

# Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Nigeria: The Desirability and Inevitability of a Pragmatic Approach

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## Abstract

Promoting gender equality has become a globally recognized and an acceptable reality. Gender issues have also been identified as critical to the achievement of national development goals. In fact, the attainment of gender equality is not only seen as an end in itself it is equally a catalyst to, and a sine-qua-non for the achievement of sustainable development. This paper which attempted an assessment of the level of attainment of gender parity and women empowerment using three critical indicators namely: enrolment in education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, employment and political decision-making, utilized valuable secondary sources of data. The paper which argues that, at the heart of the problematic of gender disparity in Nigeria, is the action dilemma by the Nigerian government which has compounded the problem of expanding the capacity level that is required to enhance the opportunity of accommodating the varying needs of both male and female gender also contends that the attainment of gender equality in Nigeria which is already time-barred, will be a mirage due to multi-dimensional constraining factors. This paper which subsequently hinged the actualization of gender equality and women empowerment on the desirability and inevitability of a pragmatic approach, concluded with some useful remarks.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, women empowerment, Nigeria, pragmatic approach.

## 1. Introduction

Globally, the growing importance of gender equality has been recognized and accepted. The normative framework for human development (UNDP: 2012) is reflected in the broad vision espoused in the Millennium Development Goals, the internationally agreed set of time-bound targeted goals for ensuring gender equality and advancing opportunities in diverse sectors of the global economy. The convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly and accepted to by 180 states outlines the rights and equality of women, their freedom from discrimination and equality under the law. Also, promoting gender equality that is a sine-qua-non to the actualization of the protection of fundamental human rights is critical to the whole concern for human development that centre on allowing people to lead a life that they value and enabling them to realize their potentials as human beings. Realizing the growing need for gender equality is also germane to the survival and development of children and the building of healthy communities, societies and nations. The gap between the Millennium Development Goal of promoting Gender Equality and its actualization in Nigeria, however, is the action dilemma by the Nigerian government that is typified by mis-governance, lack of political will, the prevailing patriarchal culture, false public investment and the absence of adequate productive capacity that will create the opportunities for women empowerment and development. This problematic explains the inevitability and imperative of a pragmatic action-based approach that will translate gender equality programs into concrete reality. This is especially because the task of achieving the target of gender equality in Nigeria by the year 2015 requires not just passive policies that are separate and distinct from doing, but an active process embodying proper analysis, goal definition, action programs and monitoring results (Ejumudo 2008:2).

## 2. Gender Equality and Women Empowerment

Gender equality (and women's empowerment) has become one of the central themes in global treaties, covenants and declarations principally due to the understanding that it is a catalyst to clear-cut development strategies which is targeted at poverty reduction, improved living standards, good governance and profitably productive investments that are critical to the creation of an enlarged capacity that provide men and women equal opportunity and unrestrained access to decision-making and policy implementation institutions and processes.

Essentially too, African countries have demonstrated some measure of concern about human development problems by initiating specific developmental goals and strategies and accepting the critical role of gender equality or parity in the developmental process. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) adopted in 1981; the Women Right Protocol of 2003; the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) adopted in 2001 are some of the initiatives that are linked with the Millennium Development Goals and at the same time, a testimony to commendable response in the African continent.

Historically, women have comparatively been subjected to marginalization, oppression and injustice both in public and private life. Although the Millennium Declaration underscored the importance of eliminating all forms and shades of discrimination, exploitation, social harassment and gender bias as well as all situations that encourage the infringement of the rights of women through government policies and decisions, traditional and customary practices, cultural prejudices and religious extremism, a lot more commitment and a pragmatic approach that will translate into concrete actions are desirable around the globe, particularly in Africa. Parity between boys and girls in primary school enrolment has, for instance, been achieved in most regions of the world, except sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. Gender disparity in tertiary education is also still tilted in favour of men in Africa and women access to paid employment that is secured in the light of income and social importance is still very low when juxtaposed with that of men in all sectors including agriculture. However, women's access to political decision-making, especially in terms of their share of seats in the parliament has gradually and steadily increased globally.

Today, it is instructive to note that due to the realization of the gap created by the marginalization and social injustice against women and the missing link in the developmental agenda by the limited access to existing opportunities in virtually all sectors of the socio-political and economic setting, women are gradually coming into public fore. A plausible explanation for this trend and development is the thinking that one of the indicators of the progress and development of any nation is the position of women in that society (Akpoveta, 2008:191; Thompson and Hickey 2012). It therefore follows that women are seen to represent a tool for positive change, an end that depends on the level of access to the opportunity for actualizing their potentials and talents.

### **3. Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, some laudable efforts have been made to put in place the necessary mechanisms required for the elimination of gender discrimination so as to ensure gender parity and human dignity. The National Gender Policy, which replaced and reinforced the previous National Policy on Women, is particularly targeted at the gender inequality problematic in Nigeria. In the face of the above, the history of development policies in Nigeria has somewhat been that of lackadaisical attitude to the gender variable. The first two decades of development planning in Nigeria from 1963 when it became a Republic, for instance, was largely characterized by gender-blind and gender-insensitive development policies. In the same vein, Nigeria, particularly since the wake of the 1980s, embraced gender-biased economic policies where women's interests were subsumed within the national interest and gender sensitivity was almost inconsequential, infinitesimal and a non-issue.

With the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals by the United Nations in September 2000 more interest has been generated and a better attention paid to the pursuit of gender sensitive policies at both global and national levels. Specifically, the third goal, which is aimed at achieving gender equality and women empowerment, is both of intrinsic value and at the same time at the heart of the attainment of all the other goals. This is essentially because the United Nations Millennium Declaration maintains that if women are granted their pride of place in history, the gesture and development will assist the process of effectively combating poverty, hunger, disease and stimulating sustainable development. At least, until equal numbers of girls and boys are in school at all levels of education it will be impossible to build the knowledge necessary to eradicate poverty and hunger, combat disease and ensure environmental sustainability. The benchmark for assessing the level of attainment of gender equality and women empowerment includes enrolment in education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, employment as well as political decision-making. The gender parity or equality question in Nigeria will therefore be analyzed in the context of the under listed indicators.

#### **3.1 Enrolment at the Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Levels of Education:**

The first indices for measuring or assessing the level of attainment of the Millennium Development Declaration in respect of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment are school enrolment at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. And knowledge is critical for development because every thing we do depends on knowledge (World Bank 2012:17). Ordinarily, to live, we must transform the resources we have into the products we need or desire and the process takes knowledge. Also, if we expect to raise our living standards as a household or as a country and to improve our health and preserve our environment, we must not only transform our resources, we must also use the resources in ways that generate higher returns on our efforts and investments. The entire process takes knowledge and it makes equal access to education by men and women inevitable, if development is to be achieved on a sustainable basis. It therefore implies that equal access to education is the foundation for all the other

developmental goals. Meeting the education goal will therefore speed up progress toward every other Millennium Development Goal.

Gender parity in school enrolment has a multi-dimensional advantage and a multiplier effect notably because it will help to reduce poverty, lower mortality rates and promote concern for the environment, aside from the opportunity to learn skills and acquire knowledge that will encourage their participation in the development process through social, economic and political decision-making. On the other hand, blocked or limited access to quality education increases their vulnerability to abuse exploitation, disease, poverty and crime. Studies have shown that allowing girls to have full access to education is the single most effective policy of enhancing the overall level of economic productivity.

In Nigeria, the 2005 MDG report shows that there is improvement in respect of attaining universal basic education and that the primary six completion rate increased significantly from 65 percent in 1998 to 83 percent in 2001; it declined in 2002 and increased again to 94 percent in 2003 and 95 percent between 2004 and 2005 (Igbuzor 2006:5). However, enrolment at the primary school level has consistently been higher for boys who have 56 percent compared with the 44 percent for girls. Generally, literacy level in Nigeria has steadily and consistently declined, especially among those between 15 and 24 years. For instance, in 1999, the overall literacy rate declined from 81.35 percent to 69.80 percent, while the rate of literacy for male between 15 and 24 years declined from 81.35 percent in 1991 to 69.80 percent and 62.49 percent to 59.30 percent for female during the same period (Igbuzor 2006:5). On the whole, there is evidence to show that gender education has not permeated all levels of the populace and the impression that gender issues negatively pose a challenge to accepted norms and values of marriage, family and religion is also rife and evident. Arguably, while enrolment gaps between girls and boys are narrowing in Nigeria, large disparities still exist at the secondary and tertiary levels, which reflect structural and institutionalized discrimination that disadvantages women by restricting their choices and reducing their opportunities for income and employment. The disturbing implication is that due to the nexus between maternal education and child health, gender discrimination equally constrains progress in child mortality reduction.

### 3.2 Employment

The second indicator for determining the achievement of the Millennium Development Goal in respect of gender equality and women empowerment is employment. Existing data show that there is a persisting wide gap between the income generating and employment opportunities of women and men in virtually all sectors of the Nigerian society (FG 2012:12). Women involvement in the industrial sector is estimated at 11% compared with the 30% for men, while women's participation in income generating activities that are predominantly characterized by intense manual labour like mining and quarrying is virtually non-existent mainly as a result of the gender-related perception concerning the social construction of labour and production-related activities (National Bureau of Statistics 2004:39-41). Also, in the Federal Civil Service, which is the largest single-entity employer in Nigeria, 76% of civil servants are men and 24% are women. Meanwhile, women constitute less than 14% of the total management level positions, while 17.5% of those engaged in the medical field are women compared with the 82.5% men (CIDA2012: 17).

Besides, other indications of gender disparity suggest that men involved in the formal sector is approximately 87% against the 11% of women, while the extractive industry with an annual business volume of over US \$ 42m has virtually zero level involvement by women (CIDA, 2012:27). Gender-induced norms and values equally assign to women the task of home or household management and it has the potency of precluding women from pursuing their careers to top management positions and decision-making cadres at the same rate, frequency and fashion as their male counterparts in essentially all sectors of the Nigerian society (National Gender Policy 2006:4). No wonder, among the 70% of the population estimated to be living below poverty line in Nigeria, over 65% are estimated to be women, especially as the income and purchasing power for women is estimated to be US\$1 .495 as against US\$614 for men who also have access to high-paying, secure and stable employment. In fact, despite the appointment of women to the cadre of permanent secretaries starting from the year 2000 in tandem with the affirmative action initiatives, the level of disparity between men and women in terms of employment in Nigeria has significantly impacted on the capacity of women to contribute to economic growth and development.

### 3.3 Political Decision Making

The third indicator for assessing the accomplishment of gender parity in line with the Millennium Development Declaration is involvement in political decision-making. According to Duverger (cited in Nziome 2012:15), if majority of women are little attracted to political careers, it is because everything tends to turn them away from

them, and if they allow politics to remain essentially a man's business, it is because everything is conducive to this belief: tradition, family life, education, religion and literature. The small part played by women in politics, he added, merely reflects and results from the secondary place to which they are assigned by the customs and attitudes of our society and which their education and training tend to make them accept as the natural order of things.

In both developing and advanced democracies, concerted efforts have been made to improve the lots of women. In the United States of America and the United Kingdom, which had 3.7 and 2.9 percent of female representatives in 1980, progress was made to 9.0 and 9.1 percent in 1994. Although Norway and Sweden had as much as 38 percent representatives, Nigeria had only 3 percent in 1992/93 (Nwankwo 2010:1). However, the Nigerian situation concerning women representation in both elective and appointive positions has slightly improved. Justifying why more women should participate in decision-making, the United Nations (UN 2011:15) in its World Survey on the "Role of Women in Development", observed that there are many reasons why there should be more women in decision-making positions. The UN which also reported that women occupied six percent of ministerial positions in the US government in 1993 attributed the problems to the lack of recruiting and career development programmes for women and male-oriented corporate cultures that create obstacles to women's promotions (Aita 1995:8). The problem of low participation by women in politics and decision-making position is not confined to any region or clime, for the so-called paucity of women in politics and public decision-making positions are therefore a global phenomenon.

In line with the Article of the UN 1948 Declaration on Human Rights, all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights (UN 1948: 17). Beyond these legalistic efforts toward gender equality, inequality is firmly embedded in most fundamental aspects of society (IDEA 2010:107-124). In the Nigerian context, it is not only that the culture which evolved expects women to take care of the home, their husbands and children; the lowly position of women was more importantly inspired by the scriptures which states that "The Lord God said, it is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him a help meet for him; I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house and give no occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully; thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over you and wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands as unto the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the Head of the Church (Holy Bible 1998: 6,7,1104 and 1089). These scriptural injunctions are suggestive of the fact that men occupy a superior position over women.

Aside the scriptural premise for understanding male domination over the female, most societies, particularly in Africa, is innately patriarchal in nature. This patriarchal nature is male-dominated in traditionally social, cultural, economic and religious realms or settings. Because of the natural responsibilities to women, they not naturally or traditionally predisposed toward socio-political activities. The patriarchal nature of the African culture encourages the exclusion of women from political sphere is interpreted as a demonstration of their passion, love and care for 1 families. Although liberal democracy permits full participation of women in politics through voting and holding of elective and appointive offices, but women still at the periphery of real politicking (Ojo 2010:334). One plausible explanation for this disconnection of women from the mainstream of politics, despite the demands and expectations of liberal democracy for gender parity in politics, is gender stereotypes and predisposition toward women participation in politics. Rather than accord it a descriptive label of oppression. it is appropriate to understand it from the perspective of innate feelings, consciousness and reactions that is in consonance with divine scriptural, religious, traditional and cultural premises. This position contradicts the somewhat shallow explanation of the greatest militating factor against gender parity or discrimination in politics from the dimension of the incorrect perception of the "role of self by women advanced by Ojo (2010:335).

#### **4. Constraints to the Actualization of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Nigeria**

There are several factors that have the potency of constraining the effectiveness of gender parity and gender sensitive policies and programmes and, as a consequence, the actualization of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Nigeria. The factors include the following:

##### **4.1 Patriarchal Culture**

The central culture that permeates the Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature. This male-dominated culture accords women an inferior and secondary position in society. The patriarchal culture of male supremacy still remains embedded, obscured and protected within traditional institutions and structures held in abeyance and relative utmost sacredness. A major challenge to the task of executing gender-sensitive and gender-parity policies in Nigeria, therefore, is the patriarchal cultural norms, attitudes and practices, which have been accepted as the

natural order of things. This culture is still in-grained in men and it is demonstrated both consciously and unconsciously, despite the general drive for a meaningful change in gender relations through policy initiatives and actions as well as sundry international conventions and accords to which Nigeria is a signatory.

#### **4.2 Corruption, Mis-governance and False Public Investment**

Corruption is the foundation of and the gateway to mis-governance. Corruption which is the misuse of entrusted power for private benefits, has become commonplace in Nigeria to the extent that it has become the culture. Although corruption is not the only dimension of mis-governance, it is at the heart of and therefore central to bribery, extortion, fraud, manipulation and different shades of malpractices. Corruption has become so systemic, institutionalized and structural that it has a holistic effect on governance principally due to the fact that it pollutes politics, undermines economy, biases government spending away from socially valuable goods such as education, employment and diverts public resources from infrastructure investments that are critical to the actualization of government programs and activities, particularly gender parity or balancing and women empowerment types. As a consequence, there are glaring distortions to the extent that clear discrepancies between government or public investments and actual government programs, projects and goods or services have become an enduring permanent feature and an integral part of the Nigerian culture. This brings into fore the issue of huge, fraudulent and false public investment which is an evident constraint to a system-wide pragmatic approach to gender mainstreaming by government especially as the establishment and strengthening of appropriate institutional and operational frameworks that are expected to serve as a nexus between the macro-policy environment and the micro sectoral levels where the interface between men and women is characterized by gender inequality manifestations is an imperative.

#### **4.3 Inadequate Capacity**

Capacity building and utilization has been trenchantly argued as the missing link in Nigeria's development (FMF 2012:51). The level of capacity building in any society can be measured or assessed using the financial, human, institutional and infrastructural criteria or indicators. Despite the huge financial resources in Nigeria, the quality of human, institutional and infrastructural capacity has been adjudged to be grossly inadequate. The inadequate capacity has grossly affected the way public resources; programs, projects and activities are managed and coordinated in Nigeria. As a consequence, the ability to formulate, analyze and implement policies and programs for the accomplishment of national development goals and aspirations has been largely constrained. The poor capacity for dealing with socio-economic programs in Nigeria is therefore due to false public investment in institutions and processes for capacity-building and the gradual dismantling of the enabling environment for maintaining and enhancing the existing capacity. Central to the problem of achieving the Millennium Development Goal of gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria is arguably the existing inadequate capacity.

#### **4.4 Political Will and Genuine Commitment**

Creating a gender friendly, responsive, equitable and egalitarian society demands the full-blown support from all levels or tiers of governance, particularly the Federal Government that formulates general or macro policies that are expected to provide the direction for the micro policies and activities at the lower levels of governance, particularly the states. To this end, the presidency, the Federal Executive Council, the legislature and the Judiciary must accept, embrace and show commitment through clear-cut gender parity principles and practices. Such commitment will be reflected in the level of participation, supportive climate and productive investment in terms of financial and time resources (Ejumudo. 2005:94). Once the above are in place, the commitment will not only be discerned by other stakeholders like private and civil society organizations and individuals, it will also engender support and co-operation that are germane for the realization of the goal of gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria. To this end, policies, partnerships and programme reforms through genuine commitment to gender concerns at all levels is a desideratum. Although the Nigerian government has severally expressed its commitment to gender parity and women empowerment, the existing policy environment across sectors, inter-sectoral cooperation and programming priorities belie this commitment that is more theoretical than pragmatic. In actuality, the present relatively tolerant policy environment was preceded by a regime of resistance to gender equality. A possible explanation for the previous atmosphere of lackadaisical attitude to gender equality in Nigeria was the patent weak conception of the implications of gender balancing for sustainable national development. The truism of the above reasoning is evident in the fact that in the past twenty-nine years, there has been a shift away from looking at gender inequality as an issue that affects women alone (IDEA, 2010:66).

## **5. The Actualization of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Nigeria: The Desirability and Inevitability of a Pragmatic Approach**

The actualization of the gender equality and women empowerment goal in Nigeria is a herculean task. Its actualization is however hinged or predicated on a number of conditions, which are inevitable. The truism of the above assertion is also evident in the fact that the conditions are not only precedent to the accomplishment of the afore-stated Millennium Development goal, but that a pragmatic approach is essentially a desideratum. The conditions are discussed below:

### **5.1 A Genial Climate**

Climate is a set of characteristics that are relatively enduring over time, typifying an organization or a system and distinguishing it from other organizations or systems (Knowles, 2010:45). Such a set of characteristics that creates a distinctive atmosphere within any system and has the tendency of influencing the attitude of its members (Pritchard and Karasick 2010: 126-136) is critical to the realization of gender parity and women empowerment in Nigeria. This climate which encapsulates political will that connotes genuine commitment by government to action plans, policies, legal and administrative framework, adequate human, institutional and financial capacity, active partnership and participation by government and non-governmental stakeholders, socio-cultural re-orientation as well as effective and systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanism has to be created by the Nigerian government at all levels.

### **5.2 Participation and Partnership by Governmental and Non-Governmental Stakeholders**

Achieving gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria demands participation and partnership by the Nigerian government at all levels and non-governmental organizations and civil society groups. Although governmental partners are primarily responsible, especially as they are expected to provide the necessary policy and action environment that will galvanize and co-ordinate the efforts of the various stakeholders, all the partners must play their vital role in the actualization of well-defined partnership arrangements, programmes and service delivery mechanisms. Government must also meet the challenge of defining gender policies that will be in tandem with and impact positively on the over-all development goals. This will transcend the legal conceptualization of gender equality to a broader developmental context that will require the retooling of development frameworks that would be tailor-made to suit gender equality and the incorporation of gender perspective into all facets of policy formulation, direction and actualization. Moreover, the activities of the various government ministries, agencies and non-governmental bodies should be strengthened, synthesized, integrated and well focused so as to facilitate the processes involved in the participation and partnership by all stakeholders. The concomitant effect will be the maintaining of gender concerns across sectors and at all levels. In sum, the need to build effective partnership between government and non-government sectors and civil society groups for purpose of promoting gender equality principles and practices for goal attainment can not be overemphasized.

### **5.3 Socio-Cultural Re-orientation**

The pervasive socio-cultural trend that favours and encourages gender inequalities or disparities in Nigeria has created a climate of conservatism and resistance to the centrality of the role of gender equality in attaining national development on a sustainable basis. There is therefore the need for a re-orientation by individuals, groups, institutions and agencies (both governmental and non-governmental) on gender equality issues that will translate into attitudinal change and response, which is germane for the efficacy of gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria. Thus, there is the need to institute the culture of respect for human and gender rights in Nigeria.

### **5.4 Political Will and Genuine Commitment**

No matter how many policies are formulated, the multiplicity of programmes that are designed and the level of investments in human, institutional and infrastructural requirements, they will lie dormant until they are activated by the appropriate political will and genuine commitment that is expected to translate gender responsive policies, programmes and activities into concrete reality. To this end, all levels of government must be actively committed through involvement and participation in and identification with the gender equality and women empowerment plans and concerns. Central to the commitment by government, is the exemplary action, which is indicative of

their supportive attitude to the task and challenges of gender parity in Nigeria. Political will or genuine commitment in this context does not terminate at the level of handing down policies; rather, it must involve the implementation, monitoring and evaluating of gender policies, plans and programmes so as to assess their performance and progress for review, modification, enhancement and goal attainment. This envisaged true commitment that can be discerned and deduced by other stakeholders, will necessarily engender their support and co-operation.

### 5.5 Adequate Human, Institutional and Infrastructural Capacity

Achieving the Millennium Declaration goal of gender equality requires the continuous creation, enhancement and strengthening of the human, institutional and infrastructural capacity. Such adequate capacity will involve building structures and providing the required technical skills, institutions and processes for facilitating and coordinating strategic plans and actions for engendering and sustaining the desirable change that is at the heart of eliminating gender disparities and inequalities in Nigeria. At least, the imperative of closing the gender gap and enhancing social justice, particularly at the policy level in Nigeria is no longer subjected to controversy. Regrettably, however, inadequate gender technical expertise, human and institutional capacity have greatly plagued and constrained the actualization of multi-sectoral gender goals with negative implications for overall national development in Nigeria.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Establishing a gender-friendly and gender-sensitive society that is devoid of all vestiges of discrimination and inequity so as to harness the full potentials of all social groups and promote the principles of fundamental human rights is the thrust of the Millennium Development Goal of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment. Achieving the above goal is not only necessary for sustainable development efforts in Nigeria: it also demands a pragmatic approach to appropriate policy formulation, programme design, focused implementation and effective monitoring and evaluation in a genial climate of political will, genuine commitment and national re-orientation. In actuality, however, despite the fact that there is the challenge of accurate, reliable and credible statistics on the progress achieved in the goal of gender equality and women empowerment, available statistics and evidence show that the target date of 2005 is already time-bad and that the deadline of 2015 for most of the MDGs is not feasible. All the same, government at all levels in cooperative partnership with other stakeholders in Nigeria has to step up efforts so that appreciable progress could be achieved in a developmental fashion. In this direction, the sundry organs, institutions and agencies of government should, as a matter of exigency, be strengthened for policy efficiency and accelerated sectoral performance.

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