

EMPOWERMENT AS A POTENT TOOL FOR ALLEVIATING POVERTY AND STRESS AMONG NIGERIAN RURAL WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Economic independence for women is crucial to break the barrier of financial disability, poor health care service etc. Invariably, poor rural women with little political, economic education and social visibility are often by-passed by development planners. This leads to lack of adequate access to food, insufficient nutrition and children being denied the right to enjoy healthy diet that is needed for the growth.

In a developing country such as Nigeria, the socio-economic status of rural women is generally low. Thus, they are marginalized in decision-making, opportunity to be in power, education and employment, thereby limiting their effective use of available resources. These amount to lifetime denials, poverty frustration, hunger, threaten peace beyond the immediate environment and stress. It is against this backdrop that the paper examines causes and effects of poverty and stress women and the need to empower them educationally to improve productivity and facilitates access to information and higher wages. Useful suggestions are also proffered.

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute a unique group that needs special attention. However, Women especially the rural dwellers are handicapped in all sectors of the society; consequently majority of them cannot develop their potentials and hence become vulnerable to poverty, exploitation and diseases.

Efforts have been made in Nigeria and other countries to equip women with literacy skills. This is so because education improves the worth and self esteem of the girl child and also enables her become an economically productive woman (Ekwueme, 2013). There is slow but gradual, increasing demand by rural women in Nigeria for access to skill and information that would empower them.

For instance the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been established to address women's need by particularly promoting gender quality and empowering women to have enormous

impact on the well-being of their families and societies; but their potentials have not been realized because of discriminatory social norms and illegal institutions (WBG <http://ddp.ext.worldbank.org/ext/MDG/home>).

Even though, women's role as preservers of families is central in virtually all societies in Nigeria, they are faced with poverty and stress. In most communities women are regarded as child bearers and minds whose duties solely revolved round the home. Ferris (1993) adduced that many women would not see themselves as politically powerful because they are not usually recognized in terms of formal power. It is a truism that the highest degree of illiteracy among Nigerian adults is among women. Ekwueme, (2013) in an interview with the weekend Chronicle stated that in Nigeria, about 60% of illiterate population are women and girls, also that about 70% of our population are below poverty level and so girls are subjected to

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hawk on the streets and markets to make ends meet for the entire family. There are also high dropout rates for the girl children (Okie, 1995). The traditional sex division of roles in the family and the society excludes most girls from learning. (Lind and Johnson, 1986). This implies that socio-cultural factors and discrimination against women constitute the bedrock of poverty and stress. According to Vickers (1991), literacy have negative economic results for women giving rise to %eminization of poverty+. Educational deprivation aggravates poverty and invariably stress among rural women since education is a vehicle for development. Thus, women who lack basic skills of literacy have limited options and difficulties in living quality lives. In line with this Mosse (1993), asserted that girls whose education is minimal, suffer great disadvantages when trying to cope with the vagaries of life.

They lack resources which could enable them tackle poverty and stress effectively. Thus without fundamental education, the door to subsequent training is shut at them.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The word empowerment implies gaining control and participating in decision making. Several researchers have devised views on women empowerment. Among them is Kari (1995) who sees it to be sensitizing women to take part in decision that affect them in the home, society, government and internal development policies. She further explains the meaning of empowerment to be ;

Having control, organizing further control; having a say and being listened to, being able to define and create from a woman's perspective being able to influence social choices and decision effecting the whole society;

Being recognized and respected as equal citizen and human beings with a contribution to make (p.14)

From the fore going, women empowerment could be explained, as the process of improving the potentials of women for effective participation in all aspects of National development. This makes women makers of development and receivers of it. Given that women constitute 50% of the world's population, their capacity building is vital for a holistic development. It is obvious that adequate literacy or education, information or knowledge resources that facilitates the empowerment framework, (Karl, 1995). Theses include welfare, access, concretization, participation and control.

Welfare deals with the primary needs of women. In this case women are merely passive beneficiaries. The second level breaks the barrier or the hindrance against access to resources. Furthermore, concretization plays an important role in women empowerment. Here, the women recognize the role they can play to sustain their growth, in all ramifications. The last stage requires mobilization. Women are able to make decision over their lives and that of their children. Karl (1995) also identifies the measures commonly used by development agencies to include empowerment to increase women economic status through employment income generation and access to credit through programme in which women's economic status is strengthened with education, literacy, the provision of basic needs, services and fertility control.

Women empowerment can be in the form of economic decision-making and education. Economically, women are involved in income-generating activities, how to use their own money, and have access to land for agricultural purpose. In these veins, women have high level of economic independence. They are strongly determined to partake in any training programme to upgrade themselves and improve upon their carrier. This implies that women need to be strengthened and assisted in order to reduce their level of dependence on their male counterparts.

More so, in decision- making, women are empowered to express their view in public. There is therefore the need for Adult Educators and other charge agents to undertake and intensify capacity building and human development activities to improve their level of decision making.

Although some women had generally altered an averagely high level of empowerment, there is still more room for improvement. The women's skill needs some sharpening in order to achieve this objective.

Education empowerment can be in form of literacy training, continuity development, on-the-job training and, continuing professional education. As more women experience the benefits of education, they will participate increasingly in social, political and occupational activities. Women orientation has resulted in the creation of a society recognizing the need to update information and skills, the desire for knowledge is also increased among women. Functional literacy programmes over several

activities to accelerate reduction of illiteracy thereby facilitating national development.

THE CONCEPT OF STRESS

Stress as defined by Webster (1973) is emotional factor that cause bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in diseases causation. The rural woman that is highly discriminated against is bound to be tensed up all the times. Widows in the rural areas are always victims of discrimination which can culminate into stress.

Denga and Ekpo (1994) define stress as alteration of physiological homeostasis (equilibrium or balance), resulting from internal and external job pressure that are perceived as threats to the individual's well-being or self-esteem. This definition describes the rural woman who at the end of her hectic days of work develops body pains, headache and even fever which may lead to her being affected psychologically

According to Melgosa (1977) stress is a combination of physiological and psychological reactions of the body when it is subjected to heavy demands. The rural woman is a victim. He toils day and night in order to cater for her family, especially those without husband or relation to help them.

Melgosa, grouped stress into two. The first he called 'stress agent or factors'. These are the circumstances that produce stress such as marital strife, procrastination, too much work or workaholics too much worry.

The second he called 'responses to stress' meaning the individual's reaction to stress. Some people do not care to listen and respond to their body reaction hence they over work themselves in order to achieve their goals.

The two groups of stress as given by Melgosa (1997) showed what comes out of the rural woman's attitude to events within her environment. She is always seen working around the clock, with no time to rest or even eat food that will help to nourish her body.

Stress already defined, can affect people at all levels or ages. Hence one of the stressors we suffer today is that of our pent-up aggressive drives. This could be either physiological.

CAUSES AND EFFECT OF STRESS

Stress are in different forms:

Physiological :- This is caused when there is increased activity or one performs strenuous

physical activities far more than the body can possibly accommodate. Denga and Ekpo (1994) gave an example of the executive worker that may bring work home physically or mentally or both. He/she works for many hours without end in order to keep ahead of rivers. The same is applicable to the rural woman who works long hours everyday in the farm, then goes to market at the end of the day, comes back to prepare dinner for the family. Cannon's study reported in winter (1983) on a study in which he used urine samples of Harvard students in the midst of tough exams, and also collecting urine samples of football players during an exciting game. He found high level of glucose which is result of adrenalin released in the heat of emotional strain and excitement.

Psychological:- Psychological stress may be derived from experiences such as anxiety, aggression, depression, excessive indulgence in social activity negative self analysis and even prolonged emotional trauma. Denga and Ekpo (1994) posits 'being anxious about achievement, possibility of failure and life uncertainties' as causes of stress. Stress as mentioned earlier does not effect only the executive but the rural woman who does not have the way and means to receive adequate medical attention, suffers stress to death.

Stress according to Okoronkwo (2006) is caused by mental or emotional activity as well as physical activity. She said that stress is 'unique and personal' to every body, it is so because individuals tend to involve themselves in activities that are sometimes difficult to accomplish or are unattainable. Idleness also causes stress. This is more on those who are unemployed and they feel it to the extent that they are emotionally distressed. Frustration and non productivity is another cause of stress.

To the rural woman who works hard to grow her crops in the farm but to see natural phenomena, such as flood to wash away all her crop leading to poor harvest. This situation may cause stress to the individual which may even lead to death.

Stress as a positive influence, can help compel one to action; it can result in a new awareness and an exciting new perspective. As a negative influence, it can result in feeling of disrupt, rejected, anger and depression which in turn can lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart diseases and stroke.

One may find it funny to hear that the birth of a child causes stress, even job promotion. The new born baby may be such that cries all the time, thereby, keeping the mother indoors. Moreover, if there is no money to take care of the baby that may cause stress on both parents. Also job promotion may create stress where the new level or alteration attracts more and difficult assignment which the individual cannot handle. To adjust to the different situation stress can help or hinder a person depending on how that person will react to it.

EMPOWERMENT AS A POTENT TOOL FOR ALLEVIATING POVERTY AND STRESS

All over the world women have been known for their contribution to sustainable development and they play vital roles in all facets of life. There is a common saying that when you educate a woman, you educate the nation. Education we know is a gateway to an improved living. Some women who lack education find it difficult to make any optimum contributions to the development of self . assured, self . sufficient individuals (Nwosu, 2000). UNESCO (2000) also noted that some trained mothers educate their children without the tools and skills to face challenges in their lives because they are illiterates. There is therefore the need to empower women with relevant skills and tools so that stress arising from poverty and inability to meet up responsibility could be alleviated. It was also advocated in the Beijing conference of (1995) that women should be empowered through educating them and bringing gender disparity

Women's Right Advancement And Protection Alternative (WRAPA, 2003) had noted that they had worked hard to ensure women empowerment. At the graduation ceremony of the 100 women skill acquisition trainees held at Abuja in September 4, 2003 with the theme: Economic Empowerment for rural women through adequate institutional support for national development; it was emphasized in the keynote address that actualization of WRAPA's objective is important. This objective which is being at the fore front of seeking redress for victims of women's rights violation as well as improving women economically so as to arrest domestic shuffles sometimes crop up as a result of their economic dependence.

Still in attempt to alleviate poverty among rural women WRAPA conducted a public session in Akwa Ibom State in the South-South Zone on October 8, 2003 at Uyo with the objective to create public awareness on the draft bill on violence against women in the zone. Some women have been subjected to poverty due to injustice. Poor instance Amina Lawal's case of adultery and death sentence lingered on for a very long time and as WRAPA intervened, she was set free in March 20, 2002 [WRAPA 2003].

It is then very obvious that in Nigeria, we should cultivate the scientific culture or attitude which requires discipline honesty, hard work and analytical mind. This attitude alleviated Japan and Germany from ashes of the world war to giants of today. Empowerment through functional education that enables one to be enterprising to know

His/her right and defined them will help to reduce or eliminated dependence and stress that generates from seeking for paid employment and retrenchment. Japan and Germany produce most of the technologies uses all over the world today. As Ekwueme (2006), stated in his inaugural lecture that education is the key to personal and national socio-economic development, if the citizenry is provided with equality and functional education, she will produce job creators not job seekers.

There is no development without eradication of poverty, Cole (1991) in Ojaleye (2002) posited that the large majority of Nigerian have been suffering and still suffering under poor infrastructure, unemployment, environmental degradation and crippling inflation as this leads to object poverty. Poverty is closely related to illiteracy which breeds ignorance and at this situation individual struggle for survival.

Poverty is enhanced by unskilled labour, uneducated and poorly educated individuals and population explosion without attendant financial backings. Ad governance according to Ukonu (2002) which is very common in African countries and mismanagement of nation's wealth is another cause of poverty.

RECOMMENDATION

1. The female youth in rural communities could be counseled, encouraged and given the necessary assistance to go

- through formal education. This will equip to operate productively.
2. Functional literacy of female adults will fortify rural women's access to public and educational information.
 3. The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and other devices will help in training women for empowerment.
 4. Women should be equipped with leadership skills for effective traditional and political governance in their various communities.
 5. It will be crucial to train rural women in farming and other business to enable their careers.
 6. Traditional authorities could also remove the traditional inclinations that prevent rural women from getting equal access to land for agricultural purposes.
 7. Organizing day care centers for the children while their mothers are at school is imperative.
 8. Literacy classes should be scheduled in order not to coincide with women's primary occupation such as farming, home management.

CONCLUSION

Poverty- and stress among rural women are the cankerworms that have eaten deep into the Nigerian rural economy. This is as a result of paucity of education and economic emancipation. Hence, Nigerian rural women need to make concerted efforts to improve their educational attainment and to constructively utilize available opportunities for uplifting their standard of living. These measures should help in alleviating poverty and stress. However, lack of adequate time may militate against participation in literacy programme. Lastly, rural women should be involved in taking decision in their community especially things that concerns them.

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