

Factors Militating Against Women Economic Empowerment And Poverty Reduction In African Countries

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Abstract: *Developing countries are constrained with the challenges of poverty and economic empowerment to reduce the level poverty especially among the women population. Women consist more than 60% of the African population which has caused more concern to the economy in the continent. International communities like World Bank, USAID, DFID, IMF, government and others individuals and private organizations have made several efforts in assisting women economically, but yet level of poverty has been in the increase. As the year 2015 draws closer, there is high expectation on the objectives of the MDGs. Unfortunately, studies reveal that female potential labor force is still high in Africa and most of the poor are women. Women consist more than 60% of the African population which has caused more concern to the economy of the continent. This paper examined two issues (i) some of the factors that hinder women from attaining economic empowerment. (ii) Other factors that increases the level of poverty of women despite the fact that several efforts are been made to empower women economically. This paper relied on content analysis of existing literature as source of data, in order to uncover some of the reasons responsible for low participation of women in economic activities. It also recommends possible ways to ameliorate the situation for policy implication.*

Keywords: *Women, Economic empowerment, Poverty reduction and Africa*

I. Introduction

Women empowerment is the development of mental and physical capacity, power and skills in women for them to operate meaningfully in their social milieu, thereby experiencing a more favorable level of social recognition and subsequently enhance their economic status (Akomolafe, 2006). Vandana and Robert (2002) report that as a result of women's wide ranging responsibilities; productive, domestic and community duties, they are generally involved in a broader range of tasks than men and will therefore require a wider range of technical knowhow on which to draw for their livelihood pursuits. Unfortunately, studies continuously show that women are affected by poverty, susceptible to diseases, prone to discrimination, marginalization and environmental degradation which are all detrimental to women economic empowerment and poverty reduction.

The existence of gender related barriers continue to militate against the enjoyment of rights and full participation of women in economic activities. Evidence has shown that Africa is highly a patriarchal society where men dominate all spheres of life; women are left in a subordinate position particularly at community and household levels. Ebele (2003) from Nigeria and Herz (1989) from Kenya found out from their studies that even where national policies encourage equal opportunities, women still generally lag behind in educational attainment, earning capacity and other respects. Yesufu (2000) reported that out of the total potential labour force of 46,091,452 in Nigeria, the male potential labour force was 49% and that of females was 51%, implying that the number of females who could work and are not working is higher than that of their male counterpart. Overall, women face more significant barriers than men in struggling with their livelihood: lower pay, lack of access to adequate education, training, capital, and exclusion from policy making process (Bakke-Seeck et al, 1998). Taiwo et al (2006) attributed these trends to cultural practices, higher illiteracy rate among the female sex and gender discrimination in both employment practices and income generating activities.

Odubokun (1996) examines the extent of economic empowerment of the Nigerian women based on evidence of their participation in various economic activities and found that the economic powers of Nigerian women systematically and persistently deteriorated particularly since 1986. That unless there is general, global constitutional empowerment of all women and all Nigerians, only few women would inherit the economic empowerment conferred on them. Akomolafe (2006) further observed that even domestic empowerment in Nigeria is too low because evidence have shown that resources that are of great importance in the life of women for the purpose of meeting their domestic and matrimonial commitments are inadequate and not available in most cases. Domestic facilities are not within the reach of average Nigerian and these problems are subjecting women and children to undue hardship.

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The aim of women economic empowerment is to enhance the socio-economic status of women through creating an economic culture that will address the technical know-how in the pursuit of women's multi-faceted roles, retooling them with various economic ventures as well as enhancing the emancipation of women from poverty. This is because women are "generally poor" and constitute majority of the population thus, targeting them will be a fundamental pre-requisite for any poverty reduction strategy to be effective. The last four decades witnessed United Nations conferences on women at Beijing in 1975, 1985, 1995 and international decade on women where laws have been passed for the improvement of women's condition. The MDGs also considered women's condition and included gender equality and women empowerment as part of its objectives. In Nigeria, a lot of programs have been implemented to better the lives of women like Better Life Program for Rural Women in 1987, Family Support Program in 1994, Family Economic Advancement Program in 1997, National Poverty Eradication Program in 1999, and Poverty Alleviation Program in 2000 etc. All these measure have been implemented with a view to reducing the level of poverty and improving welfare of the masses who are mostly women, yet the condition of women leaves much to be desired.

In view of the above, this study is undertaken in order to identify factors that inhibit women from attaining economic empowerment and poverty reduction. The rest of the paper is organized as follow: chapter two provide literature on conceptual issues, theoretical framework and a review of factors that affect women from attaining economic empowerment, chapter three provides methodology adopted for the study, chapter four concludes the paper and finally, chapter five gave recommendations for policy implication.

II. Literature Review

This comprises literature relevant to the study which includes conceptual issues, theoretical framework and a review of some of the factors militating against women economic empowerment.

Conceptual issues

Economic Empowerment: Empowerment is the process and result of the process whereby the less powerful members of the society gain access and control over resources, knowledge, challenges and ideologies of discrimination and subordination, and transform the structures and institutions through which unequal access and control over resources is sustained and perpetuated (Batliwa, 1995 cited in Olakulein and Ojo, 2006). Economic empowerment is a situation where the ability to own and control resources exist, it involves the ability to engage in income generating activities that will create access to independent income (Sabeh and Moh'd, 2007).

Poverty Reduction: Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon. There has always been difficulty in drawing the line between the poor and non-poor. As such, there is no universally accepted definition of poverty. Poverty is conceptualized in both absolute and relative terms. Absolute poverty occurs where one spend more than his income on basic necessities while relative poverty exist where one spend larger part of his income on basic necessities (Tukur et al, 2007). Therefore, poverty reduction is concerned with increasing income level of individuals and household in order to enable them cater for their basic necessities of life.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist and Gender Theory: Feminist theory focus on effects of operation on women by patriarchy and systematic inequalities. Gender theory looks at the processes and practices by which women are included and how they participate in development process in order to address the systematic exclusion of women in development. Gender theory emphasize on the inclusion of women in decision making process, access to resources, information and education, awareness building and informational resources about benefits and purpose of women empowerment (Kovacs, 2005).

Empowerment Model: This model is a four dimension typology and has been used by feminist to raise awareness about women's subordination and their rights. It has been employed successfully among the poor and women to raise awareness about their status in an effort to help them take charge of their situation (Mohasi et al, 2004). While the cognitive, psychological and economic dimension involves critical awareness, action and change at the personal level, political dimension leads to political and collective awareness and necessarily demands extending action and change to a macro level. This last dimension has been highlighted as very critical in other situations in order to promote change beyond the individual level (Luhabe, 2002 cited in Mohasi et al, 2004).

Review of Obstacles to Women Economic Empowerment

This part reviews some of the factors that hinder women from accessing economic fortunes and becoming economically empowered. Some of the factors discussed here include: cultural factor, educational factor and financial factor.

Cultural Factor

Customs and traditions of patriarchal societies serve as great deterrent to women empowerment. Adegoroye and Adegoroye (2008) find out from their study that harmful cultural practices militate against women economic empowerment. Bisika (2008) reports that cultural practices that promote gender-based violence exist and these acts of violence are usually directed at women. Briere (2004) identifies socio-cultural factors such as poverty, social inequality and inadequate social support as some of the variables that combine to determine the seriousness of the impact of violence against women. Ibekwe (2007) opines that in some countries, there are some cultural and traditional laws that negate women's rights which in one way or the other promote violence against women. In such countries one may argue that violence against women has been institutionalized. Also, Ebele (2003) explains that in some societies, inherited tradition prevents women from inheriting land both from their fathers or husbands thereby limiting their access to collateral and productive opportunities.

According to Ndom et-al (2008), stereotypes in societies are virtually unavoidable and shared throughout cultures. Societies often innocently create and perpetuate stereotypes that lead to unfair discrimination and persecution when they are unfavorable. They are seen as dangerous beliefs and threats that can prevent individuals from performing at their ability level in a domain that is important to them. Ndom et-al further asserts that, efforts should consciously be made to reduce these beliefs.

Educational Factor

Illiteracy remains at the center of women empowerment problems in Nigeria and the only effective way to meaningfully contribute to the emancipation of women is to widen the access of women and girls to quality education (Olakulein and Ojo, 2006). Suleiman (2009) describes education as the bedrock for empowerment and the only panacea to women empowerment and gender equality considering the fact that without education, it will be difficult to become genuinely economically empowered and relevant in the society and the world. Education is the most effective strategy for promoting women empowerment (Okeke, 1995).

Akomolafe (2006) conducted a qualitative survey using interview and participatory experience and finds out that low education coupled with cultural discrimination against women is a constraint to women empowerment. Olekulein and Ojo (2006) states that the issue of women education is essential for rural development and the women are not well equipped to contribute their useful quota in the society as a result of illiteracy. Adegoroye and Adegoroye (2008) find out from their study that low literacy level of the rural women denied them access to vital information that can improve their lots economically.

Ebele (2003) opines that education increases the chances of employment for women thereby empowering them economically but unfortunately, equal access to education for girls is still a challenge in Nigeria and Africa. The African patriarchal culture favors the education of males to the detriment of females especially when family resources are limited, because the males propagate and carry on the family name which leads to low level of education for girls and employment in low paid jobs than males. This is evidenced from the fact that the proportion of females decreases as the level of education increases. The Forum for African Women Educationists (FAWE, 2008) reports that only 1 girl for every 2 boys makes it to SS and 1 girl for every 3 boys completes secondary education.

Other problems identified by Ebele (2003) that affects women education which is the panacea to economic empowerment are issues of early marriage, free mixing of adolescent males and females in schools etc. However, effort is being made to address these problems through encouraging adult literacy training, pre-entry policy for pregnant school girls and teenage mothers as well as separation of males and females in secondary schools.

Financial Factor

Finance is the backbone of any economy and can limit the level of economic activities to an individual, society or country. Adegoroye and Adegoroye (2008) find out from their study that lack of finance and access to loans militate against women economic empowerment. Magaji and Aliyu (2007) also find that credit influences physical autonomy and affects most of the women empowerment indicators significantly. Dunford (2001) cited in Magaji and Aliyu (2007) states that loans with training are found more effective in addressing many socio-economic problems of women especially in developing countries. Furthermore, Malami (2008) identifies lack of proper funding as one of the fundamental problems blocking the chances of women from attaining economic

empowerment and that if provided, it will assist to empower the economic position of women and consequently reduce the level of poverty.

Ebele (2003) explains that in some African countries, employment opportunities and per capita income of women is lower than that of men, which contribute to low economic profile of women. For instance, UNDP statistics show that women form about 70% of labour in the informal sector in Nigeria, most of them in very low yielding enterprise where employment remuneration is not regulated by law and so wages are very low. High interest rate in Nigeria to the poor who are mostly women employed in the informal sector with low capital operation, limits the ability of women from getting financial assistance. Women therefore remain in vicious cycle of low investment, low output, and low profit and therefore, trapped in circles of poverty.

Ott et-al (1995) cited in Ebele (2003) opines that where women have no direct access to land and cannot have collateral because of patriarchal and customary practices that pass property through the male line, limit women from having direct access to credit. Ahenkora et al cited in Ebele (2003) also states that women are more credit worthy than men, but legal requirements and lack of collateral still limit women's access to bank credit. Similarly, Ebele (2003) explains that in Uganda, because women do not own land and therefore have nothing to pledge for collateral, their access to credit is also limited. These have implication for increasing women's income in poverty alleviation programs which require credit or land as input into production possibilities.

III. Methodology

This study is designed to carry out a qualitative survey on some of the factors militating against women economic empowerment and poverty reduction. The study adopted content analyses of existing literature as source of data. Data was sourced through secondary method.

IV. Conclusion

Women economic empowerment and poverty reduction has been of great concern to global economies most especially in African countries, Nigeria inclusive. Most of the world's poor are women and poverty cannot be reduced if women are not economically empowered. Studies have shown that women control a very minute proportion of economic resources of countries of the world and in order to fit into and be able to operate within the mainstream of decision making, any group or sub-group must control a proportionate amount of productive resources.

Recommendations

1. Societies should understand that the complex roles of women cannot be managed effectively if they are left redundant. Societies should encourage women participation in economic activities and discourage stereotypes and gender discrimination.
2. Parents, guardians and husbands should be reached-out at their places of gatherings like mosques, churches, pressure-group centers etc. and be enlightened about the importance of women education as well as the effects of early marriage.
3. Government should provide more skills acquisition centers and adult literacy training centers at the grass root level especially in the rural areas where most of the poor and non-educated reside. This is in order to make these facilities easily accessible to them.
4. Government should endeavor to provide adequate funding, adequate instructional materials and infrastructural facilities in all training centers in order to make the training effective.
5. Government should improve effort on resettlement of the educated and trained women with jobs, technical assistance, capital and credit with negligible or no-interest rate. This is to encourage more women to be engaged in economic activities.
6. The women should avail themselves any slightest opportunity offered by their parents, guardians, husbands and government to explore economic activities and improve their economic status. They should be dedicated in their pursuit of economic empowerment as it can provide improvement for their family members and the society at large.
7. The women should be encouraged to join pressure-groups where they can be sensitized about issues affecting them like maternal health, infant mortality, HIV and AIDS, environmentally sustainable practices etc. as well as the importance of effective resource management.
8. Government should provide more avenues to reach-out to the poor (women) and provide checks and balance to ensure that assistance provided really gets to the beneficiaries.

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