

# **EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN FOR PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH EDUCATION**

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By

Professor D. O. Osisanya-Olumuyiwa

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## Abstract

The paper re-examines what *EMPOWERMENT* is, as distinct from what it is assumed to be. Empowerment is the opening up of avenues for generations of women in a nation to participate actively and enjoy their participation in the family, community, society and in the world. Empowerment entails a complexity of change in developmental issues such as: combating poverty; raising productivity; widening access to education; improving nutrition and living conditions; widening access to employment; improving health conditions; enhancing agriculture and the environment; providing legal and political recognition; maintaining cultural values and enjoying peaceful co-existence.

Women are central to these issues, yet, until in the last decade in Nigeria, women were never involved in decisions regarding these most pressing problems that affect their lives.

The paper presents arguments that non-formal, formal and informal education should be the major instrumentation for empowering women. It highlights major interventions both by governments and non-governmental organisations in Nigeria and outside to empower women.

By reviewing needs and roles of Women in agriculture, in health, in literacy, economy, and leadership, it enjoins curricula developers to package multi-sectoral and well-integrated curricula for women development centres and cooperatives.

## Introduction

Empowerment, in the context of women issues, has been misunderstood by both the sincere and the cynical. Some people understand empowerment of women to mean encouraging women to feel superior to what they actually are. Others see empowerment of women as a threat to male dominancy. Some others regard it as undersirable women liberation.

In the most refined sense of the word, empowerment of women is a consciousness - raising in both men and women for participatory and integrated development of all available human resources in a nation or community. It is a social consciousness mechanism by the decision-makers in a nation to reconstruct society and effect social changes that will contribute to national development. Empowerment entails a complexity of change in the social conscience of the ruling class, to make decisions that are humane and that can make diverse interest-groups in a society labour together toward a common goal of nationalism.

Women always form about 50% or more of the population of any given nation. Yet women are not well-represented at decision-making levels on developmental issues. Whereas women are central to such developmental issues as: combating poverty; raising productivity; widening access to relevant and meaningful education; improving nutrition; sanitation and living conditions; widening access to employment and self-employment (enterpreneurship); improving health conditions; enhancing agriculture while protecting the environment; providing legal recognition and political participation; maintaining cultural and moral values and enjoying peaceful co-existence.

When wrong decisions in any of these developmental issues are made, albeit unintentionally, it is women and their children who suffer most the consequences of such decisions. For this reason, women need empowerment to be able to influence decisions even within their local wards and to be able to improve the quality of their own lives and contribute productively to societal development.

Empowerment of women can best be achieved and made sustainable through enlightenment, and training, skills-acquisition, functional literacy and numeracy, indeed, through education.



## 1.2 Why Empower Women Through Education

There are several reasons why education is an essential tool to empower women. By education we mean not only formally structured basic education and training, but also non-formal and multi-sectoral integrated programmes for women.

Education is a means of liberating the minds of women of superstitions, ignorance and “old wives’ tales”. Through education and enlightenment, rural women understand that growing children need protein for nutrition in foods like fish, eggs and meat. Such women may then reject old wives’ tales that children fed on eggs fish and meat steal.

Education trains illiterate women to acquire basic functional literacy and numeracy to improve their trade as market women. As food-stuff sellers, they need the knowledge of weights and measures even in their native language; and as sellers of groundnut-oil and palm oil and kerosine, they need the knowledge of liquid content measure and capacity.

Education, non-formal and/or formal raises the intellectual outlook of women and improves their emotional, physical and psychological health. The skills training that is integrated with functional literacy and numeracy in Women Education Centres train women to have respect for the dignity of labour. Ethics training can also be well-integrated in the package, to inculcate in women moral and spiritual values for interpersonal relationships.

Women who have education are more likely to let their daughters go to school and complete their basic education and even aspire to attain secondary and tertiary education. The benefits of a mother’s education are cumulative. Women’s education breaks down the cycle of illiteracy in the community. For this reason, every nation should train the women who form 50% of its human resources.

With education, women are able to perform their many roles and responsibilities better. With education, they are enlightened enough to make efficient choices about their roles and responsibilities. In addition, education is an important tool for enhancing better life for women, making them earn money, enjoy better health, be better mothers and have improved relationship with their spouses.

### 1.3 Women Organisations and Networking

Women groups in Nigeria have always organised themselves to improve their trades, or professions, or occupations. Osisanya-Olumuyiwa (1993) lists out a very large number of women groups starting from Iya Eleja, Iya Aladire groups in market places. They hold meetings in the market place to decide on issues affecting their trade and they serve as a censorship body to maintain discipline. The lists also include professional and religious bodies. One of the oldest is the Nigerian Association of University Women, from which other women professional groups grew: women ~~lawyers~~, women bankers, women medical doctors, women accountants, women academics, women engineers, women architects, media women or women journalists, etc. Among the women religious groups are the Young Women Christian Association and the Federation of Moslem Women in Nigeria.

The National Council of Women's Societies at Federal and State levels is also one of the oldest networks of Women groups and interests in Nigeria. There are philanthropic women groups such as Inner Wheels, Lions Clubs, Soroptomists, and Zonta International. Other women groups that have organised themselves and are improving the welfare of their members are the Associations of Wives of Army Officers, Navy Officers, Airforce Officers, Police Officers, Prison Workers and Custom-Officers. Other voluntary women groups as N.G.Os. are Women in Nigeria, Women in Development; Association of African Women in Research and Development (AAWORD), Nigerian Chapter, Women Action Society, Women in Colleges of Education, Women in Polytechnics and many more.

These women groups have for long been educating women to bring about attitudinal changes in socio-cultural practices such as: girl-child need for basic education, retention of girls in schools, prevention of early marriage in some States, discouraging the taking of dowries at traditional marriages, waging war against female circumcision in some States, role-modelling women achievers to discourage male-child preference, campaigning against demeaning widowhood practices and urging both male and female offspring inheritance practices through legal reforms.

But attitude changing must not be limited to women struggles alone. Men and women need to change traditional attitudes to all socio-cultural practices that reduce women to vulnerable segments of society.



## 2.1 Policies of Governments to Empower Women in Nigeria

We attribute great credit to successive Nigerian Military governments at both the Federal and State levels for their roles in initiating the empowerment of women through education and training. After the 1985 United Nations Conference on "FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES for the ADVANCEMENT of WOMEN", held in Nairobi, Kenya, at which our women participated, the Federal government in 1986 established through the Federal Ministry of Education, a Women Education Unit. Between 1986 and 1988 the then 21 State Ministries of Education, and that of Abuja had each a Women Education Branch which set up a Model Women Education Centre. By 1989, each Women Branch of the Ministry of Education set up three additional Model Women Education Centres. The additional Centres are located in the rural communities, as shown in Appendix V, Osisanya-Olumuyiwa (1994). Most of the structures used as Centres were built by the various Local Government Authorities, the individual communities and later by the Better Life Programme when it came on-stream.

The activities of the Centres are co-ordinated by Co-ordinators from the Federal Ministry, the State Ministry and the Local Government. The Federal Government supplied the equipment and materials needed at the Centres, while the State governments are to undertake maintenance and repairs of such equipment. Literary classes, skills-training and income-generating activities and vocational training are undertaken. Women whose main occupations are: farming, agriculture, fishing, trading, craftsmanship and artisanship, study a diversity of subjects among which are: "reading, writing, local language, social studies, religious/moral education, typing, book-keeping, drawing, painting, arithmetic/mathematics, English language and integrated science", p. 7 Kuta, 1995. A blueprint for Women Education was also published in 1990.

## **2.2 Entrepreneurship Development and Income-Generating Activities for Women**

The Better-Life-for-Rural Women Programme launched in 1987 at Federal and State levels began to encourage rural women as human resources in entrepreneurship and income-generating activities. It set up additional women development centres in rural areas where women learn farming, food processing and packaging, local arts and crafts. Recognising that four main factors of production are land, labour, capital and entrepreneurship, the Federal government established People's Banks and Community Banks.

In 1989, the National Commission for Women was set up at Federal and State levels. Women's responsibility in bearing and nurturing human lives is being recognised as crucial to national development. This recognition is evident in the first of the two objectives of the National Commission for Women as follows:

1. "Promoting the welfare of women in general, through their full utilisation in the development of human resources, thereby bringing about their acceptance as full participants in every phase of national development, with rights and corresponding obligations."

## **2.3 Women Issues Gain Ministerial Status: The F.S.P. and FEAP Introduced With Basic Education for Women.**

In 1995, the Federal and State Commissions for Women became raised to the status of Federal Ministry and State Ministries of Women's Affairs. This means there is a woman as a Minister of the Ministry and there is a provision for the Ministry in the national budget. The new status is a redress to earlier imbalance of women not being at decision-making level to influence decisions that affect them directly.

More needs to be heard by way of information and activities going on in the Ministry of Women Affairs. Women generally would wish to have inter-ministerial working committees set up to discuss inputs other ministries can make to the general welfare of women, especially in urban areas, and among educated poor. For example, what can the Ministries of Agriculture,

Industries, Health and Transport do to ensure that cheap nutritional foods are accessible to urban and rural women of all socio-economic levels?

### **2.3.1 The Family Support Programme and FEAP, Family Economic Advnace Programme**

The Family Support Programme was launched in 1994 at both the Federal and State levels. It's focus on women is not as separate groups, but as mothers, wives, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, sisters-in-laws and mothers-in-law in society. It targets the underserved and underprivileged members of the society - men and women.

Its Blue Print is yet to be available to a number of women group-leaders from whom I asked. From a recent lecture by Professor Umar of Energy Commission, delivered at the College of Education Technical, Yaba, I gather that its twin organ, FEAP, has as its overall objective:

“to stimulate appropriate economic activities in the various wards of each local government area in the country in order to raise the productivity of the people” 1998. “FEAP is promoting the following cottage industries: farming, traditional processing, industrial processing, general manufacturing and mineral beneficiation” Umar (1998).

FEAP will be working in collaboration with Vocational and Technical Education Schools and Relevant Ministries of Agriculture and Industries “to articulate training programmes and skills acquisition based on the needs of participants at ward levels.”

Before the introduction of FEAP, women and men at ward level did not have easy access to credit facilities. FEAP has brought a good change in fiscal and monetary policies to give loans to worthy cooperative societies at ward levels to expand their productivity.



### 3.1 Remedying Imbalances in Opportunities for Women Through Education

Education and training are central to the empowerment of women in all sectors. Osisanya-Olumuyiwa (1993) sums it up that multi-sectoral training is needed by illiterate women farmers:

“In times of trouble, unrest and scarcity, these illiterate women who are largely farmers are most vulnerable. Their only choice in life is tied to marriage and child-bearing/rearing. They lack health education information to protect their own lives by spacing well their childbirth. They need credit facilities to improve their farming and trading, but lack training in organising cooperative societies among themselves.”

#### 3.1.2 Women in Agriculture: Education Activities:

Ownership of agricultural inputs and poor access to farm lands have been major constraints to women's productivity in agriculture. Women farmers need to be empowered to know that they can have access to capital, through loans, and access to bigger farm holdings, through inheritance, lease agreements and outright purchase. A recent study by UNICEF (1994) in four Zones of Nigeria, reveals that less than 50% of women own land or plots they farm on. Their farming is therefore restricted to subsistence level and they cannot financially transform their lives and improve the nutrition of their children. (see Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix I).

Such women farmers need training on cost-effectiveness of larger farm holdings, on production costs and labour costs, on determining selling price and profit margin. These training programmes are given by the agricultural extension workers located in their community. In addition, they need training in literacy and numeracy so that they can keep records of sales and expenditure.

It is abundantly clear that underserved women groups need education and functional training to empower them for self-fulfilment. Education is no longer perceived as the assignment of a ministry: rather, humanistic education is the mission of the nation, with women engendering **BONDING** among fellow women.

### 3.1.3 Women and Health

The growing bonding among women can be seen not only nationally, but also internationally. Nigerian women N.G.Os network with international N.G.Os. such as the Centre for Development Population Activities. State branches of the National Council of Women's Societies and the Association of Women medical doctors, as well as the Association for Reproductive and Family Health are organising massive campaigns against female circumcision, child marriage and its attendant health problems. On the other hand, these NGOs are encouraging breast feeding, maternal care, childbirth spacing and good nutrition for children.

In its 1995 Annual Report, CEDPA reaffirms its MISSION which is "to empower women at all levels of society to be full partners in development" p.14. Branches of the National Council of Women Societies that work in collaboration with CEDPA include: Abia, Anambra, Cross-River, Niger, Plateau and Osun States. Thus, in health matters, functional and humanistic education is seen in action, by educated women for their fellow women.

### 4.1 Women and Literacy

There is a below average literacy rate among Nigerian women. As some girls in the 6 - 11 age group are out of school and as some other girls fail to complete primary education, the number of women illiterate swells. Female literacy rate in Nigeria by 1995 is said to be 47% for female. Of the 79% female enrolled for primary education, only about 33% female reached Grade 5 between 1990 and 1995. (UNICEF, 1998).

World Bank average literacy rate necessary for economic development in a nation is put at 40%. In 1990, the Federal Military Government established the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education. By 1995, its impact obviously has not reflected sufficiently to bring female literacy rate in Nigeria to world average. Nigeria is also tackling the problems of illiteracy, by stepping up the quality and quantity of basic education. A National Commission for Primary Education has also been set up. Dilapidated primary school classrooms are being refurbished. Although



the two Commissions are not gender-specific, their combined effects are going to influence positively girl-child education and female literacy rate. With the current campaigns against withdrawal of 6 - 11 age-group of children for child-labour and early marriage (for girls), meaningful and relevant themes packaged in basic education are likely to interest, retain and make girls and boys literate by the end of primary education.

Information is needed on the process and content of literacy packages for participation of women in the on-going Mass Literacy Programme in Nigeria. Oladapo (1996) focuses on psycho-social determinants of women's participation, such as reasons for participating, perception of relevance and utilization of literacy skills, supportive level of the family of participants, other social activities of participants, nearness of centres; convenience of times of classes, and ease of nursing mothers having their children with them in classes.

While these factors are strong enough to retain women in the centres until they attain literacy, making the women select and structure with instructors, themes and processes of content which the women can apply to solve problems of life they face, will also ensure success and sustainability of the programmes.

## **4.2 Women in Leadership Positions**

Nigeria is taking great strides in having an increasing number of women in decision making positions, or in positions in which they can positively influence POWER at the Federal level. The contributions of two successive Nigerian first Ladies are a good example. Of particular note are Her Excellency, Dr. (Mrs) Maryan Abacha's contributions. Having led her national women representatives to World Summits on Education and on Women, and on Peace, as a 1<sup>st</sup> Lady, she initiated socio-economic programmes for which her name would remain in the history of Nigeria. There are levels of positions of leadership women find themselves in. Be it in the community, in religious and professional circles, women should show consciousness of fellow women who are less privileged than they are.

UNICEF's (1997) Progress of Nations gives an analysis of the percentage of women worldwide who get into executive posts - 4%, and into



political or ministerial posts - 3%. The bonding that the National Council of Women's Societies showed, by giving money to female politicians, who took part in contesting for the House of Representatives election, is a step in the right direction. A number of local workshops, training programmes and exchange programme abroad had taken place among women's organisations between 1992 and 1996.

Nigerian women are making participatory contributions to the development of the various sectors of the nation. Men are welcoming women as partners in progress. Women are demonstrating that they not only can enjoy the fruits of development, but can contribute to the labour of development.

### 5.1 Conclusion

Nigerian women's participation in World Summits on critical global developmental issues, is in itself a kind of education to all participants. Its post-summit workshops and seminars further enlighten men and women on the realisation that sustainable development and economic growth are only possible through the improvement of the economic, educational, social, political, legal and cultural status of women in Nigeria.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made toward the advancement of women welfare in Nigeria.

1. A positive change in societal attitude to women is needed, by which women are appreciated as mothers, daughters, sisters and wives in our own families. Both men and women are to demonstrate this change in all human interactions.
2. Strong bonding and humane feelings should exist among women, especially by privileged women for the less fortunate ones.
3. The Ministry of Women Affairs should continue to advance the welfare of women in all sectors of the nation's economy, through inter-ministerial advocacy and review of social policies that affect women.

4. Women organisations should continue to equip women with life skills, entrepreneurship and literacy skills in non-formal training, seminars, workshops and group-enlightenment programmes in all sectors.
5. Governments in all the three tiers should enforce laws that bar school-age children from street-trading and child labour.
6. Government should improve the quality of and widen access to basic education for girls, through the agency of National Commission for Primary Education.
7. At ward level, literacy programmes of the Mass literacy Commission should be integrated with skills-training in Women Development Centres, and should be consumer-tailored.
8. The Media, especially Media Women, should use the media to raise societal image of women.
9. The progress of women should be seen as the progress of a nation and of the world.

# APPENDIX I

TABLE I

MAJOR OCCUPATIONS OF WOMEN: IN PERCENTAGES

Occupation	Zone A	Zone B	Zone C	Zone D
Farming and Food Processing	82.3%	31.6%	55.9%	42.5%
Full-time Housewife	06.2	08.4	13.1	27.5
Non-farming occupation e.g. trading	06.8	56.3	28.4	24.7
Others	0.0	0.7	0.4	01.4
Wage occupation	04.6	03.1	02.1	05.3
N	1504	2413	1500	1828

Key Zone A - South East: Benue and Cross-River States

Zone B - South West: Oyo, Osun and Ondo States

Zone C - North West: Kaduna and Niger States

Zone D - North East: Adamawa, Bauchi and Taraba States

Source: The Nutritional Status of Women and Children in Nigeria.

FGN/UNICEF, 1994, p. 32

TABLE 2

PROPORTION OF WOMEN WITH ACCESS TO LAND  
IN THE 4 ZONES, IN PERCENTAGES

ZONE	YES	NO	N
A	82.6	17.4	1504
B	41.9	58.1	2413
C	33.8	66.2	1500
D	30.3	69.7	1828
TOTAL	47.2	52.8	

Source: The Nutritional Status of Women and Children in Nigeria.

FGN/UNICEF, 1994, p. 33.



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