

# EDUCATION FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Editor - in - chief

DR. B.G. NWORGU

A publication of the  
Association for Promoting Quality  
Education in Nigeria (APQEN)

Chapter 43

## WOMEN EDUCATION MIRRORED THROUGH THE BETTER LIFE PROGRAMME: ITS IMPACT ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Q.I. Obinaju

### Introduction

During the second half of the 20th century, much attention has been paid to women education. This attention has been paid partly because there has been a conception that women had been relegated to the background especially in political matters as a result of their low level of education. Women had also been looked down upon as not contributing as much as men towards development. Much campaign has since been made towards women "liberation" from this assertion and towards mobilizing women to contribute more towards the political, social and economic life of the people. Much of the effort has been in the area of women education since education is seen as a key factor in human political recognition, self-reliance and economic development.

The most massive contributor in the area of women mobilization and education, in recent times, has been the 'Better Life' Programme launched by Mrs Maryam Babangida in September 1987. First, this programme was conceived as 'Better Life for Rural Women.' Later, it was moderated to "Better Life for Rural Dwellers". Today, it is simply known as the "Better Life Programme" (BLP). In this paper, a careful examination is made of the impact of this programme, especially as it relates to Women education on rural development.

### The Relationship Between Women Education and The 'Better Life Programme'

Education has meant different things to different people depending on the focus of the individual's perception. When formal education is addressed, education has often been referred to as "the systematic training and instruction especially of the young in school, college or any other institution" (Hornby, 1974). Education goes further to embrace "the knowledge and abilities, the development of character and mental powers resulting from such training" (Obinaju, 1993). Education generally aims at equipping the individual with knowledge and abilities which would enable him to be useful to society. In Peter's (1971) view, education transforms the outlook of an individual. Peter contends that if knowledge acquired does not transform the outlook of an individual he should not be termed an "education man". It is in the light of the above that Women Education would be looked into in this paper. Women Education, therefore, refers to equipping women with the knowledge, abilities and mental powers with which they would be useful to themselves and the society. Therefore, any form of enlightenment which has the potential of motivating a woman to be useful to herself and the society is conceived as "Women Education". Women Education is also capable of transforming women's life and outlook positively.

The 'Better Life Programme' (BLP) as organised in Nigeria is divided into state

chapters and further subdivided into local government chapters which are made up of wards. Each of the wards, chaired by the wife of the local government chairman, embarks on projects. These projects are observed to be the predominant trade of the people in the area. The project, however, takes the form of enlarging the scope which is normally done by individuals and researching into avenues by which these projects would contribute substantially towards the economic life of the people. Where training is needed, the BLP does not hesitate to select and train manpower to manage their various projects.

In this manner, the total contributions of the wards' projects form the local government chapter project except where the local government goes out to establish a unique project of its own. All these local government projects are put together as the BLP projects for the state. Occasionally, the state organises enlightenment campaigns for the local government participants who after benefitting from the workshop go back to further enlighten others in their local government area and to practise what they have learnt.

By this process and in different stages of the federation, the BLP has opened and run large farms, different facets of animal husbandry, co-operative societies, farmers' markets, craft centres and small-scale industries. Other programmes-embarked upon by the BLP include such projects which seek to improve upon the health and the literacy level of the people. Although the benefits of all these programmes would be enjoyed by all irrespective of sex, the target starting point of each of the projects are women. These activities are seen as sensitizing and mobilising women to contribute towards their individual and collective welfare. In fact, the BLP is engaged in activities no less than women education, rural and urban development.

### **The Contributions of the 'Better Life Programme' Towards Rural Development**

Rural development is seen as a progressive improvement of the individuals and collective life of the rural populace. Considering the BLP, one notices that it is a "comprehensive and well packaged" programme such that "there is no aspect of human life that it does not touch" (Nyong, 1993). For the purpose of clarity, the contributions of the BLP would be organised into political, economic and social. It is however not possible to completely delineate each aspect and treat each activity within the confines of one construct. An attempt would however be made to elaborate on how the BLP contributes towards rural development politically, economically and socially.

#### **BLP and Political Development of the Rural People**

In the packaging and the implementation of the BLP activities, 'elitist' women are brought in. The sole objective is for these women to serve as intermediaries. According to Lady Onu quoted by Nyong, (1993) these women serve as transistors of government policies and programmes to the rural people. In workshops and seminars, women are mobilized and brought into the mainstream of government activities. As a result, women are today seen seeking such political posts as local, state and national legislators, seats in the Senate and some even aspire to the presidential seat in Nigeria, a situation which was unheard of, about two decades ago.

These aside, the organisation of the BLP where women are elected into positions of authority offers an enlightenment on how to organise and govern a particular body of people. Women no longer sit and listen to their fate being determined, they contribute actively to the determination of their fate. In many parts of Nigeria today, women are brought into the village council especially when matters concerning them and children are discussed. Recently, a meeting of all women organisation (DECTEKIWA) called by the State Chairperson, BLP, Awka Ikom State was held. This was to enable women in the state to come together and speak with one voice especially on matters concerning their welfare. Such meetings form a political arena whereby women ferment their ideas and brew them to a potent link of paper political representation. Further more, chieftaincy titles are today also given to women as was not the case in the past. The sensitization, mobilisation and the awareness created by the above discussed process are seen as an integral part of women education while these contribute in no small measure towards the political upliftment of the rural people.

#### **BLP and Economic Development of the Rural People**

There is no state where the BLP has not contributed to the economic life of the people and the rural dweller in particular. In Akwa Ibom State for instance, 50 crop farms, 19 livestock farms including fish farms, 4 oil palm plantations and 5 rice farms were established. In addition to these, there are 30 food processing mills for the processing of cassava, rice and palm oil run by the state chapter of the BLP. As reported by Central Bank of Nigeria (1992), the BLP national agricultural involvement includes 60 fish ponds, 49 goateries, 104 cattle ranches valued at 1.90 million naira. In addition, 1,005 model farms, 229 hectares of cultivated land and 39 irrigation schemes were also recorded as at the end of 1991. The BLP is thus seen as a food basket. In an effort to assist in the disposal of produce from the farms and cottage industries operated by the rural women, the BLP had embarked on the establishment of 'Better Life' store, stalls and markets in both rural and urban centres. As for storage facilities, CBN (1992) recorded a total of 352 stores/stalls established in various locations in Nigeria. Bauchi State has actually established a full market in Duss L.G.A. for sale of agricultural products and other products of the BLP. These provisions and creations are testimonies to the encouragement given to women in the area of food production. Rural dwellers are encouraged to produce food without the fear of wastage. Food not sold at its original form of production are encouraged to be processed into a form which could be preserved and used later. Tomatoes of Plateau and Kaduna States are examples, as reported by National Organising Committee (1991).

In each of the farms, an agro-extension officer is posted to enlighten the rural dwellers on how to cultivate their crops towards achieving greater yield. This enlightenment sometimes introduces these rural dwellers to the process of mechanized farming which obviously will lead to increased production. In the factories, rural dwellers are encouraged to process their crops so that the fear of wastage which hitherto was the militating factor against excess crop production is removed. The following were recorded nationwide to the credit of the BLP as at end of 1991, 46 rice mills, 115 corn mills, 13

groundnut mills, 124 guinea corn mills, 19 yam flour mills, 8 cassava flour mills, 52 hulling machines and 5 fish smoking ovens. By way of agriculture and food processing, our rural areas are seen as providing the nation with food while at the same time improving upon the individual economic status of the rural dweller.

Other areas of enlightenment brought to the rural woman by the BLP is in the area of craft. At Ikot Ekpene, for instance where lawyers' wig is made, the local craft of weaving is translated through enlightenment and encouragement into serving a high economic function. Lawyers' wigs were previously being imported. Today, there is a centre where they are produced in the country. Again, in Akwa Ibom State, a relationship has been established with the Raw Material Development Institute for expert advice and assistance to women especially in ceramic production (Okon and Ubon, 1993). Several women have been trained by PRODA to man the factories so far established in the state.

Nationally, it is noted that the rural woman through the initiation of the BLP has been participating "more in home-based business such as carving, pottery, weaving, knitting, sewing, etc" (CBN, 1992: 15). These activities are seen to have been largely dormant over the years partly because of financial constraints and partly because of inadequate knowledge of "market outlets" for their finished products. The reactivation has been taken up by the BLP and the establishment or sourcing of markets for finished products has also given more impetus to the production of goods in these areas. Moreover, the BLP undertakes vocational training of women to upgrade these activities to meet modern requirements.

Improved awareness of women and the improvement of their economic status result in the establishment of co-operative societies. A total of 750 functional co-operative societies has been reported in Abia State during the first half of 1993 (Nyong 1993). In the whole Nigeria, 5479 co-operative societies have been identified and recognized as existing under the BLP. Membership has witnessed rapid growth from 220,500 in 1990 to 377,628 in 1991 with a financial strength of 8.1 million naira. These co-operative societies form the basis for funding of the BLP projects. Loans are sourced and distributed to aid production. Sources of these loans are identified as banks, the National Directorate for Employment (NDE) and the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI). These forms of funding increase the financial base of rural women thereby increasing the profit potential of their projects. Also, as a result of the awareness of the benefits Co-operative Societies provide, many 'Better Life' based Community Banks have today been opened with the sole aim of offering financial support to rural dwellers and offering saving opportunity to them too. These measures launch the rural woman far ahead of her previous status, boost her economic base and encourage her to function economically to her maximum capability.

While writing on the relationship between education and economy, Obinaju (1993) identifies education as a source of innovation, as providing the necessary manpower needs and as equipping individuals with necessary skills in the society. In recognition of these facts, the BLP has launched itself into Mass Literacy Campaign. Workshops are held frequently in different states on different areas of skill acquisition. The BLP has also established several adult-literacy classes, mostly located at the rural areas of the country.

Rural women are encouraged to attend literacy classes in Adult Education Centres. This mass-literacy campaign takes care of political education of women. For instance, the BLP has organised several workshops at central locations like Abuja for women leaders from local government areas on political party manifestoes and the transition programme. When such a seminar ends, the local government representative is expected to organise one such seminar to reach out to every rural woman in her locality. Data obtained reveal that BLP has organised 31 trade fairs, 137 workshops while members from the various state chapters have attended 214 conferences, 113 trade fairs and 212 workshops locally and internationally (CBN 1991).

To complement this literacy effort, many states including Akwa Ibom and Abia states have launched periodic magazines, 'Uforo' and 'Ezinne' respectively, in which several educative articles are exposed. All these are seen as attempts which the education of women, put across by the BLP, have made towards rural development.

#### **BLP and Social Development of the Rural People**

The BLP cannot succeed, has been observed in the economic sector, without some social contributions to the rural populace. The awareness brought about by the BLP to the rural woman has made her prepared to remove all obstacles impeding the success of her endeavour. In this vain, the following concrete social contributions towards improving rural worth are recorded nationwide for the BLP: 5 model villages have been built, 173 bore holes and wells sunk especially to aid in the irrigation projects embarked upon by the BLP, 19 towns have been provided with electricity and 11 motor vehicles have been purchased to help in mass-transit service (CBN 1992). All these achievements have been brought about by better mobilization and the upliftment of the economic base of women in our society.

In addition, the BLP has played and assumed the advisory role. Since its organisation is basically made up of women, it concerns itself with how to get women to contribute to the improvement of society. Counselling sessions have been held at different locations and at several seminars on such topics as the evils of teenage pregnancy and the hazards of female circumcision. At the Delegates Conference of Akwa Ibom Women Associations (DECAKIWA) held March 1993, such topics were addressed. Also among educative topics discussed were high bride-price and the harassment of women by male cultural groups. Through such conferences, women get together and discuss issues affecting them. They also form a forum for directing the lives of the youngsters.

Apart from these formal presentations, informal get-togethers are often organised in the form of parties, dinners, luncheons and the like. Using these media, the rural woman goes out and shares opinion with others and broadens her outlook.

In other areas like in health, the BLP launches such health-related programmes as mass dehorning of children of school age. This is done with the view that "health is wealth". Mass deworming of children is carried on side by side with enlightenment for environmental hygiene. The focus is mainly rural schools. With this in focus, the rural woman learns how a healthy child would function and the merits of hygiene. This programme has also contributed reasonably to educating the rural women on personal

hygiene, environmental sanitation, nutrition, immunisation, family planning and oral rehydration therapy. Note is taken of the national immunisation campaign sponsored by the BLP in 1992.

In recognition that a greater percentage of the rural women give birth to children outside the hospital; presumably, at the traditional birth attendant's clinic, the BLP has trained a total of 764 traditional birth attendants in Nigeria so far. This training would improve upon the health-care delivery system nationwide, and, of course, reduce maternal pre-natal and post-natal death-rate. CBN (1992), while making a comprehensive report on the health provision from the BLP recorded 19 mini-pharmacies, 15 visico-virginal fistula (VVF) clinics, 5 mobil clinics, 116 family planning clinics and Health Workers Training Centres where about 683 health workers have been trained so far. It is worth noting that all the amenities, economic or social, are made possible by and have their starting point from education.

#### Strategies for more contributions to Rural Development by Women Education

The potential of the BLP to contribute even more to rural development is abundant. It has already contributed immensely to feed, and improve upon the diet of the rural people. It has contributed to their improved health-care. These conditions could still be ameliorated.

The major impeding factor to the scope of the BLP projects has always been limited finances. To this end, it is recommended that the Federal Government make special annual allocation to the BLP. With this allocation, the BLP would be able to expand its reach and intensify its efforts towards better results.

Moreover, the current unwillingness to sponsor a woman to high political positions should be discouraged. The increasing enlightenment got by women has started to change things round in the right direction. It is therefore expected that political opportunities, if vested on women, would change Nigeria for the better.

The paramount lesson learnt by the exposition thus far is that it would pay this nation more if women are given enough education and opportunities.

#### Conclusion

In fact, education and development are inseparable. As Obinaju (1993) points out, education equips individuals with the ability which enable him to "To the rural women, education helps them to be in the limelight of the nations political conditions. Or how would one explain women occupation of 14 seats out of 1098 in the national legislature, 2 deputy governorship seats 1 seat in Senate in the immediate past administration and the mass awakening of interest in women vying for political positions in Nigeria? Economically, education being a source of innovation provides variations in practices towards improved production. As providing skills, it ensures gainful employment thereby improving upon the status of the rural dweller. Socially, education permits women to be tolerant one of another as they come together. It increases in them the urge to lead the younger generation. In all, women education, especially as carried on by the 'Better Life

Programme,' is a great contributor to rural development. Given the necessary encouragement, it has the potential to achieve higher heights.

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