

African Research Review

An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 4 (3b) July, 2010

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

Women NGO's and Women Empowerment in Nigeria (Pp. 272-280)

Arum, I. – Department of Political Science, University of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria
E-mail: arumcnwchrist@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

An investigation was carried out into the activities of various women non – governmental organizations (NGO) in Nigeria, as a veritable tool for women empowerment. The results of the research revealed that women NGO's have ventured into areas that were previously ignored by government such areas include female genital mutilation, women trafficking, widowhood rites, women reproductive health, among others. In other for these NGO's to be more effective and offer greater benefits in the development of Nigeria and Nigerian women. The study recommended that the NGO's or government should design programmes between the women in developed countries and those in Nigeria. The research further recommended that customs and taboos averse to women education should be dismantled.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Non – Governmental Organisation, irst Ladyship.

Introduction

Women empowerment involves the transformation of economic, social, psychology, political and legal circumstances of women. Women NGO's have been recognized as a very important tool for the empowerment of Nigeria women. Another institution which holds enormous potentials for the empowerment of women in Nigeria is the office of the First Lady. The issue

of women empowerment has undoubtedly become an integral part of contemporary discourse in development and democratization worldwide.

Women were largely ignored in planning, design and implementation of development programmes or policies which affect them directly. This is despite the fact that they play roles which are central to development process.

Asogwa (1995:1) for instance pointed out that Nigerian women comprises of almost half of the entire population, produce about 60% of the food crops, are involved in 90% of food processing, raise the children, maintain the household, fetch all the drinking water and fuel, tend livestock and trade in commodities. Yet, they perform these key tasks under harsh conditions, and with poor training tools, as a result, often at very low levels of productivity. As noted by Oluwasola (1998:59) A number of factors were responsible for the situation whereby women's roles in promoting economic and social change continues to be inadequately recognized and undervalued, such factors include;

- The male dominated cultures in Nigeria like in most developing nations which give women an inferior position in the society.
- Customs, taboos and the sexual division of labour which keeps women subordinated to men
- The failure of economics to put value on unpaid production activities performed by women at the domestic front, and in their family farms.

The United Nations declared 1975 through 1985 "Decade for Women". Four world Conferences on women were held; Mexico City 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985 and 1995 Beijing Conference. These conferences directed the searchlight on a variety of issues affecting the status of women in the society. These issues among others include Violence against Women, Women's Rights as Human Rights and Women's Reproductive Health etc. It was not until then, that the woman's question entered the political agenda in Nigeria. Various national development plans (before and post Independence), were gender blind, and gave no specific place to gender issues in Nigeria. These Conferences spurred Nigerian women to come together and form Non – Governmental Organisations (NGO's) to empower themselves. Government also designed some programmes that can ignite women development. Yet, they were dominant in executing these programmes.

International Agencies that were interested in women development in developing countries operated on government to government basis. Unfortunately, government was not able to successfully implement these development plans due to corruption by government officials, bureaucratic bottleneck, lack of commitment by government officials etc. The failure of government agencies to successfully implement these women developmental projects made the International donors to look for alternatives and effective structures for programme implementation. They found Women NGO's in Nigeria a veritable tool to be used in empowering women for sustainable development. This paper aims to review the various women non – governmental organizations in Nigeria, highlight their role in the empowerment of women, show the significance of First Ladyship in women empowerment, identify the problems facing women NGO's in the empowerment of women. However, the scope will be limited to Women NGO'S in Post Independent Nigeria.

Overview of Women NGO'S in Nigeria

As earlier mentioned, The UN Declaration of 1975 – 1985 as Women Decade stimulated Nigerian women to take concrete actions concerning their plight. During the period, many women NGO's were formed to empower Nigeria women.

A review some of these NGO's is pertinent here

Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN)

The Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN) was initiated by Chief (Mrs.) Ogunleye in 1982 (Ibid). Cowan approached the empowerment of rural women using “bottom up” approach. It is the only organization in the country where the Board of Directors are rural women with Mrs. Ogunleye as the Secretary (*The Guardian 28 September, 2005*). Its main goal is to empower rural women towards achieving self sufficiency. This association has succeeded in providing members with credit assistance, health and family planning, education and services, technical and managerial advice, training in agriculture and small scale businesses. It started off with 6 cooperative societies in 1982 in the Ondo State and now has well over 600 societies, operating in virtually all the 37 states in the country, including Abuja (David 1995: 16). According to Chief Ogunleye, the individual membership is about 18,000 poor families. The organization has also facilitated access to credit for smaller women's groups in South West Nigeria. Studies have shown that women have proved to be good borrowers who pay back on time (Ibid). They

are reliable, preferring loans to grants, and enjoying the dignity that paying borrowed money affords them. Women's participation is strong in credit unions and co-operative organizations, which provide both savings and loan services to members. They participate both as members and as full-time officers within these groups (Olumese 1998:160). The various achievements of this organization earned the coordinator, Mrs. Ogunleye the prestigious award of United Nations Prize for Leadership for the Sustainable End to Hunger Project and Advocacy.

Women in Nigeria (WIN)

This organization emerged in 1982 (WIN Document 1985). It was formed by a group of women academics with majority in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. WIN'S achievement could be seen in the area of raising consciousness amongst people about the subordinate position occupied by women in Nigeria. WIN argues that the only way the position of women can be improved is through the transformation of the social system. This has been done through various publications, organization of seminars, symposia and conferences.

Women Research and Documentation Center (WORDOC)

This was also formed in the early 80's. Its main aim is to coordinate research and documentation efforts of various women research groups. This organization has succeeded in encouraging documentation on women issues in Nigeria.

Miscellaneous (Sundry) Women Empowerment Groups

There are many other professional women empowerment groups such as Nigeria Association of Women in Business, National Association of Women Journalists, Association of Women Lawyers, Association of University Women, Medical Women's Association of Nigeria etc. These organizations have empowered women belonging to them, through educating them on the fact that they have same abilities and potentials as their male counterparts and therefore should not feel inferior to them. There are also religious groups such as Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), Federation of Muslim Women Association (FOMWON), and Muslim Sisters' Organization of Nigeria. These organizations have empowered women to understand about themselves, their roles as women, and how they can use their position to influence decisions especially in their families. There are also more parochial women groups reflecting specific ethnic preferences, for instance, the Jam'Iyyar matau Arewa, concerned with issues such as reproductive health

of women. In the South East, there is *Otu Umunwanyi* which is in charge of women affairs in the community. There are also women political groups like Council of Women Politicians, Network of Justice, Women in Politics and Policy, Women Rights Collective. These organizations have through seminars, publications and conferences encouraged women to stand for elective posts

First Ladyship and Women Ngo's

Following the UN declaration of 1975 – 1985 as the “Decade for Women”, Mrs. Maryam Babangida launched Better Life Programme (BLP) in 1987 (Arum 2007:42). Its objectives were to empower rural women economically, socially and politically. Subsequent First Ladies have taken a cue from this and had initiated various programmes ranging from women empowerment, children emancipation and poverty alleviation. However, Mrs. Lami Abubakar was the first First Lady to make her foundation a non – governmental organization (NGO). Mrs. Abubakar was Nigeria's First Lady between 1998-1999. Her foundation, Women Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) was established in March 1999. It is a registered non-governmental organization (NGO) with Corporate Affairs Commission of Nigeria with registration number RC 11814. WRAPA is focusing on the LEGAL RIGHTS of women irrespective of colour, creed or social status and is rendering services to women to ensure the actualization of these rights (WRAPA Newsletter Oct – Dec 2002) . This organization indeed succeeded in empowering Nigeria women through enlightenment of women regarding their legal rights, offering of free legal services and empowerment of women in vocational skills. Within the period 2004 – 2006, WRAPA successfully handled 494 cases of women rights were abused (*WRAPA Newsletter Jan – July 2006*). Through their activities, a former President, Chief Obasanjo promised to implement 30% women political representation. Though he didn't fulfill it, it is incontrovertible that no president in Nigeria has appointed as many women in federal cabinet as did President Obasanjo. He appointed women to very key and sensitive positions.

Child Care Trust

Mrs. Stella Obasanjo became the First Lady in May 1999 (Punch January 15, 2001). On November 1999, she announced the establishment of the Child Care Trust. This trust was established to tackle the problems of poverty, unemployment, nutrition, health and education as they affect children (Ibid). The organization has succeeded in bringing succour to many disadvantaged children through offering them scholarships, offering medical services and

providing accommodation. Mrs. Obasanjo did all she could to encourage women participation in governance. She was reported to have said in a speech at the African News Service that though the President had made a commitment to improving living conditions in Nigeria, things will continue to deteriorate in the country unless more women are allowed to participate in governance (*The Vanguard, October 5th, 2004*). She therefore, encouraged the President to appoint more women into his cabinet.

Mrs Turai Yar Adua (2007 Till Date)

Mrs. Turai Yar Adua, the First Lady of Nigeria from 2007 till date also launched programs to empower women. The Firsts Lady's interests are in the issues of Public Health and enhancement of the welfare of the disadvantaged as part of her effects towards realizing this, the First Lady signed a memorandum of understanding between MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston Texas (*Daily Triumph August 28, 2008*).

The Center is to help Nigerian Women suffering from Cancer. Also, through her efforts the federal government has developed an Integrated Maternal, newborn and child Health (IMNCH) strategy to strengthen the health system towards realizing some aspects of the millennium development goals. The determination of Nigeria's First Lady to enhance and promote the living conditions of Nigerian Women and Children, led her to launch a pet project which she tagged "Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAFOT) (*Vanguard 17 February, 2009*). The First Lady also directed the wives of State Governors to tailor their pet projects towards issues relating to poverty alleviation , women education and empowerment of rural women (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turai_Yar%27Adua). In over 20 states of the federation, Governor's wives have launched their pet projects with target beneficiaries as women, Children and the Youth (<http://www.vanguardngr.com/articles/2002/southwest/sw107092007>).

Prospects and Problems of Women Ngo's in Nigeria

Despite the gallant efforts made by women in NGO's to integrate women in development and uplift their socio-economic and political status, the marginalization of women in this domain still remains. Some of the problems faced by these women NGO'S are as follows:

- Some women NGO'S receive government subvention. Owing to this, they cannot really attack government policies that will not augur well for women, for fear that government may stop supporting them financially.

- Some of these women lack the managerial capabilities to fully manage these organizations and use them to positively transform the lives of women. This is not unconnected to the fact that women's access to functional education is still very low when compared with men.
- Some women NGO'S tend to show strong elitist biases, preferences and orientations. Thus, rather than seek radical alterations in the existing order and arrangements that are against women empowerment. They condone them because many of them are in the corridors of power. An attack on government would have amounted to a situation in which a house is divided against itself.
- Most of these women NGO'S are concerned about economic empowerment of women. For them, political issues are secondary in their advocacy activities. They fail to realize the fact that unless women are well represented in decision making organs, women empowerment will be difficult, if not impossible to attain.

Prospects of Women NGO's

- Exchange programmes should be designed by NGO'S or government to encourage solidarity between women in developed countries and Nigerian women. Exchange of experiences between developed and developing countries could facilitate more efficient ways of empowering women through these NGO'S.
- In order to increase the number of women in elected offices. Women should have confidence in themselves, desist from their supporting roles during election. They should come out and contest for elections. Women should encourage one another by supporting women candidates in election.
- Women NGO's should not depend solely on government subvention to run their NGO's. They should seek for financial assistance from International agencies, philanthropists etc. They can also be involved in small scale businesses that can yield money.
- Customs and taboos that are discriminatory to women's education should be dismantled.

Conclusion

Women NGO's have become a veritable force to be reckoned with in women empowerment. The recognition of this fact make this NGO's to enjoy the support of international donor agencies. The declaration of the UN in declaring 1975 -1985 as United Nations Decade for Women can never be over emphasized. This brought about global awareness of the plight of women. Also, various African government International Agencies; Non Governmental Organizations. (NGO'S) and activists, became concerned with the need to raise the socio-economic status of women through access to functional education, economic opportunities, and health facilities, among others. The number of NGO'S managed by women showed that contrary to conventional stereotyping, women have remarkable organizational and mobilisation capacity, that is yet to be fully exploited by them and other agencies interested in lightening the burden of women for a balanced and sustainable national development

References

- Arum I. (2008). *“Assessment of the office of the First Ladyship in Nigeria and Women Empowerment.* An unpublished M.Sc thesis submitted to the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ado Ekiti, Ekiti State.
- Asogwa, U. (1995). *“Women and Education in Nigeria”.* A paper presented at the national preparatory meeting for the 4th World Conference in China, Lagos.
- Bassey, E. and Toyo, N (eds) (2003). *Nigerian Women and political Entryism: Power, Intrigues and Obstacles.*Daily Triumph (2008) August 28
- David Stella Ginikanwa (2008). *Assessment of Women participation in Nigeria politics.* An unpublished M.SC thesis submitted to University of Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti state.
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turai_Yar%27Adua
- <http://www.vanguardngr.com/articles2002/southwest/sw107092007>
- Ibrahim, J and Salihu, A. (eds) (2004). *Women, Marginalisation and Politics in Nigeria.* Abuja: OSIWA, Global Rights and CDD.

- Mba, N. (1989). "Kaba and Khaki: Women and the Militarised state in Nigeria" in Parpart, J. and staudt, K.eds *Women and the state in Africa* . Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner.
- Okeke Phil (1998). *First Lady Syndrome: The En (Gendering) of Bureaucratic Corruption in Nigeria*". CODESRIA Bulletin, 3 and 4
- Olumese, 1 (1998). "Women in NGO" in *Nigeria women in Society and Development*. Ibadan: Dokun Publishing House.
- Oluwasola Oluwemimimo (1998). "Women in Agriculture in Nigeria in Sesay A and Odebuyi A *Nigerian Women in Society and Development*. Ibadan: Dokun Publishing House.
- Punch* (2001) January 15th.
- The Guardian* (2005) September, 28.
- Women in Nigeria (1985). The WIN Document: *Conditions of Women in Nigeria and Policy Recommendations to 2000 AD*. Zaria, Nigeria,
- Vanguard* (2009). 17 February
- WRAPA Newsletter, October to December 2002.
- WRAPA Newsletter. "*Legal Aid Services*" January to July. Pg 37 (2006).