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Mitigating the Environmental Impact of Poverty among Female Gender in Nigeria through Advocacy

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Abstract:

Poverty among female gender is becoming a problem in many developing countries of the world generally and Nigeria in particular. This paper has discussed the causative factors inhibiting female gender empowerment in Nigeria. The review of literature has shown that poverty persists among Nigerian female gender because they comparatively have no easy access to credit facilities, education, certain professional jobs and political position of influence. Hence most of them engaged in over-exploiting the natural resources of the environment as a curbing strategy which in turn have ecological effects. This sheer neglect of the female gender, the paper has noted, is leading to destruction of the environment. To this end, the paper has recommended the need for advocacy- action that would usher in equality to productive resources in order to improve their welfare and save the environment in the interest of the overall development of Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a country located in Western Africa, on the Gulf of Guinea. It is found between latitudes 4⁰N and 14⁰N of the Equator; and between longitudes 3⁰N and 15⁰E of Greenwich Meridian (Atlas of Nigeria 2011:18). The country has a variety of geomorphological features which extends for 1,100km from the humid Atlantic Coastline of West Africa to the semi- arid southern edge of the Sahara. The West-east extent is similarly marked with the country's borders, stretching from the Republic of Benin, 1,400km northwards to lake Chad and the frontiers with the Northern Cameroun Republic (Barry and Imo 2003:3).

The country covers an area of about 923,768km²: blessed with wetlands, valuable forests, grassland, vast arable land, plenty of livestock, abundant sunshine, enormous quantity of water with plenty aquatic animals and waterfalls for hydro-power generation. It is highly endowed with human resources of over 140 million, made up of 50.78% male and 49.22% female-based on 2006 population census figure (Atlas of Nigeria, 2011:31).

Despite the enormous wealth which the country possesses, it is paradoxical that its citizens are sliding progressively into poverty. In 2014, the United Nations Development programme, UNDP ranked Nigeria 152 out of 187 countries like Algeria, Botswana, Egypt, South Africa and Ghana coming ahead of the country often touted as the giant of Africa (Desert Herald, 2016:12).

While majority of Nigerians are generally poor, studies show significant gender disparities (James and Bwala, 2004: 83). Poverty among women is increasing alongside growing population and are adversely affected than men by some existing socio-economic circumstances of the country such as widowhood rites and inheritance practices which deprive them of their rights. Nigerian women are known to be active players in the production of food and industrial materials, in addition to their primary roles of socialization and being custodians of family values and tradition. Unfortunately, they are poor not because they are lazy but because they do not have easy access to productive resources like land title, education, capital and political influence which their male counterparts have.

In general, they are sometimes treated as second-class citizens by their male counterpart. Ojo (2002:127), averred that there are more men than women as heads of institutions, captains of industries, chief executives, parliamentarians, heads of religious organizations, society leaders and decision- makers which would have improved their welfare like their male counterpart. The prejudice against women in the socio-political and economic sectors is the major reason for their continued sliding into poverty net in this country. In order to curb with life many of the women have developed survival strategies by exploiting environmental resources mercilessly without recourse to the impact such activities may have on the environment.

This paper is set to examine the poverty situation among Nigerian female gender, causal factors inhibiting their progress of overcoming poverty, their survival strategies and the impact such actions have on the environment with a view to mobilizing the authorities, institutions, non-governmental organizations, professional bodies and individuals to practically advocate for the female gender to be granted equal opportunities to improve their welfare, overcome poverty and save the environment from merciless destruction.

2. Clarification of Concepts

The concepts requiring classification here are three namely; poverty, advocacy and female gender.

2.1. Poverty

There is no commonly acceptable definition of the term 'poverty'. It is difficult and cloudy because it cannot be defined precisely. Whilst an economist would look at it in general terms, a psychologist and Sociologist view it from the comparative perspective. They believe that poverty is a relative concept where one compares and contrasts the standard of living of the people particularly that of the rich with that of other segments of the society with a view to identifying the real poor.

Whatever people view it, poverty as used here refers to lack of material resources of a certain duration and to such an extent that participation in normal activities and possession of amenities and living condition becomes limited. Poverty touches on such factors as life expectancy, literacy level, health, nutrition, school enrolment rates for children, housing, level of socio-cultural emancipation and degree of political participation (of women).

2.2. Advocacy

The word "advocacy" comes from the word 'advocate' which refers to a person who supports or speaks in favour of somebody (woman) or of a public plan or action. So advocacy denotes the giving of public support to an idea, a course of action or a belief (Oxford Learner's Dictionary 2005:23).

In this paper, we consider advocacy as helping female gender through speaking, writing and actions to remove those barriers, inhibiting their access to productive resources in order to improve their welfare and overcome poverty in their lives in the interest of the overall development of Nigerian society.

2.3. Female Gender

This refers to socially and culturally accepted term for married and unmarried ladies. The term encompasses their roles, relationships, personal traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence which the society ascribes to them.

3. Theoretical Framework

Gender discrimination in Nigeria can best be understood within the concept of social stratification, namely functionalist view, the conflict approach and interactionist approach as identified by Olujobi (2001:127).

The functionalist theorists maintain that gender differentiation has contributed to the overall social stability as women take the expressive, emotionally supportive role and men the instrumental, practical role, with two complementing each other (Olujobi 2001:127). By instrumentality, it means men focus on more distant goals and a concern for the external relationship between one's family and other social institutions while expressiveness of women refers to the concern for maintenance of harmony and the internal emotional affairs of the family.

In functionalist perspective, man and woman form a home wherein the woman becomes anchored in the family as a wife, mother and a household manager whereas the man is anchored in the occupational world outside the home for the interests of the family. This perspective finds application in Northern Nigeria where Islamic and cultural injunctions require a woman to stay put at home without her husband allowing her to do public work while he goes out to bring foodstuffs home. This gendered-role makes the woman unproductive and whenever the breadwinner dies the whole family will plunge deeply into poverty. This 'religion-cultural' practice is one of the strong factors for the high poverty incidence in the Northeast and Northwest of the country.

Conflict approach on the other hand, contends that the relationship between males and females has been one of unequal power, with men in a dominant position over women. The theorists insist that males dominate females because of their superior power and control over key productive resources. As a result, men gain greater economic, political, educational and social power while the women are overburdened with providing the needs of the families hence shut off from decision-making arenas.

Modern conflict theorists have however, argued that men enjoy superior status only if women are inferior and the existing arrangement of gender-role patterns allow them to maintain their political, social and economic privileges (Olujobi, 2001:128). They are of the opinion that the main source of gender discrimination is due to economic inequality. This means that if women should have education, access to participate actively in decision-making on issues that concern them: from home to community to state and to the national levels, they can readily overcome poverty and even help to save the environment.

The foregone concepts of stratification, have helped to establish the fact that men and women differ in terms of biological composition however, this differentiation is nothing but a societal construe, intentionally formulated to exclude the women folk from getting their fair share of the productive resources that have high prospective of helping them improve their welfare to overcome poverty in their lives. These social, political and economic deprivations form the basis for their dependence on the environment to eke out a living. Hence the concept of environmental determinism can find application here.

Environmental Determinism emphasizes the influence of environment on economic life and social progress of mankind. The theory purports to explain the complexities and variations in human society, in terms of non-human constant (Barry and Imo 2003:86). Environmental Determinism as an environmental thought was championed by proponents like Hippocrates, Aristotle, Strabo, Bodin, Hackel, among others. A good example of Environmental Determinism can be cited in circumstances where poverty looming high in Nigeria causes food shortages, leading to resource overuse with consequential soil erosion, nutrient depletion, contamination of water supplies and increase deforestation for fuel and farming without reforestation.

4. Forms and Factors Inhibiting Female Empowerment

It has been observed worldwide that communities create norms, values, expectation and gender- specific responsibilities that in most cases favour the male gender at the expense of the female counterpart. Empirical studies have revealed that there is structural discrimination and differential treatment on the basis of sex which is often rationalized by culture, institutional and administrative rules (Amzat and Dantake, 2012:72). Such unequal treatment is no doubt, the chief cause of poverty among the female gender who are deprived access to productive resources that have high prospects of liberating them from the poverty net. To further substantiate the assertion, let us examine the startling gender discrimination throughout a woman's life, culled and presented by Amzat and Dantake (2012:73).

- Prenatal Stage: Sex selection; battering during pregnancy; coerced pregnancy (rape during war).
- Infancy Stage: Infanticide; emotional and physical abuse; differential access to food, and medical care.
- Childhood Stage: Genital cutting; incest and sexual abuse; differential access to food, medical care and education; child prostitution.
- Adolescence stage: Dating and courtship violence; economically coerced sex; sexual abuse in work place; rape; sexual harassment; forced prostitution.
- Reproductive Stage: Abuse of women by intimate partners; marital rape; abuse of women with disabilities; sexual abuse in work place; sexual harassment; dowry abuse and murders; partner homicide; psychological abuse.
- Old Age: Abuse of widows; and elder abuse which affects mostly women.

Alele-Williams (1999:204) averred that many of the abuses women suffer begins at birth where families show something akin to grief at birth of a girl-child and continue with series of unfeeling treatment of widows. Women are subjected to violence all over the world which take the form of deprivation, discrimination, rape, sexual assault, sex-selective abortion, trafficking, sexual harassment in the work place and educational institutions, deprivation of education or even work opportunities. The physical, psychological harm and suffering to women especially threats of coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty in public or in private life are all forms of violence which are common in Nigerian society resulting in high incidence of poverty among the female gender compared to their male counterpart. It is pertinent at this juncture to examine the socio-economic arenas of female gender deprivation in Nigeria in order to substantiate the claim of high incidence of poverty among them, as studies have revealed.

4.1. Health Status

Women in general are disadvantaged in accessing health services which have always resulted in high sickness and mortality. Health status differs significantly where a smaller proportion of women especially in Northern Nigeria receive prenatal care and assistance. Hence maternal mortality for Nigerian Women, some few years ago stood at 704 per 100,000. This is further supported by the 2006 population census where the percentage of the female was 47.22% while that of their male counterpart was higher, being 50.78%.

4.2. Education

Nigerian women are at disadvantage in accessing education services. This is true of Northern Nigeria where social indicators show that fewer girls attend school than boys (James and Bwala, 2004:83). The greatest constraint to female gender empowerment is low educational attainment. Many parents prefer to send boys to attend formal education as they are expected to become the family breadwinners. Women who are denied such opportunities usually are married out at tender age as low as 10 years old and many of them are even denied vocational skills. Hence, they are unproductive; poverty looms high among them in the long run.

Jat and Bot (2002:116) averred that the girl-child with little or no formal education usually finds herself into household sector or the informal sector to do unqualified work outside the home, hence the vicious cycle of marginalization and poverty is reinforced.

Sen (cited in Amzat and Dantake, 2012:76) observed that gender bias in higher education and professional training in fields like military, engineering, astrology, geology and mining among others were predominantly male-dominated. If educating a female gender actually means educating a nation, then the female gender should be given the opportunity to also have worthwhile education to serve as productive resource for overcoming poverty in their lives. The younger women should enroll and remain in school till completion while the older, not so educated one should be given some kind of non-formal education in order to be more beneficial to themselves and the entire Nigerian society.

4.3. Professional Employment

Professional inequality between the two gender is also prevalent in Nigeria where one can see more men than female as heads of institutions, captains of industries, chief executives, parliamentarians, religious and societal leaders. Figures compiled by the National Manpower Board in some selected professions in Nigeria show low women representation as follows: Architects 2.4%; Quantity Surveyors, 3.5%; Accountants 15.4%; Bankers 10.7%; Lawyers/Jurists, 25.4%; Lecturers 11.8%; Media Practitioners 18.3%; Obstetricians and Gynecologists 8.4% and Pediatricians 33.3% (Ojo, 2002:127).

In terms of employment and promotion in work and occupation, female gender often faces greater handicap than male; and the implication is that poverty among the female gender must always loom high. Alele-Williams (1999:204) lamented that women are marginalized in the affairs of the nation: from home to community to state and to the national where in most cases they are last-hired and first-fired. Her assertion is not far from the truth, though the Affirmative Action made many countries to earmark certain quota of political representation for women in political leadership but the progress is still insignificant. This explains why poverty among Nigerian women is very high compared to their male counterpart.

The incidence of poverty has certainly worsened since 1992, and by 1995, the country's Gender Employment Measure was only 0.193 – indicating that much investment in basic human capabilities and employment for participation of female gender is highly required (Araba, 1999:220).

4.4. Accessing Credit Facilities from Bank

Nigerian female gender finds it difficult to access bank loan to expand their petty businesses that may improve their welfare. The difficulty arises because most of them do not have collateral nor property right to secure bank loan. In extreme cases, women are not allowed to own or sell landed property. As a curbing strategy they sometimes have to start their petty business with small capital at their disposal which often may not flourish (Jat and Bot, 2002:114). This means that economic discrimination against female gender consists also of closing other avenues to their empowerment such as accessing bank loan.

To further buttress this form of marginalization against female gender which financial institutions perpetuate, Jat and Bot (2002:115) culled and presented a comparative analysis of Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme Fund disbursed by Gender (in percentage) for 13 consecutive years from 1979 – 1991 where the result shows that while 96.08% of male gender benefited, only 3.92% of the female counterpart had access to the loan facilities.

Alele-Williams (1999:204) was right when she decried that Nigerian women are harnessed to Petty economic entrepreneurship and deprived of accessing skills and tools with which to access industrial activity or to build the funds to enter into the capital market. This unfortunate development need to be reversed and it cannot happen until we join the crusade of the advocates.

4.5. Work-load

The Nigerian society in spite of Affirmative Action Agenda for female gender, has continued to demonstrate prejudice against them in the socio-political and economic sectors. They are rationalized out of the higher echelons of the nation's workforce and heavily overused at the lowest echelons. Jat and Bot (2002:107) averred that even the few women working in Nigeria usually end up working twice as many hours as men without adequate compensation for those hours of work and even domestic chores are not acknowledge as real. The patriarchal ideology where a woman's place is in no other place but the kitchen is seriously working against the progress and development of the nation.

Unequal gender relations can also be observed at the household level. Within the household, women are usually in the subordinate position in terms of decision-making and allocation of household resources. They are overburdened with preparing food for their respective families and as a result they are completely disregarded in making decisions which effect their persons and their lives.

4.6. Information

The low level of women's employment in the formal sector, coupled with their lack of education and their confinement to the limited arenas of home, farm and markets restrict their contacts with the world beyond the compounds. Thus, they have limited access to information about outer alternative work and income- generating opportunities (IGO) that may be existing beyond those with which they come into contact on a day-to-day basis. This means information is power because lack of it denies one the opportunity to build up social networks and contacts with the world of works (WOW) which could have improved one's welfare.

5. Impact of Survival Strategies of the Poor on the Environment

There are numerous problems women and members of their households face today in their quest to eke out a living to overcome their poverty conditions. Human activities, whether in primary, secondary or tertiary sectors of the economy have the presence of women who over the years have been contributing considerably to environmental damage.

The most important adaptation of the poor households in Nigeria is the system of shifting cultivation. This involves one to three years of cultivation on a plot, followed by leaving the plot fallow (Serageldin, 1989:23). In the fallow period, organic matter is restored as vegetative cover lifts nutrients from the lower soil, depositing them on the surface with leaf fall. However, this practice of the poor who are unable to intensify their agricultural activities because of high cost of farm inputs is seriously leading to environmental degradation.

The poor woman lacks money to purchase and use gas cooker or kerosene stove. Such women have to heavily depend on harvesting biomass as source of energy. Fuelwood needs are however, met by attacking the forests. The massive harvesting of wood for which is in high demand by the poor woman as alternative cooking fuel is leading to the destruction of natural woodland with consequential ecological problems.

Removal of tree cover increases soil erosion. In Nigeria where the kinetic energy of rain splash of the humid tropics is high, the result of deforestation is the initiation of erosion by displacement of surface particles which leaves the soil surface unprotected and structural aggregation impaired. The rise in occurrence of severely damaging floods in many parts of Nigeria in recent times undoubtedly, has link to the destruction of trees in the upper courses of rivers.

It is altruistic to say that the poor women folk depend heavily on wood as fuel and wood cutting for cooking and other domestic purposes is seriously depleting forestland. This is because of the fact that a considerable number of the poor do not have environmental education; hence in the absence of conscious measures to protect the environment, the action often results in depletion of resources and further degradation of the natural environment. The widespread crop failure and general food insecurity in Nigeria are challenges for us to act fact and empower the vulnerable female gender in particular and save the environment in general from total destruction.

Another impact of the high level of resource utilization of the poor on the environment is the generation of high amount of domestic and municipal waste which gives rise to ecological foot print. Waste is an unavoidable consequence of the need for survival. In order to live, the poor have to eat, drink and provide services to earn income and the process creates waste (Barry and Imo, 2003:98). The proliferation of maize roasting in towns and cities of this country by the poor women is increasing the amount of agricultural waste which alongside non-biodegradables constitute an eye sore in urban centres, blocking water channels to cause urban flooding. Indeed, urban floods are increasingly a common phenomenon in Nigerian urban environment (NUE) in recent times of which every inhabitant is aware of it.

Furthermore, the urban environment is not safe. Increasing encroachment into open spaces and roadsides by the poor women who erect kiosks of wood, plastic and discarded metal in order to sell food and eke out some sorts of living is a matter of concern. Their action produce eye sore and their lives are also exposed to danger of being over-run by fast moving vehicles. Even when the city authorities repeatedly round up such women who encroached into unauthorized spaces by pulling down the illegal structures, impounding and confiscating their wares, the situation only worsen their poverty conditions.

It should be noted that a polluted environment negates tourism development. The poor woman who litters the urban environment with products of agricultural produce, for instance does not see the beauty of tourist attraction in and outside their vicinity. Tourism means nothing to them that are battling for survival; since nothing tangible is being done by the Nigerian society to help them overcome their poverty conditions.

Indeed, the consequences of poverty are quite devastating in every aspect of life including the physical environment we live and have our being. It was in realization of this axiomatic fact that this paper was conceived and developed. The earlier we rise and join the crusade of female gender empowerment, the better for our environment that sustain us. For us to build a sustainable, human-based Nigerian nation, it is paramount to have a foundation of economic empowerment together with political and social empowerment; which Araba (1999:219) considers economic empowerment the foremost where the determinants are access, availability and equalization of opportunity to productive resources in terms of land, capital, technology and appropriate institutions as well as consumable goods and services.

6. Advocating for Female Gender Empowerment to Overcome Poverty

This paper has established that in all parts of the country, female gender is more adversely affected by poverty than men because the operating environment tends to favour and empower mostly male gender in all areas of human endeavours. This substantiates why Nigerian women are finding it difficult to come out of poverty net. As a curbing strategy, many of the poor Nigerian women are over-depending and over-exploiting the natural resources to survive hence are contributing significantly to environmental crisis we are witnessing today.

The unfortunate and unfair treatment of the female gender, particularly in the area of job selection, accessing loan facilities, educational and health services have not been unnoticed. A lot of efforts are being made to correct and reduce female gender disparity in accessing resources globally and regionally. The United Nations met and adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Document in Paris, France in December 10, 1948. The main objectives were to create an international order with a more humane and just society in the post-second world war era: that will provide an opportunity of respecting one another as human beings in our daily interaction freely without any form of discrimination on whatever basis.

Over the years there has been a number of additional conventions, covenants, agreements, treaties and protocols, legally binding all countries together and expecting them to respect the rights of human beings in areas of social, civil, economic, political and cultural aspects of life. Imam (1999:216-217) has highlighted a number of positive achievement made at the global level between 1948 and 1995 which were aimed at eliminating the problems that hinder women empowerment. As a way of commitment the United Nations Commission on the status of women was formed to monitor the situation of women and promote their fundamental rights around the world. Since then, the commission in 1952 initiated the Convention on the Political Rights of women which was the first global mandate to grant women equal political rights under the law.

In 1957 and 1962, the two conventions initiated on the equality of married women, guaranteeing them equal rights in marriage and in dissolving marriage.

In 1975, an International Women's Year (IWY) was declared and 1976 and 1985 was proclaimed as the United Nations Decade for Women (UNDW) where agencies and governments were enjoined to collect and assemble thorough statistical information on women for the first time.

In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on Eliminations of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

In 1985, there was another conference in Nairobi, Kenya as a follow up to the world Conference on women held in Sopenhagen, Denmark in 1980 where progress review was undertaken and future strategies adopted.

In 1995, there was another World Conference on women in Beijing, China with the theme "Equality, Development and Peace"

It is important to note that at all these conferences and conventions, issues bothering on women empowerment and development were canvassed for and discussed (Imam 1999:217). These attempts have led to the inclusion of women's rights in the key United Nations Documents. Hence a number of human rights instruments have been passed, both by the United Nations General Assembly and by United Nations specialized Agencies referring to various aspects of the role and status of women.

Despite the availability of these instruments to all countries, the status of female gender has continued to lag behind that of their male counterpart. Of particular note is the fact that women in Nigeria are still being discriminated against in most societies at the household, community, state and national levels in terms of accessing educational and health services, credit facilities, job placement and decision-making arena.

Since advocacy means helping the under-privileged (female gender) through speaking up, writing or acting for them, we therefore, recommend the following steps that would lead to removal of those barriers inhibiting female gender access to productive resources in order to enable them improve their living standards, overcome poverty in their lives and minimize the repercussions of over-dependence on environmental resources in attempt to eke-out some sort of living.

First, Nigerian government should respect all Charters, Declarations and Conventions Pertaining to Women Rights and Empowerment by entrenching them into the national constitution. It should provide enabling environment for the formation of and activities of advocacy groups that will culminate in empowering women to overcome their poverty conditions. The federal, state and local governments can play active roles in advocating for the formation of women association groups and initiate some specific programmes to empower them. Government should also establish more schools and colleges at all tiers of governance to equip the female gender adequately for job opportunities ahead. Government should increase budgetary allocation to ministries and agencies of women affairs and should note that no amount of resources allocated to women groups for empowerment can be regarded a waste.

Secondly, professionals in different fields can come together irrespective of gender to form overt and covert civil society advocacy groups on female gender issues. The overt advocacy groups should always be on alert to proceed on peaceful demonstrations and even go to law courts to sue for violation of the rights of female gender or any policies taken by government which seem discriminatory against women. In the same manner, professionals can form covert advocacy group that will always lobby government officials and parliamentarians to make policies and laws that are favourable to the female folk. They should pursue government to come up with policies that will reduce the bureaucratic process of accessing credit facilities by women who have plans to expand their businesses and improve their welfare.

Thirdly, female cooperative society should be formed by female gender themselves since they are the direct sufferers of poverty. Activities of cooperative society should be directed towards trading or carrying out some skilled occupations like weaving, cooking edible oil, baking, smoking fish and soap-making that can empower them financially. Their involvement in economic activities can assist them to forge strong linkage and extend their sphere of influence in social network and contacts for further empowerment. The general public should support them in every way possible so that they can succeed in changing their misfortune.

Fourthly, the elites among the female gender can initiate NGOs that can assist the not-so-educated ones on how to improve their welfare. Such advocacy groups can extend their participatory activities to include literacy, family planning, maternal health, improved farming methods, business skills and enlightening other women folk to discard their inferiority ideology and old ways of doing things as they get exposed to new information on foods, work, health and even their own body functions.

Fifthly, community and opinion leaders, traditional rulers, the elites, religious leaders, the media and the general public should press hard on government at the Federal, State and Local levels to design and promote equal enrolment in schools at all levels. Females should be encouraged to fill admission quota allocated to them. Efforts should be made to encourage both boys and girls to participate in mass educational programmes that favour female gender.

Finally, at the family level, every husband should be an advocate to his wife and two other women in the neighbourhood, particularly on issues aimed at improving their welfare to overcome poverty and save the environment.

7. Conclusion

This paper has shown very vividly that almost half of the population of Nigeria are females but their participation in development stride of the country is still very low. The traditional belief that men are superior to women together with other factors have contributed towards depressing them to remain in poverty net unassisted. In order to survive, the poor female gender has resorted to exploiting the environmental resources mercilessly and the action is no doubt contributing to environmental crisis being witnessed today. The paper concluded by advocating for group actions that will empower female gender to advance their welfare and overcome poverty in their lives in order to salvage the environment from abuse.

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