MIKAILALSYS
Journal of Multidisciplinary Sciences

e-ISSN : 2987-2286
p-ISSN : 2987-3924

Index : Dimensions, Scilit, Crossref, Garuda, Semantic, Lens,Google Scholar,Base, etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/mikailalsys.v3i1.4942

Women Empowerment and the Role of Gender Equality toward Development in Nigeria

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Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Jan 11, 2025	Jan 23, 2025	Feb 5, 2025	Feb 10, 2025

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to uncover the role of Women Empowerment and the Role of Gender Equality toward development in Nigeria. To achieve this purpose, qualitative methodology is employed and secondary sources of data were used as instruments of data collection. Based on the data analyzed, findings of the study show that the use of a women's labor force in the economic development of the country is minimal and the role of women across different dimensions is less reflected in the country. The political economic and social sphere of the country is large, reserved for men and few women. The place of women in society is also relegated to contributing minimally to the social development of the country. In addition to that, women's rights are not properly being protected in order for women to participate in various issues of their country but are subjected to violations. Moreover, women are highly affected by societal problems and less emphasis is given to their participation in protecting the environment. In a nutshell, women are empowered and gender equality is achieved so that women can play their role in economic, social, political, and environmental areas and the country cannot achieve development with the recognition of one gender to participation in all areas. The fact that women constitute one quarter the entire population of the country makes empowering them to be an active part of all

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development, initiatives in the country a compelling the challenges. Therefore, this paper calls for the strong commitment of the government to empower women and utilize all the potentials of the country to bring about development.

Keywords: Development, Economic growth, Gender equality, Good governance, Women's empowerment

Introduction

The issue of women's empowerment and the role of gender equality are at the top-gear of across the world, as gender inequality is been found in all societies. In developing countries, gender disparity is highly rampant compared to the developed countries (Ahmed et al., 2001). Most importantly, in Nigeria, gender-based discrimination and inequalities are very much apparent, although the government is working aggressively towards alleviating such problems. As a result, low empowerment of women and high gender gap still impede the development process of the country (Environmental Protection Authority, 2012). Even though the country is on the path of development in various respects, the likelihood of its sustainability is in question, given such a large gender disparity. Hence, this study reveals the need to empower women and achieve gender equality for the development of the country. As far as case study is concerned, this paper attempts first to conceptualize some of the keywords. Accordingly, Development, Economic growth, Gender equality, good governance, Women's empowerment and Human Rights Protection, Environmental Protection is addressed because of their importance to the reader. Lastly, the paper also looked at the relevance of women empowerment and role of gender equality for the achievement, development and progress of Nigeria.

Definition of Terms

Development: The concept of development arises due to the change of human perception as to what development is talking about. Development perspectives shifted gradually, leading to what we perceive today as development. In the 1950s and 1960s, the focus was on the economic growth and productive capacity of a country (ECA, 2015; Gunduz, 2004; Drexhage and Murphy, 2010). However, in the 1970s, the focus shifted to equity matters, i.e., social development and income distribution, as awareness grew of the prevailing gap

between rich and poor (ECA, 2015; Gunduz, 2004; Drexhage and Murphy, 2010). In the same period, environmental protection came into the picture as one component of development: knowing the impact of economic growth on the environment (ECA, 2015; Gunduz, 2004; Drexhage and Murphy, 2010). Hence, development is perceived broadly nowadays. Accordingly, the most frequently cited definition of development is "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). It calls for attention to be paid to the interest of future generations while attempting to satisfy our present needs. Following the aforesaid changes in development perspectives, development is also understood to have three interrelated pillars: economic development, social development and environmental protection (Warth and Koparanova, 2012; UN, 2007; UN Women, 2014). It is further noted that "the goal, and indeed the ultimate test, of development is the convergence among the three trajectories of economic growth, social development and environmental protection" (Warth and Koparanova, 2012). This shows that development can be achieved if and only if those three elements are satisfied cumulatively. These dimensions have equal and interrelated importance; the absence of one will impede others (Stevens, 2010). It is well articulated that stressing the environmental and social dimensions of development in the absence of economics neglects the financial capital needed to pay for progress. Building up the economic and social pillars of sustainability while neglecting the environment degrades the natural capital needed for growth. Focusing on economics and the environment without attention to social factors can lead to green growth for a few. Given gender gaps worldwide, these few tend to be mostly men (Stevens, 2010). Therefore, development denotes achieving a balance among the three pillars sustainably (Drexhage and Murphy, 2010; Murphy, 2012). Nigerian government is also convinced that development will be achieved in the country only when balanced development of those three areas is pursued and all citizens benefit from it (Birhanu, 2015). In a nutshell, development requires an all-rounded, comprehensive and integrated development.

Economic Growth

Economic development as one the component of development, is unthinkable without the involvement of women (Solomon and Memar, 2014; OECD, 2008). Nigeria is one of the fastest economically growing countries in the world (FDRE, 2011). However, like many

developing countries, the women's labor force has not been properly utilized. Despite certain improvements following efforts from the government, the economic opportunities for and participation of Nigerian women are still low. This is due to male oriented development projects and the exclusion of women from the formal employment sector (Solomon and Memar, 2014), confining women to unpaid, tiresome household work. Moreover, women still suffer from lack of adequate access to training, extension and credit services, financial support and modern technology (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2008); FDRE, n.d.). Furthermore, inadequate access to education has excluded them from jobs requiring different skills and qualifications. All of this leads women to remain passive observers in the economic sector of the country. Struggling to bring about economic growth with the recognition of men's efforts only is like clapping with one hand. For the effective and sustainable economic growth of any country, the equal participation of both sexes is crucial. It is a well-established fact that the achievement of economic growth is contingent upon the full use of the skills and qualification of women (OECD, 2008). Most importantly, in Nigeria, the participation of women is a matter of necessity. This compelling situation arises because one quarter the entire population of the country is comprised of women. Hence, their empowerment is mandatory, as it enables them to fully use their potential, creativity, and talent, which are instrumental for the economic development of the country. However, if they are not empowered and allowed to use their potential, the country will not go forward at the expected pace. Moreover, women account for 70% of the world's poor because of unequal economic opportunities (OECD, 2008). In this regard, valuing women's work is instrumental to rescuing women from a life of poverty so that they might contribute to the country's economic growth. It is well known that one significant factor inhibiting poverty reduction and economic growth across the developing world is the failure to value women's work (OECD, 2008). This assertion applies even more forcibly to Nigeria, where women are engaged in unpaid, tiresome household work, leading them to be the most impoverished section of society (Tigist, 2011). Therefore, it is highly recommended to remunerate women's domestic work in order to alleviate poverty as well as promote economic growth (OECD, 2008). Moreover, it is worth noting that the economic strength of women is instrumental in achieving other pillars of development. Most importantly, the economic empowerment of women is crucial for them to become active participants in the politics of the country. Those who are economically poor will not have time and attention

to devote to politics (Solomon and Memar, 2014). It is when women are economically powerful that they can better influence politics. Hence, the economic empowerment of women has several non-economic advantages as well.

Gender Equality

A number of studies have shown that development is impossible without women's empowerment and the role of gender equality. Consequently, it is asserted that gender equality is both a human rights issue and a precondition for, and indicator of development (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). It is also affirmed that gender disparity is prevalent across the cultures of the world and that without serious steps to tackle it, development cannot be achieved (Stevens, 2010). Furthermore, UN Women (2014) rightly outlined that to create a world and to enhance women's roles in sustaining their families and communities, achieving gender equality is paramount. On the other hand, if gender equality is not maintained, it will retard the country's development. In line with this idea, Stevens (2010) interestingly underlines that "an increasing number of studies indicate that gender inequalities are extracting high economic costs and leading to social inequities and environmental degradation around the world." Therefore, one can understand from such explanations that without the equal inclusion of women in all areas of development initiatives, all the above-mentioned components of development cannot be achieved. However, gender inequalities across economic, social and environmental dimensions remain widespread and persistent (UN Women, 2014); Nigerian's case is also very much apparent. Being cognizant of the negative effects of the prevailing gender disparity, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2008) affirmed that "any development initiative has to engage and ensure that both men and women contribute and benefit equally from it." The researcher, being firmly convinced by this assumption, further argues that women should be empowered and equally allowed to contribute and benefit from all dimensions of development so as to bring about sustainability. Therefore, in this paper, women's empowerment and gender equality are discussed as a means to bring about development in the country. In his analysis, the researcher goes beyond those three pillars of development mentioned above, due to the conviction that more issues can be considered for the attainment of development. The argument of Bossel (1999) corroborates the assertion that "development of human society has environmental,

material, ecological, social, economic, legal, cultural, political and psychological dimensions that require attention". Hence, for greater emphasis and detail, the paper also discusses political development/good governance and human rights protection separately, even if these are, in one way or another, included among the three pillars of sustainable development. The reason stems from the fact that they play equally important and interrelated roles with those three key pillars. In addition, the paper reveals the fact that all the issues/areas discussed require the prevalence of gender equality in order to result in a sustainable development. One should keep in mind that all the points raised are very much interrelated and interdependent and that they reinforce each other.

Good Governance

Political development/good governance is an essential instrument for development (Morita and Zaelke, n.d.). There is a strong assertion that a balanced achievement of all the pillars of development depends on the deliberate strategic and operational intervention of the government. Accordingly, good governance undoubtedly corroborates the achievement of economic and social development and environmental protection. As a result, there is a need for a well-established, quality political or governance system. To this end, active involvement of women in decision-making positions will help foster the overall quality of governance in terms of boosting accountability and transparency, reducing corruption, and protecting the interest of marginalized sections of society (OECD, 2008); without women, achieving development is impossible (Morito and Zaelke, n.d.). However, women across the world are underrepresented (OECD, 2008). Similarly, despite their significant number, Nigerian women's representation at different political decision-making levels is too sparse to improve governance. They have no equal power in leadership and decision-making across all levels of government (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2008); UNDP, 2015). Female legislators, senior officials and managers at the federal level have been fewer by far than their male counterparts (Solomon andMemar, 2014).

Likewise, evidence across all territories in the country shows that: the participation of women in local political, administrative and development leadership and decision making is negligible (UNDP, 2015). This proves that women are unequally represented at various levels of government. This has led women to perceive politics as an area exclusively reserved for men (Solomon and Memar, 2014). Generally, even though the government is

striving to empower women and attain gender equality across all areas through various legal frameworks, the political decision-making role of women has not been properly attained on the ground. Therefore, to improve the quality of governance as one element of development, a practical effort should be made to ensure women's empowerment and gender equality. Moreover, if one seeks people centered development within a country, there is a need to have fair representation of women across different levels of decision-making. Their equal representation is indispensable to obtaining all-inclusive decisions. By all-inclusive decision, the researcher means one that reflects the idea and protects the interest of all stakeholders, most importantly of both genders. It is apparent that to reach a fair decision that equally protects the interests of women, the mostly male dominated political system should be changed to allow women to have a say about their lives as well as the political system of their country (OECD, 2008; Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). Otherwise, there will be no representative ideas, and protection of the interest of all citizens and the overall political process will be one-sided pushing, women out of the pathway; this will surely adversely affect any efforts to achieve development. To complicate matters, even the above-mentioned economic development will not be achieved unless women are placed in key political positions. This is due to the interplay between economy and politics: one influences the other. It is common to observe political actions taken by a government affecting and determining the economy of a country (Avellaneda and Dellepiane, 2006). Consequently, if politics operate with the full and equal participation of women, the impact on the economy will be fair and beneficial to all. For instance, if the Ministry of Finance and Economic Cooperation is gender-mainstreamed (operated by women as well), the entire economic environment in the country will be more amenable to women taking an active part and thereby contributing to the economic development of the country. Consequently, it is that if women were placed in key decision-making roles, there could be a faster move towards sustainability in the economic sphere (Stevens, 2010). Women's economic empowerment, which is a precondition for sustainable development, requires sound gender-mainstreamed policies and strategies (OECD, 2012) that can be better achieved if women are there to do it themselves. Hence, the political empowerment of women has multifaceted, nonpolitical positive results as well. To conclude, empowering women and providing fair representation across the law-making, law-enforcing, and law-interpreting organs, as well as any government institutions, play a remarkable role in political development, in particular, and development of a country in general. This fact is

underscored in Alvarez and Lopez (2013), who states that "ensuring that women play an equal role in shaping the decisions, rules and structures that influence our lives is likely to lead to long-term changes." Nigeria is in short supply of such a representation of and influential roles for women. Hence, the government needs to devote a considerable amount of effort and resources to increasing women's participation in political affairs by providing them with the necessary trainings to enhance their skills and competitiveness so as to bring about positive political change suitable for development (Solomon and Memar, 2014). In addition, sustainable development is a shared responsibility of various stakeholders, not merely the government (Warth and Koparanova, 2012). Accordingly, scholars strongly recommend broader participation in governance to achieve development (Warth and Koparanova, 2012). Therefore, the political environment of the country should be participatory in the sense that not only women but also all other marginalized segments of society should be allowed to participate and thereby discharge their shared responsibility in achieving development.

Women's Empowerment

Accordingly, empowerment is central to the processes of maintaining the benefits of women at individual, household, community and broader levels (Malhotra et al., 2009). It involves the action of boosting the status of women through literacy, education, and training and rising awareness (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). Empowerment can be defined as a "multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important" (Page and Czuba, 1999). In the same way, women's empowerment refers to "women's ability to make strategic life choices where that ability had been previously denied them" (Malhotra et al., 2009). Hence, women's empowerment is all about allowing and equipping women to make life-determining choices across different issues in the country. Another, almost-related and equally important concept in this paper is gender equality. Gender equality is understood to mean that the "rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male or female" (Warth and Koparanova, 2012). It is also defined as a situation where "… all human beings are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by strict gender roles; that the different aspirations and

needs of women and men are considered, valued and favored equally" (Holzner et al., 2010). The ultimate goal of gender equality is the non-existence of discrimination on the basis of one's gender (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). To this end, empowerment of women has an indispensable role (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013), which is why the researcher preferred to use both terms together throughout the discussion.

Social development

Social development is a key pillar of development. And social transformation as a component of development is unthinkable without the involvement of women (Solomon and Memar, 2014). Even though Africa has witnessed commendable achievements in social development, its progress on gender and women's empowerment indicators is slow; it still has to face considerable challenges within post-2015 development frameworks (ECA, 2015). As part of the continent, the same also holds true for Nigeria, where the gender-based problem is still very much prevalent and impedes social development. In this respect, the researcher looked into the role of empowering and educating women in reducing population growth, maintaining healthy family/society and avoiding the badly socialized, stereotyped perception of society towards women. The world population is growing at an alarming rate. In this regard, the fast population growth in Africa, and most importantly in Nigeria, is well-known. Also remarkable is the role of the undermined life of women. As one instrument of women's empowerment (OECD, 2012), educational access should be equally given to women. The education of girls and women plays a tremendous role in social development. However, Nigerian women are not well educated compared with men. Their access to education has been hindered by traditional customary attitudes (FDRE, n.d.; Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2008)). For this reason, the knowledge of women regarding family planning is very poor, especially in rural areas (Korra, 2002). As a result, they produce children in an unplanned way, thereby contributing to the alarming population increase. Currently, Nigeria is the most populous country in West Africa. (FDRE, 2011). Such an increase in population poses a challenge to the development of the country by constraining the capacity of the government to provide social provisions such as education, health-care, and infrastructure (Environmental Protection Authority, 2012). Health is also one aspect of social development, which is strongly related to other development outcomes such as better education and higher

productivity (ECA, 2015). Health related problems will increase human costs from different directions, including health-care costs, and ultimately end up plunging people into poverty (ECA, 2015). Africa still faces the world's most dramatic public health crisis (ECA, 2015). Although there have been improvements, from the perspective of gender a great deal is required to be done in Nigeria to improve the health status of women, which constitute a significant portion of the population. For instance, the majority of HIV/AIDS victims in the country are women of reproductive age (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2008)). In addition, Nigeria is one of the countries in Africa where there exists a high rate of maternal mortality despite strong efforts being made by the government through intervention measures (Solomon and Memar, 2014; Environmental Protection Authority, 2012). These are all partly attributed to the illiteracy of women. Moreover, women's illiteracy will adversely affect the health of the family as a whole. Thus, it is clear that educating women is helpful to increasing the well-being of families and children (OECD, 2008). Hence, women should be educated to keep their health and their families' health, so as to improve the overall social development and economic growth of the country by reducing the loss of a productive working force. Furthermore, there are gender-specific diseases as well as diseases related to reproduction, and various socio-economic factors (OECD, 2008). Providing women with due care in these respects as well is imperative to maintaining their health and the labor force of the country. Moreover, to bring about social development, removing the badly socialized stereotyped perception of society towards women is also equally important. Gender is a socially and culturally constructed identity (King and Mason, 2001). Culture and social practices determine the lesser role, jobs, and status ascribed to Nigerian women, whereas they were not born for that. The stereotyped perception of society towards women is detrimental to the well-being of women as well as to the development of the entire country. There is a need to remove such culturally and socially deep-rooted attitudes so that women will be seen as equal to men and enjoy their rights, determine their lives, and fully contribute towards the development of their country. Unless such detrimental perceptions are addressed at the grass roots level, all other efforts will not address gender inequality effectively. For instance, though the current government of Nigeria is working aggressively on the protection and promotion of women's rights and gender equality, deeply rooted cultural attitudes still impede any practical effects (Endalcachew, 2015). It is worth noting that, to achieve socio-cultural transformation and thereby attain sustainable development by

alleviating the aforementioned socially constructed wrong perceptions towards women, empowering women at the family level is crucial. We human beings are socialized to be who we are today via a number of agents, namely our peers, school, the media, religion, our family, etc (Marsh, 2006). Family is the psychological agents of society, as parents, who are the representatives of the social character of their society or class, transmit to the child what we may call the psychological atmosphere or the spirit of a society just by being who they are (Marsh, 2006). Therefore, attitudes and perceptions developed towards women regarding their status, role, and jobs are importantly learnt from family. Therefore, one cannot undermine the role of the mother in particular in shaping the behavior of children. It is the mother who, from early childhood on, up brings the children and who have frequent face-to-face interaction with children in their early years. Hence, when the mother is educated, equally treated, empowered, and has a say in the treatment of children and the management of the family, it is less likely that the children will have badly constructed, discriminatory perceptions towards women. Thus, the stereotyped perception of society should be addressed at the family level so as to transform society in general and to bring about development.

Human Rights Protection

Though the concept of human rights is subject to different connotations by different authorities, there exists an understanding that human rights are rights enjoyed by all human beings (Nowak, 2005). We enjoy them because we are human beings. The protection of human rights is vital to leading life with dignity and to promoting development. Despite the debate at the development human rights nexus, there exists a strong argument that human rights should be respected in the course of development. As Sen (1999) rightly outlined, freedom is at the core of the development process, since progress should be assessed based on whether peoples' freedoms are enhanced, and the achievement of development itself is dependent on the free agency of people. This shows that human rights and freedoms should be protected for the development of a given country. As Gunduz (2004) notes, “development and human rights are to be understood as two sides of the same coin.” Aware of such a strong relationship, the UN Secretary General initiated reforms in 1997 to mainstream human rights into all mandated areas of the UN, including development (Gunduz, 2004). Sen (1999) further argued that development was “a process

of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy." One can understand from the above accounts that without realizing human rights and freedoms, development will not be achieved. As stated above, human rights are the rights of all human beings, and a 'human being' embraces both genders: male and female. Therefore, for development to be realized, all human beings, irrespective of gender, should enjoy human rights. Thus, human rights are protected by international human rights instruments for the enjoyment of all human beings regardless of their sex. However, their practical implementation on the ground is poor, especially in Nigeria. Even though such an internationally protected and equal enjoyment of rights is given a national legal framework, the implementation shows that men exercise rights more than do women. Nigerian women do not equally enjoy their rights by the mere fact of their humanity (Endalcachew, 2015). Women should enjoy human rights equally so that they can make great contributions to the economic, political, social and cultural arenas of their country, thereby contributing to its development. The respect, protection and fulfillment of women's human rights enable women to experience self-worth, exploit their potential and develop themselves as well as their country. As UN Women (2014) noted, "achieving gender equality and realizing the human rights, dignity and capabilities of diverse groups of women is a central requirement of a just and develop world." In short, scholars have affirmed that the realization of human rights is vital in the development of a country. Most importantly, implementing the rights of the significant number of marginalized Nigerian women for full participation in all levels of human activity will play a paramount role in hastening and sustaining the development of the country is pursuing.

Environmental Protection

Another aspect of development is environmental protection. It is not the intension of this paper to show the essence and nature of the term 'environment' here, but it is possible to say that 'environment' is a broad concept embracing a number of components that can be understood in the following way. Environment is the source of a country's development. The development of Africa is mainly dependent on goods and services obtained from its environment and natural resource base (ECA, 2015). The same is true for Nigeria, where the overwhelming percentage of the economy is derived from agriculture. In Nigeria, 80% of employment is still concentrated in agriculture (FDRE, 2011), and it is thought that

agriculture will remain the predominant source of the country's economic growth (FDRE, 2011). This calls for the proper management of natural capital (embracing the land, soil, water, forest, biodiversity, marine ecosystems and mineral resources). As they are primary sources of the country's socioeconomic development, without properly conserving them, or the environment as a whole, the entire effort to achieve development will not meet its goal. Thus it is clear that the environment is the source of life, economic activities, and social development (ECA, 2015), implying that the remaining pillars of development are dependent on the environment. Hence, environment deserves equal, if not greater, attention visa-vise other dimensions of development. Given their degree of dependence on it, conserving the environment is a matter of necessity in African countries, including Nigeria.

Conclusion

The study concludes that attaining development among all the pillars of development is unthinkable without empowering women and obtaining gender equality, there by using the entire potential of the country. The concept of development is a multi dimensional concept. It embraces economic and social development as well as environmental protection. In this paper, however, the issues of political development/good governance and human rights protection are discussed with an equal degree of emphasis, as we believe that they have equal and direct relevance to the achievement of development. This study revealed that even though Nigerian women account for one quarter of the country's total population full use of their potential for economic, social, political and environmental development is not being carried out due to the widespread gender gap. Thus, this paper suggests that the government needs to work hard to change the existing position of women and achieve gender equality, which will have a positive spillover effect on the development of the country.

Recommendations

Based on the findings obtained, this paper calls upon the government to take the following measures to bring about development in the country.

- Empowering women to play an equal role in the protection and management of the environment, with their special knowledge and expertise, is also essential.

- Empowering women and making full use of their labor force for economic growth.
- Educating and maintaining the health of women to enhance productivity and social development.
- Protecting the rights of women to make them active participants in the economic, social, political, cultural, and other arenas of the country, thereby bringing about development.
- Empowering women and providing them with fair representation across different decision-making levels of the government structure to better protect women's interests and to achieve quality governance.
- Protecting the environment to bring about sustainable development, as the environment is the key source of the country's economy.

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