

# **The English Language and Rural Women Participation in Governance: Implication for Attainment of the Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria**

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## **Abstract:**

*There have been a lot of speculations that the English language is elitist; that rural dwellers do not participate actively in government, and that women in the rural areas do not have equal opportunity in governance with men. Different governments- nationally and internationally- have mapped out some programmes and strategies towards eliminating the divide that exists between men and women participation in governance and national development. These programs*

*of which MDG is one are all in recognition of the backwardness of females in self and societal development and the fact that the female gender seems to have resigned their fate to living in the shadows of men in matters that is the prerogative of both men and women. The fact that these programmes appears not to be achieving their expected goals at the intended speed has compelled the writers to look into the issues that could be a clog in the wheel of progress of the nation in achieving the MDG. After critical examination of the role of the English language in Nigeria as the lingua franca, the writers discovered that linguistic problems are the predominant of the problems affecting governance and development in Nigeria. This paper therefore, examines these linguistic matters and seeks to provide answers to the related questions: What constitutes good governance? How has the government been able to communicate with people in the rural areas? How have the people in the rural areas been able to express themselves actively in governance through the English language? What are the linguistic factors militating against the effective participation of rural women in governance? The authors also wish to provide recommendations to the possible solution to English language barriers among women participation in government in the rural areas.*

### **Introduction:**

Governance has been seen as an activity that involves definition of expectations, control, direction, regulation, verification, management and leadership of the public affairs of a country, society or organization. Igwe (2008:31) defines governance as –a social contract not just between the government and the governed but more especially between the people themselves for an effective individual and collective self-empowerment for the good of all.||. Beal (1996:4) perceives governance as a bottom-up decision making involving all people at every level of government and non government organizations. From these definitions it can be inferred that governance is a communal affair in which every member of the human population is a stakeholder. An effective government takes care of the socio-economic needs of its people. It provides good health services, education, food, social amenities such as good roads for proper connectivity, industries to take care of its work force, and opportunities for harnessing the natural resources within its land for the benefit of its citizens. It maintains peace and order and safeguards the lives and property of its people. It also maintains diplomatic relationship with other people from other

nations and races. Good governance involves legitimacy, competence, respect of law, protection of human rights and accountability. Good governance is expected to device several means of eradicating hunger and poverty, illiteracy, diseases, unemployment, fear, racism, nepotism, tribalism, corruption, conflicts and gender inequality and institute their antonyms in its society for the development of its people. Unfortunately, most governments, particularly of the developing nations of the world are far from attaining these expectations of good governance and thus are at different levels of national development. For instance vanguard newspaper of January 1, 2000, listed Nigeria as the 12<sup>th</sup> poorest country in the world with the position of 146th out of 174 in the Human Development Index. It was also quoted to have 112 per 1,000 (live births) infant mortality while 50% of the population has access to clean water and 40% has access to [inconsistent] electricity. It states that 60% of rural dwellers and close to 48% of urban dwellers live in poverty. The fact that many African countries are still floundering in providing its citizens with better life after long sufferings of pre and post colonialism perhaps up to millennium year, may have informed the world leaders to come together at the United Nations Headquarters in New York in September 2000 to adopt the United Nations Millennium Declaration, committing their nations to a new global partnership captured in 8 goals, and called the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which all the developing nations, including Nigeria, must strive to attain by the year 2015. These goals are:

- a. 50% reduction in poverty and hunger
- b. universal primary education,
- c. promotion of gender equity and women empowerment
- d. reduction of child mortality by two-thirds,
- e. promotion of maternal health and family life by three-quarters,
- f. reversal of the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other disease
- g. Promotion of global environmental sustainability
- h. Development of partnership with global community.

It is evident that most of these goals concern women either directly or indirectly. In other words, women are expected to play major roles in good governance and thus sustainable development of any nation. Unfortunately, at each of the levels of governance in Nigeria - federal, the state and the local government- there is a marginal gender inequity in favour of males. This is in spite of the fact that women, particularly the rural ones, are the backbone of the national

economy (Momsen, 1993). Even though many authorities attempted to have explored the reasons for the low participation of rural women in governance in Africa with a view to redressing the situation, there appears to be no visible change in the level of their participation in governance. Of the several factors examined none, known to these writers, has tried to find out the role the English language, as the official means of communication in Nigeria, plays in the exclusion of the rural female gender from active participation in governance in Nigeria. This underscores the justification of this paper to find out the role of the English language in the exclusion of women from participating in governance. Specifically, this paper focuses on:

1. The roles of rural Women in national development;
2. Programmes for Rural Women Participation in Governance
3. Exclusion of Rural Women in Governance
4. English language and the role of rural women in Governance

### **The Roles of Rural Women in National Development:**

In Nigeria, women's population is more than half of that of men and a greater number of the population is concentrated in the rural areas. This situation is similar in most developing nations of the world (Cartledge, 1995). This implies that rural women are expected to play major roles in national development. This is buttressed by the focus on women in almost all the 8 goals of the MDG. Specifically, promotion of gender equity and women empowerment, reduction of child mortality by two-thirds, promotion of maternal health and family life by three-quarters, reversal of the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other disease which are numbers 3, 4, 5, and 6 goals respectively refer directly to women. Even though the foci of numbers 1,2,7 and 8 of the MDG which respectively are 50% reduction in poverty and hunger, universal primary education, promotion of global environmental sustainability, and development of partnership with global community concern the male gender, women are known to be more involved.

The implication of the foregoing is that the roles of rural women in national development are monumental. National development starts from the family (MDG 1). Women are child bearers and child trainers (MDG 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6). Nature has made it that the child's first contact is with the mother. From infancy, the mother nurtures the child and inculcates the right values in him/her. She exposes the child to the cultural ways of life of the society and helps him/her to acquire the right skills necessary for adjustment in the society. In other words,

women play the most active role in the primary socialization of the human society without which the secondary and even the tertiary socializations are meaningless. Thus Kongolo and Bamgose, (2002) observed that women have the cardinal roles of nurturing, bringing up, socializing and educating children. These enviable roles of women may have necessitated Adaralegbe, (1976) to say, –If you educate a man, you are educating an individual; but educate a woman and you are educating a family, a nation.||

In addition to women's role as character molders of the human society, they are also known to be more actively involved in agricultural civil service work, work with voluntary agencies and also trade. In fact, according to the Hunger Project (1999) rural women produce almost 80% of the food consumed in most of Africa's rural areas. Many engage in trade intensively and extensively. Rural women in the villages act as midwives, nurses, and doctors. They engage in farm stock trades and also try to save money through meetings and thrifts. They resolve disputes among their kindred and protect the downtrodden by standing by the right side of judgments.

It is thus an indisputable fact that the role of women, particularly the rural ones in national development is indispensable and as such adequate provisions to encourage and promote rural women play these roles in governance must be provided in any country's policy and programmes if such nation is to attain sustainable national development.

### **Programmes for Rural Women Participation in Governance:**

Perhaps, in recognition of the crucial role of rural African women in governance and development, the governments have made attempts to include them in its programmes. Some of the programmes are:

- i. The 2000 United Nations development Fund for Women,
- ii. The 1995 Beijing declaration, and
- iii. The 1995 Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women held in Kenya (UNIFEM, In Kongolo and Bamgose, 2002).

These were aimed at promoting women's economic independence by each member state. It has been noted however that although these movements have recorded achievements in the creation of awareness of the problems facing women, not much in terms of development priorities for rural women has been realized (UNIFEM, 2000).

In an attempt to include rural women in governance in Nigeria and better their lives, Mrs Miriam Babangida, the wife of the ex-president of Nigeria, in 1987, introduced the programme she named BETTER LIFE FOR RURAL WOMEN (Babangida, 1991). The objectives of the programme are:

- To stimulate women and motivate women in rural areas towards achieving a better and higher standard of living as well as to sensitize the general populace to the plight of rural women.
- To educate women on simple hygiene, family planning, the importance of child care and increase literacy.
- To mobilize women for concrete activities towards achieving specific objectives including seeking leadership roles in all spheres of national life.
- To bring women together and closer for a better understanding and resolution of their problems through collective action.
- To raise the social consciousness of women about their rights as well as, social, political and economic responsibilities.
- To encourage recreation.

The impact of the programme was the creation of awareness of the extent of neglect and marginalization of rural women. Fai (1991), however, observed that the typical rural women had not actually been participating in the programme which had been apparently hijacked by few feminine elites. This, perhaps, informed the subsequent conclusion by Monk and Mkomsen opinion (1994) that the programme, could not address the ways in which policies and programmes have increased women's workloads while reducing their status.

In 1993 Mrs. Miriam Abacha, towing the line of her predecessor also introduced a programme which was intended to help rural women participate in governance for the development of the nation. This programme she called FAMILY SUPPORT (Abacha, 1993). The programme's philosophy was hinged on the belief that the family is the basic root of the society and that the society can be developed better by, first developing the family. However, Strumgurist (1988) expressed skepticism on most of the programmes designed to alleviate the status of rural women for in his view, –such programmes perpetuate stereotypes of women providing a combination of skill on reproduction, production and emancipation that do not alleviate the hardships faced by rural women||.

It is therefore evident from these that most of the provisions for encouragement of rural women participation in governance and national development have not been able to achieve the desired outcome. This therefore suggests that there are other issues to be considered in the bid to encourage and motivate participation of rural women in governance besides the enactment of policies and formulation of women programmes.

### **Exclusion of Rural Women in Governance:**

The contributions of rural women in governance in Africa and specifically in Nigeria have been quite minimal. This situation is not far from the fact that there is less attention paid to the rural area than the urban area. Kongolo and Bamgose (2002) in their study on participation of rural women in development reported:

Most women in rural areas are illiterates. They lack initiatives, innovations and self-reliance attitudes. Women in rural areas are isolated, confined and marginalized through the non-interactive government policies on the rural areas. These symptoms reflect a lack of structured development strategy to create needed opportunities in these areas. This, according to Hunger Project (2000), is due to the overwhelming evidence of development policies and projects formulated that bypass the involvement of rural women in most African countries.

In Nigerian, little attention is paid to the contributions of women to national development. A great number of them are illiterates. They cannot understand or speak the English language. They can neither read nor write in English which is the language of governance. For this reason, the English language excludes them from participating actively in the affairs of national development and governance. They are alienated from making or interpreting government policies they cannot read nor understand the English.. The benefits of basic education, which according to F.M.E. (2000), –is equipping the individual to live a meaningful and fulfilling lives contribute to the development of the society, derive maximum social, economic and cultural benefits from the society and discharge their civil obligation competently|| are lost on them. This problem is not far removed from the language stipulations of the National Language Policy on Education in Nigeria.

The national language policy in Nigeria promotes the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at the early stage of primary schooling and English at the later primary, secondary and tertiary

institutions. In addition to this, it also promotes multilingualism in Nigeria educational system.

This policy arises from the problem posed by the diverse linguistic nature of the Nigerian society. Nigeria has over 450 languages that are mutually unintelligible (Adegbija 2004). This multilingual nature of Nigeria necessitated the adoption of English language, a legacy left to them by the British colonial masters, as the official language of the country. Thus all documentation, trade, media, education, and governmental businesses are carried out in the English language. Specifically, the 1979 and 1989 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Section 51 ) states that the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba where adequate arrangement have been made thereof. It went further to say that at the State level, the business of a House of Assembly shall be conducted in English but the House may, in addition to English, conduct the business of the House in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the case may be (Section 91 ). By this declaration the Federal Government has automatically made the act of governance elitist, to such a degree that those who have no command of the English language cannot participate in discussions on matters that affect their lives. This is because we are yet to see a situation where the National Assembly or a House of Assembly has resolved their linguistic differences well enough to conduct the business of the nation or the states in any of the indigenous languages. The status of the English language in the lives of Nigerians then, makes it a must-learn, a must-write and a must speak among the citizens.

Some writers have noted the exclusionary role of the English language in Nigeria. Agbede (1998) notes that the English language is being used by the minority ruling class to exclude the majority of Nigerians from participating in the socio-economic and political dispensation of the nation. It should be worthy to note that these minority ruling class are basically made up of men with one or two elitist women dotting the scene. In recognition of this, Ezejiakor (2007:7) concludes that although Nigeria has English as its official language, the English language is not playing its role effectively in increasing the Nigerian rural women's awareness on government set objectives.

### **English Language and the Role of Rural Women in Governance:**

The English language is a legacy left behind by the British colonial masters who ruled Nigeria from 1860 to 1960. It was the



means of communication between the colonial masters and the local people. It was therefore, a language of exclusion since the locals could understand neither their rulers nor their representatives. The drama –Ichoku|| which aired in the National Television Authority captures vividly, the kaleidoscope of events that transpired between the colonial administrators and the indigenous people as a result of language and information barrier.

When schools were established, by the missionaries, English became the language of instruction. From thenceforth, English began to develop and assume a colossal importance in Nigeria, not only as a medium of instruction in schools but as a language of unification among the multiple ethnic languages in Nigeria. The many factors that contribute to the learning and acquisition of the English language such as qualified English language teachers, instructional materials, and electricity to power electrically controlled equipment for language learning like televisions, radio, language laboratories, multi-media, projectors, and computers, availability of the spoken mediums and availability of printed materials in English in the form of books, newspapers, magazines and gazettes are absent in the rural areas and therefore, make it impossible for the women to acquire the language.

The language of communication is of paramount importance in human interactions. According to Nwosu (1992:208), no society exists without adequate communication. It is pivotal in social interaction. For communication in any relationship to be effective there has to be mutual intelligibility. It follows from this that Governance, which involves interactions among human beings (i.e. between the government and the governed) and language need each other for mutual regeneration. Language as a medium of communication is of primary importance in governance. Information dispensation and information sharing have major roles to play in governance.. Political processes involve elections and debates between and among candidates. The masses are able to judge and make decisions by listening critically to candidates' arguments and the ways they react to arguments and criticisms (Kooiman, 2002). Listening skills as attributes of language help citizens to grasp and evaluate opposing points of view on issues such as abortion, environmental policies, and health-care reform. To be a good community member, one needs skills in expressing one's point of view and responding to those of others. In a pluralistic society such as ours, people who differ from each other interact, and there is the need for each group to understand and work with each other. Both civic and social life depends on one's ability to listen thoughtfully to a range

of perspectives and to communicate in a variety of ways (Kongolo and Bangose, 2002). Communication between two or more people entails a mutual interpretation of the symbols of coding and an ability to unravel the codes and infer meanings out of them. Communication is only functional when the speaker and the hearer can listen, interpret and understand one another effectively. It can therefore, be seen that language and governance are interwoven and intertwined for one cannot exist without the other.

The Nigerian government and the rural women cannot communicate effectively with each other because of the latter's deficiency in English Language which is the language of the former. Therefore, there is generally a very high positive correlation between the levels of a country's official language acquired by the governed and the extent of the role of the latter in governance. In other words, the higher the level of official language acquired by the governed, the higher their role in governance and vice versa. Thus, as the evidences abound that Nigerian rural women acquire very low level of the English Language which is the nations official language, their level of involvement in governance is correspondingly low.

### **Conclusion:**

Several programmes and policies have been evolved which were aimed at empowering the female gender, particularly the rural women, who constitute more than 50% of the entire population to participate actively in governance and sustainable development of nations. The most current and comprehensive of is the United Nations MDG goal. Almost all of these earlier programmes could not achieve the desired targets in Nigeria because the critical roles of English Language among rural women in governance appear to have been ignored in the designing and implementation of these programmes and policies.

The current MDG goals are laudable as they are targeted at empowering the women to play the expected roles in governance and sustainable national development. However, for it to achieve the desired goals, workable strategies must first be evolved at facilitating the rural women's free access to opportunities for acquiring Basic English Language Proficiency.

### **Recommendation:**

The recommendations for closing the evident gender gap against rural women towards empowering them to play active role in

governance is first to provide them with free access to basic education through which they would acquire basic literacy skills through English Language which is the official means of communication needed for active participation in governance in Nigeria.. This is the target of the number 2 goal of the MDG (attainment 50% of universal primary education) of which the government of Nigeria is pursuing via the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme. For meaningful implementation of the UBE towards empowering the rural women, the following strategies should be adopted to encourage girl child enrolment in schools and promote their achievement in schools:

- i. massive sensitization through various types of media on the crucial need of girl-child education
- ii. provision of all the relevant school facilities in the rural area which should be comparable to those schools in the urban area
- iii. discouraging early marriage of teenage girls through creation of awareness on the associated dangers
- iv. institutionalizing special scholarships for girls education

For the adult rural women, non-formal adult literacy centers should be established in each community which should not only be made free to the women but should involve added monetary incentives for the students so as to promote enrollment and participation in the programme.

The main factors that reduce the general potentials of rural women towards active participation in governance is poverty, occasioned by the fact that they shoulder the bulk of the family responsibilities and socio-cultural beliefs that the woman's role is in the kitchen. While poverty reduction is the target of the goal 1 of the MDG, the second class position accorded women by cultural beliefs is addressed in number 3 of the MDG (promotion of gender equity and women empowerment). Even though the Nigerian government, in principle has an agency aimed at poverty reduction, the activities of this agency are not directed at the actual-poor i.e. the rural women rather focus is on the elites who have access and connections to government. For Poverty Alleviation programmes to achieve the desired intention, the attention of the proponents should be redirected to the actual rural women who constitute the actual poor. One suggestion towards actualizing this is to entrust the responsibility programme to the Ministry of women affairs that should have a valid mechanism of identifying the actual poor in each of the communities.

The problem of socio-cultural beliefs against women that appear to have created a sense of weaker sex in them thereby, discouraging them from playing certain governance-related roles should be addressed through creating awareness of the benefits of rural women participation governance. This can be done through. Radio and television programmes, use of jingles, drama, films, cinemas, churches, workshops, seminars, symposiums, etc. Through these means, women personalities in Nigeria such as Okonjo Iwella, Oby Ezekwesili, Prof Alele Williams etc and women from other countries like Mrs Indira Ghandi of India and Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the present President of Liberia, should be cited as examples to show them that some women have even higher potentials than most men.

In other to reduce the workload of women so as to provide them time and opportunities to play active role in governance, special and workable health and maternal care, should be provided to them as contained in MDG goals 4 and 6. Similarly, as the major producers of staple foods, gender appropriate agro-technologies should be made accessible to them at affordable prices. Government should use extension agents to educate them on new and easier methods of agricultural practices like the use of fertilizers and its application for greater yield.

Elaborate and extensive awareness should be created among the rural women folk of their potentials and the need to harness them for good governance and realization of the Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria for as the saying goes, –What a man can do, a woman can even do better.||

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