of Promise: Vol. 1 No. 4, 1999).

With the population of over 2.4 million, the state is made up of a homogenous group which migrated from the East Central Africa during the historic expedition of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Traditional occupations include trading, woodcarving, raffia works, and ceramics works, bead making, fishing, blacksmithing and others:

Akwa Ibom State is known nation wide and internationally for its rich and enviable cultural heritage. The people exhibit common cultural patterns which are epitomized in their menu and dressing. The people share similar festivals, folklore, and songs, plays, dances. They also share common philosophies, beliefs in cults, oracles and mythology (Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria Information Guide: the Land of Promise Vol. 1 No. 4 of 1999).

### **Women Activities in Akwa-Ibom State of Nigeria**

In addition to child bearing, family care and chores, the productive engagements of women in Akwa Ibom State, include subsistence farming, oil palm processing, weaving, pottery, craft and petty trading. A woman in the riverine areas engages in fish industry. In Akwa Ibom State, women engage and run successfully their cottage industries in various sections of the state. Since it is far more difficult for women to operate individually in terms of development, it becomes necessary that they mobilize themselves effectively into women organizations. The economies of the rural communities in Akwa Ibom State are sustained mainly through the various productive ventures undertaken by women. Talbot (1968) maintained that the greater proportion of labour in Ibibioland is taken by the women: Essen (1982) maintained that the Ibibio women develop their children to become productive members of the society. Esen (1982) discusses the Ibiobio women assuming the capacity to raise their children irrespective of the husband in a polygamous family.

### **Women Activities in Etinan Local Government Area**

There is a fishpond established in Ikot Udobia and Ikot Esua both in Etinan Local Government Area. Fish trading is a lucrative business in the state and the establishment of the fishponds has eased in producing more fish. When fish is harvested, prices of fishes are likely to be brought low, this is the case when fish is harvested by an Etinan fish farmer.

Improved method for the production of palm oil has been introduced to ease women in Etinan Local Government Area. Other projects established by the women organizations are the Home Economic Training Center, which is located in Mbioto I and Mbioto II. Pottery and Craft centers are also located in these two villages. There are several registered women cooperative societies in Etinan Local Government Area that embark on various kinds of courtesy industries.

### **Women Activities in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area**

There are several registered women cooperative which give financial support to women projects in their various areas of operating. There is a craft centre that has trained many women. There is also a functional Adult education centre. Fish smoking is a predominant occupation of women in Ikot Abasi.

Thus allowing the women to be popular in fishing occupation, which is undertaken by both males and females.

### **Women Activities in Uyo Local Government Area**

At Obi Offot, there is a comprehensive training centre. This centre caters for women who train in bakery, catering, sewing, knitting, and home management. An arm in the Governor's office, Life Enhancement Programmes has trained women in various trades like sewing (cloth designing and interior decoration) weaving and other trades that have helped to enhance the standard of women in the state. Several women cooperative societies have also been registered in Uyo Local Government, some of which specialise in petty trading.

### **Women Activities in Mbo Local Government Area**

There exists Nka Uforo Iban fish smoking kiln and fish market located at the Ebughu fishing terminal. There is a pineapple farm, which is mainly cultivated by the women. Faring is carried out at a subsistent level but the most popular is fish smoking which is predominant occupation of women in the area.

### **Women Activities in Eket Local Government Area**

There exist goatry, poultry and large cassava farm in addition to weaving centres, tie and dye, beads works, sewing and catering services. There are also several women cooperative registered societies.

~~East~~ ~~West~~ Local Government being a riverine area enables the women to ~~engage~~ extensively in fish farming.

#### **Women Activities in Uruan Local Government Area**

At Adadia and Ndon Ebom is located in piggery farm, run by the ~~woman~~. Several cooperative societies are also registered. There is a ~~functional~~ development center. Women and men organizations in Uruan Local Government engage in extensive farming as they are blessed with ~~uninhabited~~ areas that favour farming occupation.

#### **Problems Encountered by Akwa Ibom State Women in Contributing Significantly in Rural Development**

1. **Lack of Reasonable Capital:** Although it has been discussed in this work that there are uncountable cooperative societies, countrywide, it is quite imminent that most of the member of these cooperative societies have very small amount of money as loans making it impossible for them to make any reasonable investment. The author of this work recollects a situation where she encountered problems when she organized women in her church to form a cooperative society for the purpose of acquiring small-scale loans. It proved difficult for the rural women to be able to make any reasonably contribution to the cooperative society's account to enable the cooperative society qualify for a loan.
2. **Traditional Beliefs which prevent Women from Inheriting from their Parents:** This is a widely held belief in the Nigerian society that women in some part of the country have no share in their father's estate. This belief already puts the man in a sure footing while the female child is left to seek assistance somewhere. Few women ever have collaterals to lean on and it thus becomes difficult to have an easy take off in economic ventures.
3. **Women have little Access to Leadership Positions:** Most Nigerians are witnesses that many women organizations have proved their worth in some programmes and project implementation. Since the inception of the Better Life for Rural Women, women who have been privileged to manage small-scale industries have executed project fairly well. This becomes evident that if women were allowed to participate significantly in public sector leadership, they would be able to mobilize women effectively for development. In spite of some short comings exhibited by some women organization, programmes initiated by women become popular, not only among women but among the entire Nigerian citizens.

4. **Marginalization in Political Arena:** It is quite acceptable that few women accept to come out for political participation but it is also a serious problem that the few women who agree to contest for positions are unable to get nominations even at the primary level. It is not disputable that women who must contest for positions must be backed up by the men, but they (men) refuse to spend money on women who they believe, will never win elections even at the primary level. If women are unable to push themselves into the policy-making bodies such as The House of Assembly in the state, it becomes impossible for policies favouring women to sail through. For example, the current Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly is without a female member. The outgoing Local Government Chairman has ratio of 30:1; 30 male and only one female.
5. **Ineffective Management of Women Programmes (government sponsored):** It is speculated that most government sponsored women programmes are not effectively managed; because, sometimes the funds released for projects fail to enter the right hands and as a result the projects are either poorly implemented or not implemented at all. Current events, however, show that project and programmes implementation regarding women are greatly enhanced with intensive enlightenment campaigns.

#### **Proffered Solutions:**

1. It is advisable for the women to strive harder in the social and economic ventures in life. It is quite glaring that women's standard of living has improved with the increase in women programmes than in the past. They are enjoying improved ways of frying garri, production of palm oil and palm kernel, production of vegetable oil, improved ways of weaving, pottery, and other economic activities. More women should form more cooperative societies to enable them enjoy loans.
2. Men in Akwa Ibom State society are advised to regard the women as counterparts and not the "other sex" who are inferior citizens, and incapable of exhibiting the characteristics of "partners in progress" or "partners in developing".
3. It is advisable for the entire citizenry of Akwa Ibom State society is to tap the rich potentials hidden in half the population of Nigeria and not allow the potentials to rot away. The notion that women are not for the political sphere should be discarded, now that women have exhibited their good talents as good public sector leaders.

4. Money released by government for implementation of women programmes should be effectively monitored and directed towards the desired goals.
5. Government should strive harder to supply women organization with the services of modern farming implements like tractors. Fertilizers supplied to women organization are very insignificant and therefore, are unable to go round female organizations in sufficient quantities. The United Nations Development project (UNDP) assisted commercial projects such as palm oil processing centres should also be introduced in many rural areas to eliminate the instances of cracking kernels with stones.
6. There should be improved roads to enable women evacuate their farm products from the farms to the markets. It is often very sad to see women trek long distances of about 10 kilometers through the forest to evacuate their products, sometimes, those products are never entirely evacuated.
7. Government should institute legal reforms to guarantee women's constitutional and legal rights in terms of access to land and other means of production and should ensure that women control the products they produce.

### Conclusion

The increase in cooperative societies is positive evidence that women in Akwa Ibo State are responding to the campaigns that women should engage effectively in economic ventures. The improved methods of farming, cassava frying, fish smoking etc have contributed to improve health of women in the state thus reducing the death rate. Females have proved Mytelka wrong (African Studies Review Vol. 32, No.3, 1989) in her speculation that there exists "the unfulfilled promise of African industrialization". Women have successfully implemented The Resources Demand Model, that is, using the local raw materials for industrialization and development thus fulfilling African industrialization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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