

Women and Developmental Strides in Contemporary Igbo Society



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Abstract

Women in contemporary society have been neglected in policy and decision-making in most African nations, especially Nigeria. The task of nation building requires the participation of all regardless of their race, ethnicity or gender in the creation of a strong state. The challenge of balancing between the need for unity and the recognition for diversity in the course of nation building is manifest not just in the interaction between Nigerians of different racial and ethnic backgrounds but also between the different genders. This important milestone provides the opportunity to reflect on the role of women in nation building and thus the education that women should receive in order to prepare them to effectively contribute to nation building. This paper reflects on this by addressing the questions: What makes woman “woman”? And, What type of education does she need so as to make that unique contribution to nation building and sustenance that only her can make? This affirmative action was necessary to remedy many years of inequality manifest by the lack of gender parity in education and access to religious, social, economic and political opportunities. While acknowledging the efforts made by various parties we must also admit that, it marks only the beginning in so far as the task for women now lies ahead of them. It anchors on sociological approach in its data collection and analysis. A lot more still needs to be done to ensure the full participation of women in the political and economic lives of their countries. Women having gained access to positions of decision making must now contribute to the task of nation building.

Keywords: Women, Development, Contemporary, and, Nigerian Society

Introduction

Nigeria is a blessed country. One of her many natural endowments is the human capital. About half of the population is made up of the female gender many of whom are of ‘timber and caliber’ having distinguished themselves in their chosen careers. In politics, women form the bulk of the

electorate and campaign mobilizers. Unfortunately, when it comes to elective and appointive positions, they are never given serious considerations. There are several policies, protocols and conventions that have been put in place to address and redress the age-long marginalization against women in politics. In order for women to contribute effectively to the task of nation building they must begin by considering their specific essence and thus determine the unique contribution they as women are called to make in society. St Josemaría the inspiration behind Strathmore University gave some distinctive characteristics of women:

characteristics which are their own and which they alone can give: their gentle warmth and untiring generosity, their love for detail, their quick-wittedness and intuition, their simple and deep piety, their constancy... A woman's femininity is genuine only if she is aware of the beauty of this contribution for which there is no substitute and if she incorporates it into her own life (St. Josemaria, 1967, p.12).

This means that Nigerian women must ask the question 'who are we' in order to determine what they can give to the nation. Education has an important role to play in this process as it provides the platform for addressing this fundamental question on the essence of woman. As Nigerian women grapple with these questions, it is crucial for Imo people and other Nigerian educational institutions to facilitate through the education provided the discovery of the true essence of women and thus their unique contribution to society.

Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionist Perspective Theory

The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective "is based on the assumption that society is created and maintained through the interaction of its members and how its member negotiate and define reality" (Lindsey, 1997, p. 8). Hence, gender is a social construction which is based on what the society defines as "masculine" or "feminine." Further, the process of negotiation is expressed in The Thomas theorem (referring to William I. Thomas, 1931/1966, cited in Lindsey, 1997, p.8): "a situation defined as real is real in its consequences." George Herbert Mead, in Lindsey, (1997, p.231), argues that symbolic interaction is concerned with the meanings individuals assign not only to their own behavior, but that of others as well. Briefly, during the first half of the 20th century, the functionalist perspective on gender roles dominated our views about family life. Proponents of this perspective postulate that in order to maintain harmony in society, there must be a division of labor, in which men take on instrumental roles of meeting their

families' economic needs, and women take on expressive roles and meet their families emotional and physical needs. In contrast, the conflict perspective emphasizes the exploiter-exploited nature of family relations. Conflict, then is derived not only from the struggle between classes, but between other groups as well. And because women's caring work is not paid, they are in a disadvantage position compared to men, which is the basis for gender inequality. Lastly, according to symbolic interactionist perspective, gender roles are socially constructed, depending on what society's views as feminine and masculine, and these roles are maintained through social interaction.

The Role of Women in Nation Building and Sustenance

Speaking on the role of women in national life, Stein (1985, p.73) urges, “The nation...doesn’t simply need what we have. It needs what we are.” This assertion can be applied in all arenas that a woman finds herself and forms a useful background for African women as they reflect on their call to contribute to nation building. Through the exercise of her maternal vocation, woman preserves certain values in society which are invaluable. In the case of physical motherhood, woman plays a crucial role in the determination of societal values as the task of educating children in values is primarily hers. A Woman is thus called to contribute to society’s values by inculcating in her physical children these values. As noted earlier, her maternal role is not constrained to biological motherhood. A Woman’s role in educating in values transcends the family or home and extends to society as a whole. For instance, Kenyan women must thus not lose sight of this role which they can exercise in whatever position they occupy in society. Currently, Kenya is mourning one of it’s the greatest African Heroine, Margaret Atieno Ogola. She was a nationalist, prolific writer, mother and wife During the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995 she clearly points out the role of women in society:

The woman is the heart of the family, and the family is the corner stone of society, therefore it is very fitting that we should be here in Beijing for the Fourth World Women's Conference seeking new ways to enhance her well being, natural talents and gifts. The woman is a powerhouse of creativity, development and peace. Conflict between men and women is therefore unnecessary because a woman brings an equal and powerful complementarity to the common human condition. Women have been entrusted with the capacity to transmit life which is the most precious gift that anybody can give or receive. Without life no other good is possible.

According to Josemaría (1965, p.90) “the fact that women’s central core is linked to motherhood does not mean that they are precluded from any other profession besides those related to this

maternal characteristic. Given that men and women are different and that each has a unique contribution to make to society, women should be found in all aspects of social and professional life. When Stein was asked if women should be confined to the domestic realm, the “home and hearth”, her response was a resounding no. “Involvement of women in public life may not necessarily translate into a seizing of power but rather constitutes the public witness that only women can offer. Besides, decisions made in the public sphere have tremendous impact on the family and society in general this leads them to take a keen interest in them. When asked whether the natural vocation of women ruled out certain professions as unsuitable for her, Stein (1985, p.23) answers, “One could say that in case of need, every normal and healthy woman is able to hold a position. And there is no profession which cannot be practiced by a woman”. It is likely that some professions will continue to attract more women than men, partly because of their strong human component. We might expect to find a large percentage of women drawn to fields like teaching, nursing, law, social work, psychology, etc. Obviously, not everyone can make a choice when entering the job market as to what sort of work they would find most attractive, and many women (along with many men) will work at jobs which are not especially suited to them. However all professions can be practiced in a feminine way; that is, every profession can be humanized, made more person-friendly, and brought into greater contact with human concerns. Stein (1985, p.24) sums it up by saying, “the fact that all powers which the man possesses are present in the feminine nature as well – even though they may generally appear in different degrees and relationships - is an indication they should be employed in corresponding activity”.

Whether as mothers in families, as a vital presence in the work force and the institutions of society Nigerian women need to exercise their proper role as well as their particular charisma and talents if they are to contribute effectively to nation building. They have an indispensable role to play in creating that “human ecology” which society and the world at large so urgently need. In 2009 Pope Benedict XVI summarizes the role of women in society as:

.....bearers of love, teachers of mercy and artisans of peace. Their greatest role is that of bringing warmth and humanity to a world that all too often judges the value of a person by the cold criteria of usefulness and profit. This effectively contributes to the advancement of a culture of true humanity and the building of the civilization of love.

“The capacity of women to excel in all professions is arguably a fact already attested to by history; Women today have proved themselves capable in careers formerly closed to them” (Daniel, 1974, p.112). However, this must not be translated as automatic evidence of the increased contribution

of women in the task of nation building. Stein (1959, p.79), avers that, “in many cases, the inclusion of women in the professional and public spheres has not been in the circumstances necessary to foster a contribution based on their unique essence. Women have found themselves in a situation analogous to that of outsiders in an exclusive club”. As a result, their ability to enjoy the pleasures of being a woman while exercising these professions is hampered. Women have found themselves forced to imitate men so as to ‘fit in’ but also confused on how to remain women while doing so.

Without a clear appreciation of femininity, women's identity is lost in the search for equality. As more Nigerian women make enter the public sphere, they must be careful not to fall into the trap of imitating men, but rather maintain a true sense of equality that appreciates that a woman's feminine way of being is legitimate and valuable. The world today needs women who are aware and faithful to their nature and hence their role. Their greatest task is the nurturing and rebuilding of human values that will avert humanity's self destruction. John Paul II (1988, pp.101-102) puts it this way:

In our own time, the successes of science and technology make it possible to attain material wellbeing to a degree hitherto unknown. While this favours some, it pushes others to the margins of society. In this way, unilateral progress can also lead to a gradual loss of sensitivity for man, that is, for what is essentially human. In this sense, our time in particular awaits the manifestation of that 'genius' which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance: because they are human.

Women thus have a central contribution to make to national development and sustenance. At these crucial moments of the history of the Nigerian nation, women ought not to lose sight of their role as protector and teacher of humanity. In order to fulfill this role, they must understand what true humanity means which understanding is dependent on their understanding their unique essence. The education of women must be geared towards this.

The leadership roles women have played in the development of various African societies cannot be underestimated. The contributions of women towards the social, religious, economic, political and educational developments of African societies cannot also be gainsaid. In fact, traditional African society attached no importance to gender issues because every individual had a role to play both in the family as well as in the larger society. Each gender had its traditional role in the development of the society. In other words, the position of women was complimentary to that of men. There was the non-existent of gender inequality. Each role, regardless of who performed it

was considered equally important because it contributed to the fundamental goal of community survival. What this simply implies is that indigenous people in Africa performed varying roles to maintain the efficient functioning of their society, prior to colonialism. The claim, therefore, is that “gender inequality came with the advent of colonialism” (St. Clair, 1994, p.27). In spite of the complimentary role women played to men, the dynamism that prevailed, *ipso facto*, was that there existed the patriarchy system where men were still seen as the head of the family and leader of the society. This therefore shows that traditional Igbo was not based on gender inequality but a complement of gender, because each gender had a role to play in contributions to societal development.

Women in African Traditional Society

The fact remains that no degree of stereotyping against women existed in traditional Africa. The woman possessed the power to organize the family and the society at large. There was an enormous task and responsibility conferred on womanhood. In fact the responsibility of both men and women were seen as complementary to one another “there was a codependence and a balance that existed” (St. Clair, 1994, p.27).

Akintunde (2004, p.171) points out that in religious sphere especially in the traditional religion of the people, women serve as priestesses, diviners, healers and praise singers. While arguing for the priesthood of women in the traditional religion, Owanikin (1974, p.217) says that, “Traditional religion recognizes the priesthood of women. Priests and priestesses abound and have equal status and authority in religion”. This is true in relation to the Ala who is a goddess that people come to appease and make requests from. It is no exaggeration to observe that the African Traditional religions served as vehicles for political and socio-economic developments of the communities and societies. It is also a fact that some of these deities belonged to the female gender with followers headed by dedicated and committed women. Examples of such deities are Osun, Yemoja and Oya in the western states of Nigeria. These deities were highly revered for their prompt response to providing solutions to worshipper’s problem. Ezeanya (1976, p.121) concludes that the role of women in traditional religion is indispensable not only in order that the men may be able to perform their acts of religion with the requisite pomp and pageantry both private and public, but also especially because the divinities needed women to play their roles in society by their own

prayers and ministry, and what is more, to cater for the proper execution of the various rituals and give a guarantee of constant and palatable dishes On the occasion of sacrifice.

In various traditional African societies, the African woman possessed the power that binds the society together. In fact the survival of the family and the future of the marriage depended a great deal on the African woman. This is why Leith (1967, p.34) emphasizes that:

Culturally, African women were the transmitters of the language, the history and the oral culture, the music, the dance, the habits and the artisanal knowledge. They were the teachers and were responsible for instilling traditional values and knowledge in children. Men were also essential in the transmission of knowledge to the youth because they had a different type of knowledge of the earth and environment, and also of ceremonies and traditions that were performed exclusively by men.

What Leith explains in this regard is the fact that each gender had its role and responsibility which helped in the formation and upkeep of the family, particularly, as it affects the essential upbringing of children. Furthermore, Leith (1967, p.40) points out that:

The woman had extensive knowledge of the natural environment; they were gatherers, which meant that their communities depended on them to provide nourishment or they would face starvation. Indigenous women in Africa held vital knowledge of herbs and medicines that also ensured the survival of their communities, they were the healers.

The indication here is that women's role in traditional Africa is a sine qua non to societal development and transformation. The impacts of the women were felt in every aspect of life of the society. Thus, the African woman played a key role in the education and the teaching of children, social, ethical and moral values which were part of the cultural standards for evaluating proper societal behaviour. Evaluating the status and position standing of women in traditional Africa, Hafkin and Hanson (1976, pp.59-60) reiterate that:

Women were treated with unparalleled respect because they were seen to be closer to the creator than men ever had the potential of being. This is because women themselves had the ability to create due to the fact that they were able to give birth. As creation of life, they were charged with the sacred responsibility of caring for the needs of the next generation, and because of this, they can be regarded as the originations of the idea that is now known as sustainable developments.

Buttressing the above quotation, it is an incontrovertible fact that societal sustainable development depends essentially on a solid family structure. In every society, the most important aspect of life and survival was a family. For Obi (2009, p.4), in African family context, the mother (woman) is "the heart of the home, the procurator, the caretaker of the house. For all major needs she gets the

necessary funds from the father who controls the family economy”. An African mother is a well-established woman in the family. She has very little fear of divorce unless she is childless. The husband is her protector and her pride. She has her husband’s confidence in all matters affecting the family. African traditional societies assigned to women the role of educator. It is the type of education that starts from the cradle and is given through a variety of activities. Moral values and virtues are not born, but made while the culture of peace, love, obedience etc, in traditional African societies are implanted in a child through responsible upbringing and socialization undertaken and supervised by mothers. African woman is therefore the first teacher of a child, boy as well as girl. “The African woman is the first and the best ethics teacher” (Obi, 2008, p.15). The main task of a mother is over and above all to teach the children social and moral values, etiquette, respect, obedience and good manners, honesty and self-control. It is the sole duty of an African mother to teach her children (especially girls) some domestic skills. This is why Agarwal (1970, p.75) agrees that, “the women are often the backbone of the family in traditional Africa. The African family has always been characterized by strong women who usually held pertinent positions in the family”.

It is important, however, to mention that one of the many forms of traditional African notions of family structure which cannot be ignored was polygamy. It is, as it is known, the practice where a man marries and lives with more than one wife. Despite its many woes, it is often viewed as a mean of achieving family social and economic stability. Iheanyi (2011, p.34) cites Dobson when he explicates in broad perspective the necessity and importance of polygamy in family structure as well as the many benefits it portends for the woman. According to him:

As a result of the agrarian society of the economy of traditional Africa, polygamy was warned as socially necessary in order to ensure continuation of the society, and to provide for the needs of the many woman who might otherwise never enjoy the status and benefits which accompany becoming a mother, a bearer of children and are thus a vital link to the ancestors. Wars between groups often resulted in the reduction of the male population, thus females usually outnumbered males. Unmarried women risked social humiliation without a husband and children, thus the system sought to provide for the needs of everyone in the society. (Dobson, 1954, p.57)

Furthermore, Okenze (2003, p.71) explains that, women have played a significant role in Owerri culture. They are highly respected and adorned in many fashions throughout several clans. Essentially, the women’s role is not only that of a caretaker, but extends to other forms. In reality, the Imo woman has been portrayed in several ways as procreator, goddess, mother, ancestor and sage.

In Mbaitoli for example, (a local government area in Imo State) traditional family structure (irrespective of the form of family structure) the female influence on the moral character of the traditional society was very enduring. The reason for this is women's traditional care-giving roles, which put them in a unique and strategic position not only to produce and sustain life but also to help instill socio-religious values and morals in the family. Thus, in Mbaitoli (Orodo in particular) traditional society, the survival of the family depended fundamentally on the women. Women in Imo State traditional families played an important role in teaching children social and moral values. Much of the teaching, according to, Okenze (2003, p.74) "was focused on regulating sexuality and family life in general". In submission therefore, one could say that women have played indispensable roles in the African traditional society.

Recommendations

Even though in recent years, Nigerian contemporary society has made noticeable progress in strengthening women's capacity so as to enhance their contributions towards National growth in all realms, all the stakeholders need to improve on their efforts for more distinct and sustainable impacts.

Much will be expected from these stakeholders such as (Government, Employers, Society and general public) which we will now examine in turn are:

On The Government

- In order to promote gender equality in employment, women should be given greater educational opportunities by the family (parent, guardian or spouse).
- Furthermore the promotion of sound education for women at all levels is essential for national development as the adage goes: "educate a man, you educate an individual – educate a woman, you educate a nation". To reinforce this, a Minister of State for Education Hajia Aishatu Dukku recently said of the ways to enhance women's education is the establishment of more Adult Education Centres. Late President Yar'adua government laid emphasis on the 35% women affirmative which gave rise to more women participation in government executive and legislature. The current dispensation of President Bola Tinubu is equally playing a role in women involvement in governance as this administration given to women some sensitive posts in its ministerial appointments.
- Also, government should remove unorthodox means of discriminating against women in our labour laws. For example, section 34(1) and section 44 of the Labour Act allows for an employed

person recruited for service outside Nigeria to be accompanied by members of his family including up to two wives and children. Family refers to wives and children with no provision for husbands.

- Economic planners can also identify growth sectors and analyze the job descriptions to pinpoint those areas which require appropriate female skills. Then they should develop appropriate women's training and placement programmes.
- Government should also ensure the provision of quality and quantity of education for the girl child. Also, the practice of girl child marriage and child abuse should be abolished. Adequate monitoring apparatus to ensure compliance with these policies should be put in place.
- Government should establish an agency for social securities welfare and safety nets to cater for the needs of special categories of people especially those in the vulnerable group where we have high concentration of women.
- Government should also devote more efforts to implement the provision of the affirmative action.

On Employers

- Employers should promote gender friendly policies and actions to enhance women's contributions.
- There should be establishment of crèches and daycare centers for babies of female employees to stay within the vicinity of their mothers while at work.
- Employers could also make working hours flexible to accommodate women to conveniently juggle official responsibilities with other needs.
- Employers should review all policies, practices, procedures and the working environment to be gender friendly. In particular, issues to be reviewed should include:

On the Society

- Discrimination based on religion, tradition or custom such as the pudah system which prevents healthy and even educated women from contributing their quota to national development should be eliminated.
- Women in ministry should also be encouraged in their quest for leadership attainment in the church.
- Spouse and family members should encourage and maximally support women as they advance in or seek leadership positions. According to Onyejeocha (2011, p.4), "most of our women are not getting to the peak of their political career because of the lack of support from their husbands, so, men should please trust in their wives". This notion cannot be disputed as nature has structured

marital relationship in a way that it is the men that determine both the Productive and Reproductive lives of women.

- Women in positions of leadership should also encourage others to aim high.

Conclusion

No doubt, it has been established that women have made significant contribution to societal development. Women all over the world have played great roles in the socio-economic development, as well as leadership roles in society. The fact that women have suffered from injustice, inequality and other forms of oppression in modern contemporary society is a fact of history. This has been attributed to colonial administration in Africa which deliberately excluded women from activities such as road constructions, the mines and processing industries “which led to their gradual displacement from engaging in productivity activity” (Saje and Abubakar, 1997, p.23). Equally discriminatory was the character to colonial education system which marginalized the female gender.

However, today the idea of gender inequality has been downplayed. It is no longer fashionable to discriminate against an individual because of gender. But one cannot deny the fact that the contemporary society is going through dramatic changes with concomitant shifts in the role and status of women, as well as its attendant erosion of traditional family values. The call here is not to go back to the traditional African past where women possessed the power that binds society together, rather there is the need to recast the traditional order by incorporating some viable traditional values with modern realities for the good of contemporary society. In spite of the new increased social and economic empowerment of the contemporary Igbo women, their traditional roles as wives and mothers must not be abandoned or neglected. Such neglects have caused the society with the existence of various social vices. The key role the traditional Igbo women played in teaching of children social, ethical and moral values helped to maintain a high level of morality in the traditional society. It is therefore important that the contemporary Igbo woman braces up to this challenge.

Conclusively, one would be right to say that the contemporary is in transition as a result of a conglomeration of factors such as “urbanization, Christian teachings, formal education, Islamization, male labour migration, monetization of the economy, feminism and other modern social forces” (Ogede, 1991, p.13). It is therefore important to submit that as a panacea to societal development, the understanding of traditional African perspective on gender roles is crucial to a

sustainable future of Nigeria in particular and Africa at large. Of course, “by giving equal value and importance to the roles played by both male and female, the balance and harmony that once existed can be re-established”. (Olufemi and VerEecke, 1992, p.226). The misery of our society today has its genesis from the oppression, inequality and discrimination against women. Our society must not lose sight of the fact that cooperation between man and woman, interdependence on one another is quintessentially fundamental to achieving a well-ordered society.

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