



Skills Development and Women Empowerment in Nigeria: An Imperative for Partnership and Economic Growth

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ABSTRACT

Over the years there has been growing concern by governments, development partners and other stakeholders on the need to empower women to fight poverty and contribute meaningfully to the economic growth of their communities. In Nigeria, just as in other African countries, various policies have been established by government at national and state levels to facilitate the acquisition of skills by women to enable them become employable or in some cases, become entrepreneurs themselves. However, these policies do not seem to be making any appreciable impact as poverty, joblessness and other challenges that accompany such situations continue to spiral higher, especially among women. This paper seeks to evaluate the skills acquisition programmes in Nigeria and to understand why, in spite of the huge resources committed to skills acquisition, not much seem to have been gained from it. The paper also explores the level of cooperation or partnerships that exist between the government and other stakeholders to see how improving such partnerships could be the nexus that is required to turn the situation around and lift women and their communities out of poverty unto a path of self-reliance, economic growth and development.

Keywords: Poverty, Women, Skills, Development, Empowerment, Governments, Partners

1. Introduction

The problem of poverty and how to reduce it has for decades, remained a very daunting task to leaders in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and development partners working on the continent. In spite of the enormous resources that have been deployed to eradicate this scourge, very little seem to have been achieved in that regard. And because of that, the region is classified today as the poorest region in the world. According to the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI), scores for the region have either stagnated or have dwindled since 1990, and 28 out of the 31 low human development countries are located in SSA. Also, since the 1990's most regions of the world have witnessed a decline in income poverty except in SSA where there is estimate to be about 300 million people (about half the population of the entire region) living on less than US\$1per day (Handley et al. 2009).

Nigeria with all its oil wealth, has a significant size of its population living in poverty. The poverty situation in Nigeria is not very different from that of the rest of SSA and statistics have shown that it has been on the increase for decades. Poverty has been on the upward spiral rising from 28.1 percent in 1980 to 69.0 percent in 2010 (NBS, 2010). According to the UNDP Human Development Report 2015, 54.8 percent of Nigerians were living under intense deprivation. The group most affected by this grim situation are women and girls because they are the ones who are taken out of school, married off early and are forced to take on the responsibilities of taking care of the home, raising the kids and contributing in the upkeep of the family by helping to grow food or engage in petty trading to provide some household needs. And because they lack the requisite skills or education to be formally engaged as wage earners, they are unable to develop themselves or contribute to the growth and development of their communities and the country at large.

The Nigerian government and development partners have over the years been preoccupied with finding solutions to these and other challenges that have impeded women in both rural and urban areas from being empowered economically. A number of skills development initiatives have been implemented by both government and other concerned stakeholders including development partners and aid agencies as a transformative strategy to empower women and help them to become participants in the socio-economic and political development of their communities.

However, in spite of these initiatives and the huge resources that have been expended on skills development for women empowerment, not much seem to have been achieved. Poverty and unemployment especially among women seem to be on the rise and more and more women are getting caught in this ugly and dehumanizing situation by the day. Our intention in this paper is to evaluate the skills acquisition programs in Nigeria and to understand

why, in spite of the huge resources committed to skills acquisition, not much seem to have been gained from it. The paper will also explore the level of cooperation or partnerships that exist between the government and other stakeholders to see how improving such partnerships could be the nexus that is required to turn the situation around and lift women and their communities out of poverty unto a path of economic growth and development.

2. Conceptualizing women empowerment

This section of the paper draws extensively from an excellent paper prepared by Maholtra, Schuler and Boender (2002) for a workshop on poverty and gender which was conducted by the world in 2002. We begin with the definition of empowerment which has been used differently by stakeholders often times to denote some form of policies or intervention strategies for elevating some disadvantaged group or groups to a position where they would be able to make choices that would improve their lives. Bennett (2002) describes empowerment as “the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them”. Batliwala’s (1994) definition is in terms of “how much influence people have over external actions that matter to their welfare.” While Kabeer (2001) aptly describes empowerment as “The expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.” What these definitions have in common is that they are addressing empowerment generally (for all disadvantaged groups) and not women specifically. Which is why Maholtra, Schuler and Boender (2002) are of the view that although a lot of literature exist on empowerment generally, women do not seem to have taken a central place in much of it. For them, although the broad reference to empowerment as the freedom of choice and action, as articulated in the World Bank’s Sourcebook on Empowerment and Poverty Reduction applies to women as well as other disadvantaged or socially excluded groups, it is important to acknowledge that women’s empowerment encompasses some unique additional elements which they went further to enumerated as follows;

First, women are not just one group amongst several disempowered subsets of society (the poor, ethnic minorities, etc.); they are a cross-cutting category of individuals that overlaps with all these other groups. Second, the household and interfamilial relations are a central locus of women’s disempowerment in a way that is not true for other disadvantaged groups. This means that efforts at empowering women must be especially cognizant of the implications of broader policy action at the household level. Third, several of the authors whose work we review in this paper argue that women’s empowerment requires systemic transformation in not just any institutions, but fundamentally in those supporting patriarchal structures (Kabeer 2001; Bismath and Elson 1999; Sen and Grown 1987; Batliwala 1994 as cited in Mohaltra 2002)

Working specifically on women empowerment Keller and Mbwewe (1991 as cited in Rowlands 1995) described women empowerment as “a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination”. This definition covers not just the economic but also the socio-political and cultural dimensions of empowerment. It is important to note this because most policies and strategies which are established to address women and the powerless they suffer, are largely focused on the economic aspect leaving out other social and cultural challenges that they suffer at the home front and at the community level.

For Eyben, Kabeer and Cornwall (2008) empowerment is fundamentally about power i.e. “power to redefine our possibilities and options and to act on them”. They explain further that empowerment is a process and a path out of poverty rather than an end in itself and they classify three kinds of empowerment which they believe are “interconnected” and “iterative”: social, economic and political. They however, paid particular attention to “economic empowerment” to clarify their position that improvement in economic conditions may not necessarily trigger improvement at home or even politically at the community level.

Strandberg (2002) hold a contrary opinion to this. To her, empowerment as all process where women take control and ownership of their lives. This process is “transformative” and it changes the underlying power relations that render women disempowered. She went further to explain that although this empowerment process can be facilitated by outsiders, women must take possession and drive the process by themselves, while government, donor agencies and other stakeholders provide the needed support and to facilitate the process.

In Nigeria, empowerment strategies have taken a number of dimension (Promoting gender equality, prevention of gender-based violence, improving maternal and child and reproductive health etc. But for the purpose of this presentation, we shall focus on empowerment through skills acquisition. For this publication, we identify with the position which sees women empowerment as a process although with some slight additions of our own. Our addition is that this process of empowerment must start with the removal of constraints (economic, institutional, educational, socio-cultural, political etc.) which prevent women from self-actualisation. This is then followed by the creation of the enabling conditions (funding, education, legislations, government policies, support etc.) for women to pursue whatever goals they set for themselves.

3. Women empowerment strategies in Nigeria

Successive Nigerian governments have since the early 1980’s implemented women empowerment strategies which were mostly pet projects of the first ladies like “Better Life for Rural Women” which was a project of Maryam Babangida, “Family Support Programme” of Maryam Abacha, Stella Obasanjo’s “Child Care Trust”, TuraiYar’Adua’s “Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation” and Patience Jonathan’s “Women for Change Initiative”. These projects were mostly geared towards improving the social and economic well-being of Nigerian families by financially empowering women to become wage earners or entrepreneurs in some instances so that they can contribute meaningfully to national development. Unfortunately, these projects couldn’t last long enough to make any meaningful impact on their target groups as they fizzled out immediately the ladies who set them up left government with their husbands.

There have also been a number of economic development policies that were implemented by the Nigerian government which had components of women empowerment and were meant to combat poverty and promote economic growth especially among women. An example is the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) at the national level and State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) at the state level. A major objective of this programme was the creation of jobs to eradicate poverty especially among women. In fact, the aim of the programme was to create seven million which was envisaged to reduce the number of unemployed women in the country; but like other programmes before it, the NEEDS and SEEDS failed and ended up leaving more women impoverished in its aftermath.

A National Gender Policy in Nigeria was established in 2006 to replace the National Policy on Women has been the vehicle by which women empowerment and numerous other issues that confront women are articulated and implemented. A major pillar of the thrust of this policy is to pursue the establishment of an economic reform programme that will “help enhance productivity and policy efficiency, and with a lasting outcome for the empowerment of women and the vulnerable groups in our society” (NGP, 2006). Part of this enhancement of productivity is the development of skills that will make women earn income and begin to live economically productive lives and become valued members of their communities.

The business dictionary defines skills as “an ability and capacity acquired through deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to smoothly and adaptively carryout complex activities or job functions involving ideas (cognitive skills), things (technical skills), and/or people (interpersonal skills)”. So developing such skills will no doubt enable women to become not only self-sufficient but also enable them to have the power to make their life choices.

The government both at the states and federal levels have used a number of strategies to pursue skills development and we shall proceed to consider some of these strategies as follows:

3.1 Education

Education enhances lives, ends generational poverty and provides a foundation for a nations development (Foluke, 2013) In Nigeria like in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls have for so many years been at the receiving end of the harsh economic conditions and worsening poverty situation in the country. This is so because they are usually the ones who get taken out of school and get married off early so that their parents can keep the boys in school. And because their education has been truncated and they lack any specialised skill to enable them get gainfully employed, they are left at the mercy of their husbands to provide for them. They spend most of their time tending to their children and engaging in household chores. For many young girls and adult women in this category, acquiring education is the only means of untangling themselves from the clutches of poverty, dependency and powerlessness. The federal government of Nigeria in response to the needs of such groups established the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education. The Commission was established in 1990 and it has offices in all the 774 LGAs. The Commission’s objectives include among other things the mobilization and motivation of people to participate in adult literacy classes and non-formal education for people who for some reason could not continue with their education. Women constitute a huge chunk of the beneficiaries of the programme.

It is also worth noting that a number of tertiary institutions in the country through their Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes have given opportunity to educationally disadvantaged people especially women to enrol and acquire education at cost effective and flexible arrangements which is tailored to suit their peculiar circumstances. Through such programmes a lot of women who dropped out of school due to early marriage, teenage pregnancy or other such circumstances were now to have a second chance to acquire some education so that they can be employable and contribute towards the development of their communities and the country at large. However, a plethora of challenges have bedevilled these programmes and have prevented them from delivery on their mandate. Challenges like governmental interference, misappropriation of funds, lack of merit in appointments, lack of political will to execute their mandate and a host of other challenges to have combined to render the desire of the federal government to educate women and girls especially those who at some in their lives have had their education truncated, almost comatose. Although, every year there is budgetary allocation for these agencies, there has not been a commensurate level of activities to show for the funds expended on them. The very few indigent people who have tried to access the services of especially the adult literacy classes have had to pay very dearly for these services which were meant to be enjoyed by them at very little or no cost. The government of the day must muster the will to commit whatever is required to revive such initiatives as a lot of people out there are depending on them for a second chance to become literate members of their communities.

3.2 Vocational Training

For some women, the opportunity offered through the adult education classes for them to acquire education and become employable is a dream that cannot be restored. This people may however be interested in some vocational training which will help them start a small business and become financially independent. For such category of people, a number of programmes have been initiated by states and the federal government to train women and other disadvantaged groups in vocation like farming, fashion designing, baking, soap making, hair dressing, garri processing, fish farming etc. The trainings are organised in a manner that takes into consideration the educational background of the trainee. For those with some level of academic qualification, the training is delivered through a series of workshops and seminars. While for those that are illiterate or semi-literate the training takes the form of internship for a certain period of time to enable them learn on the job at the end of which the trainee is certified to start on her own. Usually after the training, some kind of assistance is given to the trainee to set out in the form of tools and equipment that are required for the business to commence and some instances loans are issued to the beneficiaries to assist them in securing business premises and purchase whatever is required for the business to take off.

The federal government of Nigeria set up a number of agencies to train and guide these aspiring entrepreneurs as they prepare to become not only income earners but also employers of labour in the future if they play their cards right. Such agencies include the National Directorate of Employment

(NDE) which was established in 1986 to “design and implement job creation programmes that would promote attitudinal change, employment generation, poverty reduction and wealth creation” (Foluke, 2013). These objectives are achieved through a number of strategies which include; vocational skills programme, small scale enterprises programme, rural employment promotion programme, special public works and collaboration with other national and international agencies. There is also the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) which was established by the federal government of Nigeria in the year 2003 to “facilitate the access of micro, small and medium entrepreneurs and investors to all resources required for their development” (SMEDAN, 2016). However, these agencies have largely been unable to contribute in any meaningful way to reduce the scourge of joblessness and women disempowerment. For most people the NDE is almost non-existent as they have been rendered ineffective by lack of funding. Most of the programmes that were used for vocational training at the inception of the project have folded up because their partners have pulled out and mobile workshops and other training centres have also become unserviceable and have thus broken down or have been vandalised by corrupt officials. The story of SMEDAN is slightly different in the sense that although it seems to be doing well financially, it is difficult to find anyone who has benefitted from the institution. It is a shame that such institutions that were created to empower thousands of Nigerian women who have been wallowing in poverty, have become part of the problem. It is as if we have collectively agreed to outsource these challenges to international donor and aid agencies who have of late become the only reliable hope for thousands of women struggling to wriggle their way out of poverty.

4. International organizations in Nigeria and the need for partnership

Women empowerment has become a global issue which perhaps explains why the United Nations included women empowerment among the Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by all countries come 2030. International Donor and Aid organisations working around the world especially in the developing world have also included women empowerment as a major component of their work. In Nigeria, they have contributed immensely in promoting the course of women and the protection of their rights as citizens and as members of communities who have the right to make choices about how they desire to live their lives. The issues they cover are diverse but they can be broadly categorised into three; social-economic, political and cultural empowerment. Although they partner with national and local civil society and non-governmental organisations, they sometimes work directly with communities to address certain specific areas or issues of interest. They have without doubt contributed immensely to the development of the country and especially in the campaign for and improvement of the lives of disadvantaged groups like poor women. Their international connections have brought into the country foreign Aid in the form of funding and expertise which has helped not just in capacity building and training but also in provision of social infrastructure like schools, clinics, shelter, food and drugs etc. to those in need.

The contribution of international organisation working in Nigeria especially in the field of poverty reduction, skills development and women empowerment cannot but be appreciated but a lot still needs to be done to ensure that the resources committed to these efforts do not go to waste. Firstly, there does not appear to us to be any well thought out plan for engaging and coordinating the activities of these organisations in order to get some kind of synergy among them. The federal government has its programmes which it executes through its agencies and there appears to be no linkage with that and the numerous initiatives that foreign donor and Aid organisations are undertaking on the same issues. Secondly, donor organisations themselves have been unable to organise themselves so that they all have a good idea of what each one is doing and in what areas to avoid duplication and wastage of resources. Thirdly, there appears to be a total disconnect between the federal and state governments efforts which has led to a lot of confusion even among the beneficiaries of the programmes as to which to approach for assistance. Fourthly, the domestic CSOs and NGOs appear to be partitioning communities and spheres of influence for themselves leading to fierce competition and rivalry which has in some instances led to their undercutting each other in a bid to secure grants from donors. This has seriously hampered progress and in some cases, even led to retrogression where some progress has been realised.

It is quite clear that something needs to be done to bring all the stakeholders to understand what each is doing and to have a carefully laid out plan that would, if possible, consider the capacity of the organisation(s) to deliver based on the needs of the community before they engage the communities. The federal government can take the lead on this and with proper coordination at the federal and state levels, we would have a more effective and rewarding campaign to empower women in Nigeria.

5. Conclusion

Women empowerment has come to stay and one of the most viable ways of raising women out of poverty and giving them a new lease of life and making them proud members of their households and communities is by equipping them with the right skills and supporting them with funding to set out on their own. The federal government will do well to partner with donor agencies and other aid groups to tap from their wealth of experience and expertise to improve the wellbeing of disadvantaged groups like poor women who are without any skill or education but are daily struggling and are eager to engage in some vocation to provide for themselves and their families. It is our hope and desire that the government at the federal and state level will wake up from their slumber and begin to take meaningful steps to address the challenges that are setting us back as a society. One sure way of beginning is by partnering with organisations who have acquired the experiences that would help us to confront head-on the problems of poverty and unemployment and help our people especially disadvantaged women to attain self-reliance and live in dignity.

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