WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY IN NIGERIA'S LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The concern on women's empowerment in sustainable development and sustainability discourse is imperative due to the place they occupy and the role they perform in any nation, especially at the local government level; they are referred to as development partners in this context. However, when viewing population growth rate and economic prosperity in Nigeria, like most parts of the world, the issues of poverty, poor income, unemployment, and under-representation in decision making have continued to affect the role and contributions of women to sustainable development. Relying extensively on secondary materials and historical analysis; this paper examines women's empowerment invincibility in sustaining development. The paper contends that there will be negative impact on sustainable development if women are not adequately empowered in the midst of teaming population of Nigeria; and hence resulting to dwindling economic growth and development. The paper therefore proposed that ways to achieving sustainable development would involve a great commitment to women empowerment through education and training, provision of soft loans, attitudinal change, entrepreneurial effort and decision making as recommendations.

Keywords: Decision Making, Local Government, Sustainable Development, Training, Women's Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

There is a direct relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development; that is why in the world we live in today, it is practically impossible to avoid the issue and discourse of women's empowerment in development context. For instance, the issue is discussed among political scientists, civil society groups, politicians, economists, feminists, philosophers, teachers, environmentalists, journalists, scientists and technologists, and among others. At different periods, there is a persistent reference to women's empowerment in form of affirmative action, gender rights, gender equality and balance, women's political participation, socio-economic construct of women, rural-urban women life style and the like (UN, 2015; UN, 2012; UNDP, 2006; UN, 2000; UN, 1996; UN, 1980).

Growing concerns about the impacts of women's empowerment on sustainable development have generated lots of interest as to enhancing the political and economic capacity of the local women in developing countries like Nigeria, where vulnerability to low political and economic capacity is high, because they are the marginalized group in the society (Ihemeje, 2013; Agbalajobi, 2010). Thus, women's empowerment is a vehicle to ensuring effective sustainable development.

Analyzing women's empowerment is therefore germane to finding ways to helping the poor rural women in the local government areas of Nigeria on a sustainable basis.

For the purpose of this discourse, the paper is structured into four parts. First part is the introduction; the second deals with conceptual clarifications; the third focuses on Nigeria's local governments, sustainable development and women's empowerment while the fourth is the conclusion and recommendations.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Concepts are identified as the most basic tool science has at its disposal (Dinwerth & Pattberg, 2006:186). Empowerment, sustainable development, political participation and women are the concepts in this paper. Thus, this section deals with the discourses of concepts as the foundation of its analysis (Akindele et al, 2012:175; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998: 891). Such orientation is informed and compelled by the fact that existential complexities and sustainability notion cannot be isolated from women's empowerment, particularly when thinking and appraising sustainable development in the Nigerian local government purview.

Conceptualizing 'empowerment' in this context, establishes the link between women's empowerment and sustainable development. This is because women make up 50% of the world's population, and have contributed immensely in economic and social development in the last three decades (UNECE, 2012:4). Three definitions are put forward about empowerment. First, empowerment is a term frequently used in general terms, often synonymous with a multi-dimensional definition of poverty alleviation, however the term "women empowerment" is often considered best avoided as being too controversial and political (Burkey, 1993:67). Second, empowerment can be defined as a "multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives (UNECE, 2012:5). Third, empowerment is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their societies, by acting on issues that they define important (Page & Czuba, 1999). Arising from these definitions, empowerment has become a tool used to harness

potentials of women as active partners in sustainable development; not only at the local government level, but also at the state and national levels. As such, women empowerment describes the increasing and improving social, economic, political, environmental and legal strengths of the women to ensuring equal right, make them confident enough to claim their rights and participate meaningfully in decision making process.

The term sustainable development deals with any form of development programme that can be sustained. In other words, any development effort that cannot be sustained is not a sustainable development. Hence, sustainable development is that kind of development which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN, 1987). Sustainable development is conceptualized as resting on inter-related pillars: economic development, social development, and environmental protection, preservation of cultural diversity, political development and legal development (UNESCO, 2001; Burkey, 1993). The synergy between sustainable development and women's empowerment is undoubtedly threatened at the local government in Nigeria by inequality, low sustainable livelihoods and unlimited time allocated to take care of children, the sick and elderly (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2013). Another threat is that women are treated in a tokenistic manner in project management committees; and they offer inadequate initiatives for community-based sustainable development (Harcourt, 2012). Dealing with these threats requires redistributive measures that address inequalities and realize human rights and capabilities; they need to be prioritized as central to sustainable development.

The concept of political participation and women presupposes a departure or shift from the popular structure. Most definitions regarding women and political participation have an outlook that starts with "women" and ends with "political participation" (Abiola & Lanre, 2003; Agbalajobi, 2010; Anifowose, 2004; Conway, 2001). They clearly reveal semantically fused description. Thus the concept here takes a reverse order from the common definitions because, I argue that the idea of political participation should come first and be well-grasped before establishing its synergy with the women. There is no universally accepted definition of political participation (Uhlaner, 2001). However, political participation is often referred to as "political engagement" or "political involvement in decision making" (Lamprianou, 2013). Political participation refers to "citizen's right to seek to influence public affairs; it can take many forms, the most notable of which is voting in elections, but also including joining a political party, standing as a candidate in an election, joining a non-governmental advocacy group, or participating in a demonstration" (Klein, 2005:1). Political participation concept can be viewed from rights cum duties perspective and influence perspective (Riley et al. 2010; Arowolo & Aluko, 2010; Klein, 2005). In the rights cum duties perspective, political participation has been traditionally thought of as "a set of rights and duties that involve formally organized civil and political activities (e.g., voting or joining a political party)" (Riley et al. 2010). In the influence perspective, "the essence of political participation in any society, either civilized or primitive is to seek control of power, acquisition of power and to influence decision making." In view of these perspectives, I argue that since democracy is essentially embedded in sustainable development, then women should not be excluded from political participation. Therefore, political participation and women concept is defined as all kinds of political engagement that allows full, active and contributive involvement of the women folk towards effective decision making process in any democratic setting that translates to sustainable development

NIGERIA'S LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The local government is the closest tier of government to the people of Nigeria and comprises of 774 local government areas from among the existing six geo-political zones that make up the entity referred to as The Federal Republic of Nigeria; occupying the lowest level to the state and federal governments respectively. Oviasuyi, et al. (2010: 81) observed that the term local government administration in Nigeria attracted serious attention both nationally and international since the great local government reform of 1976. However, the confidence and faith of citizens was scuttled in the area of service delivery (Oviasuyi, et al. 2010: 81). The mention of service delivery is a sine qua non to sustainable development; just as Abubakar (2005: 2) notes that "we do not see much evidence of involvement of citizens in articulating development priorities, not to talk of integrating these priorities into national plan framework." When citizens at the local government level do not enjoy public essential services such as good road networks, electricity supply, portable water, and functioning health centres and free education, they care less about contributing to their locality.

Specifically, the local government areas offer the Nigerian women at that level the environment and avenue to articulate, develop and achieve their potentials; while their role and contributions to sustainable development constitute an integral part of the development process and should not be inaccessible to them. On the contrary, local government authorities that is supposed to cater for the well-being of their people, especially women in their area of jurisdiction do not seem to be making enough effort to encourage participation of their constituents on the matter of felt-needs (Abubakar, 2005:2), while it is equally argued that the local government have not used discretionary power to plan for development in their various jurisdiction (Olanipekun, 1988:6) by virtue of inadequate autonomy; hence reducing women contribution within joint decision-making processes, and as a result, they (women) opt for independent economic control (Kabeer, 1998).

Sustainable development in this sense is about the contribution of women to development process at the local level, but the question is: how empowered are they? In a study carried out among Urhobo local people of Delta State for instance, results showed that men own the land, less than 20% of them are engaged in diverse non-rural economic and socio-political activities (Idisi, 1996:263). In other parts of Delta and Edo States of Nigeria, largely in local government areas, over 70% of the farmers are rural women and girls (Ukpere, 2009:271). In another study conducted by the British Council on "improving the lives of girls and women in Nigeria," with emphasis on local female populace, results showed that 47% of Nigerian women are mothers before they reach 20; only about 4% of women are local government councilors, while only 7.2% of women own the land they farm (British Council, 2012). In addition, women are more likely than men to be affected by environmental problems because of their social roles and more impoverished status in local communities as they are more vulnerable to storms, floods and climate change impacts (Stevens, 2010:4). Besides that, most women in local communities are confronted with economic deficits as they lack financial muscles. This challenge is very pronounced and worse in developing countries, including Nigeria that adds up to the seventy percent of the world's 1.3 billion people living on less than US$1 dollar a day who are either women or girls (Stevens, 2010:3). In the light of these responses that clearly reveal the zeal, courage, strength and constraints of women to ward sustainable development at the local level, it thus appear therefore that women contribute so much but achieve a little due to their level of empowerment which is ridiculously low.

Stevens (2010:3) posits that women are essential to poverty reduction because of their role in increasing economic opportunities; thus, women are the cornerstone of development. Corroboratively, women are increasing behind the organization of co-operatives producing artisan goods as well as agricultural products from coffee to chocolate in the quest to enhance their livelihoods, their communities and local eco-systems (Stevens, 2010:6). RESULTS (1997) opines that 'reaching and empowering women' are its second key goal after poverty reduction; and in fact, empowerment for women has recently recorded a major strategy in meeting not only Millennium Goal 3 on gender equality, poverty reduction, health, HIV/AIDS, Ebola virus restraint; rather maintained synergy with Goals 5 and 8 in the Sustainable Development Goals target (ICSU, ISSC, 2015). Plethora of recommendations have been made in the past to ensuring that women are empowered and contribute effectively to sustainable development at the local government levels by government, international organizations and community-based efforts but all to no avail (Akosile, 2008; Agee, 1996; Ukpore, 2009).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from this exploration, it is pertinent to conclude that women play pivotal role in sustaining development at the local government level in Nigeria, despite their inadequacies. This paper establishes that it is low rate of women's empowerment that pose adverse effect to sustainable development at the local government level, hence the need for better women's empowerment programmes. It is believed that if women were in more productive and decision making roles, we could be moving faster and more assuredly towards sustainability in the economic, political, social and environmental sense. Problem identification is crucial to enhancing the capacities of local women to contribute to development locally and nationally. In a bid to meet up with current Sustainable development goals 5 and 8, this paper recommends the following:

- Education and training should be given to women at the local government areas irrespective of their age. Through this medium more local government women would be sensitized about their rights, role and responsibilities toward development of their localities and thereby catalyze sustainable development process nationally;
- They should be sensitized about climate change and the use of environmental resources like felling and planting of trees (deforestation and afforestation);
- Government should stop paying lip-service about women empowerment because women are very important instrument to sustainable development, rather build skills and capacity in gender mainstreaming;
- There must be attitudinal change among the women themselves at the local government not to totally rely on their husbands, governments and other interventions about political and economic independence. It will make them self-reliant and self-independent;
- Women should be provided with investment opportunities at the local level through greater access to agricultural inputs such as land, labour, fertilizers, soft loans and high yielding seeds; and
- Enlightenment programmes for the women on the need to be actively involved civic engagements and decision making by attending town meetings involve in community development efforts and participate in the electoral process.

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