

## A CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*Literature is replete with studies on women empowerment in different parts of the world. However, little is often mentioned about the history of women empowerment struggles Nigeria. This paper sets out to fill that gap by providing a precise literature review on the history of women empowerment initiatives from the global platform to the African context, specifically Nigeria. The lingering debates on how to appropriately measure empowerment are discussed. In addition, the views of some scholars such as Mary Wollstonecraft, John S. Mill, and Boserup are mentioned. Furthermore, the action-oriented contributions of many African women including Adelaide Casely-Hayford, Funmilayo Ransome-kuti, Margaret Ekpo, and Ruth Kharma are highlighted. The implication of empowerment initiatives is focused on women farmers. In conclusion, the paper upholds that women empowerment struggles have recorded great success across many contexts in the world, including Nigeria, although much remains to be done.*

**Keywords:** Beijing Conference, Gender equality, Nigeria, Women empowerment,

### The concept of empowerment

A perceived channel to easily surmount gender inequality is women empowerment (FAO, 2012). The conceptualization of empowerment varies widely. Consequently, Mehra (1997) cautions that effort must be made to ensure the definition of empowerment is quantified according to specific contexts. Literature shows that many scholars accentuate 'agency' as an essential element of empowerment, although they use different terms (Kabeer, 2001; Abu-Lughod, 2009; Schuler &

Rottach, 2010; Njoh & Akiwumi, 2012). Efforts to define empowerment are often faced with many challenges as there are often contradicting general set of indicators. Consequently, Santillan, Schuler, Anh, Minh, Trang, & Duc (2004: 536) observe that:

*Although general 'domains' or 'dimensions' developed in one setting may be transferable to another, specific indicators will need to be developed in any given setting, taking into account the purpose for which they are to be used.*

Deriving from the growing focus on women's empowerment, there has been a corresponding rising body of literature attempting to define the concept. Definition of empowerment in broad terms is often situated within two concepts – process and agency. With respect to women empowerment, empowerment as a process is seen as the development of policies and programmes that will enable girls and women to challenge current norms and change conditions. Mehra (1997:138) also notes that ‘the definition of empowerment should include the expansion of choices for women and an increase in women's ability to exercise choice’.

Kabeer (2001) defines empowerment as “the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them”. The position of Malhotra, Vanneman, & Kishor (1995) concurs with the definition by emphasizing that the definition highlights a transition from relative powerlessness to greater equity in the exercise of power and as such differentiate “empowerment” from the general concept of “power”, as espoused by dominant individuals or groups. They argue further that to be considered 'empowered', women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change. That is, women must engage in agency. For example, health and development strategies may support or enable women's empowerment, but they cannot provide empowerment as if they were health services or commodities themselves.

According to Santillan *et al.* (2004: 546),

*Women's agency is often expressed in terms of women's ability to make decisions and affect outcomes of importance to themselves and their families or, put another way, as women's control over their own lives and over resources. 'Process', the progression to a state of greater equity is a second element of empowerment emphasized by many writers on the subject.*

They argue further that the definition proffered by Kabeer (2001) provides a basis to differentiate “women's empowerment” from the related concepts of “gender equality” or “gender equity”. This is because a transformation towards gender equality or greater gender equity would not be described as “empowerment” unless women had been agents of that change.

Some criticisms have been made on how empowerment approaches are being promoted in recent times. Prominent among these criticisms is that advanced by Batliwala (2007), who posits that empowerment has been ‘abused’ as the mainstream approach taken by recent gender scholars end up taking the ‘power’ in empowerment out, thereby making the whole essence defeated. She described this as the

*... distortion of good ideas and innovative practices as they are lifted out of the political and historical context in which they evolved and rendered into formulas that are 'main streamed'. This usually involves divesting the idea of its cultural specificity, its political content, and generalizing it into a series of rituals and steps that simulate its original elements, but lacking the transformative power of the real thing. Thus good ideas - evolved to address specific development challenges - are altered into universally applicable panaceas. Transferring the correct rhetoric - buzzwords and catch phrases emptied of their original meaning - is a vital part of this legerdemain (Batliwala, 2007:89).*

The following facts can be deduced about the concept of empowerment due to the amorphous nature of the concept:

1. There is no universally accepted definition of empowerment.
2. Empowerment is a complex process.
3. Since empowerment has different meanings in different contexts, a behaviour that signifies empowerment in one setting may indicate something else in another. For example, belonging to self-help group may indicate empowerment in Northern Nigeria, but not in Southern Nigeria.
4. Within a particular setting, the ways in which empowerment is manifested are likely to vary over time, as social norms change.
5. Empowerment is multi-dimensional as someone who is empowered in one aspect of her life might not be empowered in another.

### **Global Women Empowerment Movements**

Europe is the bedrock upon which feminist movements in many societies today is built (Monteiro & Ferreira, 2016; Colombo, 1981; Einhorn, 1981; Juusola-Halonen, 1981; Kadwan & Weber, 1981; Petra de Vries, 1981; Sauter-Baillet, 1981). The emergence of women empowerment is traceable to the feminist movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe intensified with the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Structures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft. This was followed by *The Enfranchisement of Women* (1851) by Harriet Taylor Mill and *The Subjection of Women* by John Stuart Mill (1869). This struggle was replicated in America by the publication of *The woman's bible* (1895) by Elizabeth Cady Stanton alongside 26 other feminists (McMillen, 2008). Their agitations were geared towards directing attention to the fact that women were being discriminated against in many ways thereby breaching their rights. The overthrow of patriarchy or 'patriarchal equilibrium' was a major driving force (Bennett, 2006:54). According to Motta, Fominaya & Eschle (2011), feminist activism has

been targeted at projecting the poverty, inequality, exclusion, alienation and violence women face in society.

### **The Spark in Africa**

In Africa, women activism began to surface in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, facilitated by the increasing independence of many African nations (Berger, 2008). However, most of the agitations were not theoretical as in the case of Europe and America which utilized the power of the media through publications; although that later emerged (Kolawole, 2002). The attempt to adopt the same pattern of activism in the Europe and America was highly hampered by the differences in language. Nevertheless, events showed that African women did not relent in their struggles for emancipation despite this limitation (Kolawole, 2002).

Prior to the book by Ester Boserup titled *Woman's Role in Economic Development* in 1970, there were other scholars who published books reflecting the plight of African women though not directly stating that women were under subjugation. In some cases, the writers never considered themselves as feminist writers. Nigeria's first female novelist, Flora Nwapa, author of *Efuru* (1966) amongst other books, and Buchi Emecheta, author of more than twenty books including the *Bride Price* (1976) fall into this category. According to Ogunyemi (1985), Nwapa asserted, "I don't think that I am a radical feminist. I don't even accept that I am a feminist. I accept that I'm an ordinary woman who is writing about what she knows". According to Mikell (1995:2), Buchi Emecheta declared, while delivering a speech at George Town University that, "I have never called myself a feminist..."

It follows then that the history of African women's movement was mainly action-based. Their activisms were communicated through such ways as music, fashion, charisma, political influence, and riot (Afigbo, 1966; Nwabughugu, 1982; Weir, 2007; Salami, 2010). Some cases are notable. In Nigeria, Funmilayo Kuti (1900-1978) and Margaret Ekpo are notable in the feminist struggle in Africa. Mrs.

Ransome-Kuti's activism led to the establishment of Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) and Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in the late 1940s. These were organizations and movements that aided Kuti to promote women's rights to formal educational trainings, political participation and employment. One of her notable protest with her AWU members was that which was against Alake of Egbaland, King Ladipo Samuel Ademola 2, when he wanted to impose taxes on women. They protested with the slogan 'no taxation without representation'. The women contended that since they were not regarded as equal members of society, they should not be asked to pay taxes (Peel, 1980; Adebisi, 2008).

Margaret Ekpo (1914-2004) promoted her political activism with her fashion skills. She organized with Mrs. Ransome-Kuti in the 1950s to protest the killings at an Enugu coal mine. In 1954 Ekpo created the Aba Township Women's Association, which later afforded her the opportunity in 1961 to win a seat to the Eastern Regional House of Assembly. This position gave her a greater platform to promote women's issues (Etim & James, 1999). The activism of Ruth Khama of Botswana (1923-2002); Marian Makeba (1932-2008) and Winnie Mandela (1936-) both of South Africa, against apartheid, especially as it relates to women, is worth noting. Earlier African feminists include Adelaide Casely-Hayford of Sierra Leone (1868-1960), Charlotte Maxeke of South Africa (1874-1939) and Huda Sharaawi of Egypt (1879-1947) (McClintock, 1993).

### **Aftermath**

The United Nations (UN), which was established in 1945, adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human rights in 1948. Article one of the Declaration stated that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and article two added that "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" (UN, 1948) All member countries of the United

Nations, including Nigeria, who later joined in 1960, were bound to abide by this Declaration.

As a global effort to promote the course of women, consequent upon the rising intensification of feminist movements in the 1970s, the General Assembly of the United Nations declared 1975 as the International Women's year. During the year, the General Assembly organized the first World Conference on Women, which was convened in Mexico City. The outcome of the meeting was the declaration of 1976-1985 as the UN Decade for Women followed by the approval of a voluntary fund for the decade. After the first world conference on women, three other sessions have been held, namely, Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995).

Remarkably, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has become the basis upon which the progress in women empowerment is assessed (Aina, 2012). Furthermore, the United Nations, included gender equality and women empowerment as goal number three in its Millennium Development Goals in 2000. This was followed by the amalgamation, in January 2011, of UNIFEM into UN Women, which is a composite entity of the UN. This was in conjunction with International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues (OSAGI), and Division for the advancement of Women (DAW). The actions were geared towards instituting policies that will promote women's access to political power and productive resources such as land, technology and credit facilities (Abu-Lughod, 2009).

The formulation of global tools to measure gender equality is another major outcome of women's empowerment initiatives. These tools consist of (UNECA, 2007:5):

- i. The Global Gender Gap, World Economic Forum, 115 countries;
- ii. Gender-related Development Index (GDI), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 140 countries;
- iii. Gender-empowerment measure (GEM), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 80 countries; and

iv. The Gender, Institutions and Development Database (GID),  
Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development  
(OECD)

The African continent contributed her quota to women empowerment through the African Union by declaring the year 2010 to 2020 as the African Women's Decade with the theme: *Grassroots Approach to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE)*. The theme reflects a commitment of the Union to instituting programmes that will stimulate rural development thereby evolving women's empowerment from bottom-up (rural to urban). This was delightedly in contrast with the prevailing trickle-down approach in existing development programmes (Martin, 2013). This move was borne out of the increasing evidences that the inclusive participation in decision-making and exposure to gender related matters through capacity building, education and women's empowerment, among others, are necessary to achieving gender equality in every society (Boserup, 1970). The grass root approach is necessary to close the gender gap in agriculture in order to generate significant gains for the agriculture sector and for society in general (FAO, 2003; Iruonagbe, 2011).

The focus of the theme for the African Women's Decade was categorized into ten divisions. The second division was centered on agriculture and food security. The goals were articulated as follows:

- i. Achieving Food Security and Fighting Hunger;
- ii. Increased women access to agricultural land, farm inputs, credit, technology, extension services, irrigation and access to water through water harvesting, boreholes, among others; and
- iii. Link women to markets through value addition of their products including agro-based supply chain, creating new markets for their produce including organic food stuffs.

### **Impact on Nigeria rural women farmers**

Despite the diverse opinion on what constitutes empowerment, there is a consensus among scholars that access to land, farming technologies, agricultural extension services and microcredit are fundamental to the empowerment of rural women farmers in boosting food production



and ensuring global food security (Santillan *et al.*, 2004; Gupta & Yesudian, 2006; Abu-Lughod, 2009; Pitt, Khandker, & Cartwright, 2006; Schuler & Rottach, 2010; Njoh & Akiwumi, 2012; and Tarozzi, Desai, & Johnson, 2015).

However, studies have shown that many women in many countries of Africa persistently lack rights, control and access to land, credit facilities, farm technologies and extension services (UNECA, 2007). For instance, in a comprehensive study of women farmers conducted in Esan West Local Area of Edo State, Nigeria, none of the women owned the land they used for farming. Only 0.2% of the respondents had access to extension services. Access to credit was reported by only 1.1% of the 457 respondents. Access to farm technologies was found only among 8.5% of the study population (Ozoya, 2016). This study confirms the conclusion of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa on women's access to land credit facilities that many African women are landless (UNECA, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

It was clear from the 1995 Beijing Conference that the Governments, including Nigeria, which participated in Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995, resolved to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women worldwide. Paramount among these declarations is the goal to ensure women's equal access to economic resources such as land, credit, science and technology, vocational training, information, communication, and markets. The Nigerian government has demonstrated an interest not only in improving women's economic status and well-being but also in empowering the women themselves to attain improvements in their lives. Indisputably, women empowerment struggles have yielded enormous success; however, much is left to be done and education for women will constitute a veritable tool in this direction. In terms of agriculture, there still remains a wide gap with respect to access of rural women farmers to land, farm input, credit facilities, technology, market and water. Addressing these issues is vital to empowering rural women farmers.

No doubt, empowering women is empowering humankind. However, the road to such empowerment should not be very narrow or disruptive. Consequently, the success of future women empowerment struggles will be dependent on the ability of activists to broaden their perspectives from women-specific issues to that which will encompass empowerment for the entire family members, both male and female. It is noteworthy to mention how women organizations in Nigeria have evolved from Women in Nigeria (WIN) to Women and Development (WAD) and now it is being driven on the model of Gender and Development (GAD). Evidenced-based research endeavours and action will be very vital to accomplishing the goal of achieving gender issues. There will be need to collaborate with multi-lateral establishments, government agencies and other Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) for optimal success. It is hoped that the current Sustainable Development Goals will help to advance this course tremendously.

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