GENDER QUESTION IN NIGERIA: RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Gender generally suggests women issues and the need to empower women has attracted global attention. In Nigeria, various attempts have been made in this regard. Successes there-from have, however, been rather ephemeral. The situation thus calls for a "rethinking" – hence- the challenge of this work. Pivoted by Feminism as the theoretical underpinning, the study which relied on secondary data, content analysis, and observation regrets that the gender question has not been sufficiently addressed. It recommends time-tested and research-based policy formulation, gender mainstreaming, religious sensitivity, community-based programmes, consolidation on previous attempts and programmes, as well as de-emphasizing on tying empowerment programmes to individuals in government since such programmes prove to suffer extinction when administrations go with their pivoting individuals.

Introduction

Gender and empowerment have lately become buzzwords in development discourses. This, however, does not suggest that they are new in concept or practice. The recent past has only witnessed growing interest on the issues. This paper is largely a library work and collaborates the fact that the concepts are not new in Nigeria.; but the results have not been satisfactory. The situation thus, calls for a "rethinking" of the methods and strategies. Here lies the main thrust of this paper.

In the light of this, this paper will place emphasis on: the main concepts; theoretical underpinnings; trends of gender-related empowerment programmes in Nigeria; the challenge of rethinking.

Naming Gender

Ann Oakley is said to have introduced the term "gender" to sociology. According to her, gender is the parallel and socially unequal division into feminity and masculinity (Oakley, 1972). Since then many authors including: Chodorow,(1979) and Miller(1986) have posited that differential socialization experiences produce different sets of attributes and characteristics for males and females in line with societal expectations. While Gottfredson (1981) argues that

circumscription and compromise are mainly responsible for the differences. Aitkenhead (1987) ascertained that organizational barriers hardly featured as potential resistance to the development of equal opportunities. Though one cannot choose to biologically be male or female, Anderson (1998) submits that in matters of educational and occupational choice as a psychological process, one can choose. To this end, Itzin and Newman (1995) affirm that gender is the socially constructed and culturally determined characteristics associated with men and women, the assumptions made about the skills and abilities of men and women based on these characteristics, the conditions in which women and men live and work, the relations that exist between men and women, and how these are represented, communicated, transmitted and maintained over time. It also includes sexual and social relations, relations based on sexuality and relations of power and control based on ferminity and masculinity.

Summarily, everything social in our lives is gendered and we tend to evaluate people along gender lines (Brown, 2007). Gender therefore is an integral part of the daily experiences of both men and women (Kimmel and Messner 1992). Simply put, gender refers to the personal traits and social positions that members of the society attach to being male and female (Macionis 2003:325).

Understanding Empowerment

In an attempt to fathom the scope of empowerment, Akpan (2006) posits that although the object of empowerment ultimately manifests as economic value, the causes of deprivation and improvement encompass many social, ecological and other natural factors. By extension, empowerment involves moral capital, factor input control, communications and monetization, infrastructure, and population dynamics. Akpan further identifies the government, communities, intervention agencies, non-governmental organizations, government agencies, and I dare add individuals and community-based organizations as the sources of empowerment. These sources contribute in a variety of ways.

To Izugbara and Brown (2006:226), empowerment is both a dangerous and powerful word. The former is because it is susceptible to various (mis)interpretations and has been politicized; and the latter because it drives contemporary development planning. More academically, McWhirther(1991) in Izugbara and Brown(2006) advances that empowerment refers to the process by which people or groups who are powerless: (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context; (b) develop skills and capacities for gaining some researchable control over their lives; and (c) exercise this control without infringing upon the right of others.

Regrettably, empowerment is often frustrated by unrealistic assumptions and inadequate planning. This unfortunate reality is what Plunkett and Fournier (1991) discuss as *"myths"* of empowerment. Fear is a problem and must be overcome by clearly explaining the rationale for empowerment as well as steps that are undertaken to ease implementation and ensure fair and positive consequences for the members of the society. Other problems include inadequate planning and lack of foresight (Bowen and Lawler 1995). All in all, real empowerment is a sense of efficacy that when people realize that they can solve the problems they face and have the right to contest unjust conditions (Malan and Breitenbach, 2001). This, however, only occurs when people have secured skills and have a feeling of confidence. Thus, a scholar like Rowland (1997) likens empowerment to development itself.

In sum, empowerment is about participation (UN, HDR, 1995) , and challenging oppression and inequality (Oxfarm, 1995). It is not about replacing one form of empowerment with another. Rather, it should lead to the liberation of men

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from false value systems and ideologies of oppression; but where everyone can become a whole being, irrespective of gender, with the ultimate goal of a more humane society for all (Akhtar 1992, in Batliwala, 1994). Finally, it must be a bottom-up process (Rowlands 1995). This will enhance greater participation.

Empowerment attempts should not be project-specific; rather, they should be integrated and broad-based. A check list is also necessary in order to appreciate possible indicators which can be used in comparing the success or failure of different programmes in empowering women (Ackerley, 1995). Thus, Hashemi, et al (1996) raised a model based on eight indicators of empowerment which include: mobility; economic security; ability to make small purchases; ability to make larger purchases; involvement in major household decisions; freedom from domination within the family; political and legal awareness; and involvement in political campaigning and protests.

The above checklist underscores the relationship between empowerment and participatory evaluation (Wierenga, 1994; and Kabeer, 1994). In which case, context and programme specific indicators for empowerment should be developed to meet methodological needs.

Theoretical Drift: Functionalism Versus Feminism: From the functionalist perspective, gender helps to integrate society. It, according to Parsons (1954), forms a complementary set of roles that links men and women into family units for the purpose of carrying out various tasks. Society thus promotes gender conformity. This issue of complementarity is inherent in Davis and Moore (1945) which *thesises* that social stratification (female subjection to male) has beneficial consequences for the operation of the society. This is not always true, though (Merton 1968).

On the contrary, Conflict theory argues that upon the women's awareness of their poor state, they would constitute a group and begin to challenge the status-quo (Ritzer, 2000). This reality is seen in the activities of the feminist movements which date back to the mid 19th century. The movement for women emancipation, however, is not about the competitive spirit of the dominant system. Rather, it is an attempt to convert men and the system to the sense of responsibility, nurturance, openness, and rejection of sex-based social hierarchical disposition (Sen and Grown, 1985).

Here again, bottom-up characterization of the empowerment approach is acknowledged and as regarded as more in tune with the growing interest in participatory forms of development. The crux here is that the main problem for third world women is insignificant participation in an otherwise benevolent process of growth and development. As a result, the issues of poverty, inequality, and the cases of resource use and abuse will be attended to (Sen and Grown, 1985).

Feminism as a school of thought advocates social equality for men and women. It argues that cultural conceptions of gender truncate the full potentials of human qualities. Though opposed by both male and female who hold fast to conventions (Doyle, 1983), feminism is capable of ending sexual violence, and gender stratification on the one hand, as well as promoting sexual freedom and development on the other hand. This underscores the theoretical underpinning of this work.

Realities and Trends of Gender

Writing on The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Edward Gibbon posited that:

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> *In every age and country, the wiser, or at least the stronger, of the two sexes, has usurped the powers of the state, and confined the other to the cares and pleasures of domestic life"* cited in (Jay, 1997:151).

The outcome of the above situation is anti-development.

This picture was well captured by John Stuart Mill in his The Subjection of Women (1869) in which he stated:

> *The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement* cited in (Jay 1997:257).

This sordid situation calls for the need to integrate both sexes in development - a framework which Ekong (2003) terms gender analysis. This challenge of analysis informed Oakey (1974's) regrets that the subjection of women is coloured from a structured male view rather than seen as a superficial flaw. Our world is patriarchy – driven. In concord with this position, Walby (1990) identifies two forms of patriarchy – namely: private and public which differ in terms of the relations between the structures and in the institutionalized form of each structure. This is extended by the institutionalized features of family structure and social relations of reproduction (Chodorow, 1978).

Through the ages, masculinism has taken for granted that there is a fundamental difference between men and women. It assumes that heterosexuality is normal. It accepts without question the sexual division of labour, and it sanctions the political and dominant role of men in the public and private spheres (Brittan 1989). In competitions, prize monies favour men. And men pay too much to *"promote"* their marital status. This scenario informed Schur (1983's) concept of "objectivization of women". Supported by some belief systems (religions), women are seen as commodities and granted the "weaker" sex status.

In contemporary studies, the concept of "gender" erroneously first suggests women. Gender discrimination thus suggests discriminations against women. This development becomes very risky particularly in Nigeria – a developing country with a population of over one hundred and forty million (140m) people – with women constituting almost half. The need to carry women along in development drives which attracted wider global attention after the Beijing Conference of 1995 could not, therefore, be over emphasized.

(En)Gendered Empowerment

To engender is simply to give rise to. The context of this sub-title emphasizes gender and empowerment – a relationship that should better the lot of women in the society. The global recognition of the sordid plight of women in societies brought in its wake the need for gender equality which, in turn informed the United Nations' adoption of "Gender mainstreaming" as a strategy with the aim of increasing women's involvement in decision-making processes and agenda-setting with regards to development directions, social values and resource allocation (Oxaal and Baden, 1997).

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The United Nations Children' Fund (UNICEF 1994) in response to the challenges adopted the Sara Longwe – developed framework as the appropriate approach to be used in mainstreaming gender. The framework considers that women's development can be viewed in terms of five levels of equality with empowerment as an essential element of each level. Longwe (1990) identifies the levels as:

(i) **Welfare:** which addresses only the basic needs of women, without attending to the structural causes which necessitate the provision of welfare services.

(ii) **Access:** which emphasizes equality of access to resources with women necessarily recognizing their lack of access to resources as a primary problem and taking action to redress the situation.

(iii) **Awareness – Raising :** women must recognize that their problems stem from inherent structural and institutional discrimination, on the one hand, and their role in reinforcing the system that restricts them.

(iv) **Participation:** where women take decisions equally alongside men; the result of which will be increased empowerment and greater control as an ultimate.

(v) **Control:** this is the ultimate level of equality and empowerment which speaks for a balance of power between women and men and neither has dominance.

The above model of analysis grants impetus to the need for policy and strategy implications which Oxfam (1995) views in the light of an integrated process spreading across the social, economic, political, and cultural realities. Further implications are highlighted below:

(i) Where women's empowerment is stated as a policy goal, it should be defined or explained since empowerment is a very complex and somewhat over-used term (Rowlands, 1995).

(ii) Strategies for promoting women's empowerment need to be integrated into development programmes with policies translated into specific strategies in the context of development programmes.

(iii) It should be acknowledged that empowerment is relevant to all programmes/projects and should not be confined to one area of development activity.

(iv) The different aspects of empowerment, such as: political, economic, legal, physical, etc should not be addressed in isolation; rather, the links between them should be considered in programme planning and implementation.

(v) The participation of women in planning at all stages is essential if development programmes are to be empowering.

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(vi)   Since the context is crucial to understanding processes of empowerment, indicators of empowerment need to be devised specific to programmes

(vii)   Mainstreaming policies within agencies and policies/programmes to support empowerment in the work of agencies should be linked.

(viii)   Support for women's organizations is a key strategy in promoting women's empowerment. Women must strive to empower themselves.

(ix)   The examination of organizational culture, structures and processes, and identifying where these may conflict with empowerment goals such as accountability should be promoted.

The Nigerian Trend:

Historically, in Nigeria, Ikot Abasi Women in 1929 staged an empowerment march (protest) which global history has christened the "Aba Women Riots". That move inspired the spirit of nationalism in no small measure. In post independence Nigeria the women folk has recorded some lofty strides. For instance, Victoria Gowon – a nurse by profession and the wife to Yakubu Gowon, then Military Head of State, made the initial attempts at institutionalizing the office of the First Lady in Nigeria. In that "office" she "empowered" the lot for nursing – a profession dominated by women.

In the mid-1980s, Maryam Babangida, the wife to the then Military President- Gen. Ibrahim Babangida conventionally institutionalized the office. She created the Better Life Programme for Rural Dwellers which focused on women. The programme was holistic and popular to the extent that wives of state governors and local council chairmen keyed into. Its multi-dimensional approach endeared the programme to many. The momentum was much, and for the first time, the Nigerian women felt important in the scheme of things. Regrettably, the programme fizzled away as the Babangida regime ended in 1993. Then came the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) and the Family Support Programme (FSP) which were introduced by Maryam Abacha – wife of the late Head of State, Gen. Sani Abacha. With Olusegun Obasanjo's ascension as Executive President, his wife (Stella) launched the Child Care Trust programme and it sank-in well to all tiers of government as a pet project. And currently, Turai Yar'Adua is passionately committed to disciplined and moral opportunities for the girl child. Though somewhat parochial in focus, Hajiya Yar'Adua has expressed uncommon commitment to the fight against HIV/AIDS.This is evident in the National Women Coalition Against AIDS (NAWOCA) which is also her dream project.

All these have been lofty and commendable projects and programmes aimed at empowering the women in Nigeria. The impacts have, however, proved them to be ephemeral in post-mortem analysis. The ephemeral and marginal improvement could be seen in the area of politics. For instance, in 1983, only one woman was a Senator out of ninety-five (95) representing less than 1% of the total number of Senators. But currently, almost 10% of the Senators are women in the One Hundred and Nine (109) chamber. This is an obvious improvement from the past; but a far of from the United Nations minimum of 30%. Little wonder Oha (2007) submits that gender disparity in public life has not been sufficiently addressed despite the fact that Nigeria has been a signatory to several international conventions. Here lies the need for a "rethinking".

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The Challenge of Rethinking

The minimal success(es) recorded by gendered-empowerment programmes in Nigeria have called for the need to have a rethink. The challenge of rethinking is presented below as suggestions for the betterment of gendered-empowerment programmes in Nigeria:

(i)   Government should come with time-tested legislations and policies which would outlive the successions of governmental administrations. In which case, policy summersaults should be guarded against. Empowerment programmes should not be tied to personalities in government else such programmes as power will remain in transit. To achieve this, policies should be built around communities, community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, individuals and intervention agencies. Consequently, reliance level on government will be reduced.

(ii)   Religious leaders and teachers should stem the tide by putting gender – discriminating doctrines in their correct perspectives.

(iii)   Empowerment programmes **must** be well planned with foresightedness and devoid of personalization and fear. To achieve this, goals must be set and checklist put in place in order to enhance periodic appraisals. The Longwe and Oxfam models earlier discussed should be borne in mind.

(iv)   Since gender is engraved in our culture, it takes a sustained institutional approach to correct the inherent wrongs. In Parsonian parlance, the social institutions for integration and persuasion should be seriously put to use. Gendered school enrolment and exclusivity of courses to specific gender should be discouraged. Also gender sensitivity should be a front burner in matters of employment and appointment.

(v)   To play down on the objectivization of the female folk, marriage pressures on men should be revisited. Presently, girl children are like commodities in the hands of their parents and their market values rise as they move to change their marital status.

(vi)   In competitions, there should not be gendered dichotomies in the prizes won. This ugly situation sadly colours our psyche and perpetrates the status-quo.

(vii)   Since some silver linings were recorded in the past empowerment programmes, such previous programmes should be sustained and consolidated. Sustainability and consolidation will institute a new order overtime.

(viii) Such a new order should be predicated on the premise of gender equalization so as to guard against lopsidedness in the opposite direction.

(ix)   Finally, further researches on the issue are bound to unearth new paradigms that will answer the question. A reliable database is herein strongly recommended.

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Conclusion

From the foregoing, it could be concluded that gender and empowerment are concepts which border seriously on development. With women constituting nearly fifty percent of the population in Nigeria, a correct rethink of the concept of empowerment will go a long way to answering the gender question in Nigeria. Previous gendered empowerment programmes though with promises have proved ephemeral – hence low in yield.

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