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Institutionalization of Gender Inequality in Nigeria: Implications for the Advancement of Women

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Abstract

This paper highlights the institutionalization of gender inequality in Nigerian society and affirms that there is a thin divide between the public and private lives of women in Nigeria, especially in rural areas. It draws attention to the emergence of non-traditional female-headed families. The new trend in defining the household shows that it is a dynamic social unit that is not necessarily built around men. This new flexibility in defining the household helps to envision women, not as persons who work merely to supplement household income, but as persons who engage in economic ventures because they have personal needs and aspirations. The main barriers to the advancement of women in public life are low level of employment of women in the formal labor sector, low literacy rates, gender stereotypes with regard to employment opportunities and promotions, and cultural practices such as patriarchy and early marriage that limit women's access to and control over resources. In their private lives women somehow manage to provide the necessary resources to maintain themselves and their children with or without financial assistance from spouses, although with increased difficulty. The feminization of poverty concept is applicable in view of the high level of poverty among women. In order to remedy the situation for women in Nigeria, and to enhance the lives of the populace in general, proposals are put forth that it is hoped will be embraced by government leaders, employers, families and individuals.

Keywords

Gender inequality, Nigeria, career advancement, discrimination

Introduction

The introduction of gender issues into matters involving development is an advancement that enables researchers to have a more balanced view of the multidimensional nature of social problems. In recent years the need to better articulate the concept of a gender system has led to more research on the condition of women and demographic behaviour (IUSSP, 2001). Although sex is a biological phenomenon involving males and females, gender is a social phenomenon that defines the roles played by males and females within each society. It has been noted that there is hardly any society where men and women occupy equal social status (Mason, 1984). This is because each individual sex has specific roles to perform, and there are varying ways of awarding merit to these roles. Gender therefore looks at the status of women *in comparison to men* (Mason, 1984). However, most cultures tend to assign higher value to the roles played by males than those played by females (Olurode and Olusanya, 1994; Oyekanmi, 2004).

The historical tendency has been to assume that males (men and boys) are superior and that females (women and girls) are subordinate. In some societies discrimination against females is exhibited even before the child is born through gender-specific selective infanticide. Some studies have also shown that in cases where food is perceived to be limited baby girls are deliberately starved in order to provide adequate nourishment for baby boys. Discrimination against females in access to education and labour force participation has also been documented (Klasen, 1999). In many cultures a married woman is thought of as a mere possession of her male spouse, often rationalizing and leading to the abuse of women without any regard for their fundamental human rights. The assumption that women are inferior to men is often based on the belief that male-oriented work outside the home (e.g. farming) is real and valuable work, and that female-oriented work inside the home (e.g. taking care of children and doing household chores) is not real work and only marginally valuable. As a corollary of this assumption it is often assumed that work outside the home is more valuable than housework and procreation.

Patriarchal attitudes and the gender bias that underpin women's insubordination represent hidden obstacles to social and economic development. Cain, et al. (1979: 406) defined 'patriarchy' as a set of social relations with a material base that enables men to dominate women. Patriarchy, therefore, describes a distribution of power and resources within the family. Men maintain power and control of resources, and women are effectively powerless and dependent on men. Gender inequality is often reflected in gender violence either within or outside the family. With respect to wife battery, Abane (2000) contends that it saps women's energy, undermines their confidence, compromises their health and prevents the full participation of women in society. The subordinate position of women is also exhibited in their powerlessness to negotiate sexual relations that sometimes result in forced marriages as well as rape within marriage (Ellsberg, et. el., 2001). Clearly, with the current high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in virtually all societies it is critical to recognize the danger of spreading the virus either through forced sex or within a network of partners in polygamous marital unions and/or extra marital sexual liaisons of any of the partners in a monogamous marital union (Oyekanmi, 1994).

Many terms and phrases have been used in the social demographic literature to define and operationalize gender. Among the most common are "status of women", "female autonomy", "patriarchy", "rigidity of the sex stratification system", "women's rights", and "men's situational advantage". All of these refer, in part, to some aspect of gender inequality (Mason, 1984:4-6). Some authors focus on the amount of prestige, respect or esteem (or lack thereof) that is accorded to women by virtue of their gender, rather than some other reason like social standing of their family (Olurode and Olusanya, 1994). Other authors focus on women's power or freedom from control by others, especially within the family or household (Blanc, et. al., 1996). The status of

women is an elusive concept that defines the degree of women's access to and control over material resources (including food, income, land, and other forms of wealth) and social resources (e.g. knowledge, power, and prestige within the family, in the community, and in the society at large). Safilos-Rothschild (1980: 192) emphasized the control of resources when she stated that the sex stratification system determines that men only will occupy major decision-making positions and will control the valued resources of the society such as wealth, income, credit, knowledge, technology, valued skills, valued income-generating activities, food, health, power and prestige. The relative control of resources is in turn assumed to reflect economic and kinship institutions, especially cultural norms that determine the sexual division of labour and patterns of exchange associated with marriage and death. Ladan (2003: 212) stated that the term gender is used to denote discriminatory practices, policies and laws against women or female groups in governance or public life and in the enjoyment or protection of women's rights.

Most terms and definitions of gender inequality focus on three basic dimensions: inequality in prestige, inequality in power and/or inequality in access to or control over resources. It should be noted that gender and its possible connections to development could be best understood in particular socio-historical contexts. This is because the indicators of gender inequality tend to be heavily context dependent (i.e. what indicates high status in one setting may indicate low status in another) and also because particular aspects of gender (e. g. female status) may have contradictory effects on development in different socio-cultural settings. The indices of gender equality or inequality are not static within any given society. Moreover there is more than one dimension on which it is theoretically possible for the sexes to be unequal. Put differently, gender inequality is empirically as well as conceptually a multidimensional phenomenon (Drovandi and Salvani, 2004). A picture of gender inequality varying across dimensions emerges in the description of West African women, who are sometimes cited as being unusual for their economic independence. But these women do not appear to have prestige or legal rights markedly superior to those of African women not engaged in independent economic activities. Another contradiction is seen in the seclusion of Muslim women in *purdah*. On the one hand it enhances the status of the women within religious circles. But on the other hand it reduces their control over material goods and minimizes the possibility that they can develop an economic power base.

Gender and Development

Feminists and other researchers have highlighted the need for a gender sensitive approach to social and economic issues, particularly in the quest to accelerate development in most countries of the world (Folbre, 1995; Afonja, 1986; UNDP, 1998). The period 1976-85, proclaimed the United Nations Decade for Women, had a plan of action with the goals of equality, development and peace (UNDP, 1998; UNICEF, 2001). This marked a watershed in human resource development. Why? Because it brought women, the other half of the world population, into the development picture. With the aim of improving the lives and conditions of the world's poor, sustainable human development (SHD) was adopted by countries worldwide from the early 1980s. SHD entailed, among other things, an improvement in the status of women and an opening up of economic opportunities for women (UNDP, 1995). It was realized that sustainable human development was predicated on the removal of social, economic and political inequality between the sexes along with sex imbalances. In other words, a gender approach to development was recognized as critical to meeting the goals of SHD. This approach was expected to address women's concerns within socially constructed relationships between men and women.

The United Nations Decade for Women compelled various governments--including many in Africa--to intensify their efforts to place women at the center of national development debates. This effort was, however, hampered by the unequal and subordinate positions of the majority of

women in these countries. In terms of the failure of government programs and efforts, two factors stand out: first, the co-existence of women's multiple roles as reproducer, producer and traditional manager of resources, although the latter was often unacknowledged; and second, the gender discriminatory cultural beliefs that infiltrate institutions at various levels of society (UNDP, 1995). These factors have a direct impact on women's lives in terms of the amount of decision-making power they have at the household, community and national levels. They also impact women's access to and participation in education, health care and employment. Relatedly they make it difficult (if not impossible) for women to own land and other forms of property and obtain bank loans, especially loans to purchase land or a home. Male bias permeates all parts of the African socioeconomic structure (Abane, 2000). One needs to note, however, that women, in large part, keep the pattern of discrimination on track due to their manipulation of the flow of cultural information via learning--particularly during the critical childhood stages of development (Roberts, J. Personal communication, 2005). Moreover the upholding of most cultural practices which are oppressive to women such as widowhood rites to 'cleanse' women after the death of their husbands are done by women in the various lineages. That is why some researchers have observed that women are their own worst enemies.

The most recent attempt at fostering development in Africa is the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), whose document was agreed upon in 2001. Nigeria's President, Olusegun Obasanjo, was a central figure in the promulgation of this initiative. The thrust of the document is that Africa's development strategy must be experiential and not imposed (Omoweh, 2003). NEPAD's long term objectives, as specified in articles 174-188 of the document, are to eradicate poverty in Africa, place African countries both individually and collectively on a path of sustainable growth and development, incorporate African nations into the globalization process, and promote the role of women in important activities. One of the objectives highlighted in the document is elevating and improving the role of women in social and economic development by reinforcing their capacity in the domains of education and training by developing revenue-generating activities through facilitating access to credit, and by assuring their participation in the political and economic life of African countries. Under the framework of the International Development Goals (IDG), NEPAD has the specific task of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education in 2005. This means that NEPAD has only one more year to achieve this goal. Hence it is becoming obvious that the goal cannot be met by the target date given the current level of achievement. The NEPAD document states that the conditions for promoting sustainable development include peace, security, and democracy, attainable via various initiatives: Political Governance Initiative, the Economic and Corporate Governance Initiative, Sub-regional and Regional Development Initiative.

Given limited resources, it is clear that the goals set by NEPAD to be achieved by the years 2005 and 2015 respectively are not attainable. Moreover, with respect to Nigeria, the enabling laws and programs to achieve the objectives of NEPAD are not yet operational. For example, the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) program that is supposed to actualize the objectives of NEPAD at the national level was not launched until the fourth quarter of 2004. Equivalent programs at the state and local government levels e.g. State Economic Empowerment Development Strategy {SEEDS} and Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy {SEEDS} are still being drafted for future approval by the relevant levels of government. Unfortunately, it is obvious from the contents of the NEEDS document that no special consideration has been given to gender issues beyond the usual rhetoric.

In a bid to ensure accountability and transparency in the management of governmental activities, the current regime has enacted the 'Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Act' of 2000. The Act defines corruption to include bribery, fraud and other related offences. The Act also provides for the establishment of the Independent Corrupt Practice and Allied Offences Commission. The Commission is charged with investigating and prosecuting offenders of the Act. The composition of the Commission is, however, questionable because the Act stipulates

that the Commission shall consist of a chairman *and twelve (12) other members, one of who shall be a woman* (Akinbode, 2003). The Act itself, therefore, illuminates a mindset that upholds discrimination against women.

Is there a path that if followed will place gender issues at the forefront of political debate and decision-making? According to Ladan (2003), the following six steps must be taken:

- Women must gain more power and autonomy. This is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and sustainable development.
- Women must gain equality in terms of political decision-making. This performs a leverage function without which it is unlikely that a real integration of the equality dimension of government policy making is feasible.
- The target endorsed by the UN Economic and Social Council of having 30 percent women in positions at decision-making levels of government must be attained. This is essential to address the under-representation of women at most levels of government.
- Discriminatory attitudes and practices with regard to family and child-care responsibilities must be removed, and the cost of seeking public office must be reduced.
- Women must gain access to power through alternative structures such as the non-governmental organizational sector (this is due to the fact that women have limited access to traditional avenues of power like political parties and trade unions).
- Positive measures must be taken to increase the proportion of women among economic and political decision makers at the local, regional and international levels.

Ladan (2003) proposed these points for mainstreaming gender in development, but the current situation in Nigeria does not indicate an actualization of most of these points.

Roles of Women in Society

This section highlights the institutionalization of gender inequality in the Nigerian society with respect to both work and non-work roles. At this point the following questions arise: What do we really know about what women are doing? How have these activities changed over time? What factors are responsible for these changes? What important social, economic, political and demographic interactions are associated with changing women's roles? Historically, research has paid particular attention to the domestic domain of women's social life. This is largely due to the fact that women's familial obligations, household activities and child-care duties—all of which are vital for the fulfillment of the basic needs of society—tend to consume so much of their time and energy. The basic activities that revolve around the home comprise a critical component of any full understanding and explanation of demographic phenomena involving women, including fertility, mortality and migration. A review of literature clearly shows that women perform several social roles irrespective of cultural setting. These roles can be classified into seven major roles: parental, occupational, conjugal, domestic, kin, community and individual (Oppong and Church, 1981).

The importance of different roles varies enormously from culture to culture, and different combinations of roles are especially valued and salient for women in different cultures. For example, among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria a woman who gives birth to eight children is honored at a party at which her husband kills a cow and the woman eats the neck of the cow. Thereafter she is given special social recognition in the community. Whereas among the Yoruba of western Nigeria, a woman who gives birth to twins or triplets, irrespective of her parity, gets an equivalent honor. Increasing attention is being paid to the economic achievement of women, particularly

their acquisition of formal education and material wealth. Moreover, the amount of time and energy that women devote to their different roles is noted to change rapidly in periods of socio-economic and political change (Dauda, 2004). In order to perform their various roles with some degree of efficiency, Nigerian women have had to learn to manage their time wisely, sometimes using female children and other substitutes to perform household duties.

It is important to note the emergence of the female-headed family that stands in contrast to the traditional male-headed family. The new trend in defining the household shows that it is not necessarily built around men and it is sometimes unstable in its composition. Flexibility in defining the household helps to reconceptualize women as persons who engage in economic ventures because they have their own personal needs and aspirations to fulfill, and not simply because they need to supplement household income (Aina, 1995: 90-115). The acknowledgement of female-headed households has become more common since the adverse effects of the structural adjustment program (SAP) became increasingly noticeable since the mid-1980s. This emerging phenomenon as indicated from the figures of the 1991 Nigerian population census showed that 15.2% of the heads of households were females. This figure varied markedly among the states, varying from 4% in Kano (3.8%), Jigawa (3.8%), Bauchi (4.0%), Niger (4.1%), Sokoto (4.1%) to 15.7% in Lagos and 32.5% in Delta (NPC, 1998).

In traditional Nigerian society there was no strict separation between reproductive and productive roles of men and women. Rather these roles were seen as an integral part of life experience from early childhood to later adult years. The concept of housewife as conceived in 19th and 20th century Europe did not exist in indigenous African society. Extending the European or western definition of housework to the description of African women's domestic activities, which include working in the home and in the field as unpaid family labourers, is misplaced.

Among the roles performed by women in Nigeria, Alele (1990) considered three to be most important: the procreative role, the domiciliary role, and the indirect political influential role. The procreative and domiciliary roles have tended to be acknowledged with pride. The political influential role is observed in situations where women were brought in to resolve civil conflicts. Madam Tinubu of Lagos, Emotan of Benin, and Queen Amina of Zaria are examples of political activists in the pre-colonial era. In pre-colonial times the political roles of women included 'Yeye oba', 'Oloris', 'Iya agon' and others who symbolized women holding indirect political powers in the kings' palaces and among some traditional religious groups among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria. Similarly the 'Omu' held a position of leadership among the women analogous to the 'Obi' among the men in Igboland in eastern Nigeria. Other political roles held by women are the 'Queen Mother' among the Edo of Benin, the 'Sagi and 'Sonya' among the Nupe and the royal princesses of the Kanuri in Borno area of Nigeria. These roles are linked with local governance and politics. Moreover, in traditional religious settings, post-menopausal women were accorded respect and honored just like men. However, these women were feared and revered mainly because of the belief of the devotees that these women had magical powers or witchcraft with which they could wield bad influence on their opponents. However, the structure of political power inherited from the colonial powers did not give room for female political activists to transform into leaders, either under military rule or civilian {e.g. democratic party} dispensations. Moreover the type of money politics as presently practiced in Nigeria is such that women who are already marginalized economically can hardly make appreciable progress without conscious effort on the part of the males to yield some ground through concessions (e.g. the quota system).

Osinulu stated that women in Nigerian traditional societies were viewed as appendages that were to render assistance to their father/ husband/ family/ village group; properties of the husband and his family even after his demise; child bearer who contributed to manpower needed by her husband through her children and her own labour for farming; economic partner who processed and marketed her husband's products; and child care giver. However, due to the weakening of families as a result of more urban living, several women's associations like the Nigerian Association of University Women (NAUW), the National Council for Women's Societies

(NCWS), et cetera, have established day-care centers in order to alleviate the child-care dilemma of working mothers.

Hence women in the traditional settings worked within or on behalf of family enterprises. And whatever they earned was regarded as part of the husbands' income and accounted for as family income. Despite this the women had ingenious ways of taking care of responsibilities which arose from their families of orientation.

With colonization came noticeable introduction of formal education. Social scientists have often commented that formal education has affected a silent revolution of immense proportions and has changed the face of the Nigerian society more decisively than any other force. From the beginning more men than women had access to formal (Western) education as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected Education Indicators

Indicators	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995
(1) Adult Illiteracy Rate – Total (%)	89.7	84.9	67.1	59.2	51.4	48.5
(a) Female (%)	89.7	84.9	78.4	70.4	61.9	55.8
(b) Male (%)	69.4	62.7	55.2	47.6	40.5	42.9
(2) Adult Literacy Rate (%)	25	-	25	-	50	48.6
(a) % Female enrolment	-	-	-	-	57	41.2
(b) % Male enrolment	-	-	-	-	42	56.1
(3) Primary School Enrolment (Total) in (000s)	3,516	4,890	12,117	13,025	13,007	17,994
(a) % Female enrolment	37.0	60.0	43.7	44.3	43.2	44.0
(b) % Male enrolment	63.0	40.0	56.3	55.7	56.8	56.0
(4) Secondary School Enrolment in (000s)	na	746	2346	3088	2902	5,084
(a) % Female enrolment	na	7.2	25.0	43.2	42.8	43.0
(b) % Male enrolment	na	92.8	75.0	56.8	57.2	57.0
(5) Female School Teachers – Primary (%)	23.7	28.0	34.5	40.8	42.9	(1994) 46.4

Sources: CBN, Annual Report & Statement of Account, various years.
 FOS, Annual Abstract of Statistics, various years
 FOS (1997) The Statistical Profile of Nigerian Women,
 FOS, Abuja. As quoted in Dauda, R., 2004.

Furthermore the influence of education tended to decrease as one moved away from the coast. Initially educated women entered teaching and other care related professions. From the 1930s, gradually more women entered into law, medicine and nursing. However, considerable prejudice affected the relatively few women who sought employment in the 1940s. At that time the labour code prescribed a lower salary for single women than for men, and women had to resign their appointments on marriage. In cases where a newly wed woman wished to work in the formal sector of the economy, the husband had to give his permission to allow his wife to continue in

paid employment. But these women had to resign their appointment if they wanted to go on maternity leave (Ighodalo, 1990).

Fortunately, things have changed a lot since then. The female students' population in Nigerian universities rose from a ratio of 1:40 around 1950 to about 1:4 in 1980 and 1:2 in 2000. This is a significant achievement that has elevated the economic and social status of women. Data from the Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) reveals that total female enrolment in tertiary institutions has considerably increased. It however, constitutes less than 30% of total enrolment. An examination of the enrolment at tertiary level by disciplines indicated a sharp inequality in 1997. In agricultural science, 22.26% of those enrolled were women. The enrollments for women were highest in pharmacy (25.95%), science (26.58%), and medicine (22.98%), while enrolments for engineering and environmental designs were the lowest of all the disciplines (FOS, 1997: 35; Dauda, 2004).

A description of the activities of women in the formal and informal sectors of the Nigerian labour market shows that the majority of the working women are in the informal sector of the economy in trading, crafts, services and other small family enterprises (Table 2) as shown by the data from the 1991 national population census. Though informal economy is also predominantly a rural phenomenon, a large proportion of urban women are self-employed, engaging in trading, home industry and services.

Table 2: Occupational Structure of Employed Persons by Sex, 1991

S/N	Occupation	Both Sexes (M + F)		Male (M)		Female (F)	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1	Professional/Technical and related workers	1,750,638	7.3	1,172,164	7.8	578,474	6.4
2	Senior Administrative/Managerial and related workers	654,066	2.7	508,299	3.4	145,767	1.6
3	Clerical and related workers	831,819	3.7	559,999	3.7	271,820	3.0
4	Sales workers	5,627,923	23.3	1,962,442	13.0	3,665,481	40.7
5	Service workers	784,856	3.1	561,249	3.3	283,607	3.1
6	Agricultural and related workers	10,155,327	42.1	7,118,370	47.1	3,036,957	33.7
7	Production and related workers	3,576,364	14.8	2,717,902	18.0	58,462	9.5
8	Occupation not stated	736,849	3.1	567,458	3.8	169,391	1.9
9	Total: all occupations	24,117,842	100	15,107,883	100	9,009,959	100

Adapted from Yesufu, T.M. (2000) *The Human Factor in National Development*, Ibadan, Spectrum Books Limited, p. 156.

The high level of illiteracy among women precludes their entry into the formal economy, whereas the compatibility of informal sector work with childcare and the variable hours of work make the latter convenient for women. The average woman in the country has 5 or 6 children (Table 3). She engages in several economic activities in order to maintain her offspring and provide for her kith and kin. The national population policy promulgated in 1988 prescribed four children per woman in an effort to slow down the rapid rate of population growth in the country (Oyekanmi, 1991).

Low capital investment, low profits margins and low incomes usually characterize women's

informal sector enterprises. Economic activities open to women in the informal sector are limited by competition from state-supported industry and from men with better access to capital and

Table 3: Selected Health Indicators

Indicators	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1994	2000
Life Expectancy at Birth – Total (years)	43.2	45.3	47.4	49.2	50.4	50.9	54
a. Female (years)	44.1	46.1	48.1	49.9	51.0	51.3	48.2
b. Male (years)	42.4	44.5	46.7	48.6	49.8	50.5	46.8
c. Gender Ratio F/M	1.04	1.04	1.03	1.03	1.02	1.02	1.03
Total Fertility Rate (per woman)	6.9	6.9	6.9	6.9	6.5	6.2	5.2
Maternal Mortality Rate (per 100,000)	na	na	na	1500.0	1000.0	1500	704
Infant Mortality Rate (per 1,000) Female (per 1,000)	141.4	130.4	120.0	110.0	100.6	93.4	105 (1999)
Fully Immunized (1-yr-old) in %						(1995)	
Tuberculosis	20	22.5	23.3	25	45	30	72.4
DPT	21	23	24	21	25	29.5	75.3
Poliomyelitis	22	23	24	20	30	28	72.5
Measles	40	45	55	40	45	32.7	70.4

UNDP, Human Development Report (1999) as quoted in Dauda, R., 2004.

trading opportunities. It has been noted, however that the time constraint of informal sector activities of women has negative effect on child bearing and rearing and the welfare of the children (Aina, 1995). Furthermore, women in the informal sector are heterogeneous, ranging from street hawkers, stall-owners and distributors, to big-time female entrepreneurs. Women, therefore, do not have exactly similar problems. Hence, programs should be designed to meet the various needs of the different categories.

Poor living conditions of the Nigerian populace are strongly suggested by a high infant mortality rate of 75 per 1000 births as of 2001 (Table 3). The IMR for female births for year 2000 was 105 as published by the Population Reference Bureau (PRB, 2001) which was higher than that for all live births (both male and female). Poor living conditions in Nigerian are further indicated by a maternal mortality rate of 704 per 100,000 births in year 2000. Furthermore, estimates indicate that 5.1% of the population aged 15 to 49 years was living with HIV/AIDS at the end of 1999. This has been revised somewhat to 5.0% as of 2004. For women this age group represents their reproductive years and hence HIV/AIDS will have grievous consequences in terms of their fertility and mortality, as well as the mortality of their future offspring.

The Nigerian Federal Government established the National Committee on Women and Development in 1982. Later in 1990, the National Commission for Women (NCW) was established for the sole purpose of integrating women into the development process. Since then a Ministry for Women Affairs has been established at both the national and state levels. Rural women were the focus of policy planners and development programmers like the Better Life Programme (BLP) initiated by Maryam Babangida during the regime of her husband (1985-93) and the Family Support Programme of Maryam Abacha (1993-98). Government ministries have focused on women in both urban and rural areas, but the dividends of these activities are not

clearly visible. This is the case even though enormous resources have been committed to their programs and activities. Empirical evidence shows that women in the informal urban labour market lack access to critical resources (land, capital, quality labour and entrepreneurial skills) and basic infrastructure (regular electricity, water supply and appropriate technology). In order to overcome some of these constraints women have been known to form small groups which they operate as thrift societies to which they make daily contributions from sales, known as 'esusu' among the Yoruba, and from which they can get small credit facilities based on their total contribution. The total amount distributable, however, is usually limited. In addition, there is no insurance coverage in case of the demise or default of the person collecting and keeping the money on behalf of all the participants.

The formal sector is divided into two sectors: private and public. The former consists of large industrial and commercial establishments while the latter includes government Ministries and federal/ state/ local establishments. Many studies have documented the poor representation of women in this sector (Oyekanmi, 1985; Akande, et al, 1990). These studies show that capitalistic economic development is reinforcing structural inequalities within the Nigerian economy. A unique characteristic of female employment, as shown by the Manpower Board's surveys of 1977, 1981 and 1983 respectively, is women's concentration in few occupations that are seen as mere extensions of women's domestic roles. When the prospect of being employed in the market depends on educational qualifications and competence, gender disparity in education implies unequal job opportunities. For example by 1986/87 academic session, only 11.5% of Nigerian universities' academic staff were women. 88.5% were men. The proportion of females in the employment of the universities has started to increase significantly since the mid-1990s, in large part due to the fact that many men went in search of international jobs in order to cushion the impact of SAP and the subsequent devaluation of the national currency. The female share of the total labour force was 38.1% in 1984. It declined to 34.3% in 1993 and increased to 38.1% in 1994, the same level it was ten years prior (FOS, 1997: 94 as quoted in Dauda, 2004).

Women work hard whether in the formal or informal sectors of the economy (Okojie, 1990). And women are good managers whether in the home, at the farm, at place of worship, at work settings, etc. Women manage other people, deal with challenges and changes effectively, and adapt to circumstance of scarcity and uncertainties in the economy. Yet, in Nigeria today, less than 5% of managers in strategic sectors are women. It has been observed that the inability of women managers to be readily mobile because of domestic responsibilities has been the main stumbling block to the upward movement, especially of married women managers in Nigeria. Traits thought to be characteristic of successful managers, like masculinity, aggressiveness, competitiveness, firmness and justice, have traditionally been viewed as being present in men but absent in women. However, experience has shown that this is a false notion.

It has been suggested that the prospect for change from the current peripheral position of Nigerian women in the urban labor market depends on three main factors: 1) improvements in female education; 2) enhancing women's roles in trade unions and industrial relations; and 3) enacting government labour laws in relation to protecting women from discriminatory practices. Given the fact that the Nigerian women play such diverse roles in society, it is clear that much needs to be done in order to enhance their capability to perform their various roles.

Barriers and Opportunities to Women's Career Advancement

The systematic devaluation of the roles that women play in society results in the marginalization of women in all spheres of society. This marginalization is reflected in differential economic benefits, dependent relations, and social and political inferiority. Attempts to explain this phenomenon from a sociological perspective have largely being anchored on biology, culture and materialism (Dauda, 2004; Cain, 1979). Despite divergent views, the consensus seems to be that

marginalization of any social unit reduces the ability of that unit to contribute to the development of the country and society at large.

Career choices for women in public life are severely limited in Nigeria. And in those cases where they do find employment in the public sector, discriminatory practices in the workplace (e.g., lower pay for women doing the same work as men; limited chances of overtime work, in-service training, and slower upward mobility) make it extremely difficult for them to advance in their chosen carriers. Entry into the informal sector labour force was easier for women with little or no education. However, the initial capital needed to set-up and expand their businesses was often not easily available to women. Moreover the high level of fertility in the country (total fertility rate of 5.9) and the resources needed for childcare meant that women had to combine both work outside the home and familial responsibilities, sometimes to the detriment of their own welfare. Paradoxically the economic activities of women in the informal sector are usually undervalued because of the problems of conceptual definition and statistical measurement (Oyekanmi, 1991). In this regard, the development programs promulgated by governments and their agencies tend to focus on males as agents of growth rather than on women who do most of the actual work. Even in rural settings, agricultural and extension workers tend to make similar mistakes when disseminating knowledge about new and improved technologies for the production and preservation of food products, or other information about non-farm activities. This may in part account for the slow increase in the productivity of the workers in these areas.

However, the opportunities for the advancement of women can be extended, not only through the resilience of the women, but also through the manipulation of national policies to meet the aspirations of the changing international order. The goals of the millennium development (www.un.org.Millenium Development Goals) that include the mainstreaming of women into development and the reduction of the gender gaps in economic, social and political spheres should be translated into the opening up of windows of opportunity for women. It may take considerable time before the leadership structure and population at large understand the positive impact that change will bring. However, in order to achieve this, the educational system must change. Instead of encouraging girls to take only liberal arts courses, girls must also take courses in science, technology, and the humanities, just like boys. Relatedly, young women should be encouraged to enter fields traditionally dominated by men like computing, engineering, and building and construction. Moreover instead of assuming that only women will be self-employed, entrepreneurial skills should be taught to both males and females.

Reducing poverty in the country should be a “genuine” priority of government. A situation where 70% of the Nigerian population is living below poverty level (income of less than \$1 per person per day) barely leaves room for survival and makes personal savings and investment impossible. Furthermore the high level of inequality in income distribution is such that 5% of the population earn 80% of all income. Moreover the high level of official corruption and mismanagement of public funds as exhibited by various political leaders have led to strident calls for women to get more involved in the politics. Very few women have ventured into politics. This is because the women either do not have the economic resources necessary to enter politics or are afraid of the violence associated with party politics. In recent times, during both military and civilian regimes, some women have been handpicked for various political posts such as Commissioner, Minister and Head of Local Government. It is not surprising that these women are the daughters, sisters or wives of well-known male politicians. Nevertheless, a few women have won elections to the various legislative houses and local government councils. But these women form such a small proportion of the total number of the members that they hardly exert any influence on political affairs. This might partly account for why the laws being passed and programs being implemented by the government are not gender sensitive. One can speculate that if more women go into politics there would be a reduction in the blatant use of excessive state power to terrorize the general public and those perceived to be against the status quo.

Conclusion

The conclusion can be divided into two sections: future research and future action. With respect to the former, there is a need for in-depth studies of the time budget of working women such as was done in Ile-Ife in 1982 under an ILO sponsored project (L. A. Adeokun, et. al., 1984). That study showed that, on average, women work longer hours per day than men. But because their economic activities are carried out at or near the home in conjunction with household chores (e.g. child care or cooking) these activities are under-recorded or not recorded at all. This paper repeats the suggestion that there should be attachment of cash value to housework (Okojie, 1990).

Furthermore, instead of relying on haphazard estimates and guesses, conducting national population censuses every ten years as prescribed by the United Nations (some developed countries conduct such censuses every five years) would result in compilation of up-to-date socioeconomic and demographic data that can be used to gauge the level of Nigeria's development and in-depth studies can be done to estimate the contribution of women to such development.

As part of the effort to enhance the value of women's work, there is a need for a greater proportion of women to acquire technical and science related education. In addition to education, the call for greater participation of women in trade union activities has been made since the 1980s, but there seems to be little success in this regard. As a result, trade union priorities do not include important issues like improved maternity benefits, childcare facilities, and housing allowances for married women. While recognizing the fact that men will not hand over political leadership positions to women on a platter of gold, it is also necessary to recognize that the present desperation and animosity exhibited by male competitors for political offices in the country needs to be corrected by injecting in more female participation. Under normal circumstances, one would not expect women to start sending assassins and blackmailers to political opponents in the name of democracy. Although a desperate wish to get to or remain at the apex of the economic-political-military triangle of power could push people, either male or female, to do unethical things (for a similar view, see Roberts 1999). A quota system of some sort might have to be worked out at this stage so that women hold at least 30% of political posts, as advocated under the 1995 Beijing platform, until such time as they can compete favorably against men in the political sector. This is important in view of the fact that the holding of political office has been closely associated with economic empowerment in the country.

Moreover, political parties need to examine party structures and procedures in order to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women. They should also develop initiatives that allow women to participate fully in all internal policy making structures and appointive and electoral nominating processes. It is also necessary to incorporate gender issues into their political agenda. In the quest for peace and good governance, the indirect political power of women should be harnessed in order to resolve conflicts and settle wars, not just within Nigeria, but in other places on the African continent like the Darfur region of Sudan.

The government must abolish tax laws that discriminate against women and reverse policies that prohibit night and underground work (such as in mines). In addition, the government should provide the same free medical care for a woman's spouse as it does for a man's spouse(s). A few employers of labour have started to provide the latter. Government should promulgate laws to force employers to have a certain quota for the employment of women. To reduce gender gap in the urban labour market, policies must be constructed that will enhance and broaden economic opportunities for women. Government should promote an active and visible policy that ensures that all policies and programs are informed by a gender perspective. Relatedly, before any final decision is made with regard to new legislation, the impact of the proposed legislation on both men and women should be fully assessed (i.e., a gender impact assessment.).

With regard to training women for gainful employment, the activities of non-governmental agencies should compliment those of government agencies. If done properly this will enhance the productivity of the corporate and informal sectors by providing an environment that encourages fair competition and timely reward for work done. Further, in order to minimize absenteeism from school due to illness, it is essential that efficient and affordable medical facilities are established in both urban and rural areas. The profit-oriented approach to health and social services being pursued by the government must be changed as it is retrogressive and detrimental to women and children. Finally it must be stressed that the enhancement of women's status in Nigeria will not reduce or negate the social, economic and political standing of men. What it will do is accelerate the pace of development, something that, if done properly, will improve the quality of life for all.

In reference to the private lives of women there is a need to empower women so that they can freely determine how to live their lives. Religious and cultural practices such as early marriage, excessive male control under patriarchal family arrangements, burial rites and punitive widowhood practices (including widow inheritance) should be critically looked into and revised according to more modern demands for existence and sustainable development. Of particular concern is the inability of women to negotiate safe sexual relations, thus placing them at risk of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases as well as HIV/AIDS. Information has to be disseminated to women detailing ways of reducing the risks of such contamination. And health care services for those already infected must be provided at subsidized costs. There is also a substantial need for more family planning services to reduce fertility and mortality and teach responsible parenthood. In order to minimize family expenditure on health care, government educational efforts should include the dissemination of basic information on how to maintain a balanced diet. And serious effort should be made to improve environmental sanitation including the provision of safe and clean water.

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