

FUNCTIONAL LITERACY OF WOMEN AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria, despite all the resources and opportunities available, still lacks sustainable economic development. It is discovered that overdependence of the female folk coupled with the neglect of women in terms of empowerment and functional education can be considered an economic omission for the nation. Indeed, there is a growing awareness of the restrictive traditional role ascribed to the women folk, in spite of their high population and socio-economic relevance. This paper therefore attempts to establish the prospects of exposing the women to functional literacy education which will not only equip them with skills and knowledge in the chosen occupations but also make them relevant and major contributors to the sustainability of Nigeria's development. Relevant literature on major concepts of sustainable development, functional literacy and women education were reviewed as a basis of discussing the attributes of women empowerment, roles of women in the nation's development and a gender theory that serves as guide to their right and privileges. Possible forms of functional literacy education such as basic mass literacy programmes for women, seasonal educational education, Agriculture, weaving technology, among others, are discussed. It then concludes with the recommendation that government should set aside a reasonable percentage of political positions for women as motivation.

Keywords: *Functional Literacy, sustainable, education, development.*

Introduction

The sustainable development of any society is undoubtedly determined by the desirable values, ideas, resources and principles that can provide the present as well as the future needs of such people or nation. Omoniyi (2002:1) quoted Omolewa (1988) as saying that:

“There has always been acceptance of the point that education is a literacy business and that anyone who stops learning would inevitably stop living”

This implies that education must necessarily be a functional process, so as to enable an individual to cope with the changing circumstances in the society, and hence achieve an expected development.

As a key player in any a nation’s development, special attention for women education in the country becomes imperative for a sustainable development. Shuaibu and Ayuba (2015) reported that female population is a little more than that of the male. Out of about 170 million (Nigerian Population), women constitute more than 50%. Aside this, women are the custodians of the social, cultural and fundamental values of a society (Adetuyi, 2014). Women education has been viewed as the education that would make a woman become aware of herself and her capacity to exploit her environment and training in literacy and vocational skills to enable her become functional in the society (Anaeto, 2010:18). All over the world, education is recognized as the cornerstone for sustainable national development. However, for women to be integrated meaningfully in the development process, they need functional literacy education

Nigerian Women in Retrospect

The history of human creation placed women as subordinate to men. Hence African tradition denied them of asserting their will, until recently. Christianity, which the colonizers introduced, helps in furthering the secondary roles assigned to women and they (Women) are seen in the light of the Tempter, the “Criminal Eve” in the Garden of Eden who made man to derail in the first instance, (Adetuyi, 2015, 103) Religion thus helps to actualize the reductionist maxim that permits polygamy and outlaws polyandry, hence a recurring women degradation and male dominance. Let us examine this observation:

“A combination of patriarchy ideology, cultural prejudices and related socialization have tended to socially condition the women to uncritically accept and even justify male domination and exploitative gender practices, such that women, especially traditions without questioning” (Onyeonoru, Eneji & Chiagoze, 2007:141)

It is evident even from Onyeonoru's study on gender and leadership of Bodija Market Association in Nigeria that women have increasing social burden without corresponding rewards.

Nigerian women, through feminism, have started aggressive fight against male chauvinism in this country, when spurred (among other observations) by scholars. For instance, Ogunyemi (1998) argued that:

"Nigeria is a male, a fact that is daily thrust in myriad of ways on the Nigeria women. An example of this cultural aspect is the national anthem with its incredibly decisive call on "Compatriots" to serve their "fatherland" in the tradition of past heroes"

King and Hill (2010) asserted that womenfolk have been dehumanized and traumatized in many ways. For instance, out of over 1.3 billion people who live in abject poverty around the globe, about seventy percent are women

For these women, poverty does not only mean scarcity and want, it implies rights denied, opportunities curtailed and voice silenced. The importance of literacy and woman empowerment in promoting gender equality and advancement of women is highly stressed as the panacea to a nation's failure at sustainable development.

Over the years, the role of females in the Nigerian society has been erroneously conceptualized to childbearing and house-keeping. This is why, in most developing countries, male children are groomed for career in technical and scientific fields while female ones are guided to concentrate their efforts on home economics. In fact, the social relations and activities of Nigerian women are governed by patriarchal system of socialization and cultural practices that favour the interest of men above those of women. Women are in subordinate position particularly at the community and household levels and the male children are preferred to the female.

It should be emphasized that it is functional literacy that triggers women empowerment and education towards developing the society and themselves in particular. This paper is of the view that a functional literacy education of women in Nigeria will deliver sustainable development to the country.

Concept of Functional Literacy

Though illiteracy, considered an enemy as well as evil that keeps people in darkness, has continued to be attacked through series of literacy processes and efforts, such literacy efforts may not have any impact on the recipients except it is functional and permanent. Mofoluwawo (2015) submitted that:

“Education reforms people and thereby preventing deformation and when a woman is informed, she informs her world”

A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engaged in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group of community. Functional literacy is hence not just a skill or knowledge but its acquisition encompasses more than learning a number of technical skills. It is an emancipatory practice which requires competence that goes beyond grammar and semantics in order to apply them to everyday exchanges. It emphasizes the linkages among reading, writing, culture, economy and political system.

Levine (1994) however argued that:

“Individual functional literacy represents the minimum facility with the written word that is compatible with social survival”

This explains the positive effect of literacy on a woman in her immediate environment. It then becomes an essential condition for her participation in politics and economic life. With the woman's basic literacy, she becomes functionally relevant in the society.

Omoniyi (2002:10) emphasizes the relevance of functional literacy with specific focus that

“Functional Literacy education programmes, being essentially out of school in nature and characterized by requisition of purpose has been generally accepted within the Nigeria society, as capable of playing a crucial role in National Development helping at develop Nigeria's vast human resources, towards achieving the goals of socio-economic developments”

Women are therefore motivated through functional literacy programmes to get engaged in fashion designing, weaving and dying,

soap-making, candle making, baking, interior decoration, palm-oil processing factories and gari processing factories.

Radical Feminism Theory

The controversial treatment of women and their potentialities for Nigeria's sustainable development demands a critical look at an important gender theory relevant to this topic -'Radical Feminism Theory'. This theory views the society as patriarchal dominated and women therefore have to move against such dominance for their liberation. A group of radical feminists even claim female superiority over male while another group believes that the socially-constructed differences between the masculine and the feminine should be removed to ensure gender equality (Toluhi, 2001). This agitation for radicalism in gender equality should however take note of the social responsibilities of the women in the society. The theory is very relevant to this topic, especially in Nigeria where women constitute almost fifty percent of the population and a profitable development may not be attained, of sustaining it, if this section of the population is not taken care of educationally in form of functional literacy education.

Onaga (2010:67) however stated vital areas where equal opportunities are lacking to include the following:

- i. Women are saddled with most of the responsibility for childcare and domestic work.**
- ii. Women are more likely to suffer poverty than men because of outdated working culture and lack of support for their efforts.**
- iii. Women suffer much more domestic and sexual violence than men."**

It should be noted that the intellectual contribution by female folk will surely enhance a nation's development. The importance of women education to self and national sustainable development cannot be over-emphasized. Comprehensive access to education, training, credit and other extension services will undoubtedly contribute to the social and economic development of a nation. According to Amaechi (2009), time has come for women to develop their skills and generate meaningful ideas and initiative that will complement government's economic and development strides because women are the bedrock of the society.

Attributes of Women Empowerment

The expected goal of functional literacy of women is to prepare them for self-reliance and become formidable stakeholders in national sustainable development. It has been discovered that by the time the goal has been achieved, they must have attained the following remarkable heights;

- i. Access to credit facilities: this is possible once she has a stable source of income and collateral securities which in turn becomes an input into the national economic development. Olaley (2004) observed that such women will automatically have access to micro-credit which contributes to individual and community empowerment. They are able to have bank accounts which implies an increase in their level of household management and decision making
- ii. They also enjoy adequate access to social services such as telephone, social media and good medical services
- iii. Eradication of malnutrition among them, their children and even in pregnancies

UNICEF (2001) stated that:

“Poverty’s cycle does not stop in a life cycle. A girl born in poverty is more likely to marry early and a child, while an adolescent. A malnourished mother, who will give birth to an underweight baby” (p.23)

Most of the attributes of women empowerment are geared towards a more human-rights-based multi-sectional approach development (Aromolaran, 2010). It can therefore be stated that women literacy education is focused on eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, achieving gender equality, empowerment, reducing child mortality, improving material health and combating diseases pervading the society at large

Functional literacy for women in Nigeria implies a progressive move towards national economic and social sustainable development. **Ekpenyong** (2004), quoting the National Policy on Women (2000), observed that:

“Globalization, trade liberation and increasing competition have transformed social, economic and political landscape of the

African region and the Nigerian nation. These trends have been closely associated with rapid increase in women's entry into the paid labour force, and the growing visibility of women's contribution to the economy."

This is an attestation to the benefits Nigeria can get through proper functional literacy education of women.

Forms of Women Functional Literacy Programmes

- i. Women mass literacy centres: Basic literacy centres where women who are illiterates can be taught how to read and write should be established in all local government areas of the country. It is the traditional adult education literacy centres without which any productive trade can be learnt. Ability to read, write and calculate simple arithmetic can be acquired there with adequate funding by the government. Just as Fafunwa (2004) reiterated.

"Today, we daily come into contact with situations that demand the use of all our faculties and the application of simple mathematic skills..... a literacy class does not end with reading and writing alone"

Akintayo and Akintayo (2000) also emphasized that:

".....we must reconsider women's roles in the larger social, educational and economic order so that women can become more literate....."

- ii. Non-formal vocational education can also bail women out of poverty and oppression, if given the opportunity. Oladipo and Owolabi? (2005) observed that the conditions of women are yet to be decolonized and that even seventy percent of them are still ridiculed with inferiority complex. A country like Nigeria therefore requires self-reliant people to organize their own entrepreneurial undertakings, produce goods and services and employ others. Women should be the target since they constitute the manpower used by man in such venture. This type of education (vocational) is a kind of training that equips the trainees with skills that are enterprising (Olaitan, 1991), an

- occupational type of education and creates opportunity for self-reliance.
- iii. Weaving technology and fashion design can also be introduced in the training manual for the women. The demand for such is great in Africa now depending on the culture of the regions the women belong.
 - iv. Agriculture is now the focus of even the government as a way out of the present economic recession. In most rural areas in Nigeria, men own the land but they use women to do the farming. Women can therefore be trained to have theirs. Aspects such as piggery, fishery, snailry, bee-keeping, turkey production, poultry and domestication are lucrative forms to sustain Nigeria's development at this time
 - v. Business centres for computer services, typing, photocopies, electronic mail (e-mail) services can also be included in women education.
 - vi. Home economics such as catering services, hairdressing, textile design, interior decorations and corporate food supply are women-oriented and can transform the nation's economy positively.

Summary

This paper has justified the possible contributions of women to the sustainable development of a country. It gives the opportunity of functional literacy education. Their empowerment will undoubtedly prepare them for self-reliance and eradication of poverty in the society. This will eventually translate into an economic transformation of the nation. An educated and empowered woman helps in the fulfillment of her marital obligation and the destiny of nations and people lies in the hands of such intelligent woman.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is now clear that education plays a prominent role in shaping and enhancing the well-being of an individual as well as a sustainable development of a nation. Functional literacy is a fundamental right for all. Women, through functional literacy education, could contribute to improved standard of living, not only for their immediate families but to the society at large. When the women in a country are deprived the

opportunity of acquiring functional literacy education, the development of such a nation will be adversely affected.

It is therefore recommended that the government at various levels should defend the rights and privileges of women to have access to formal education in the country

A reasonable percentage of political positions should be set aside for women in the country so as to motivate them for women empowerment and this should be included in the constitution

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