

Deterrents To Women's Empowerment In Africa: Analysis Of Some Socio-Cultural Practices In Akwa Ibom State Of Nigeria

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Abstract: *Women's Empowerment Programme (WEP) is generally built upon the notion that, women constitute a greater percentage of the continent's population, yet, they constitute an endangered group challenged by illiteracy, discrimination, and poverty, hidden under the web of obnoxious cultural practices. Data emerging from the present study show that, effort to get the women out of the web of poverty and discrimination continue to be hindered by negative socio-cultural practice such as not having a share in the family assets, restriction from acquiring landed properties in their father or husbands homeland and submitting of whatever property acquired to the control of the husband or male member of the family, etc. The study recommends among others that, governments and donor agencies should encourage the formation of co-operative societies and also initiate programmes that should empower women through co-operative society as against the use of collateral in order to promote women's economic independence and participation in socio-economic development in their various communities.*

Keywords: *Women's empowerment, Development, socio-cultural practice; Deterrents.*

I. Introduction

Twenty-first century development scholars have brought to focus, gender-sensitive approach as an action to accelerate gender-related discussion and public awareness particularly, the issue of women's empowerment through their membership in cooperative societies. There is a glaring evidence that Africa and the world's population is dominated by women whereas, women have been relegated to the background in several societies (Beneria and Feldman, 1992 and Ekong, 2003). Gender studies have revealed that, women often lose control over resources such as land and houses and are generally excluded from access to improved socio-economic activities. Whereas, male mobility is known to be higher than female, both between places and between jobs, and more women are being left alone to support children incase of dead of their husbands a situation that increase the plight of women in recent times (IDA/IMFI, 2003). It has been argued elsewhere that, in some countries, particularly in the Middle East, South Asia and Latin America, several women are still under their male domination. In the societies named above, women cannot engage in paid jobs or travel without their husband or father's written permission. In addition, they carry a double or even triple burden of works as they manage to cope with domestic work, childcare and subsistence food production, in addition to an expanding involvement in paid employment (Udoh and Ekpeyong, 2010; UNDP, 1998). In Africa, the picture of women marginalization is gloomy as all women are under the control of men, work under men's supervision, married by men and influenced by men's opinion (Conger and Kanungo, 1988 and Clark, 1991).

As a relatively nascent concept in development parlance, women empowerment and Co-operative Associations made its upstart more as a strategic feminist issue than an instrument in the conventional policy issues of the development economies. It is defined by the Learner's Dictionary as "the giving of confidence or skill to someone to improve his/her life". It entails the giving of confidence or skill to women for the purpose of improving their lives. This simplified definition of women's empowerment connotes some sociological significance that touches on gender equity (Okon and Basse, 2006 and Udoh, 2008). While co-operative association will enhance the chance of women to be empowered, recognized and assisted financially and technically, it also has a tendency of reducing the gender gap between men and women.

Writing on the inequality of men and women in pre-industrial Europe, Engels observes that, the development of private property was responsible for the subjugation and domestication of women (UNDP, 2003; Ukpak, 2002. and Udoh, 2001). It follows therefore that, for ages, women's place had been in the "kitchen." To the extent that, whatever labour they put up toward the maintenance of the home in particular, and the society at large, was never remunerated. This non-computation of women's productivity in the Gross National Product (GNP) does not, however, imply that women never contributed their quota towards the development of the society (Alui, 2003;2007)

Undoubtedly, the issues of poverty, unemployment, marginalization and suppression of women have continued to appear in various development discourses, especially among Third World countries in general and particularly in Africa where the problem of women discrimination is prevalent (Khan, 2000 and World Bank,

1996). This has made many developing societies to continue to chart the course of women's liberation through Co-operative Empowerment Programmes (CEP). Momsen (2004), in recognition of this fact argues that, in every country the jobs done predominantly by women are the least well paid and have the lowest status. Again, in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, Russia and China where most jobs were open to men and women under communism, the transition to capitalism has led to increased unemployment among women, a situation that called for a concerted intervention and policy action to cushion the incidence of gender inequality nationally and internationally (Also see Ibanga, 2002 and Eade, 1997).

In Nigeria, the problem of confronting the plight of women is noticeable in areas such as employment, education, inheritance as well as occupation. The issues of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic status of the Nigerian Society makes the phenomenon of gender inequality more challenging as obnoxious cultural factors are brought to bear in several societies making women subject of ridicule. Among the Hausa-Fulani ethnic tribe, for instance, women were not only to be seen, but were also not to be heard. They must marry and remain behind their husband's confine till death. However, though similar problems were experienced all through the country, it became relaxed as one travels down south, particularly, among the Yoruba, Ibo and Ibibio speaking tribes. (Udoh, 2001, 2005, Ekong, 2003).

The issue of empowerment through co-operative association has come to be recognized as a step in the right direction towards eradicating poverty and reducing the gender-gap in the society. In particular, there has been an improvement in education, employment opportunities and political participation for women in Nigeria. Again, the thirty-five percent affirmative action has positioned Nigerian women on a participatory platform in Nigeria's policy making while public and private companies have equally boosted their management/administrative strength with the appointment of women into sensitive positions (Cornwell and Sarah, 2000, Coll, 2000 and Igbuzo, 2000). In Nigeria some states such as Akwa Ibom, Imo, Kaduna, etcetera, have made girl's education free, while women that pursue professions such as law, medicine, engineering, architecture and accounting have been awarded scholarship up to the university level.

In Akwa Ibom state in particular, empowerment programme and co-operative association for women is one of the priorities of the state government. In addition, government has declared education free and compulsory at the primary and secondary school levels. Also, there has been a legislation against child abuse, trafficking and labour, while early marriage and childbearing have reduced drastically. Empowerment of rural women in particular, through micro-credit facilities, co-operative societies, provision of residential quarters, farm inputs such as fertilizers, seedlings, etcetera, is now a priority of the state government (Dyck, 2001; Krug, 2002 and Mose, et al. 2001). Currently, diverse organisations at the state and national levels have started to show interest in empowering women. Again, institutions such as government ministries, NGOs, International agencies, as well as well-to-do individuals are showing interests in women empowerment. Despite the lofty efforts in improving the conditions of women in that direction, women in Akwa Ibom State especially those residing in remote rural communities, where traditional cultural values are still being practiced, continue to suffer from poverty and discrimination (Azeez, et al. 2005, Conger, et al., 1988; Udoh, 2001, and Dade, 2005). In order to promote women's economic status, address the current gender-gap, reduce poverty, and provide information data base for effective women's empowerment in the area, the present study therefore seeks to answer the following questions:

- i. Are women aware of the co-operative empowerment programmes in the State?
- ii. What are the rational for women's empowerment?
- iii. What strategies are being adopted to empower women in the area?
- iv. Could membership in co-operative societies enhance the chances of women's empowerment?
- v. What challenges are being faced by organizations in the course of women's empowerment and what strategies could be adopted to overcome these challenges?

Answers to the above hypothetical questions require much broader analysis which will offer critical insight into the challenges of women's co-operative empower in the area.

Objectives of Study

The study seeks to achieve the following o objectives:

- i) To unveil available empowerment sources available for women in the area.
- ii) To educate women on how to access the available opportunities for their empowerment.
- iii) To evaluate the extent to which women in the area could contribute to community development; and
- iv) To evaluate the challenges facing women's empowerment in the area and how to ameliorate such problems.

Co-operative associations and empowerment programme in Nigeria: Review of literature:

Women's capabilities and potentials can be dormant, unused or untapped if not properly harnessed. Empowering women can be attained if effective policy measures and programmes are embarked upon. One of

the ways through which women could be empowered include formation of and membership in co-operative associations, provision of incentives or motivation in form of loans, grants, promotion of women's education and provision of farm inputs as well as technical assistance among others. (Nwabah, 1996; Enterprise, 1999 and Ikeanyibe, 2009). It has been asserted elsewhere that, the best way women could break away from male grip and domination is through women education (Udoh, 2008). Clark (1992) also observes that "the road to a successful career for women in any profession of their choice is through education, and this is the highest level," (Clark, 1992:17). One sure thing to note at this point therefore, is that education has the power to enrich the lives and compatibilities of the people, mostly the rural women (John, 2009; 2002, and NPC, 2005). According to Nwabah (1992), if qualitative education is provided to women, there is the tendency for them to be marketable and can therefore escape from the challenge of gender bondage in both labour markets and in other social spheres (Rappaport, 1987 and Ramakrishna, 2001).

Griffin and Night (1990), Okin (2001), Igbuzor (2000) and Momsen (2004) in their different studies on women's empowerment observe that if the health statuses of women is improved through the provision of cheap and affordable health services, then, there will be an enhancement of efficiency in productivity that will also reduce their workload. However, Cornia (1990) and Modu (2005) clearly pointed out new approaches to the alleviation of women's problems to include:

- a) A simple pregnancy management programme consisting of periodic check ups for pregnant women, supplementary feeding for malnourished mothers, vaccination against mortality and the training of traditional birth attendants;
- b) Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) which is the most appropriate treatment for most digestive tract infection should be promoted, while improvement in water supply, sanitation and health education are best form of prevention, and
- c) An essential drug programme to many health problems including infectious disease, respiratory disease and insect borne disease, should be promoted.

While Cassen (1979), Eade, et.al. (2001) and Ibanga (2002) agree that the many regulations militating against the development of women should be removed and replaced with laws that act as incentive to women in their effort to help themselves out of the predicament they found themselves, Whetten (1996), Mitter (1989) and Esuma (2000) noted differently that improving the role and status of women through empowerment is important, not for socio-economic development of the society alone, but also to reduce their dependency on their husbands, fathers and other family relatives. It has also been argued by Ekong (2003) that, the best approach towards empowering women is to organize them under co-operative associations. As observed by Amma (2013), Co-operative and Women Association (CWAs) provide opportunities for improved standard of living.

According to World Bank (1992), Sarin (2001) and Ashford (2001), increase in the economic independence of women would stimulate the preference for small families through hanging the opportunity cost of bearing and raising children. Moser, et al., (1985) observed also that women should be made to participate in decision making policies, or in the planning, execution and management of projects that affect them directly. This view is also shared by Ekong (2003) when he observed that such participation allows for the tapping of human resources of women. But Awe (1996), posits that in order to reduce some of the socio-cultural and economic constraints that hinder the status of women in the society, as well as improved their income generation abilities, there is the need for total enlightenment of the women folk so that they could be given the opportunity to develop themselves and have the same opportunities as men to contribute to the progress of the society in a bigger way (Also see Udoh, et al. 2010).

Hopter (1999) in his contributions noted that, women's empowerment through Co-operative Association is a strategy that several societies, particularly, the advanced ones have already employed to eradicate poverty and dependency among women. To him, proper liberation of women from the shackles of poverty lies on the formation of co-operative and empowerment associations and self-help groups. For women to be economically empowered, they must focus their strategies on forming savings and credit-based Women Groups and Association as well as engage in income-generating Activating-based Group. Thus, he emphasized different micro-strategies such as:

- i. People's savings as the basis for group formation, and
- ii. People's savings to solve consumption/credit needs.

But according to Ekejuba (1977), Ismail (2000) and Iheduru (2000), for women to be properly empowered, space should be created for the projection of their views among policy makers; strengthens the capability of the media to effectively report women's activities and getting them to be involved in the information super highway. Again, balanced and comprehensive education should be encouraged while

adequate access to material, human, and social resources should be promoted in order to encourage strategic choices in their lives (Also see Udoh, 2004; 2008).

Although Nigeria as a leading country in Africa has evolved various strategies to empower her women, and even as women now rise in power through this encouragement, certain fundamental problems continue to limit the effort of governments, NGOs and individuals from achieving the needed goals of women's empowerment. It is in the light of the above challenges that the present formulation seeks to investigate what challenges hinder Co-operative Association as instrument for women's empowerment and how such challenges could be ameliorated.

II. Cases and Methodology

The field work for the study focused on four (4) Co-operative (OSUSU) Empowerment Schemes in Akwa Ibom State. Two (2) of the Co-operative Societies are sited in urban areas of Uyo and Ikot Ekpene while the other two (2) are sited in rural communities of Mbiafun Nkwono (Ikono Local Government Area) and Abak Usung Atai (in Abak Local Government Area). Criteria for selecting the scheme include, the presence of evidence of empowerment to women who constitute its. Data gathering focused on the catchments areas where the Co-operative Association programmes were launched. This was to assess its impact and influences on empowerment of women in these communities. The aim was to provide better understanding of empowerment through co-operatives membership and what factors inhibit its full implementation and success in the area.

This methodology is adopted because it enables the researcher to obtain first hand information from women organizations as well as empowerment agencies in Akwa Ibom State. It also helps in collaborating information obtained from the field with those gained from studies made by other scholars. In addition, the methodology makes statistical explanation simple and accurate.

A total of three hundred and twenty (320) women respondents were interviewed informally as well as through participant observation. Two focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held. During the first FGDs at Mbiafun Nkwongo, sixteen (16) women participated while twelve (12) women participated in Abak Usung Atai. In all, twenty eight (28) women participated in the FGDs. To achieve a reliable FGD information, participants were assembled by educational and occupational groups only. The FGDs provided a wider perspective of local experience with membership in Women Association and Empowerment of women. Those interviewed informally included; President, Secretaries, treasurers as well as identified beneficiaries in each association. Some prospective beneficiaries were also interviewed to determine reasons behind their membership in the association.

III. Finding and Discussion

i. Awareness and knowledge of women empowerment programme in the area:

Findings from the present study show that, empowerment through Women Association in the state is a recent strategy. Although there have been some forms of empowerment in the area, such opportunities only opened to men who were regarded as heads of their various families. Recent attempt to empower women was first brought forward under the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) of the Federal Government which was latter adopted by States and Local Governments. The study indicates that, government attempt to reduce poverty among women necessitated the formation of women co-operative associations for easy access to soft credit, technical assistance as well as employment and education. In this study, more than four-fifth (97.0 percent) of the respondents agreed that, they were aware of the existence of one form of empowerment association programme or another. They also observe that, such associations exist in churches, families, villages, status groups and in clans.

This goes to confirm the position of Akwa Ibom State Information Report of 2005 that, the awareness of women's empowerment in the State through co-operative societies has increased from 2.8 percent in 2000 to 4.8 percent in 2005. According to this study,, one hundred and one (101) respondents from Ikono reported that they were aware of empowerment programme, one hundred and seven (107) respondents knowledge that empowerment programme existed in Ikot Ekpene, while one hundred and twelve(112) respondents accepted having knowledge of women's empowerment association in Uyo Local Government Area.

ii. Measures Adopted to Empower Women in the Area:

Data from present study show that two strategies are mostly used to reach out to women for empowerment. Respondents in this study identified membership in development unions/ethnic associations and membership in Co-operative (OSUSU) Organisations as the ways that women could be mobilized. Respondents also identified church associations, community/residential associations, professional or work place associations as well as age-grade associations. In all, 73.3 percent of the respondents interviewed accepted that they benefited or were empowered through co-operative societies while 26.7 percent of them attributed their empowerment to either churches, ethnic unions or micro-finance banks.

Probing our respondents further, respondent observed that, co-operative societies do not charge high interest on any facility, and their terms are not too difficult for them to meet, unlike what is obtained in the micro-finance banks or other lending institutions. A large majority of the respondents (92.4percent) claimed that all members have equal opportunity to benefit financially provided that, a member is sincere and was willing to comply in the membership terms of the association. All respondents (100.0 percent) accepted that, before they became members, it was difficult for them to eat, trade, farm, assist their children in school fees or even buy cloth. But with the change in their financial status through empowerment, some of these needs are easily being met. Some members who are traders accepted that they used to obtain their articles of trade on credit, but now they often pay upfront to get their articles. This shows that, co-operative empowerment has indeed improved the financial status of women in the area.

iii. Challenges for effective women empowerment:

Findings from the studies show that effective empowerment of women in the area suffers serious setback mostly due to adherence to certain obnoxious socio-cultural practices still going on in the area. Respondents identified such socio-cultural factors to include; non-inclusion of women in family assets, poor attention to girl-child education or training, early marriage and early child birth, and the rating of women with low capability to carry out any serious economic task. Of the 320 respondents, more than three-quarters (81.3 percent) complained that, they were not included when their family property or assets were shared. That the sharing was done only in favour of the male members of the family.

Probing our respondents further, Mrs. Arit Umoren, during one of the FDGs at Ikono complained as follows:

“I lost my father while I was in secondary school over twenty five years ago, and when his assets were shared, no female was included. It was shared only among the men. At least that could have helped me to complete my secondary education then.”

And another respondent added:

“when I wanted to obtain a loan from a micro finance bank at Ikot Ekpene, management demanded that, I should bring my husband who, incidentally was critically idled in the hospital. I could not obtain that loan because I lost my husband after some weeks and the bank suspended the negotiation...”

And yet, another respondent added:

“... In our community then, it was not easy for a woman to buy land or build her own house except through her husband or brother's help. After the death of my husband, I bought a land in my brother's name and when he got married, he forfeited the land and drove me away from the family house simply because I am a female...”

Another respondent from Uyo added:

“..... One major problem that hinders women's empowerment includes poor education. You can see that in our areas, men are considered first in terms of training. So, women resort to early marriage and rearing of children. Most of them have no good jobs and no good source of income...”

The above testimonies go to confirm the challenges faced by women. These call for the need for their empowerment. It also shows that indeed, certain socio-cultural factors work against the empowerment efforts of government in Nigeria. The picture is the same in virtually all African Societies.

IV. Conclusion and Policy Suggestions

The findings of the present study draw attention to the fact that while Government, Non-Governmental Organizations and individuals are trying to fight against poor status of women through empowerment programme, certain cultural practices continue to thwart such effort. Unfortunately, there is insufficient field-based information to show the extent of the problem both in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole. It also shows that indeed women who are members of co-operative societies stand the chance of being empowered than non-members. This connotes the fact that, co-operative societies form the basis through which empowerment could be realized. Based on the author's findings, the present formulation suggests the following policy directives in order to eradicate obnoxious traditional practices and bring to focus the importance of women empowerment through membership in co-operative associations:

- The development of a comprehensive, inter-sectoral and concrete women co-operative programmes and policies. In very strong terms, empowerment of women through co-operative organisations should go beyond financial assistance, as most women, especially those in the rural areas may have other needs than finance. Education, training and mobilization should be pursued concretely by all donor organizations.

- As much as possible, women's empowerment must concentrate in areas of investment that will liberate women from the shackles of men's domination and poverty. Areas that will give women economic and political power should be intensified by donor organizations.
- While donor agencies should develop culturally acceptable programmes/projects, certain obnoxious cultural practices such as not allowing women to have shares in the family assets, not being educated or trained like their male brothers, etc. should be discouraged. Women should be given equal training in the family;
- Donor institutions/agencies should, as a matter of priority initiate programmes /projects that will be easy for the women to key-into.
- Proper channels of delivery and mechanisms to identify women who are really in need of assistance/empowerment should be evolved. There is a strong need to encourage women to form or join co-operative societies. This proves to be the only way they could be reached and empowered. The Nigeria example of allocating thirty-five percent to women in politics should be emulated by other African countries. African leaders should show more seriousness in raising the status of women not only in public but also in the private sectors.

However, the strategies and suggestions in this study for stimulating women's empowerment through co-operative associations in Nigeria and Africa, may not be exhaustive, nonetheless, they constitute an important addition to existing policy options for development planners. If properly and realistically reviewed, integrated and applied, they would go a long way to enhancing women's empowerment process in the region.

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