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FACTORS INHIBITING THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE NIGERIAN ECONOMY: THE AKWA IBOM STATE EXPERIENCE

By

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Abstract

For many years before and after independence Nigerian Women and indeed Akwa Ibom have not been participating positively in moving the economy forward as should be expected. Today there are changing trends in the world economy making everyone a player. In this connection, the paper seeks to find out the factors responsible for this economic apathy by women and proffer ways of integrating them into the economic orbit of the 21st Century. Non participation of many women in propelling the economy stems from low level and inadequate education, poverty, poor health and unemployment. It is discovered that if women are accorded rightful place in the community through provision of good education, good and access to health facilities, having access to gainful employment their situation would have metamorphosed to a worthwhile state. The paper is historically oriented; hence analytical research method is used. However, some recommendations made include the enactment of laws, making the education of women in the country mandatory. Women should have access to loan facilities to enable them participate in setting up industries or companies that would empower them economically.

Introduction

According to the United Nations report (1999), women constitute about half of the world's population, and of this, more than half do not have access to education, cannot participate in decision making in their countries, and indeed live below the acceptable standard. They lack access to basic essentials of life, such as adequate and affordable health care facilities, economic opportunities, which include productive arable land for farming and opportunity and access to loan facilities. Put it differently, they constitute the poor majority living mostly in the rural areas, ghettos and slums in the cities (Knowles and Wareing, 1976).

Indeed, by late 19th century, the issue related to women condition began to attract sympathy and international attention which later led to International Women Convention in 1988, though, the issues then were limited to education, sanitation, family planning and the quality of life for their families. In 1975 the United Nations General Assembly took a step further at examining the condition of women and their families by convening a conference in Mexico City. That conference led to the declaration of 1975 as the *International Year of the Women*. In 1995, the Beijing conference on women was held. The conference made several declarations including those on equality, development, empowerment and elimination of all forms of and discrimination against women.

Despite the Beijing declaration, it appears there has been little or no improvement on the condition of women especially in the third world.

In Akwa Ibom State, the women by 1991 Census outnumbered men and more than half the number are illiterates (The Sensor 2007). Equally women are not regarded as partners in progress in the society. They are often seen and regarded as mills for the production of children, provision of household services to the husbands, and in other instances do the farm work and ensure food for the household (Ndem, 2007; Ode, 2005). Women are regarded purely as second-class citizens by their male counterparts.

In 1987, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the Better Life for Rural Women specifically for the emancipation of women. The idea is that majority of women live and do business in the rural areas. Closely following that, in 1993, a similar organization Family Support Programmes came to being (Ayodele, 2004).

Effect of Women Participation in Nigeria Economy

In the Colonial and post colonial days, when agriculture had the commanding height in the Nigerian economy, women in the rural areas produced food crops as well as cash crops for export. For instance, a stable economy functions when the populace have sufficient and regular supply of food. Food security has a linkage effect on production and productivity. The rural women produced Nigeria's food crops such as yams, beans, cassava, millet, and other vegetables and also keep birds and animals (Inim, 2007); Women in Western Region participated in the production of cocoa for export; women in Eastern region and Northern region participated in the production of oil palm and kernel, cotton and groundnut respectively. The question is to what extent did they go? The extent of their contribution is worrisome. It is because petty trading do not allow for good savings. Women like their male counterparts should be "big time" entrepreneurs in all spheres. But this is not the case with Akwa Ibom Women it is common to see the Igbo women of the South East Nigeria and Yoruba women of Western Nigeria competing with their male counterparts: and in some cases out class the men.

Factors inhibiting the participation of Akwa Ibom Women in the Economy

The major constraints that hinder women's positive contribution to Akwa Ibom State and indeed Nigeria economy are: low level of education, poverty, early marriage, low self-esteem, and lack of genuine economic empowerment, deprivation of husband's property in case of death and disease; and restriction by husbands.

i) Low level of education:

In Nigeria it has been estimated that about 70 percent of women can neither read nor write (Ode, 2005; Ayesha, 1985). In Akwa Ibom State of about 3 million people in the 1991 census, 1.6 million are illiterates. However, it is only of recent that women education have been given consideration by most parents and families. Before 1980, only very few women attended formal school system and made it to the secondary school level and beyond. Many usually dropped out for very many reasons some of which we are examining in the paper. Many men (fathers) considered the education of women as a

waste of resources since they most times end up as house wives. That the advantage they enjoyed would be shared with another family. The women themselves are also thorns on their flesh; they have the fear that when they read up to the University level, they would have no husband. There is a linkage effect between good education and the economy. Good education is the key to success in industry and in social set up. Those who are not educated are on the disadvantage (Inim 2007; Akpan 2005). It is also contended that many men prefer to marry illiterates or semi-educated women because they cost less and obey their husbands sheepishly.

Nika and Ifeancha (1998) and Udo Udo (2005), opined that in the rural areas, and mainly in of the riverine Akwa Ibom State, the education of girls were not given any preference, hence girls did not attend school. For those who have the opportunity did not advance beyond primary six, and were given out in marriage at the very tender age. Marriage at the prime or tender age exposes a girl to dangers associated with teenage pregnancy and child birth; in most cases some suffer from the urinary tract defect visco vaginal fistula (VVF) after the child's birth. From then, the girl suffers from the trauma of early child births, and disease many cannot fit it socially and economically within the society. Many are scattered throughout the state as house helps and urchins. There is a positive correlation between people who suffer from one prolonged disease with level of productivity.

ii) Cultural practices

In the same vein, Cutrufelli (1983) quoted from Felix (2006) observed that certain cultural hindrances militate against women empowerment. According to her, women could not own lands or inherit her husband's property due to cultural inhibition. This is a common feature in Akwa Ibom and indeed in African societies where the woman has no right to her husband's property, though the responsibilities of child upbringing rests on her shoulders. She is always treated as a second-class citizen within her husband's family.

In the same corollary, the current approach by governments in most developing countries and Nigeria in particular had only created few urban based women, leaving the real target rural populace in abject poverty and want. This is so because the top-bottom approach does not benefit the target group. In a situation where the presidents', Governors and Local Government Chairman's wives determine what programmes/strategies a typical rural women needs to change her fortune is a wrong approach. They are surrounded by well-to-do women who probably for the very long time do not associate with rural people or have never been to the rural communities, and therefore information about current needs of the rural people are not up to date.

More often than not, certain women who through hard work and qualification would have achieved much for the economy are restricted by their husbands. In effect, some women are restricted at home and are not allowed to do any job or vocation of their own, the effect is that they live at the mercy of their husbands for means of survival. Other women owing to marital commitments cannot go into their choice of occupation, or owing to transfer of spouse, have to resign their jobs to accompany their spouses to their

new location.

iii) Poverty

Poverty is an index of underdevelopment. Akwa Ibom State is an oil producing state. The expectation is that people here should be well to do, but unfortunately it is one of the poorest states in Nigeria. According to the World Bank assessment, 70 percent of Nigerians live below internationally recognized poverty line and subsist on an income of less than \$1.00 per day. Comparatively, in the United States of America, a minimum wage is \$5.15 per hour which is equivalent to N571.65 per hour at the current exchange rate. Indeed Akwa Ibom State Socio-economic study report on poverty of sex of household heads shows that poverty is highest among female-headed households than male-headed households. Poverty is lowest among the never married as 52 percent of them live above poverty. In overall only 25 percent of married people are non-poor compared to just 19 percent of widowed household heads. Indicating that poverty is highest among the widowed followed by the married and divorced. A Nigerian and indeed Akwa Ibom woman can no longer afford a decent meal or a comfortable accommodation. This type of condition does not allow for saving in order to participate in worthwhile economic venture (Akwa Ibom State Socio-economic study report, 2005:154; Akpan, 2005).

iv) Health of the People

Closely related to poverty is the health sector. 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. Unfortunately, many people including women do not attend to hospitals or health centers when sick because of high cost of medical care. This high medical expenditure keeps many people off the medical scene. The young and productive people who would have contributed to the economy are either unhealthy or have died. It is a serious problem to the economy. (Federal Ministry of Health Technical Report: Department of Public Health, 2005; Akwa Ibom State, the Unfolding Scenario, undated).

v) Unemployment and Underemployment

Unemployment is also one of the factors that inhibit women's contribution to Akwa Ibom economy. From the National Demographic Health survey in the South-south, maternal mortality rate is 15 percent per thousand (meaning about 1,500 persons per 1,000 are unhealthy. Infant and child mortality rate is 120 per 1,000 life births. Akwa Ibom is a civil service state; meaning that everybody is struggling to gain employment or had been employed in the civil service. In other words there are no productive industries either private or public to absorb the teeming unemployed youths. There are few industries, which have closed shops for over ten or more years now. The only viable industry in Akwa Ibom now is the Champion Breweries. Few other cottage industries are privately owned and very insignificant numbers of qualified people are needed. However, the numbers of women who are actually engaged in large scale productive sector of the economy are very few and are found in the banking sector. Others are underemployed.

The idea that Akwa Ibom State is an oil producing state, and that all is five with the citizens and the economy requires reassessment (Akwa Ibom State: The Unfolding Scenario, undated; National Demographic Health Survey, South-south, 2003).

Some Recent Efforts to Empower Women to Contribute to the Economy

The issue of empowerment of women is recent development that came with the military administration. Since 1987-93 Better Life Programme and Family Support Programmes were under the control of the wives of the Head of State without proper linkages with the parent ministries saddled with the responsibilities of organizing, harnessing all women activities within states. The fall out was that those who benefited from the programme were already well-to-do, while the needy ones were left out. In fact it was "Better life for Royal women". Women in the rural areas never have the touch of those programmes hence such empowerment meant nothing to them (Felix, 2006).

Some Nigerian Women who have Contributed to Nigeria Economy

However, in Nigeria and to be very specific women such as late Mrs. Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti successfully organized Abeokuta women to fight against women taxation in Western Nigeria. She was also a successful business woman. Late Mrs. Margaret Ekpo was also known to fight the women cause as the President of Aba Women Association. She ensured women participation in economic ventures in the defunct Eastern Nigeria. Of recent, the likes of Mrs. Egun Oyegbola was former Minister of National Planning, Mrs. Elizabeth Ivase was former Minister of state for Education. Mrs. Ngozi Okonji Iweala was the Minister of Finance. Mrs. Ibru a performer and Chief Executive officer in Oceanic Bank Plc. Mrs. Dora Akunyili of NAFDAC (Ode, Ibid).

In Akwa Ibom State, Mrs. Affiong Abasiattai and Mrs. Cecilia Umanah, were former Commissioners in the State Civil Service between 1987 and 1995. Mrs. Rita Akpan was the Secretary to Akwa Ibom State Government. Late Mrs. Mma Akpata and Mrs. Nkoyo Essien are successful business women in Akwa Ibom State (Ukpong, 1991). Mma Akpata and Nkoyo Essien are Petroleum Independent Marketers, enjoying the respect of members of the public and contributed to the National economy.

Conclusion

Essentially women contribute to Akwa Ibom state economy, since their activities revolve around three basic spheres of life. There are education, politics and economy. Women contribute to food security through petty trading in food materials within and outside the state. They engaged in distant trading in areas such as Cross River, Benue, Edo, Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta. Petty trading and food security have a linkage effect in sustaining the economy. But they would have done better if empowered through adequate or functional education; economic empowerment through loans, allowing women effective participation in politics and decision making. Women are marginalized, dehumanized and generally denied a respectable place within the economic set up in the state and indeed Nigeria. There is need for proper integration of women in national economy especially in this era of globalization.

Recommendations

1. Government at all levels should enact laws, making the education of women mandatory. Education is the weapon that can enhance Nigeria's women participation in national economy.
2. Women should have access to loan facilities to enable them participate in setting up industries or companies that would empower them economically.
3. Women contribute to food security yet they have little access to agricultural loans because they cannot satisfy bank conditionalities. In this connection, Government at all levels should increase budgetary allocation to women based institutions and organizations.
4. The issue of land tenure and inheritance should be considered for legislation. Women should be allowed to have access to agricultural lands. The issue of male inheritances should be abolished forthwith through appropriate legislation.

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