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GENDER INEQUALITY, WOMEN'S HEALTH AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE AKWA IBOM STATE EXPERIENCE SINCE 1970S

Dominic A. Akpan,

Department of History and International Studies
University of Uyo
Akwa Ibom State.

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Abstract

Women in most parts of the world are denied their rights and pride of place expected of human beings. They did not have access to farmlands of their own, do not enjoy equal representation in politics, did not have access to education and medical facilities. Within the area in which this work is addressing, they were treated as tools for farm and child production. Put differently, they were catalysts in most instances, in effect reduced in status and dwarfed their image in the scheme of things. The paper uses oral interview as the major method of research in addition to other secondary sources. The findings are that, of recent, women are being integrated into the society and are enjoying the pride of place through education, access to loan facilities, right to assembly and partners in governance. But much is still left to be done for full integration in a globalized world. It adds that with time the changing scenario would improve the inequality situation, and improve their health status which, if sustained, may lead to women's contribution to sustainable development.

Introduction

For more than two millenia, the issue of gender inequality, whether in families, communities or states have been and is still an issue for discussion within national and international boundaries. It is an undisputable fact that there is inequality between males and females, not only in Nigeria but globally. This inequality is observed through limited opportunities in areas of access to education, employment, politics and economy. This lack of opportunities make for contradictions in the way women are perceived and rated in the society. However, the movement towards equality of men and women in the world is not a recent development. Over the centuries before and after the birth of Christ women were never equal to men in all ramifications. As it should be noted that it was during the French revolution that the idea of local equality between the genders was sought, but never achieved. But the revolution had encouraged feminism, a word coined by the French



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merchant and philosopher Charles Fourier (1772-1837) to denote efforts towards gender equity. In 1808, Fourier urged reform, and put forward that:

The best nations are always those that accord women the greatest amount of liberty Social progress and historic changes occur by virtue of the progress of women toward liberty, and decadence of the social order occurs as a result of a decrease in the liberty of women (Spodek, 1998)

Spodek (1998) is also at the opinion that the extension of women's privileges is the general principle for all social progress. Examining Gender under the contemporary, Ibibio experience, the word "Eka (mother in all detects spoken in Ibibio land means 'large' or extensive, motherhood and is often if not always, used in expression of adoration and awe. Eka also connotes greatness, importance, respect and reverence as in Eka Abasi, Eka Ekong, Eka eyen (the mother of the child (Essien 1986 in Umoh 2001.

Over the years, in what is now known as Akwa Ibom State, which was excised from Cross River State in 1987, though women performed many functions in the society, some even outclassed their male folks, they were not seen as equal to men. For instance, men had opportunities over women in discussing developmental issues in village, clans in village squares and other places. Certain cultural plays such as Ekpe, Ekpo, Obon, and others, women were totally excluded from participating in those plays. In seasons where these plays were performed or staged women were not allowed outside for any reason whatever. They were to remain indoors, for those women who were stubborn had to pay a price for disobeying or defiling the custom of the people. It is not really clear why women in those days were not allowed to be part of the culture of the society in which they were born into. In other words, women to a large extent were restricted in certain gatherings that were male dominated. In most instances, women were never part of some discussions even in areas that were women sensitive such as adultery (Nkantak, 2008). Indeed, the equality in those days manifested itself clearly, for instance women were never family heads, village heads nor clan heads. They were never allowed to participate in the politics of the village or clans such as in the choice or appointment of the village heads or clan heads where there were vacancies. On the issue of developments within villages or clans, they were not part of the planning but would be only part in the contributions of money for such projects.

In addition the already discussed restriction, there were some days in the week in which women were restricted or forbidden from fetching water in "special streams". Women who had given birth to twins were completely barred from associating with some women; or entering a stream to fetch water. In some parts of Akwa Ibom State such practices are still going on (Ekpa, 2008; Iboke, 2008). On another corollary, certain days too, women were restricted from markets especially on Ekpo playing days. There were other varied restrictions imposed by males on females that were inimical to their development. Women were only seen and perhaps regarded as mills for the manufacture of children and tending to the needs of their husbands.

With the introduction of Western education, males were preferred to females in the acquisition of Western civilization through education. So, a number of women who have the opportunity of attending school were crudely denied. Denying women the opportunity of being educated meant placing them in perpetual darkness.

Today in Akwa Ibom State, though there is no equality of males and females in all human endeavours, but women are more relevant in the society than before. Now, some women are part and parcel of decision making processes in extended families, villages, clans, and in executive councils of the modern democratic governments. Though, there are no women family heads, village heads or clan heads, but there were and are women heads of schools, commissioners, permanent secretaries, secretaries to State Government.

However, to show the progression that women are assuming the rightful positions now than before is summed up thus; in 1978 the first Akwa Ibom State Woman Commissioner was Obonganwan Bassey Akra, she served under Brigadier Paul Omu; she was closely followed by Mrs. Affiong Abasiattai as a Commissioner for Education in 1986. The first Secretary to Akwa Ibom State Government was Mrs. Mary Obot under Lt. Col. Bako's military administration in the 90s, closely followed by Mrs. Rita Akpan and Mrs. Grace Ekong under Governor Atra's administration of 1999 through 2003. In the present dispensation of Governor Godswill Akpabio are four women commissioners and a woman head of service. These are: Elder Mrs. Grace Anwana, Head of Civil Service, Lady (Barr.) Valerie M. Ebe, Commissioner for Culture and Tourism; Dr. Louisa O. Ukpe, Commissioner for Health and Mrs. Eunice Thomas, Commissioner for Women Affairs.

Causes of Inequality Between Men and Women in Akwa Ibom State

It is difficult to say when and what were the causes of inequality between males and females in our society. It is cultural; the society had been structured that way many years before this century. Women were not and are still not admitted into the following cult groups – Ekpo, Ekpe, Idiong and Inam. There is no reason for not being admitted, but the society is structured that way for a very long time, probably as late as the 18th century after their immigration and settlement. Others are of the opinion that, because women 'do not always keep secrets'. It is also difficult to say what some people refer to as 'secrets'. Before now title holding was exclusively for men. Then titles were bestowed on people who controlled resources and political power. Ibibio political institutions were and still being presided over by men except in Ekparakwa in the former Opobo division but today in Ukanafun Local Government Area (Eka, 2007). The structure of the society can also be witnessed through the fact that, a woman cannot be the head of a family even when such a family is a single family owing to the death of a husband or where children are raised by a woman without public identified husband. Women had no such rights. A family head is usually a man (Udo, 1983).

However, it would appear that women were contented to play the role assigned to them by the tradition and culture of the people – that was men dominated. It is so because, there was the story of Adiaha Udobong who brought Ekpo (Ekpo cult), and men later taken over from her, and she was later killed before the invitation (Eka, 2007). In other words Ekpo was a play that was introduced into the society by women, but was taken over by men and forbade women from watching when 'played'. Indeed, for even an argument that the Bible forbids women from having a say in the church, such argument would be baseless because the polarization of women and men has been part of our culture before the missionaries who brought the Bible landed on our shores. The Nigerian constitution guarantees equality to all citizens regardless of sex, and the right to be educated. Implying that there should be no discrimination by male or female. Poverty has reduced

considerably when compared to what occurred in the 1970s. In this connection most women have access to modern medical facilities.

Women's Health in Akwa Ibom

Before 1970, only very few women were said to be healthy and could contribute meaningful to the development of the state. They were plagued with two things – poverty and education. Quite a number of women were poor and that condition kept them out of access to modern medical facilities. However, at the time, there were few hospitals and other medical facilities and were located in the urban centres. Such health centres include St. Luke's Hospital in Uyo, St. Theresa's Hospital, Use-Abat, General Hospital, Ikot Ekpene. Most of these centres were kilometers away from people, hence very many could not afford transport to these places, let alone the medical bills. In this connection, many therefore, embraced the traditional medicine. This traditional medicine became a choice since there was no alternative. Thus, those who would not have died tend to die prematurely. The rural people and the illiterates were the worst affected (AKS Handbook, 1988).

Now, the situation has changed, there are 33 hospitals, 12 Comprehensive Health centres, 35 Primary Health Centres, 37 Health Posts, 6 State Clinics, 3 Dental Centres, 22 Leprosy Clinics, and 149 registered private clinics in Akwa Ibom State. In the process, the health of individuals not only women have improved (AKS Ministry of Health, 2000). Equally of note is the fact that Anti-Natal Women and old women are receiving free medical treatment in Akwa Ibom State

Public health has been and is still an important factor in human development. The health sector in any economy constitutes an important sector because when the citizens especially the growing and productive age are healthy, they become the pivot of the economy. A healthy population will contribute positively to the growth and development of the economic and social sector. A healthy population is vital to economic growth and sustainability since unhealthy people often consume more of society's resources than they produce (Akpan, 2005).

By 1991 census, Akwa Ibom State has more women than men. Statistically, women were 94,585 while men numbered 94,294. In 2006 census, it was the reverse, women were 1,875,689 while men numbered 2,044,510 (Nigeria Population Census, 2006). Majority of these women live in rural environment pursuing one business or another. Akwa Ibom falls within the area of high material endemicity (there is no reliable statistics), hence it has a direct effect on female health by its impact on the course of pregnancy. Besides, malaria weakens the immune system in so many women, and often times accompanied with fever. In this connection it slows down and wastes man hours in term of productivity. In most instances malaria is responsible for the high death toll especially in the rural communities. It is difficult to say the number of people suffering from it for lack of statistics (Kisekka, 1992).

There is also the plight of women suffering from Vesico Vagina Fistula (VVF). This disease has alienated a lot of women from their relations and non-relations alike and has jeopardized their productive years.

Many women still embrace the Traditional birth attendance either because of ignorance or driven by poverty, hence they cannot attend the conventional hospital. In this respect about 400 traditional birth workers have been trained in the state from 1988 to date (Ikpe, 2007).

Generally, the state of health of most women in Akwa Ibom is pathetic; this is as a result of poverty. There is high rate of poverty among women especially those in the rural communities; this explains the low life expectancy experienced by this group.

Women are the bedrock of the development of any nation. In spite of this, certain traditional norms and customs tended to undermine and relegate women and undercut the development processes of this sex. Women were often sidelined, marginalized and stressfully shelved aside when issues for sustainable development were discussed. It was in recognition of this ugly and dangerous trend that the United Nations General Assembly in 1975, at Mexico declared 1975-1985, as the United Nations decade for women and urged member states to map out strategies for translating this plan of action into the development processes in their various countries.

In the area of education, after the civil war in 1970, the number of women who enrolled in school was higher than what was obtained in the pre-war years. What aided this was the 1976, re-introduction of Universal Primary Education. In 1977 the first edition of the National Policy on Education was published to give guidance to educational dispensation at all levels. Besides many enrolled in Primary and Secondary Schools, Universities and other higher institutions. That translates into enlightenment of individuals not only on the health sector but on other areas of human endeavour (Oinaju, 2004)

The number of women who embraced education after the civil war is translated on the many positions and contributions women are making not only in the kitchen but in the public life. They have contributed much in the main power development of the state – in nursing profession, teaching profession businesses. Such names as Mrs. Affiong Abasiattai, Mrs. Cecilia Umanah, Mary Obot. Some are commissioners and Permanent Secretaries such as Lady Valeric Ebe among others.

Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development was brought or muted and used locally and internationally in 1987 by the World Commission on environment and development (the Brundtland Commission) calling for development that meets the needs of present generation without compromising the needs of future generations, (World Bank in Okere, 2006). Jhingan (2005), "Sustainable development" means that development that should "keep on going". It lays emphasis on the creation of sustainable improvement in the quality of life of all people through increases in real income per capital, improvement in education, health and general quality of life and improvement in quality of natural environmental resources. In this connection sustainable development should be continuous and permanent. It should be inelastic kind of development devoid of want and insecurity both life and property. Pickering and Owen (1995) as quoted in Adeyemi (2002), saw sustainable development as invoking present development of available resources without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs". Implying a reduction in the poverty rate, inequality and unemployment without a loss of self-reliance.

Akwa Ibom women are mainly farmers and petty traders. Very few are in the public service. However, owing to the inability of the various governments' poverty alleviation or reduction programmes to practically reduce poverty and give way for sustainable development, the present government called for formation of cooperative societies. There are over two hundred and fifty viable cooperative societies in the state. Government, through these cooperative societies have been able to reach out to the women through provision of soft loans for agriculture, trading, supplies and allied functions. Government is also providing capital such as mills for processing of oil palm products, cassava products among others. These to a large extent have assisted in poverty reduction, and have provided hope for the future. It should be known that the cooperative activities are not exclusively for women, men are also part of the system.

Indeed, the present administration through cooperative societies has established some small scale industries in all the three senatorial districts of the state. This depends on the type of activities on area is known for. For instance, this administration established a rice mill in Odoro Ikpe in Ikot Ekpene Senatorial District to enhance production of rice and provide for food security. The zone is noted for rice cultivation and majority of women there are farmers. Oil mill industry is provided in Abak because the zone has a lot of oil palm trees, for easy extraction of palm oil and kernel oil for their uses (AKS Ministry of Commerce and Industries, 2007).

Another sustainable development programme for women was (is) the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP). In 2001 the Obasanjo Administration strengthens the Poverty Alleviation Programme by renaming it National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP). The general target of this programme is to eradicate absolute poverty in three stages. The first target was the restoration of hope in most of the affected people. The government effort was to lower the poverty level. In the second stage, it was to restore the economic independence and confidence. It was expected that at the end of this stage, most Nigerians, especially in rural areas would very active in clearly defined National Development activities. The third stage was to be the final stage and was aimed at wealth creation. It was expected and is still being expected that all Nigerians shall be free of the reigns of absolute poverty. This stage would mean that all Nigerians (women and men) shall have access to steady source of real income, high purchasing power, access to basic health facilities, good and regular supply of nutritional food, creation of wealth and diversification of investment opportunities. In this connection, the paces for sustainable development have been mapped. For it to come up stream, structures such as Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES) Rural Infrastructure Development Scheme (RIDS), Social Welfare Service Scheme (SOWES) and National Resources Development and Conservation Scheme (NRDCS) are given attention by successive governments (Aliyu, 2001).

Efforts at Bridging Inequality between men and women in Nigeria/Akwa Ibom State

For the period spanning between 1960 and 1970, some women had achieved so much in nearly all fields but hardly were they recognized or given a chance to excel in the relevant fields. This trend did not change until the international year for women in 1975, when Nigeria started making deliberate efforts at bringing women into public and national life. Before then, men dominated both the economic and political scenes, and women were assigned to the peripheral bench.

Indeed, since the declaration of international year for women in, notable Nigerian women have been given pride of place in various fields of human endeavour. For

instance, Justice Roseline Omotosho, the first woman Chief Justice, Professor Grace Alele Williams, a mathematician, the first woman to be appointed Vice Chancellor, Jadesola Akande, a professor of law also a Vice Chancellor of Lagos State University (Ucheaga, 1999), of recent Mrs. Patricia Ete, a parliamentarian was the speaker of the House of Representatives, Professor Dora Akunyeli, Director of National Drug Law Enforcement Agency are some good testimonies for women.

In Akwa Ibom State, between 1993 and 1997, Mrs. Mary Obot was appointed the first woman secretary to Akwa Ibom State Government; Mrs. Cecilia Umanah was the first woman to be appointed Commissioner in Akwa Ibom State; 1997-2003 Mrs. Rita Akpan was the secretary to Akwa Ibom State Government and later minister for Women Affairs (Uyama, 2007).

The creation of the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare is in the right direction. In Akwa Ibom State, this ministry deals with training and development of women in formal and non-formal education to be functional to themselves and the society. It also trains and sensitizes on the use of resources.

There is an Advocacy and Mobilization Division, which is responsible for campaign and enlightenment on obnoxious norms and practices or inheritance affecting widows. Young girls are being encouraged to attend formal school system, as education is free to JSS three. Women who are interested in politics do not pay for nomination forms.

It initiates programmes that promote the economic empowerment of women through formation of cooperative societies, income generating activities, encouragement of women in agriculture and other poverty alleviation programmes. It also liaises with United Nations bodies to take advantage of programmes that are of benefit to women (Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Welfare, Akwa Ibom State, undated).

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, equality, good health and sustainable development can only be achieved through making education accessible to Nigerian women, mostly girls. Women should be made to be productive through acquisition of skills especially those in the rural communities. Besides, they should be made to have access to soft loans in Agricultural banks, micro-finance banks so as to have a capital base for self-development. Health is wealth; women should be made to have access to free medical treatment in any government hospital or health centre of their choice. Issues such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, early marriage, need to be addressed if gender equality and sustainable development must be attained in this era of globalization.

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