

Women, Community Education and Rural Transformation in Nigeria: A Synergy

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Abstract

Women have always been relevant in any development process either at home or in their various communities. They are the key actors in bringing about real changes positively given their population statistics and their active roles in the community. They are often at the grassroots level and are seen to be important in decision making processes though in most cases this is not acknowledged or appreciated given the patriarchal nature of the communities and also at higher levels of human socialisation. This paper seeks to bring to discourse the crucial importance of women and how the transformation process of their communities may not be worthwhile if they are not actively involved. The popular notion that if you train a woman you train a community is the underlying factor guiding this paper. The paper is also premised on the fact that if women are giving the right atmosphere and environment to operate then, a strong synergy is expected to bring about positive rural transformation for the betterment of all the stakeholders.

Keywords: Women, Community Education, Rural transformation

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Introduction

It is no more news that women have made major contributions to the upkeep of their families through the work of their hands. Women used to be and are still the main producers of household goods and managers of families. This view is corroborated by Klein (1981) who maintained that women bring resources to the family from outside through work. Women work because they need to do so to support their families and ultimately the community.

Women everywhere but especially in rural areas constitute an underprivileged group who through tradition and poor preparation are characterised by inferior social status. Despite this, women constitute about 46.6% of the total population and are responsible for 60-80% of the food produced in Nigeria which is the focus of this study (Imhabekhai, 2009).

In addition to their traditional, reproductive, household and community roles, a woman according to Sesay and Odebiyi (1998), more often than not, derives her social status from her two major roles—that of a wife and a mother. As a mother, the woman is the primary custodian of the cherished values of her society. This she does by devoting her energies to life-preserving activities of procreation which means having as many children as possible.

Like most other patriarchal societies of the world, a Nigerian woman is socialised into a culture of female subordination (Aina, 1998). A Nigerian woman is not only subordinate to her husband and men in her own family of orientation, but also to the entire members of her husband's family. Boulding in Aina (1998), illustrated the familiar constraints on women's role by the triple-role concept of 'breeder-feeder-producer'. He argued that in all societies from the past to the present, the breeding of babies and the feeding of humans of all ages is exclusively the work of women.

In the rural areas, women constitute a larger percentage of the population. This is mainly because the male gender is so mobile in their quest for greener pastures and is often interested in going to the urban areas to make more economic gains, therefore leaving women and children in their rural abodes to return intermittently for visit.

CONCEPT OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHARACTERISTICS OF A RURAL COMMUNITY.

Rural development entails efforts directed towards initiating policies, programmes and projects meant for the improvement of the standard of living of people in rural communities. It is a process of transforming and enriching the lives of rural dwellers through provision of infrastructure, social amenities and services that impact positively on rural people.

The various characteristics of a rural community are discussed below:

Population size, density and distribution.

The word rural is the opposite of urban. Therefore, if Nigeria's definition of rural which dates back to the 1963 census is any 'settlement with less than 20,000 inhabitants', one can conveniently define a rural area as any community with less than 20,000 people. The use of the number of people in a community to categorise it as rural according to Imhabekhai (2009) does not enjoy a universal acceptance. Rural community also has political connections. For instance where a community has a very low population, but it is a local government headquarters,

it is regarded as an urban area in Nigeria. This is why all local government headquarters are categorised as urban areas in Nigeria.

The distribution of the population of rural communities is such that they usually contain large proportions of ageing and growing populations (old people and children) since most of the able-bodied young men and women may have migrated to urban centres in search of education and employment and to enjoy better living conditions. Since population mobility is higher among the males than females, the rural communities usually consist of more females than males. All these make dependency ratio higher in rural areas than urban areas.

Political system/Leadership patterns

Families, households and kindred have their recognised heads or leaders that provide leadership to each group. Most rural communities practice gerontocracy (ruling by elders) and membership or ascension into positions is strictly according to age, integrity and laid down procedures and not by amount of wealth/income or strength of the individual. In some cases, ascension to leadership positions is through the principle of primogeniture (the first son of the immediate past ruler succeeding the father) Imhabekhai (2009).

Quality of available infrastructure and social amenities

Rural communities in Nigeria lack modern infrastructure for development and social amenities. These include roads, electricity supply, health institutions, educational institutions, good and adequate water supply and other facilities that make life worth living and enjoyable. Transportation is usually difficult and expensive since in many cases, there are no good roads. Health services are either not available or in poor supply. The implication of this is that many children in rural areas die from preventable diseases like malaria, diarrhoea, cough, measles etc. as a result of poor health care systems. In the area of education, the quality and access to education in rural areas is low. There is a high degree of infrastructure decay in rural schools where they exist. Most classrooms are dilapidated and seats and desks for pupils are hardly available.

Occupations

The majority of people living in rural communities engage primarily agricultural practices: crop farming, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing and at the same time, local crafts like weaving, pottery, carving, blacksmithing and the likes. These are their major occupations and sources of livelihood. Roles are shared within the family system according to gender and age.

Subsistence economy

Rural dwellers are mainly engaged in subsistence economy rather than market economy. They produce goods and services in such a manner and quality that are sufficient for family needs, and when the situation arises may be sent to the market to get the money they need for payment for goods and services that they need but do not produce.

Habitation pattern

Rural inhabitants build their houses in clusters according to households or kindred. This means that people from the same household or kindred build their houses in clusters in the same vicinity so close to one another that they can readily interact without any hindrance. They know one another by name and behaviour perform activities together or communally and share things in common. There is a strong feeling of oneness among the people such that whatever happens to any member whether in times of sorrow or joy is taken as affecting all the people in the community. The pattern of building houses so close to one another forms the basis for the extended family system practice in rural communities in Nigeria.

Social control measures

Social control in rural communities is enforced through informal pressures in such a manner that both the offender and the aggrieved are satisfied at the end of it all. This promotes peace and oneness. The various forms or methods of social control include shaming, restitution, fines, communal work. The fear of bringing shame on oneself and or to the family helps to control the behaviours of the people in the rural community. The fear that a girl that is promiscuous or becomes pregnant before marriage brings shame to her and parents or may not get a husband in the community moderates sexual behaviours in girls. Similarly, the fear that a male child with anti-social behaviours may not get a good wife or be assigned position of responsibility in the community controls the behaviour of male children. Formal measures of social control like taking cases to police station and courts for litigation are highly discouraged and have traditional consequences.

Physical features.

Most rural communities are located in difficult and inaccessible terrains like swamps, rocky areas, desert etc. These make the development of these areas difficult and expensive. The physical features influence the types of

occupation the people engage in and the type and quality of development programmes that can be provided. Because of limited access to rural communities, hardship and poverty exist and these encourage rural-urban migration. Rural communities therefore become unattractive to development partners and investors. Such migration depopulates rural areas and over populates urban areas with varied consequences.

Poverty situation

Poverty has been defined as the absence of the basic requirement essential for survival and to an extent the comfort of man. Vincent-Osagie defines poverty as;

A situation where individuals or communities lack enough of the basic necessities of life which they require to make a happy and successful living. It may manifest in inadequacy of food, clothing and housing/shelter, unemployment, poor health, low-income etc. It relates to deprivation not just of income but also of health, education and democratic rights. All the characteristics discussed above account for the high level of poverty in rural communities of which women are in the larger percentage.

WOMEN AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION.

Achieving real progress regarding the situation of women in society has been a major priority for many policy makers, national and international Organisations. For many reasons, rural women are at a disadvantage compared to women living in cities and urban areas.

Community education is a veritable tool that can liberate women from ignorance, it is a known fact that community education means enlightenment, and also is a means of raising awareness of the rural women for community development. Community education positioned within the meanings of community may be construed as a caring process with a big emphasis on relationship and interpersonal connections with the attendant focus on processes and methods shaped to enhance these caring qualities. In the heart of these lie the fundamental and significant roles women play in the growth and development of any given community. Since population mobility is higher among the males than females, the populations of rural communities usually consist of more females than males. The rural women form a substantial proportion of the poor and most members of the female labour force live and work in rural areas. About 70% of Nigeria's population live in rural areas and are impoverished. Research has indicated that women are more likely than men to use their incomes to improve the wellbeing of their families and communities. This is especially the case for children.

Community Education may be interpreted as a dimension of community development empowering powerless people to address their own educational and social needs. Terms such as non-formal adult education, outreach, extra-mural, liberal adult education, locally based adult education, lifelong learning, training and informal adult educations are also used as synonyms for community education in different circumstances.

WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE FOR RURAL TRANSFORMATION

Apart from the multiple roles women usually have as household managers and family carers, their contribution to local and community development is significant. Despite this, rural women everywhere are in a minority in decision making and planning particularly at regional and national levels.

Women are also strong contributors to the economy and form a large proportion of the agricultural work force globally. They can do much more given equal resources.

In Nigeria, women like their counterparts all over the world are highly industrious and form a major economic backbone for the family. Their contributions may not be explicitly appreciated because of the predominantly patriarchal culture of the society that tends to undervalue women and the contributions of the women folk to the economic survival of the family (Ogunrin 2003). Recognised or not, rural women play a very active role in promoting the economic wellbeing of rural communities.

Women are undoubtedly the economic livewire of any community (Aina 1998). No meaningful household food security can occur without women who make up more than one half of the rural population. Women produce a large part of the world's food. Exact data is very hard to come by but FAO estimates that women are the main producers of the world's staple foods like maize, wheat and rice.

Health is regarded as the primary basis of development without which nothing can be achieved. At the heart of this are the women who are in charge of hygiene, food preparation, child birth and child rearing. Health services are either not available or in poor supply in rural areas. The result is that many children in rural areas die from preventable diseases, in the same vein, maternal death is high in rural areas. Educations of women in the right steps to prevent these diseases have helped to reduce avoidable deaths.

In terms of the education of children, women are in charge seeing to the general upkeep of the children. The quality of children is largely on them, rural women's improved training and education is therefore crucial to enable them acquire the knowledge and skills required to expand the range of their income-generated activities in a changing rural economy.

Politically, women are more in politics, despite this, they are still being side-lined in the decision making

processes. Decisions in rural areas as in general are currently made in groups that are predominantly masculine and tend to reflect the values, perspectives and life experiences of the people who make them. The role of rural women in public life is weak, although, they may be elected to the village board or local government, they are often not represented in proportion to their involvement in rural activities and thus have a lesser ability to influence the decisions made. It has also been observed that there appears to be a strange contrast between women's economic dynamism and their political passivity. Baker noted that "market women are the most highly organised socially cohesive group in the city".... However, they rarely lobby for specific measures or directly attempt to initiate public policies of particular concern to themselves. Community education therefore geared towards the sensitisation of the need for more women to be involved is very crucial for rural transformation.

For effective rural transformation, community education can help to change the ideology of women themselves. The ideological factors such as low self-esteem, inferiority complex and participation in one's subordination are deeply embedded in the consciousness of women (Ogunrin 2004). There is the need through community education to change these ideological factors for rural transformation.

For rural transformation to be more effective, policies attracting women and young girls to stay in the rural areas should be promoted so that migration to urban areas will be low.

Ensuring a gender perspective is incorporated into the mandates and activities of organisations through the development of concrete action plans and programmes is also essential. Of equal importance is the need to provide training and awareness-raising for decision-makers as well as for staff of those ministries/government bodies dealing with rural issues, the experiences and needs of women in rural areas and the importance of recognising gender in rural development policies and planning.

CONCLUSION

For any community development to take place, every participant in the process of decision making should be allowed to make her/his own contribution irrespective of status, age, gender or level of education. There is the need to create an environment that encourages rural women's participation in decision making.

Community education can come in different forms in bringing about rural transformation: Community rally, public lectures, community days, cooperative societies, religious programmes are some of the avenues where enlightenment programmes can be done for more effective transformation. The need to establish local training institutions and programmes in rural areas and promote more innovative training models that fit women's daily schedules including the development of part-time courses, community-based initiatives, correspondence courses and distance learning at all educational levels is crucial to any rural transformation.

Also, there is the need to develop and promote personal skills training courses for rural women on leadership and empowerment, public speaking, decision making and self-assertion.

It is also important to create new channels for enabling women to have inputs by promoting participatory approaches and involving women's groups and associations in decision making processes at all levels. This cannot be overemphasised.

Encouraging dialogue and the building of links between local women's associations and networks is very important. Rural development organisations, authorities and promoting affirmative action policies in technical ministries such as agriculture and rural development are very crucial in the process of rural transformation. A better sharing of domestic role through community education is necessary. According to Sanday (1975), for women's status to be positively related to their productive roles, "men and women must be more or less equally dependent on one another economically, socially and politically"...

A full recognition of women's role in rural development would greatly contribute to rural prosperity and would in particular help sustainable rural development in communities all over the nation. All of these can only be achieved through community education which will ultimately lead to rural transformation for the betterment of all.

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