

# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN COMMUNITY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

The paper examines the role of women in community and national development in Nigeria. It looks at different aspects of the role of women, ranging from women's contributions from the pre-colonial era, to the present time in leadership and conflict resolution, as well as at what has been their contribution in education and agriculture. The paper makes it clear that for any meaningful development that can stand the test of time to be achieved, the involvement of women cannot be downplayed. The paper identifies some challenges that women are confronted with in their effort to play their roles in community and national development. A few recommendations are proffered on how to address these challenges.

Key words: women, community, development

## Introduction

The struggle for women to be able to make their mark in every society they find themselves in has been a long and tortuous one. Through the years of neglect and abandonment, up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, few women who had opportunities endeavoured to prove themselves in the task of community building and national development. Community building is a continuous process where people make collective efforts for a space which

is equitable enough to facilitate holistic development; a space that gives attention to development in the areas of health, education, economy, security, and even religion. Understanding the level of development so far, what the community aspirations are, what needs to happen to enable change to happen, and adapting what has worked elsewhere, and canvassing for support from government and other partners to act together to create change, are all pressing issues. Consequent upon the struggle and enlightenment campaigns about the capacity of women to contribute to development in communities in recent times, there has been a paradigm shift in community development. This shift challenges the traditional concepts promoted by community planners and developers.

Women, in every culture are endowed with qualities and responsibilities that necessitate the roles which they perform. These roles begin with the various roles they perform in their individual families and communities. Women take part in roles, such as handling of food production, food processing and food preparation. Nigerian women are known as the main producers of food and they also engage in other income generating activities. Studies have shown that women produce about 90% of the food consumed locally, and in addition, are responsible for preparing the food and nutrition of the family.

#### Concepts of Community and National Development

The United Nations definition of community development states that it is a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems. Similarly the International Association for Community Development ([www.iacdglobal.org](http://www.iacdglobal.org)) defines community development as a practice-based profession and academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organisation, education and empowerment

of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings.

From these definitions it is clear that community development has, as one of its priorities, the empowerment of both individuals and groups of people within the community with the skills they need to effect the desired change. Usually, the creation of these skills is done through the formation of social groups that work for a common agenda. On the other hand, National development, as a concept is often conceived narrowly from the economic and technological points of view, measuring it from the perspective of the material status of the society Ibileye (2000). However, national development is broader than that, as it includes all aspects of our national life, namely, political, socio-cultural, legal, administrative and linguistic.

Joshua (1983) shares this opinion as he defined national development to include all the indicators of development such as the rate of growth of per capital income, the degree of mass mobilisation and participation in political process. Similarly, Essien (1998) defines it as a process of cumulative change that results from positive forces that raise productivity and real income per head, create more employment opportunities and achieve a wider distribution of gains from the change itself in a nation state. National development is the ability of a country to improve the social welfare of the people, by providing social amenities such as quality education, potable water, transportation infrastructure, medical care and other indices of good governance. It includes full growth and expansion of our industries, agriculture, and education, and strong social, religious and cultural institutions. Simply put, it is the all-round and balanced development of different aspects and facets of the nation, be it political, economic, social, cultural, scientific or material.

### Women's Leadership Role in the Pre-Colonial Era

It is important to note that before the colonial era, and the eventual struggle for independence, some women, against all odds, played key leadership roles which are highly remarkable and cannot be swept under the carpet today. In history, names like Ebele Ejaunu, the founder of Igala Kingdom, Queen Amina of Zaria in Northern Nigeria, Umu Ada in Eastern Nigeria, who were organisers of civil society groups which controlled the markets and instituted standards. Mrs Funmilayo Ransome Kuti also rose up as an icon in the Nigerian political arena and Mrs Margaret Ekpo, wasequally a renowned political figure.

All these women made significant contributions in their respective communities. Women have also played leading roles in shaping the nation, Nigeria, through their involvement in politics. We have women like, Iyalode (women leader) of the old Oyo Empire whose contributions remain a reference point on how the involvement of women in politics can engender a free society. In addition, the contributions of women leaders, like Margaret Ekpo, afore-mentioned Janet Mokelu, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Gambo Sawaba, cannot be over emphasised. They all fought for the political and cultural emancipation of women in their respective regions.

Today, in politics, women make valid contributions through opportunities of service in their various offices and fields of endeavour. For instance, through the Office of the First Lady, which was first given recognition during the Babangida regime, the wife of the President launched some programs, chief of which was the "Better Life for Rural Women" program. Subsequently, other Presidents' wives also launched other programs to impact upon the lives of women, children, the less privileged and the disabled in the society as a whole.

From Mariam Babangida's "Better Life for Rural Women", program, other First Ladies after her launched their own pet projects that include, Mariam Abacha's Family Support

Programme, Stella Obasanjo's Child Care Trust, Turai Yar'adua's Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation, Fati Atiku's Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF), Patience Jonathan's Women for Change Initiative, Aisha Mohammadu Buhari's "Future Assured," program, which aims at tackling issues of maternal and infant mortality. Even though the constitution of Nigeria has no room for the Office of the First Lady, the Office is one that cannot be wished away.

Generally, politics is dominated by men, and this is one of the challenges for women who decide to join the political sphere. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the number of women participants in politics continues to increase around the world, and Nigeria is not left out. In this modern time, educated women have come out of their shells, and are occupying leadership positions, and shouldering other responsibilities, such as being managers and pilots and stenographers, and holding legislative and ministerial positions.

However, despite tangible testimonies of women's high performance in leadership roles, they still suffer discrimination by the male folks. A case in point is the blatant refusal by the current administration in Nigeria to implement the 35% Affirmation Action, whereby women are supposed to have about 35% reservation in both legislative and executive appointments. For instance, Iyitor, (2015), while lamenting the disappointment felt as a result of marginalization of women in the present administration, recalled that in March 2015, at the Harbour Point Hall, Lagos, President Buhari met with women professionals and specifically vowed to implement the 2005 National Gender Policy, which made provision for women to occupy 35 percent appointive positions. He promised that his administration would ensure that gender is mainstreamed throughout all government commitment in all key areas of national development and that the government would commit itself to merit-based affirmation Action to level the playing field for women, with opportunities

to be part of decision-making and governance.

However, the reality on ground is a far cry from the promise, and expectation, and of course, remains unacceptable. The Ministerial list of thirty-six has only six women, out of which five are from the North, and only one from the southwest. This shows that the gender picture is poor, and portends a bleak future for women. From these figures, the women just have 14% representation in this century when other countries are progressing from 35% to 50%. (Lawyersalert, 2017).

Indeed, women have come a long way in the struggle to show the ability of women to exceed expectations in achievement and leadership quality. A flashback at the role played by women in the famous Aba women's riot of 1929 can attest to this fact, as it was very well organised, impactful and successful. Their protest was against the unconstitutional imposition of taxation in Eastern Nigeria. The success of the protest was a testimony to the fact that women cannot be abandoned to obscurity. Ever since then, women have not relented in their struggle to rise to positions of leadership as is evident in this century.

Evidently, under the Obasanjo administration, some women were opportuned to show their ingenuity and ability in various capacities. Examples of such women, among others, include Ruqqayya A. Ruffai, who was Minister of Education, Farida Waziri who headed the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Dora Akunyili, who both headed the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), and later became the Federal Minister of Information and Communication. In addition, we have Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who was the Minister of Finance, under two respective regimes and also the coordinating Minister for the Economic team in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Mention also must be made of Obiageli Ezekwesili who headed the Due Process unit under the Presidency, and became the Minister of Education before being appointed World Bank Vice President for African region. In

In addition, Justice Aloma Mukhtar was appointed Nigeria's first female chief Justice of the Federation.

All the above listed women demonstrated high leadership qualities as they made valid contributions in their respective capacities, to the development of Nigeria.

### Women's Role in Conflict Resolution

Peace building consists of cooperative work to deal with underlying economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems. Peace building is a process involving the establishment of programs, policies, and associated efforts to restore stability and effectiveness of social, political and economic institutions and structures in the wake of war or some debilitating or catastrophic events (Ghali, 1992). According to Ibeanu (2006) peace building is a process involving activities that are directly or indirectly linked to increasing development and reducing conflict, both within specific societies and in wider international communities. In other words, peace building is the responsibility of all citizens. Generally, efforts at peace building arise from the recognition of the connection between security and development. The main objective being to create and foster stability through institutionalising democratic development, human rights, social justice, gender equity and other issues which could promote development in the post conflict society. All these are directed towards consolidating peace, and they also help to minimize, if not eliminate conflict.

From these perspectives, it is clear that women in Africa generally, and in Nigeria in particular, have been involved in activities that foster peace, leading to the avoidance of conflict situations. For instance, in the South Eastern Nigeria, women make some impact through the "August" meeting activities, where enlightenment programs on how to live harmoniously and the benefits of good communal relationship are embarked upon, as different groups of women from different communities assemble.

The 'August meeting' is a term that is popularly used for the "Mothers' Summit" which is a concept that is commonly used among women of South Eastern Nigeria, whether resident in Nigeria or abroad. This meeting is usually organised in August, exclusively for married women. They assemble together in their hometowns in a meeting that spans over some days to discuss issues that affect them generally. The women first meet in their villages to articulate ideas based on community development. From the second day, they now converge at the venue of the meeting and then for days begin to deliberate on issues. This August meeting has been of immense benefit, because through it, different development programs have been successfully carried out, such as the erection of town halls, community health clinics, civic centres, secondary schools, and other peace and income generating ventures have been successfully embarked upon.

Nwankwo (2010) opines that, when the expected government help was not forthcoming after the civil war, the people, known for their resilience, determination and enterprise adopted the self-help method to rebuild their communities, and this was how the August meeting commenced, which is a vivid reflection of the fantastic role of women in community development and nation building. Rather than leave their husbands alone to handle the problem, the women mobilised themselves and rose up to the situation. Thus, the August meeting has been active in grass root mobilization of women towards the development of their communities. It also focuses on fights against cultural malpractices against women, and many other unpleasant situations which women face or are forced to endure.

Similarly in other parts of the country, women have taken active part in conflict resolution in every area of life, acting necessarily as mediators in inter-ethnic rivalry; an example being the action of Moremi during the Ife-Modakeke war. Indeed, the role of women in the struggle for freedom and peace cannot be



ignored. Undoubtedly, the woman is the builder and moulder of a nation's destiny, though delicate and soft as lily, she has a heart, stronger and bolder than that of a man, she is the supreme inspiration for man's onward march.

Apart from participation in tangible community development projects, women make very valid contributions, which, in actual sense, drive the destiny of a community. This great task begins from the family level. Women influence a large percentage of the decisions made in families and communities because they make decisions regarding health care providers, personal banking relationships, choices of school, personal family time, and much more beside these. In most communities, women as important resources in community development, are often underutilized. However, the earlier the society realizes the great benefits that can be derived from women participation, the better for that society.

Men and women interpret and execute plans differently, and this necessitates women involvement and contribution to development in any given society. Refusal to accommodate women's roles in community and national development can limit positive outcomes. From various feats by women, it is clear that women are agents of change and advocates of success anywhere they are given the opportunity to function. Communities record better success stories when they tap into women's unique abilities for building capacity and resilience.

#### The Role of Women in Education

For any nation to achieve quality education, that nation must involve the active participation of both men and women. This participation should be right from the stage of policy formulation through to the implementation level. Successful attainment of the goals of education as laid down in the National Policy on Education (NPE), requires that women are carried along right from the decision making process.

It is clear that naturally, women are the first teachers of children because they are the closest to the children right from birth through infancy and even to maturity. Consequently, even right from the pre-colonial era, Nigerian women had strong involvement in the development of education in the country. The pioneering effort of the association of Young Catholic Women (YWCA), which was founded in 1906 was of great benefit. The organisation trained women and young girls in basic home management in preparation for marriage. In addition, educational programs were also provided such as Vocational training, Home management, Day-care and Nursery Schools, Hostel for young girls and women in cities and other programs geared towards women's development. The existence of the YWCA facilitated the enlightenment activities on women issues. The establishment of the National Council for Women Societies (NCWS) was one of the beneficiaries of the underground work of the YWCA. The NCWS was established in 1958 as an umbrella organisation of various women's interest, professional groups consisting of over forty women organisations all over the country. It promotes the welfare and progress of women, with special emphasis on education and training, (Gundu, 2002). The existence and activities of this body served as a wake-up call for women to the realisation of their potentials and responsibilities to the community.

Gundu, (1999) points to the important positive effects of the various women conferences to the awareness of the importance of women's contribution to national growth and development. He opines that the United Nations' declaration on the Decade for Women in 1975 in Mexico, sparked off a series of women empowerment activities worldwide including Nigeria. Examples of such conferences include the Beijing, and the Nairobi conferences, which will be briefly discussed in this paper.

### The Role of Women in Agriculture

Agriculture is one of the important engines of growth, development, and by extension, poverty reduction. The contribution of women in the agricultural sector of the economy is very important to the development of the country. Rahman (2008) opines that full participation of women in agricultural development can only be achieved when women are perceived as subjects of development. In the food producing areas of the country, women work mostly manually, to produce food crops such as cassava, potatoes, nuts of various kinds, to mention a few. These are done extensively in various parts of Nigeria. And it is important to note that women's involvement in agriculture is both for domestic and commercial purposes. In a study by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, it was observed that women constitute sixty to eighty percent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries. The study showed that women play a significant role in the agricultural labour force. (UNECA, 1972) Nigeria as one of the developing countries is not left out in this. The contribution of women in agricultural and food production is significant, however they are over represented in unpaid, seasonal and part-time work, and the available evidence suggests that women are often paid less than men, for the same work. (SOFA Team, 2011).

Various successive governments in Nigeria have made several efforts at community development in the country, and this has led to the establishment of various agricultural development programs. Examples of such programs include: Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Green Revolution (GR), Operation Feed to Land (OFL), and the Establishment of River Basin Development Authorities, (RBDA).

All these were efforts made by governments during their respective tenures to tackle the need for nation building and development via agriculture. Some projects that were handled under these programs were done with the express support of

women. They participated in the execution of these projects such as the construction of community schools, hospitals, roads, market stall, etc. This is in consonance with the opinion of Okoli and Onah (2002), that community development involves a lot of multi-sectoral activities such as the improvement in Agriculture and the promotion of rural industrial activities.

#### The Beijing Conference

The United Nations World Conference for women and non-governmental organisations (NGO) was a forum that took place in Beijing, September 1995. The conference had as its theme “Equality, Development and Peace” and had the objective to create an impetus in the society for women to move forward, and to be well equipped to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in several areas. The conference was also geared towards addressing the pertinent question of how women can be empowered to take part more efficiently in decision-making.

Giddens (2009), quoting one of the attendees at the conference, highlights that “Beijing was an eye-opening, humbling, and transformative experience”. US women were startled by the sophisticated analysis and well-organised and powerful voices of women from other parts of the world. And the testimony is that conference participants left Beijing with a sense of global solidarity, pride, and affirmation.

#### The Nairobi Conference

The conference that gave birth to the blueprint tagged the ‘Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (NFLS) was organised by the United Nations (UN) in 1985, with the venue at Nairobi, Kenya. It was the third UN women’s conference aimed at empowering women in every sphere of life. Thus, a blueprint was produced to guide governments and policy makers in empowering women. It was aimed, among others, to focus on the critical issue of commitment to the rights of women.

Consequently, upon the success of this conference, the rights of women gained more attention, and this led to more support for the resolutions of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), (Abu, 2007). The success of the Nairobi conference led to the establishment of the National Commission for Women, in Nigeria in 1989. The establishment of the commission is a great achievement given that it is primarily concerned with issues affecting women. Furthermore, the effects of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of women, and the World Decade for Women gave rise to the Better Life Programme for Rural Women, which was launched in 1987. This program was impactful in that it created awareness among Nigerian women. All these conferences and conventions contributed in making nations all over the world, agencies and women's organisations to realise the need for issues concerning women to be brought to the fore-front..

The United Nations Fund for Women, (UNIFEM) was also established with the mandate, among others, of assisting women at the grassroots. In addition, it offers support directly to projects and efforts of women in developing countries. No doubt, this has positive effects on the quality of life.

### Challenges

From the pre-colonial era, through the colonial period, and all through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it can be seen that women have been making progress in their fight for women empowerment generally. However, there are a lot of challenges women still have to grapple with in their effort to make tangible contributions to community and national development. These factors are evident in every area of endeavours and operation by women, including, cultural, socio-economic, psychological, educational and political factors. Ohizzy (2016), shares the same opinion as she opines that factors like age, sex (gender), financial status,

level of education, political and economic experience, psychology, geo-political zoning, primordial factors (religion, ethnicity), and nature of government, affect political participation of women.

Generally, taking a comparison of Africa as a continent, statistics has it that in Africa, the political participation of women in Nigeria is very low. In fact, Nigeria is far at the bottom, at 178, only ahead of Comoros which ranks no 182. (Ohizzy, 2016).

This is a real challenge being faced by women in Nigeria inspite of the protocol and laid down principles of the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa. Article 9, of the Maputo Protocol, which Nigeria has also ratified along with other countries, states that nations should “take specific positive action to promote participative governance and the equal participation of women in the political life of their countries through affirmative action, enabling national legislation..” (Wikipedia,2016). Nevertheless, it is disheartening to see Nigeria lagging behind in this area. Indeed, apart from political participation and decision making, women face a lot of challenges in other areas. Nigerian women and girls suffer systematic disadvantage and discrimination, especially women in the rural areas. According to available statistics, sixty to seventy-nine percent of the rural work forces are women, but men are five times more likely to own land. Also, women with dependants pay more tax than men. Furthermore, women constitute a larger percentage of the illiterate group, a major reason being that in most families, parents prefer to send their sons to school instead of their daughters whom they feel will eventually get married, and incorporated into another family. This forms part of the foundation of the challenges faced by women in Nigeria.

### Conclusion

The forgoing discussions on the different contributions of women to community and national development, attest to the fact that

if a community development plan is to be successful, it must take into cognisance the fact that women are valuable assets, and so should not be ignored. In the words of Mofya (2000), “women have amazing strength... The heart of a woman is what makes the world spin. Women do more than just give birth, they bring joy and hope. Women have a lot to say and a lot to give.” It goes without gainsaying, therefore, that for any appreciable development to take place, women should be recognised as key players. This means that Nigeria as a nation must empower, upskill and invest in the girl-child education for a better society.

#### Recommendations

- \* Generally, gender disparities hinder societal growth and productivity, therefore, conscious efforts should be made to diffuse gender norms through gender balanced decision-making.

Emphasis should be directed more on the value of the individual and the importance of capturing individual experience.

- \* Government should pay attention to the implementation of the National Gender Policy of giving women 35% representation in appointive positions.
- \* Women can use constructive legal and constitutional reform to facilitate women’s rights to participate in the decision-making process, especially under a government that has completely ignored the protocol and laid down principles of the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa.
- \* Women should fight for the application of quota system to facilitate political empowerment of women, following the example of countries with higher women participation, such as Rwanda, Seychelles, Senegal, and South Africa. (Ohizzy, 2016)

Socialisation of boys and girls should be balanced in such a way that it will discourage gender stereotypes.

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