



Gender Equality: A Panacea to Social Justice and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the need for gender equality between men and women in Nigeria towards actualizing social justice and sustainable development. The patriarchy system is more prevailing in Nigeria where women are subjected to social control and dominated by men. This is as a result of difference in culture, misuse of religious and traditional practices in which educational, political and social power are dominated by men. Women have always been followers of men in the society and the men predominantly see themselves as leaders. Gender inequality has been a great issue of concern in Nigeria most especially among the women. The attainment of gender equality is not only seen as an end in itself and human right issue but as a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development and national security in Nigeria. To respond to the challenges of gender inequalities, there is need to recognise the main issues leading to inequality between genders and proffer solutions to them for the purpose of achieving sustainable development. To achieve this goal, there is the need to ensure women equality of rights to economic participation as men, access to basic and higher education, lesser health and safety risks and more political representation. Against this backdrop, the paper examined the impact of gender equality in proffering solutions to the social injustice and economic challenges in Nigeria.

Keywords: Gender, Inequality, Social justice, Women, Sustainable development.



Introduction

The overall development of a country depends upon the maximum utilization of her people, both men and women. Women are an integral part of the society. Sustainable development must include the full and equal participation of women and men. Therefore, women participation in social and economic development is essential to the overall development of the nation. Ekong (2006) asserts that women are the keys to development and therefore crucial to the goal of sustainable development.

The seemingly gender inequality among women has been a global phenomenon which is being discussed and analysed in every country of the world. All over the world, a review of gender equality among citizenry towards sustainable development is of great concern. This concern emanates from the fact that there is still an imbalance between women and their male counterparts in virtually all sectors of the world most especially in Nigeria.

Nigeria, like most developing nations of the world is faced with myriad of problems and harsh realities which include poverty, unemployment, conflicts and diseases. These situations pose great challenges to the very existence of individuals in most developing nations thereby calling for the training of educated men and women who can function effectively in the society. In Nigeria context, it was observed that most of the existing culture accord men total authority and control over their wives expecting

them to serve all domestic services and sexual duties. The old system of marriage is characterized with total practice of patriarchy that makes women not free and happy as the cultural environment encourages men to dominate, control and exploit women. This appears to give some men the audacity to take this advantage to the negative extreme by oppressing and abusing them. These abuses do not stop at home but also extend to the workplaces and offices where women are subjected to various forms of humiliations that vividly showcase gender inequality between men and women.

Hence, George, Adetunde, Ijagbemi, and Udume (2016) asserted that women all over the world are in one way or another discriminated against and/or marginalized. This is evident in their representation in all sectors of global economy. This is an indication of an active patriarchy system in Nigeria where men dominate and determine the pace in the society. This nature of man makes him to dominate women and that is why gender balancing has necessarily advocated for women social justice and sustainable development in the society.

Gender equality refers to a situation where women and men have equal conditions for realising their full human rights and potentials; are able to contribute equally to national, political, economic, social and cultural development and benefit equally from the results. Furthermore, it entails that the underlying causes of



discrimination are systematically identified and removed in order to give men and women equal opportunities. Equality is therefore understood to include both formal equality and substantive equality, and not merely simple equality to men (Elegbede, 2012). This equality will lead to social justice and sustainable development.

Society is made up of many different communities. Social justice means the rights of all people in our community are considered in a fair and equitable manner. Social justice is a philosophical and political concept based on the principles of natural justice and equity. It focuses on the fact that everyone deserves to have access to property, education, opportunities, justice etc. It focuses on creating an ideal society that is just, fair and looks after the downtrodden. In a socially just world, there are no class struggles and justifiable distribution of wealth and opportunities. According to Augustus Kakanowski and Marijus Narusevich (2010), social justice is a society in which justice is achieved in every aspect of society, rather than merely the administration of law. It is generally both the promoter and the outcome of a world in which individuals and groups receive fair treatment and an impartial share and equal distribution of the benefits and goods within a society. In conditions of social justice, people are “not to be discriminated against, nor their welfare and well-being constrained or prejudiced on the basis of gender, sexuality, religion, political affiliations, age, race, belief, disability,

location, social class, socio-economic circumstances, or other characteristic of background or group membership”.

Sustainable development is defined in many ways. Adebola (2007) defined sustainable development as a kind of development that can be initiated and managed properly in such a way as to give attention to continuity and preservation as people explore an explicit available resources for the enlargement of their existence. On the other hand, Kudan in Ugoh (2008) describes sustainable development as meeting the need of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generation. The concept of sustainable development requires balancing environmental, societal and economic considerations in the pursuit of development and an improved quality of life. According to Arogundade (2011), sustainability includes intergenerational equity, gender equity, just and peaceful societies, social tolerance, environmental preservation and restoration, poverty alleviation and natural resource conservation.

Gender equality for social justice and sustainable development is the focus of women education that seeks to equip women towards creating a sustainable future through their equal participation in developmental programmes in the society. United Nations (2014) stated that linking gender equality, social justice and sustainable development is important for several reasons; it is for moral and ethical imperative; it is for redressing the disproportionate impact



of economic, social and environmental shocks and stresses on women and girls which undermine their human rights and their vital roles in sustaining their families and communities; and it is for building up women's agency and capabilities to create better synergies between gender equality and sustainable development outcomes.

In Nigeria, not until recently, an important document emerged to redirect gender equality, improve standard of living and build a just society devoid of discrimination, harness fee fall potentials of all social groups, regardless of sex or circumstance that can give both men & women equal voices in decision making and policy implementation. The attainment of gender equality is not only seen as an end in it itself and human right issue, but as a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development. The present economic recession in Nigeria before and during the unexpected and unprepared disease disturbing the entire continents of the world, COVID-19 emerged like a thunderbolt at the instance of the negative growth rates recently released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2020). In the first quarter of 2020, the nominal year on year growth rate for Trade stood at -0.27%. This indicates a decrease of -5.09% points when compared to the first quarter of 2019. This admission was just an official declaration of the situation the Nigerian masses have been battling with for quite some time. The attendant effects of the economic recession are felt virtually in every part of the

country. According to Ayanwale (2007), economic recession that became visible as many citizens struggled to cope with a downturn in their conditions of living, back logs of unpaid salaries, inability to pay rent, inability to pay school fees of their children and even inability to feed. According to NBS (2020) report, there is decrease in sales of goods and services, due to decreased finances available to individuals and families, the purchase of goods and services are declining.

There is also an increase in unemployment due to decreased sales of goods and services by business owners and companies; a reduction in the workforce takes place, leading to loss of jobs. Moreover, there are limited numbers of women in the working class due to gender discrimination and this has led to unsustainable economy as only men who were given priority were losing their jobs on daily basis and not being able to satisfy the need of their families. In addition, women are being marginalized in the area of work, education, empowerment programme, politics and many more. They are also being subjected to various forms of inhuman behaviour such as rape, battering, rigorous house chores and domestic violence. Inequality among genders has led to various social injustices against women and this has an important factor of consideration in discussion of gender equality.

To move away from the current state of recession and ensure social justice and



sustainable development, government, community leaders and religious leaders have to give adequate attention to issues of equality between men and women and must recognise the main issues leading to inequality between genders. The core focus of this new thinking is on women education, massive campaign against gender inequality.

Concept of Gender

The term 'gender' refers to economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female (UN-Habitat, 2003). Gender is used to refer to a set of roles, responsibilities, rights, expectations and obligations that are socially and/or culturally associated with being male or female. Gender also includes the power relations between and among women and men, and girls and boys. It is based on widely shared beliefs and norms within a society or culture about male and female characteristics and capacities. Similarities and differences will vary within and between societies and can change over time. Gender is different from 'sex,' which refers to how people are classified biologically as male or female. At birth, infants are assigned a sex based on a group of characteristics such as chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs and genitalia (USAID, 2013).

Social Justice

Social justice is a concept of fair and just relations between the individual and society, as measured by the distribution of wealth, opportunities for personal activity, and social

privileges. In Western as well as in older Asian cultures, the concept of social justice has often referred to the process of ensuring that individuals fulfill their societal roles and receive what was their due from society (El Khoury, 2015). In the current global grassroots movements for social justice, the emphasis has been on the breaking of barriers for social mobility, the creation of safety nets and economic justice.

Social justice is the equal access to wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. Social justice thought and action weaves itself throughout world history, working as a counterpoint to humankind's unfortunate propensities for greed, power, and physical and economic violence. The fundamental of this thought and action has come out of philosophy, religion, and politics. It has also originated organically as a reaction to exploitation and oppression. Sometimes it is a combination of two or more of these factors. It never separates, however, from the context of history, cultural, and human social relations (Barry, 2005).

Social justice assigns rights and duties in the institutions of society, which enables people to receive the basic benefits and burdens of cooperation. The relevant institutions often include taxation, social insurance, public health, public school, public services, labour law and regulation of markets, to ensure fair distribution of wealth, and equal opportunity.



Sustainable Development

Sustainable development according to Brundtland (1987) was defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of needs goes beyond simply material needs and includes values, relationships, freedom to think, act, and participate, all amounting to sustainable living, morally, and spiritually. According to Shah (2008), sustainable development is perceived as the means to achieve a balanced civilization that exists in sync with its environment while at the same time progressing economically. Economists generally accepted and supported Brundtland definition of sustainable development. They also said that future generations should be entitled to at least the same level of economic well-being as is currently available to the present generation. It can also be defined as meeting human fundamental needs while preserving the life-support systems of the planet Earth. This is a scientific perspective on the sustainable development relation between nature and society. The main pillars of sustainable development are:

- Economic development
- Social development and
- Environmental development

The United Nations 2005 World Summit Outcome Document refers the above pillars as the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development. There has been an indigenous controversy over the main pillars of sustainable

development through various International Forums such as United Nation Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the Convention of Biological Diversity that there are four pillars of sustainable development which they called the fourth one, Cultural development. Also, The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO, 2001) further detailed the concept by saying that the cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.

Despite difference of opinions among different countries, commissions and international agencies, major objectives of sustainable development can be earmarked very easily:

1. Provision of basic human requirements like food, shelter, clothing, health, education etc. with minimum disturbance of natural eco-systems.
2. Environment and bio-diversity should be preserved for the ultimate future of mankind.
3. Individuals and countries should be integrated to the process of sustainable development.

Gender Inequality

In almost all societies, women and men differ in their activities and undertakings, regarding access to and control over resources, and participating in decision-making. Ikechukwu (2013) identified gender as a social institution, cultural construct and power tool. There is a danger to confuse "gender" with "women". Soetan (2003) posited that the concept



of gender is not limited to the male or female species, but goes further to assess the relations between them as are constantly being renegotiated in the context of changing political, economic, social and cultural environments at the local, national and supra national levels. Gender analysis entails having knowledge of both women and men's roles and responsibilities, as it is the comparative analysis between these that will highlight the gender inequalities of any society. Gender inequality does not imply that all women are worse off than all men. Rather, gender (being male or female) is an important social division characterized by inequality. Being a woman or a man influences people's perspectives and their social expectations.

Gender Equality

Gender equality is a state or condition that affords women and men equal enjoyment of human rights, socially valued goods, opportunities and resources. Genuine equality means more than equality in numbers or laws; it means expanded freedoms and improved overall quality of life for all people (USAID, 2012a). According to Adegboye and Adeyanju (2012), gender equality based on the beliefs of bodies like UNICEF and United Nations Population Fund (2015) described gender equality as a means that women and men, girls and boys enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protection. Ana (2011) declared that women have right to equality, the agency equally asserted

that female gender equality is one of the goals of the United Nations Millennium project to end world poverty by the year 2015. The project claims every single goal is directly related to women's right and achieving sustainable development in societies require support for gender equality between men and women.

According to Unterhalter (2013), gender equality means that women and men enjoy the same status and have equal opportunities for realizing their full human rights and potential to contribute to national, political, economic, social, and cultural development, and to benefit from the results. The concept of gender equality acknowledges that different treatment of women and men sometimes required to achieve sameness of results, because of different life conditions or to compensate for past discrimination.

Gender equality requires equal enjoyment by women and men of socially-valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards. Where gender inequality exists, it is generally women who are excluded or disadvantaged in relation to decision-making and access to economic and social resources. Therefore a critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives. Gender equality does not mean that men and women become the same; only that access to opportunities and



life changes is neither dependent on, nor constrained by, their sex. Achieving gender equality requires women's empowerment to ensure that decision-making at private and public levels and access to resources are no longer weighted in men's favour, so that both women and men can fully participate as equal partners in productive and reproductive life.

Importance of Gender Equality

Gender equality is intrinsically linked to sustainable development and is vital to the realization of human rights for all. The overall objective of gender equality is a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Equality between men and women exists when both sexes are able to share equally in the distribution of power and influence; have equal opportunities for financial independence through work or through setting up businesses; enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity to develop personal ambitions, interests and talents; share responsibility for the home and children and are completely free from coercion, intimidation and gender-based violence both at work and at home.

Within the context of population and development programmes, gender equality is critical because it will enable women and men to make decisions that impact more positively on their own sexual and reproductive health as well as that of their spouses and families. Decision-making with regard to such issues as age at

marriage, timing of births, use of contraception and recourse to harmful practices (such as female genital cutting) stands to be improved with the achievement of gender equality. However it is important to acknowledge that where gender inequality exists, it is generally women who are excluded or disadvantaged in relation to decision-making and access to economic and social resources. Therefore a critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives. This would enable them to make decisions and take actions to achieve and maintain their own reproductive and sexual health. Gender equality and women's empowerment do not mean that men and women become the same; only that access to opportunities and life changes is neither dependent on nor constrained by their sex.

Areas of Gender Inequality in Nigeria

The finding of the United National Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) revealed five important areas concerning the global patterns of inequality between men and women: namely:

1. Economic participation
2. Economic opportunity (National employment level)
4. Educational attainment
5. Health and well-being

Economic Participation

The participation of women in the workforce in both quantitative and



qualitative is now accepted not only as important for covering the level inequalities of poverty among women, but also very essential towards raising household income and the overall economic development of the nation. It is therefore of great importance to actively involve women in modern education that could lift them out of poverty by providing them with greater opportunity to actively involved in community activities that tend towards providing sustainable development.

To this end, the notion of securing women as a mere recipient of help is not accommodating but rather seen with a view strongly supported by an evidence of suggesting that the education, employment, and ownership rights of women has a great influence on their ability to control their environment and contribute to economic development.

Economic Opportunity (National Employment Level)

Contemporary labour markets also continue to be characterized by gender inequality. In 2019, the female labour force participation rate was just 47%, 27 % points below the male rate (at 74%). There is strong regional variation in gender disparities in access to employment. Gender stereotypes that emphasize the role of women as the main caregivers and that of men as the main breadwinners remain deeply ingrained in some regions. Female labour underutilization is very pronounced in North Africa and in the Arab States, affecting around 40% of women in the extended labour force in

both sub-regions (compared with 20 and 12% of men, respectively). Apart from access to employment, there are also persisting gender disparities in relation to job quality. This is true even in regions where women have made significant inroads in the labour market. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, the average level of educational attainment of women now surpasses that of men, yet women in the region still earn 17% less per hour worked than men. In Nigeria, estimates of unemployment rate vary widely according to geopolitical zones between rural and urban centre as well as between women and men. In 2003, women accounted for about 41% of the national workforce (14-70 years) and 45% of the unemployment while men account for 50% of the workforce and 55% of the unemployed. From 2001 - 2004, women constituted 29% - 31% of the federal civil service workforce while men made up 69% - 71%. There is only an increase of 1% in the proportion of women in the federal civil service workforce from 2001 - 2004. Women are significantly under represented both in the entire national workforce and in the federal civil service in view of the fact that women constitute approximately 49% of the Nigeria population (Nigerian Gender Statistics Book, 2006).

Political Empowerment

Political empowerment refers to the equitable representation of women in decision-making structures, (both formal and informal) and incorporation of women views in the formulation of policies affecting their



societies. The interparliamentary union reports a world average of only 15.6% participation by women in combined houses of parliaments. The statistics of region offer few surprises, ranging from less than 6.8% in the Arab States and African countries to 18.6% in the Americans and 39.7% in the Nordic states. While women are poorly represented in the lower levels of government, they are rarer still in the upper echelons of decision making. The absence of women from structures of governance inevitably means that national regional and local priorities (i.e. how resources are allocated) are typically defined without meaningful input from women, whose life experience gives them a different awareness of the community's need, concern and interests different from those of men. In Nigeria, the participation of women in decision making is low due to impending factors like culture and traditions which generally have greater influence in authority, social status and opportunities to men and regards women's role mainly to that of the household keeping (family and child bearing). This seems to slow down active participation of women in politics in Nigeria.

Education Attainment

One of the most important organs of empowering women at all levels is educational attainment because without education, comparable and content to that given to boys and men, women cannot have access to and participation in all forms of socio-economic aspect of the society. Under

the national policy on education adopted in 1981, revised in 1995 and 1998, Nigeria operates a 6-3-3-4 educational system previously comprising six years of primary education, three years of junior secondary education, three years of senior secondary education and four years of higher education. Under the Universal Basic Education, the first nine years of schooling up to the end of the junior secondary, now constitute the basic education component. The system also includes adult and non-formal education programmes as well as a teacher training and special education, especially for physically/mentally challenged children. Since the introduction, of formal western education in Nigeria by the early church missionaries in the late 18th century, women enrolment in all three levels of education (primary, secondary and tertiary) has continued to be consistently well below that of men because of Nigeria's cultures and traditions. This generally accorded greater authority/opportunities to men/boys and regards women's roles as largely compared to the family and child bearing (Nigerian Gender Statistics Book, 2006).

Link between Gender Inequality, Social Justice and Sustainable Development

Gender inequality issue is a global phenomenon which is being discussed and analysed in every country of the world. Marginalization of women has continued to be on the increase. All over the world, a review of progress achieved by women in the community



development is of great concern (Mullins, 2009). However, there is still an imbalance between women and their male counterparts in the work place in the world today. According to Wilson (2009), it is apparent that the progress towards women participation in development has encountered obstacles at the institutional level in all the countries of the world. Among traditional societies of the world, men and women were assigned different roles.

Observation shows that globally, women participation in community development has been generally less than that of men and not encouraging despite their numerical strength. The situation has declined so worst that it has generated both national and international recognition. In Nigeria, various interventions and conferences such as the one held in 1989 were embarked upon to improve the status of women in the society. Nigeria is a signatory to many international instruments such as Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) signed on 13th June 1985. All these efforts made by both Nigerian government and international communities point to the fact that women participation in development has remained abysmally poor both in the developed and developing countries alike but the situation is worst in developing countries like Nigeria where women are regarded as inferior and second class citizen. This prevents them from contributing their quota to the development of their communities.

Gender inequality also reflected in the political scenes as pointed out by Ahiauzu (2014). This reflected as only a small number of exceptional women have achieved prominence on modern political and governmental spheres, despite their numerical strength. Some women are active party members and officers. They contribute towards winning votes and elections for their political parties. This way, their political influence and participation help to attract appointments and development to their communities. However, one sour point is always there, women from the communities are seldom appointed to the number of positions comparable to their input. Neither are they regularly featured or fielded for elective positions according to their number. Their male counterparts dominate both appointive and elective positions, leaving the women to dominate in casting votes. According to Adedotun (2010), in April 2007, there were a total of 1,200 women aspirants to 1,532 offices in Nigeria, 660 of these women won their primaries. Out of the 660 candidates who contested elections for various posts, 96 women finally emerged as winners: six deputy governors, nine senators, 26 national representatives, and 55 in various state Houses of Assembly. Even though this represents a significant increase in female participation in the political process, it is still a far cry from the aspirations of women the world over for full participation.

According to CEDAW (2017), gender inequality in education is extreme.



Girls are less likely to access school, to remain in school or to achieve in education. Despite almost 30 years of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and 20 years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), today girls make up around 56% of the 77 million children not in school, and women make up two thirds of the adults who are illiterates. Even girls who do enroll in school may have irregular attendance due to other demands on them, and the fact that their education may not be prioritized. Girls are more likely to repeat years, to drop out early and to fail key subjects, and in most countries girls are less likely to complete the transition to secondary schooling. Inequality in society inevitably has an impact on the provision and content of education.

In Nigeria, girls' access to basic education especially in northern states has remained so low. According to UNFPA (2006) report about 67.3% of the Nigerian women are illiterates. Education brings benefits to the educated in the form of access to information and it equips men and women alike for greater participation in economic, politics, and other forms of community development. Low level of education among Nigerian women constitutes obstacle to development effort in the areas. It is believed that although in many countries including Nigeria, school dropout rates are steadily falling, they continue to be higher among the girls than among the boys. According to Akosile (2008) the most recent available national MDGs

progress report states that in Nigeria, the gross enrolment ratio for the boys has remained consistently higher than that of girls by over 10% with a male: female ratio of 55.9%:44.1%. At the level of secondary enrolment, girls have a much higher dropout rate such that by terminal class only 48.83% reach senior secondary school. Consequently, only 39.7% of female students graduate from universities and 37.54% from polytechnics. This is because some parents do not see the benefit of girls education as girls are given away in marriage to serve the husbands family. This goes a long way to impair women participation in all aspects of community development.

Women and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by world leaders in 2015, embody a roadmap for progress that is sustainable and leaves no one behind. Achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is integral to each of the 17 goals. Only by ensuring the rights of women and girls across all the goals will we get to justice and inclusion, economies that work for all, and sustaining our shared environment now and for future generations. Financially, most Nigerian women are backward. Much of their work remains invisible, unremunerated and unrecognized. Their annual income has declined so sharply that most of the rural women are living below poverty line. Financial backwardness of women has made them depend on their



husbands for living thereby making it difficult for them to take active part in development activities within the community. Since it is said that, he who plays the piper dictates the tune, they do not go beyond the limit set by their husbands virtually in all they do. Very few women who go beyond the limit either cope with divorce or severe punishment from the husband.

Conclusion

Gender equality as stated earlier in the introduction, improves the development of any society. Nigerian women who are the future leaders need to be educated for them to be self-reliant. If the education sector is properly managed, gender discrimination will be eradicated and gives women chances the quality output from our institutions will be productive in the society for a positive turnaround of the national economy. This paper revealed that gender inequality in Nigeria has caused serious dangers to the economy in terms of inabilities of higher increase in poverty level of women, women poor participation in politics, higher rate of illiterate women among others. In order to proffer solutions to these problems, gender equality must be promoted as a powerful instrument to resolve these malicious effects of economic recession of COVID-19 through strengthening of policy on gender equality for social justice and sustainable development.

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