

Understanding Gender and Sustainable Development

Innocent Modo and Solomon Ogbu*

Gender inequities constitute a very controversial subject today especially in Africa where it has virtually become a way of life. While some scholars argue that gender imbalance in society is natural, since, according to them, females are naturally inferior to males, feminist writers have in recent years joined forces with the women folk to press for gender equity. Gender disparity in society is indeed a sensitive issue in Africa in that the position and status of women are implicitly defined in the dominant patriarchal value system. Thus any approach to change in the situation must reflect and interrogate value systems and perceptions embedded in the process of socialisation. Women in all societies should be given enough freedom to compete with their male counterparts in all spheres of life. The development of society requires the collaborative efforts of both men and women, and women who have been marginalised in the past should now be encouraged to rise to the challenge of making significant contribution to sustainable development.

Introduction

Issues on gender relations have remained a vexed question from time immemorial. But renewed arguments, claims and counter-claims about gender have become more vigorous today than ever before in the wake of the clamour for women liberation and empowerment in the last quarter of the twentieth century. This controversy has provoked divergent views by gender-minded scholars especially in Africa where gender inequities are rooted in the belief system of the people, and reinforced by the world-wide notion that women are by nature inferior to men.

* Dr. I. Modo is a Senior Lecturer at the National University of Lesotho. Dr. S. Ogbu is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Abuja, Nigeria.

Such scholars as Tiger, Fox, and Murdock who are associated with what is known as the Victorian School on gender relations argue that women are biologically the weaker of the two sexes and should therefore be accepted as such. Murdock (1947) contends that childbearing dissipates the physical strength of women and that they are therefore naturally meant to carry out soft duties while men who radiate much stronger physical prowess are predisposed to more tasking, energy-sapping, and mentally demanding responsibilities. It is against this background that Talcott Parsons (1959) insists that women should content themselves with their natural role of providing comfort, security and warmth for their children and the men folk. This, according to him, is consistent with biological division of labour which ensures the smooth functioning and stability of society.

The Victorian School's position on gender operation no doubt appears logical since it is based on biological (natural) factors which draw a line of demarcation between men and the women folk. However, the exigencies of development and nation-building in the modern time demand a change of heart by the Victorian school. Evidence shows that even though women are weaker, their complementary role in society is a crucial factor for sustainable development.

It is in the light of this that critical feminism opposes a situation where development and anything else is defined in relation to male interests, needs and concerns" (WIN 1985:4). Indeed the process of community development is no longer an exclusive right of men. It is high time men accepted challenge and share with women in decision making process. Writing on 'Women and the State', Moore (1988:149-150) observed that women and men may be theoretically united in their revolutionary struggle, but in the final analysis they turn out to be different sorts of political subjects with regard to the state. She further argued that in both socialist and capitalist societies, the modern state works in part through a process of politicising women's and men's roles; it politicises or constructs the kinds of citizens women and men are supposed to be under the state's jurisdiction. Moore (1988:150) further, remarked that interestingly none of the known forms of the state, whether ancient, pristine or modern, politicises women's roles in such a way as to give them *de facto* rather than *de jure* equality with men. Comparative data suggest that even in states where women's emancipation and political participation receive state advancement and support,

the institutions of state power as well as formal political roles, remain male-dominated (Hamilton 1978:87; Mitchel 1974:412). Little wonder therefore that O'Brien (1982:252, 256); and Modo (1995:109) argue that men and women are joined together by class consciousness but are widely separated by reproductive consciousness.

The increasing number and relevance of women in all walks of life in recent times call for re-thinking of gender roles. In terms of population, for example, records show that the population of women in the world is only slightly below that of men. In Nigeria, the 1991 national head count put the population of women and men at 43,969,970 and 44,544,531 respectively. Besides, women bank managers, accountants, educationists, politicians, etc. all over the world are justifying their positions by working assiduously and conscientiously to achieve organisational goals. In Lesotho 54% of school going students are females and women dominate the bureaucratic institutions (UNESCO 1998) yet women are regarded as minors (Maqutu 1992:116).

Since the end of World War II in 1945, there have been a steady increase in the number of feminist writers criticising gender-based imbalance and advocating the removal of all forms of gender differentials in the sharing of resources and responsibilities and having unhindered access or opportunities at all levels of society. Ai Mazrui (1991) laments that the lot of Nigerian and indeed African women generally is what may be described as 'politics of centering or liberation' and not empowerment since, according to him, the typical African woman is consigned to child-bearing and fetching of firewood and water. In the same vein, Tadiodi (Guardian, June 22, 1997:6) has called for the full participation of women in the affairs of their nations, arguing that there is a wrong relationship between empowerment of women and social development. Gunder Frank (1979) has been particularly vociferous in advocating women empowerment and increased role in national development. Leith-Ross (1939) Alele-Williams (1986) Callaway (1987), Chalton (1984) Akande (1985) relentlessly called for the elimination of any form of obstacle that may limit women's capacity to participate fully in development.

All these scholars have made incisive contributions to the burning issue of gender

relations in society. Apart from enriching the literature on gender relations with particular reference to the injustices and all manner of discriminations being perpetrated against the African woman, the feminists have also highlighted vividly the dangers posed to national development by excluding women from playing an active role in the task of nation building and rapid development. However, the pundits could have demonstrated more maturity and restraint in their reaction to the issue. A revolutionary approach prescribed by the pundits would only compound the problem. Gender differentials constitute an integral part of Africa's cultural heritage, and it is only a gradual but sustained process of social re-orientation and adjustment that will ultimately eliminate the social stigma from the people's culture.

Gender Inequities and Effects on Development

Gender which refers to the male or female sex of a person reminds us of the disparate relationships between men and the womenfolk in different societies of the world. Women are generally regarded as the weaker sex and this finds practical expression in the cultural practices of almost all races of the world.

In Africa the customary law clearly treats women as 'minors' and denies them adult legal status and rights (Maqutu 1992:116); World Bank Publication, 1995:19). Their efforts towards obtaining credit, productive inputs, education and even information all of which are needed for productive ventures, are frustrated. This has dire consequences for the development of any society. It would seem as if in terms of hierarchy the social order of the traditional African society takes the form of the Supreme God, smaller gods, ancestors, man, woman and child in that order. The place and definite roles of each group are built into the value system of the people and have remained so over a long time. Thus the roles of the sexes are stereotyped, insisted upon by the people, and transmitted from generation to generation through rigorous socialisation process. The traditional African society through routine socialisation makes the female child to internalise the virtues of performing household chores such as fetching water and firewood and cooking food in addition to rearing children and satisfying the sexual desire of their husbands. On the other hand, male children have the audacity to be boisterous, aggressive and assertive. The gender-based division

of labour has hampered the full development of women and society by restricting their contribution to social progress and development generally.

The marginalisation and exploitation of women, especially in Africa, have elicited a storm of criticisms and outright condemnation world-wide. For example, Tadiodi (Guardian, June 22, 1997:6) laments that the stereotyped apportionment of roles to the sexes has put African women at a disadvantage, subjected them to psychological trauma and limited the overall development of the region. There is a correlation between the roles of women and national development in that societies that limit women participation in national development inadvertently slow down their rate of development since rapid development requires the active participation of all patriotic men and women. The history of all the developed countries of the world is replete with records of significant contributions of women. Examples include Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain, Mrs Ali Bhuto of Pakistan, Queen Amina of Nigeria.

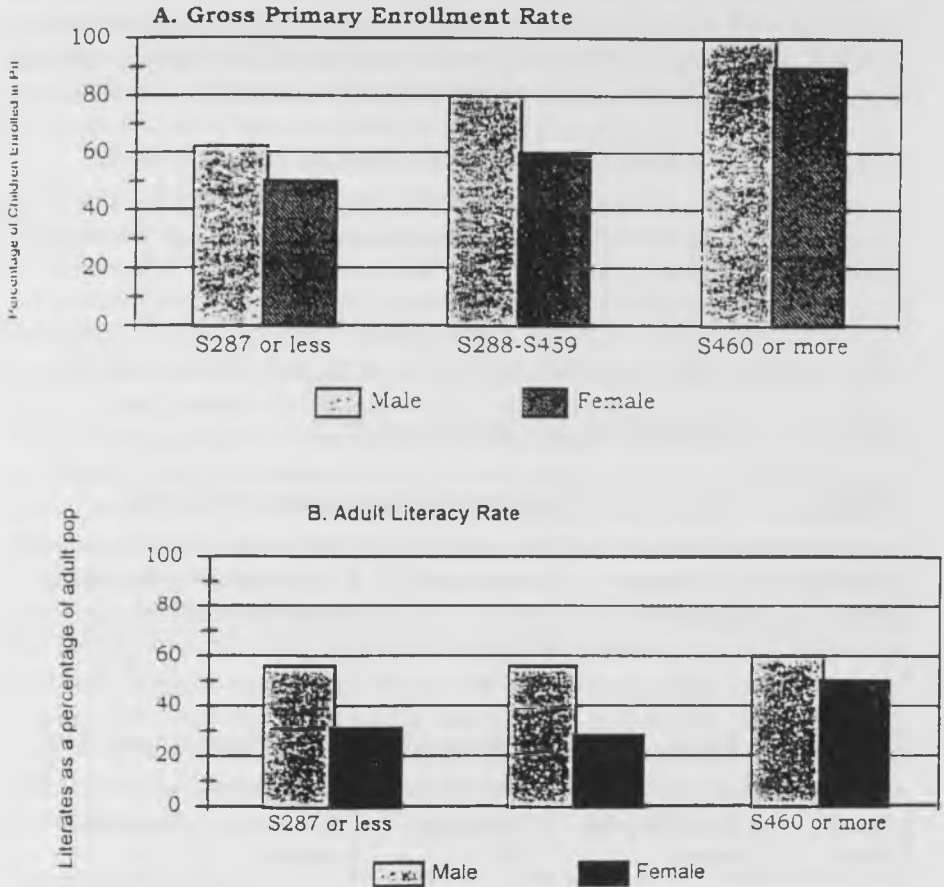
The apparent exclusion or severe restriction of women from participating actively in social development hampers the rapid development of a developing society like Nigeria. Although Section 39 of the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex, there is no doubt that the roles of the Nigerian women in the task of national development are limited. For example, women in northern Nigeria were denied universal adult suffrage until the late 1950s. As Thomas-Emeagwali (1988) argues, meaningful development cannot take place without creating a congenial condition for women to realise their full potentials. To that extent, women empowerment is a *sine qua non* for equitable gender relations. A UNICEF report (1956) indicates that gender equities in the family and in society at large are a necessary condition for economic development and stability.

In Africa as a whole and especially in Lesotho, there is clear evidence of what the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action describes as 'feminisation of poverty' (World Bank Publication, 1995:18). Gender differentials make it difficult for Lesotho women to have a stake in the economy. Their access to, and control of, productive resources are limited. For example, Lesotho women do not own land which is a primary means of production. Rural women are easy prey to men's

exploitation. Their involvement in the economy is mainly agrarian, and this takes the form of helping their husbands in weeding the farm, carrying home and marketing the farm produce. These activities are neither quantified nor paid for. Besides those having husbands still fair better for 50% of rural Lesotho lives below poverty line and 34% of the poorest are made up of female headed families (UNICEF 1998). This goes to show that the typical Lesotho woman is only considered good for child bearing, preparation of food, but not adequately cared for. Generally in tasks involving men and women; women are underpaid. The 1996 UNICEF report indicates that 40% of the world's labour is made up of women. The average wage for women in non-agricultural work is only three-fourth in comparison with that of men. Yet it has been estimated that the total value of women unpaid subsistence and household work is eleven trillion dollars annually.

Sadly enough, women are also discriminated against even in the area of social services. The World Bank Report (1995:20) shows that "there is a systematic gender bias in having access to basic social services, notably education, skill training, and health." This is particularly glaring in the education sector where the enrolment gap between males and females widens from the primary school level to the tertiary level. In 1990, females in Africa represented 45 percent of total enrolments at the primary school level; 40 percent at the secondary school level; and 31 percent at the tertiary level (Ibid.). Female adult literacy in Africa is 36 percent as against 59 percent for male adults (Ibid.). The only exception is Lesotho where females go to school and males go to the mines (Gill 1993:56; UNICEF 1998). There are gender differentials at all levels of income, implying that gender bias is a poverty/income problem rooted in social and cultural factors which determine, among other things, female enrolment in schools. Thus "women, especially in developing countries, are thought to bear an unequal share of the burden of poverty" (Population and Development Review, 1998:131). The following figures illustrate the situation vividly:

Fig. 1: Gross Primary Enrolment and Adult Literacy Rates of Sub-Sahara Africa, by Gender and Income Group 1990.



Source: UNESCO 1994

A realistic effort towards the development of any society must proceed from labour-intensive growth with a focus on eliminating gender inequities. The few women who have made their mark in the political arena have amply demonstrated to the world that if given a chance women can prove their mettle. But in relative terms the overall success of women in politics remains imponderable throughout the world. The results of the general elections of 1991-93 in Nigeria provide an eloquent testimony of the lopsided trend in favour of men:

Table 1: Results of State Legislators Elections held in 1991-93

Total No. of State	Total No. of Seats contested	No. of women elected	Percentage	No. of men elected	Percentage
30	1,172	27	2.3	1,145	97.7

Source: National Electoral Commission (NEC)

Table 2: Results of the Senatorial Elections held 1992-1993

Total No. of Seats	Women elected	Percentage (%)	Total No. of men elected	Percentage
91	1	1.1	90	98.9

Table 3: Results of Federal House of Assembly Elections held 1993

No. of Seats	No. of Women elected	Percentage (%)	No. of men elected	Percentage
593	13	2.2	580	98.8

Source: same as tables 1 & 2 above.

Nonetheless, women cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand even in the

game of politics where a few of them have shown that they are as good as men, if no better! The world was held spell bound when Mme Vijaya Lakami Pandit in September 1953 became the first Woman President of the Eighth Assembly of the United Nations; Mrs. Siramavo Badranaike in 1960 became the first woman Prime Minister in the world; Mrs. Golda Meir in 1969 became the first Prime Minister of Israel; and Mrs Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister remained at the helm of affairs of Britain for 12 years. In Lesotho, Chieftainess Mantšebo acted as Regent from 1941 to 1960, and prepared the country for independence

In Nigeria such eminent women as Queen Amina, Madam Tinubu, Mrs. Fumilayo Ransome Kuti and Margaret Ekpo contributed immensely to the political development of their respective communities. Similarly, A.R.O.M. Alakija and Mrs. Adebisi who distinguished themselves as female barristers in Nigeria in the 1940s and 1960s respectively represent an epitome of women's capability and vibrance in the intellectual world. In view of all this, it is obvious that women have a great potential for enhancing the development of any society. It has therefore been argued by Ben Joseph in an article titled "The Role of Women in our Society" that "any attempt to plan or even implement plans without seeking the full co-operation of women is doomed to failure and cannot be regarded as serious attempt to move forward." Mazrui (1991:15) asserts that the task of addressing gender inequities in Africa requires a three-dimensional approach: liberating, centring and empowering. He contends that the rural African women have been at the centre of the economy by providing water, energy (firewood) in the home, but not necessarily liberated or empowered. Besides, democracy requires that both men and women should work assiduously as partners in progress to build an egalitarian and stable society. Any pretension to democracy without the active participation of women would be a contradiction of the concept of democracy.

Concluding Remarks

The population of women relative to men in the world has increased tremendously and this points to the urgent need to involve them fully in the decision-making processes, policy formulation and implementation of their countries. The task of nation-building and the desire to achieve maximum economic growth and

development require all hands to be on deck. In Nigeria, status-enhancing programmes for women like Better Life for Rural Women, the creation of a full-fledged ministry of Women Affairs, etc. have been put in place but none of these programmes had yet produced appreciable impact on the life and status of the women. Women should no longer be left on the sideline.

It must be admitted, however, that in Africa the process of women empowerment may take a fairly long time since gender inequities are rooted in the culture. On their part, women should strive to get out of the bondage of male exploitation and domination by taking education seriously, coming out of their shell to contest for elective and appointive offices and by demonstrating a high sense of patriotism and commitment towards their nations. However, women empowerment should not be misconstrued by the women folk as a licence for disrespect for their husbands, habitual disregard for men's views, or scheming to frustrate and upstage men in the management and allocation of political and economic resources.

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