

# GENDER PERSPECTIVES AND ISSUES IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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## Abstract

Gender and women studies are gaining currency in the social sciences. However, there are dearth of information on the application of theories and issues that surround the woman question and empowerment. The objective of this paper is to contribute a part in solving this lack of information by reviewing six theories and raising issues concerning women empowerment using secondary data. It is the conclusion of this paper that efforts at gender and women studies must be hinged at reducing the inequality between men and women by improving the five levels of empowerment which are: welfare; access; conscientization, participation and control. That development projects must include the target population in this case women, in the process of needs assessment, problem identification, project planning, management, implementation and evaluation. *Key words: Gender, Woman, Empowerment, Inequality, Development.*

## Introduction

Gender equality is an important part of a development strategy that seeks to enable all people women and men to escape poverty, improve their standard of living and contribute positively to societal development. Therefore the attainment of

gender equality is not only seen as an end itself but a condition for the achievement of sustainable development.

Development then becomes more than the creation of opportunities for people to earn sustainable livelihoods, it also then necessarily requires the creation of condition for men and women to seize these opportunities. Similarly, good governments that give men and women equal voices in decision making and policy implementation is development.

The Beijing conference of 1995 provided a unique opportunity for women to become a critical part of the decision making process in matters relating to economic, political and social advancement all over the world.

The Beijing platform for Action (BPA) thus touched on twelve critical areas of women concerns which include: women's health, violence against women, media, increased resources for women access to education, women's rights as human rights, improved economic and political participation and empowerment (National Gender Policy, 2006: 13).

Mayoux (1997) had argued that investment in women will enhance their capacities; it will help them to become empowered to make their own choices as well as lead to superior economic growth and development. This effort goes beyond setting up bureaucratic institutions to deal with women empowerment and inequality in society.

To Yunus (1997) women empowerment is defined as gaining more controlled participation opportunities, and more responsibility in various aspects that may be social, political, economic or legal that has an effect on their lives. While Hasheni, Schuler and Riley (1996: 144) developed the indicator of empowerment based on the eight criterions that are: freedom of mobility, ability to make small purchases, ability to make large purchases, involvement in public protests and political campaigns and economic security and contribution to the family support.

These eight criterions provide the basis for the measurement of women empowerment, though deep rooted

cultural practices and beliefs may make it to differ from society to society and from culture to culture, it is important that there is something for which women empowerment can be measured, assessed and judged.

It is also important to emphasize that, development projects must include women in the process of needs assessment, problem identification, project planning, management, implementation and evaluation. This will include women in the development process and eventually lead to empowerment, equity and finally equality.

To achieve these, this paper examined six gender based theories and raised issues concerning women empowerment.

### Conceptual Issues

Gender as it is presently used referred to the social construction of the relations between male and female in terms of the roles they play, in that certain roles are classified as females and others as males (Idyorough 2005). The concept of gender lies in the fact that not only biology is involved in the understanding of the differences between women and men in society.

Western feminists have argued that the differences between women and men lie in culture not in nature. Therefore gender is socially constructed not biologically determined (Pereira, 1996).

Just like gender, the concept of womanhood is socially constructed. In Igbo society what makes you a woman is what society ascribes at that particular time. In Ifi Amaduime's book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*; she asserted that, a woman can acquire the rights ascribed to a man, and can be called a man. This view is supported by the practice in Nupe society where an old woman who lost her husband can be regarded as a man. However, the womanhood in Yoruba culture is contradictory, at times emphasizing equality and at other times, inferiority (cited in Pereira, 1996).

In addition to being male and female, we are also members of classes or ethnic groups or races. The social construction of gender differs from one ethnic group to another and from one race to another. Though in the west, it has generally been assumed that there are only two genders, masculine and feminine, but social anthropologists have argued that in other societies there may be three or four genders. For example, one may ask whether women who do not have children are viewed as constituting another gender.

The advantages of the concept of gender to feminist theory and methodology is that it enables us to recognize the differences between women in terms of gender formation and identity and the way these are also formed around class, race, sexuality to mention these few. It also enables us to recognize masculinities as gender that varies. Gender is a useful concept when it comes to deconstructing the 'woman question'. Posing the issue as the woman question assumes that men are the norm and women are 'the problem'. Instead it should be recognized that there is a 'man question' (Roberts, 1996).

### **Theoretical Approaches in Women Studies**

Ityavyar (1992) identified six main theoretical approaches in the general area of women and development. To him these theoretical approaches have their roots in the main theoretical paradigms in the social sciences such as Functionalism and Marxism. These six theoretical approaches are summarized in this work.

### **The Conservative Approach**

This perspective is derived largely from the work of early functionalist such as Raddiffee-Brown, Malinowski, reinforced by socio-biological explanations of Murdock and Tiger and Fox.

The socio-biologists and the conservative camps holds that the biological differences between sexes are necessary and effective causes of division of labour by sex in all societies. They argued that women are actually inferior to men and this

inferiority was inherited as every society is burdened with gender – role divisions. In which men are always warriors, therefore, assigned the responsibilities of protecting the group, while women work at home rearing children and performing domestic tasks.

The implication of this approach is that women are pushed squarely out of public life, policy making even when policies that affect them are made. It also reinforces the patriarchal system of male dominance and finally it re-enforces systemic subjection of women.

### **Modernization Feminism**

This perspective draws strength from modernization theory. It believes that men are excellent leaders in any given human society. Oakley (1974, 1982) argued that human cultures are diverse and they are human creations and not an invisible hand of biological forces. She dismissed the idea of sexual division of labour as an ideology enforcing the superiority of the male gender. She believes that gender roles are determined culturally rather than biologically.

Modernization feminism is theoretically shallow as the conservative approach that they reacted to. They are also very gullible as they are easily deceived with little economic and political tokens which often reach only a few of the top bourgeois women (Ityavyar, 1992). For example, the activities of better life for rural women eventually turned out to be bitter life for rural women, while few urban women are seen glavanting from one state to another state in expensive levies and head gear, led by a flamboyant Maryam Babangida the wife of then military president. The creation of the Ministry of Women Affairs, National Commission for Women, headed by women are a few of such tokens enjoyed by bourgeois women which did not and does not actually address the marginalization of women in society.

## Critical Feminism

The very immediate and central concerns of critical feminism are the reformation of concepts and an attack on epistemological assumptions that affect the conception of the position of women in society (Ityavyar, 1992).

Critical Feminism as a theory questions the long established myths and even jokes that misrepresent or downgrade women and demand that such should be abolished to allow for new and better socialization process in society which will not deny women their rightful position. They are therefore sensitive to the language, style and general attitudes of men towards women in Nigeria society (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1988). She is informed by the fact that being a man is enough for a person to disregard any Nigerian woman, no matter her status socially in the society.

Critical Feminism opposes the situation that development and anything else in society is defined in relation to male interests, needs and concerns. So concepts such as Chairman, three man panel to mention these two are offensive to them and would prefer concepts that covers both gender such as Chairperson, three persons panel and so on. Prefix such as 'MRS' for married women are queried. They argued that since Men are 'MR' whether married or unmarried, women too should be 'MS'.

This theory largely engages attention on things that can be termed as trivial. However, they submitted that these issues have implications for the improvement of the status of women in society and indeed development.

## Traditional Marxist Approach

The statements that systematically addressed the women question are found in the works of Marx and Engels and later Lenin. Engels outlined the successive socio-economic forms which underlay the activities of early human history as mankind gained increasing mastery over the sources of subsistence. He undertook a logical history of the genesis of sexual inequality in society. He unveiled the relationship between the forces of

production and the nature of the family. He argued that in the early human evolution the forces of production were communally owned and the family was the society and the society was the large family. He summarized his position in the following words:

We have three principal forms of marriage, which correspond broadly to the three principal stages of human development. For the period of savagery, group marriage, for barbarism, pairing marriage, for civilization, monogamy supplemented by adultery and prostitution (Engels 1942:138).

Engels argued that as private property ownership was developing, monogamous marriage developed alongside, especially private ownership of the forces of production and the rise of the State.

The State was therefore needed to protect the system of private property and to ensure the continuity of monogamous marriage. Men had complete control over women so as to ensure the paternity of their offspring as de jure inheritors of their property.

To Engels private property was the cause of monogamy, which is apparently the subjection of one sex by the other (obviously the female sex continuously remained subjected by the male sex).

This argument unearthed the historical causes of the subjection of women in society. However, it completely ignored social, religious and cultural contribution to this subjection.

### **Socialist or Radical Feminism**

The Socialist or Radical Feminism addresses two related issues of biological inequality of man and woman, and the social class system. The argument is embedded in the fact that historically, women have borne the greater burden for the perpetuation of the species. That the caste-like system in which men receive ego gratification and enjoy creature comforts from their domination of women came from the biological inequality

of the sexes. The biological inequality of man and woman provides the basis for institutions such as the family which according to the socialist feminists developed to keep women oppressed and subjected (Ityavyar, 1992).

As Ityavyar (1992) argued, the dual emphasis on biology and social structure has made socialist feminists to investigate issues which have always not been considered political. Issues such as love, sexual intercourse, vaginal orgasm, abortion, rape, courtship, marriage, the sex role system and sexuality.

To a growing generation of radical or socialist feminists, it is sexism and patriarchy that explain the problem of women in society and not just capitalism as presented by the Marxists.

### Marxist Feminism

This theory is an attempt by scholars interested in the women question and is out to overcome the general concepts and historical confusion of the socialist feminists and the apparent absence of a serious consideration of the woman question by the Marxists. This theory carefully blended the Marxist and socialist feminist theories. So, both the biological and material explanations of the woman question are the central focus of Marxist Feminism.

The position of women in any society is related to the prevailing mode of production as argued by the Marxists; however stopping the analysis there may limit our understanding or knowledge of how women within that mode are treated as human beings.

When Marxism and Feminism are taken together, then the knowledge becomes more comprehensive because Marxism deals with social relations of women and men within a given mode of production while Feminism deals with forms of Patriarchal ideology within a given mode.

Ityavyar (1992) summarized Marxist feminism as saying that, not only women suffers in our society. That other disadvantaged people in society such as peasants, unemployed, artisans, labourers and workers also need to be liberated from



capitalist oppression. Thus, the real solution to the woman question is the overthrow of capitalism and patriarchy.

However, the theory failed to outline systematically how these two evils will be overthrown to free women finally from the stranglehold of male dominance.

These six summarized theories are attempts at understanding the 'woman question' and how the situation and condition of women can be bettered in the Nigerian Society. No matter the shortcomings of these theories they have given an inroad into understanding the woman question and solving it. In the light of this, the next section attempts to provide workable ways at solving the woman question within a holistic development agenda.

### **Women, Empowerment and Development in Nigeria**

Any attempt at understanding woman question and empowerment must first of all attempt a definition of development. Development is a process by which access to resources and improved welfare are obtained and sustained. Most development agencies see development as a process in which members of the target group (in this case) women are involved as participants in the development process.

Development that will lead to empowerment must involve the improvement of the beneficiaries' capacity to recognize and overcome their own problems.

To correctly understand women development, it is important to combine the concept of gender equality with that of empowerment for women involved in the development process.

Five levels of concerns surround women developments which are: control, participation, conscientization, access and welfare.

**Welfare:** This refers to the level of the material welfare of females relative to males in areas such as; nutritional status, food supply, and income. Action to improve welfare will entail increased access to resources.

**Access:** The inequality of access to resources has a direct relationship with gender gap. Restricted access to resources is responsible to women's lower levels of productivity. Such restricted access in the areas of land, credit, labour and services, relative to men, women have less access to education and wage employment.

**Conscientization:** This level is more of a believe gap, belief that women's lower socio-economic position and the traditional gender division of labour is part of a natural order or is "God ordained". This conception of the gender gap is usually reflected and conveyed in everyday messages in the mass media, school, textbooks, etc. Empowerment will mean conscientization to remove these beliefs at the levels they are entrenched.

**Participation:** The gender gap in women participation is the most visible and obvious phenomenon in the gender gap. Small proportions of women are found in the legislative assembly, in the leadership of political parties, in the management of public organization, and the private sector etc. Equality here means women's equal participation in the decision making process, in a development project, women will be represented in the process of needs assessment, problem identification, project planning, management, implementation, and evaluation.

This is my understanding of development whether women development, development of the rural areas, development of the urban areas etc. It must be via the mobilization for participation by the targeted group.

**Control:** The unequal relations between women and men at the household, where husbands' control their wives' labour and consequently the cash income, means increased wife's income may not lead to increased welfare for herself and her children. Therefore, women should have increased control over the reward of their efforts.

These five levels of empowerment must be found at the different dimensions of the development process, which always ought to be found in a project if such project is contributing to the

process of overcoming gender inequality and enhance women development/contribution.

## Conclusion

This work woman in development: issues and perspectives, attempted to conceptualize gender and women, six theories are reviewed and summarized, and issues surrounding women and empowerment in Nigeria are raised and discussed. This work concludes that, efforts at mainstreaming women in development in Nigeria must be hinged at reducing the inequality between the genders, it must include the improvement of the five levels of empowerment which are: Welfare, Access, Conscientization, Participation and Control.

It is recommended that, any development project must include the target population (be it, women, rural dwellers, urban dwellers, youths etc) in the process of needs assessment, problem identification, project planning, management, implementation and evaluation, that is, the mobilization of the target population for participation. It is through this that gender equality can be achieved, enhanced and sustained.

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