

Economic Empowerment among African Women and the Eradication of Poverty

Lakan M. J.
Mayowa O. Abe
Estu Bello Abubakar

Abstract

Economic empowerment among women and poverty reduction has been of great concern to global economies most especially in African nations, Nigeria inclusive. Majority of the world's poor are women and attempt to reduce poverty will only be futile if women are not economically empowered. It is best understood when one logically consider and analyze the Arab saying that: "if woman had not been created there wouldn't have been sun and moon, no agriculture and no fire". African women are regarded as hewers of wood and drawers of water with the nature of their place and participation in development issues in African societies. Women's economic empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development, (eradication of poverty) and pro-poor growth. To this end this paper examines factors militating against women participation and measures to achieving women's economic empowerment which requires sound public policies, a holistic approach and long-term commitment and gender-specific perspectives which must be integrated at the design stage of policy and programming. The paper recommends that women should have equal access to assets and services; infrastructure programmes should be designed considering the poor, both men and women, and equality in employment opportunities in recognition of women's vast unpaid work. This will not only increase specialization but also utilize the mass population which is lying idle in our societies to naturally diversify the economy.

Lakan M. J., & **Estu Bello Abubakar**, Department of Adult Education and Community Development, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai, Niger State., **Mayowa O. Abe**, Department of History and International Studies, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai, Niger State.

Introduction

Economic empowerment among women and poverty reduction has been one of the most discussed topics in this contemporary era, due to the circumstances surrounding women's participation in the development of any given society. Majority of the world's poor are women and attempt to reduce poverty and revamp economy will only be futile if women are not economically empowered. It is best understood when one logically consider and analyze the Arab saying that: "if woman had not been created there wouldn't have been sun and moon, no agriculture and no fire". African women are regarded as hewers of wood and drawers of water with the nature of their place and participation in development issues in African societies. Women's economic empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development, and eradication of poverty and pro-poor growth. To this end this paper examines factors militating against women's participation and measures to achieving women's economic empowerment which requires sound public policies, a holistic approach and long-term commitment and gender-specific perspectives which must be integrated at the design stage of policy and programming.

In an attempt to make a holistic research, there is need to conceptualize poverty as economic and social elements: a state of being inferior in quality or insufficient in amount and also a condition where people's needs for food, clothing and shelter are not being met.¹

The conceptualization of this keyword (poverty) leads us to a need to understand "economic empowerment". Generally, economic empowerment is the capacity of women and men to participate in contributing to, and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth.

Economic empowerment is the empowerment approach that focuses on mobilizing the self – help efforts of the poor, rather than providing them with local welfare. It is also the empowerment of previously disadvantaged sections of population.²

Economic empowerment, centered on the groups of people that are powerless; people who have had very little control of their economic destinies and have been largely spurned by other groups. Economic empowerment includes efforts to improve the wellbeing of the people that are economically powerless towards self sufficiency. This may include a provision of loans or "microcredit" to this set of people in other for them to open their own businesses or improving their occupation. It can also involve providing

training for this set of people so that they can be informed of a need to improve their economic status.

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On taken the research question again: Do economic empowerment among African women necessarily eradicate poverty”? The question can only be answered when we look at the need for the empowerment. Below are some of the analyses on the need to empower women for eradication of poverty:

- Higher female earnings and bargaining power translate into greater investment in children’s education, health and nutrition, which leads to economic growth in the long term. The share of women in waged and salaried work grew from 42% in 1997 to 46% in 2007 in Asia.⁴
- In India, GDP could rise by 8% if the female/male ratio of workers went up by 10%.
- Total agricultural outputs in Africa could increase by up to 20% if women’s access to agricultural inputs was equal to men’s.
- Women-owned businesses comprise up to 38% of all registered small businesses worldwide. The number of women-owned businesses in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America is growing rapidly and, with that growth, come direct impacts on job creation and poverty reduction.⁴

Women are integral part of any given society and in the case of Africa, women population rises above that of their men counterparts just like in many other parts of the world and the opening up of the new human resources (Women) in Africa can contribute greatly to the sustainability and growth of economy and eradicate poverty. If however, African societies had to rely and maintain this nature of occupational segregation (as we have in the political appointment and election) without undergoing basic changes in the organization of production by empowering women it is doubtful that the phenomenon of economic development as we have known it in the developed nations would ever have taken place.⁵

If a society has “unemployed resources”, it may be able to increase both consumption and investment at the same time i.e, by putting their “idle” resources to work. Thus, for example, the United States was able to expand war production rapidly in the early years of World War II without any major production sacrifice of consumption because of the backlog of unemployed labour from the depression of 1920s. Many observers believe

that most underdeveloped countries have unemployed resources which could, if effectively mobilized, be used in this way to eradicate poverty. Research shows that African women operate below the capacity of their potentials, both mentally and economic wise due to lack of empowerment and occupational segregation between them and male counterpart.

Women economic empowerment will lead to increase in specialization by utilizing their population and producing personnel out of competitive approach to aid shortage of labour we have in all sectors of the economy. Smith observed: "The greatest improvement in the productivities power is labour and the greater part of an increased skill. Dexterity, and judgment with which it is any where directed, or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labour". To prove his contention, Smith gave an example of a pin factory where many hands are put to work to increase the level of production and ease the pressure on the labour.⁵ going by this analogy, it is needless to say that utilizing the women population will aid the division of labour and specialization as discussed above.

Basically, production is a major means of eradicating poverty, an increase in production means an increase of wealth. When the wealth being produced in a country (GDP) Gross, Domestic Products declines for two or more successive quarters (Six months or more) that country is said to be in recession, but to improve the GDP there is need to utilize the availability of unemployed resources (women) to beat the tussle of recession and guarantee a sustainable development.⁶

With the occupational segregation in Africa (mainly in politics), one will begg to disbelieve the view of Walter Rodney that African economies are integrated into the structure of the developed capitalist economies and they are integrated in a manner that is unfavourable to Africa. It is natural to mention the subject of women population because generally, human beings service as both ends and mean, in all economic activities. The relationship of population growth to economic development is interesting and complex. An increase population means, of course an increasing supply of the basic factor of producing labor. Over the long course of history, until fairly modern times population growth has been the main source of such general expansions of output as the world has enjoyed. And this was because labour assisted by a minimum of tools and working in essentially traditionally ways was unquestionably mankind's greatest productive asset. It is to this end that we should begin to maximize our economic potential through population by empowering women in Africa with reference to Walter Rodney's definition of development: "development at the level of individual implies greater skill"... Empowering women in Africa enables

greater skill and capacity, freedom, responsibility and material well-being, this in turn will increase the GDP (Gross Domestic product) of African countries and set them on a more reliable path of development and attempt eradication of poverty.⁷

Surely, where there are more productive hands it becomes an assurance of the highest order that poverty will be eradicated. The gender occupational segregation in this part of the world (Africa) has in no small way heightened the level of poverty. For example, population growth is associated with high fertility and an increasing number of children relative to adult, both male and female, then the number of consumers will be growing more rapidly than the number of producers if there is no economic empowerment among the African women.

Lack of economic empowerment among African women will make the dependency burden (leaving the financial responsibility) on the active workers of the society heavier and the effect may be negative (Poverty). But if there is a rise in life – expectancy which extends the productive years of the workers of African societies, then the problem of an increase burden of dependency may be at least partially offset. Economic empowerment among African women will beyond doubt expand market and may stimulate the society to high levels of investment in capital goods which will definitely help business activity and increase employment opportunities and jobs. Furthermore, it may provide an outlet for the products of efficient large – scale, mass production and industries. Generally one can say that the integration of African women into the labour force will be a more reliable process of raising living standards, industrialization and technological process.⁹

It requires first of all, the existence of the basic productive agents, or factors, of production as they are commonly called. There must be labour natural resources, and certain tool-implementation, and other capital goods. It also requires that these factors of production be organized into some kind of producing units and there must be a minimum of technological knowledge to direct the societies' productive efforts. Without any one of these elements a country's productive capacity and economy would either vanish or sink to the level of the recession.¹⁰

By the same token, economic growth can be thought of as the process of expansion or improvement of these basic productive elements. A society's economy may grow because of an increase in its supply of factors of production – labour, natural resources, capital goods – or because of improvement in the organization or basic technology of production. It is needless to say that women are been sidelined from the labour market in

Africa prior to colonialism during colonialization and post-colonial period. Odubokun examines the extent of economic empowerment of the Nigerian women based on evidence of their participation in various economic activities and found that the economic powers of Nigerian women systematically and persistently deteriorated particularly since 1986. That unless there is general, global constitutional empowerment of all women and all Nigerians, only few women would inherit the economic empowerment conferred on them. Odubokun further observed that even domestic empowerment in Nigeria is too low because evidence have shown that resources that are of great importance in the life of women for the purpose of meeting their domestic and matrimonial commitments are inadequate and not available in most cases. Domestic facilities are not within the reach of average Nigerian and these problems are subjecting women and children to undue hardship.¹¹

Increasing the role of women in the economy is part of the solution to the financial and economic crises and critical for economic resilience and growth. However, at the same time, we need to be mindful that women are in some contexts bearing the costs of recovering from the crisis, with poor working conditions and increasing precariousness.

Factors Militating against Women Economic Empowerment and Poverty Reduction in African

These are some of the factors that hinder women from accessing economic fortunes and becoming economically empowered. Some of the factors discussed here include: cultural factor, educational factor and financial factor.

Cultural Factor

Customs and traditions of patriarchal societies serve as great deterrent to women empowerment. Harmful cultural practices militate against women economic empowerment. Research shows that in some African societies, for instance among the Igbo in Nigeria where female are denied right to own land property coupled with other cultural and traditional laws that negate women's rights promote violence against women. In such society one may argue that violence against women has been institutionalized.¹² Some societies, inherited traditions that prevents women from inheriting land both from their fathers or husbands thereby limiting their access to collateral and productive opportunities.

According to Ndom *etal*, social stereotype in societies are virtually unavoidable and shared throughout cultures. Societies often innocently create

and perpetuate stereotypes that lead to unfair discrimination and persecution when they are unfavorable. They are seen as dangerous beliefs and threats that can prevent individuals from performing at their ability level in a domain that is important to them. Ndom et-al further asserts that, efforts should consciously be made to reduce these beliefs.¹³

Educational Factor

Illiteracy remains at the center of women empowerment problems in Africa which can be effectively broken by giving women and girls access to quality education. Education is the bedrock for empowerment and the only panacea to women empowerment and gender equality. It is needless to say that, to become genuinely economically empowered and relevant in the society and the world education is the key.¹⁴ Akomolafe in his study concluded that low education coupled with cultural discrimination against women is a constraint to women empowerment. Low literacy level of the rural women denied them access to vital information that can improve their lots economically and transform their rural society.¹⁵

Education increases the chances of employment for women thereby empowering them economically this has become a challenge in Africa. The African patriarchal culture favors the education of males to the detriment of females especially when family resources are limited, this is because of the belief that males propagate and carry on the family name which leads to low level of education for girls and employment in low paid jobs than males. This is evidenced from the fact that the proportion of females decreases as the level of education increases. The Forum for African Women Educationists (FAWE, 2008) reports that only 1 girl for every 2 boys makes it to SS and 1 girl for every 3 boys completes secondary education.¹⁶

Other problems identified that affects women education which is the panacea to economic empowerment are issues of early marriage, free mixing of adolescent males and females in schools etc. However, effort is being made to address these problems through encouraging adult literacy training, pre-entry policy for pregnant school girls and teenage mothers as well as separation of males and females in secondary schools.¹⁶

Financial Factor

Finance is the backbone of any economy and can limit the level of economic activities to an individual, society or country. Lack of finance and access to loans militate against women economic empowerment. Access to loans with training are found more effective in addressing many socio-economic problems of women especially in developing countries.¹⁷

In most African countries, employment opportunities and per capita income of women is lower than that of men, which contribute to low economic profile of women. For instance, UNDP statistics show that women form about 70% of labour in the informal sector in Nigeria, most of them in very low yielding enterprise where employment remuneration is not regulated by law and so wages are very low. High interest rate in Nigeria to the poor who are mostly women employed in the informal sector with low capital operation, limits the ability of women from getting financial assistance. Women therefore remain in vicious cycle of low investment, low output, and low profit and therefore, trapped in circles of poverty.

Translating Rural Women's Agricultural work into Economic Empowerment and Poverty Reduction

Governments and the private sector continue to maintain wage disparities in agricultural rates that continue to present greater challenges for women in translating their agriculture-based work into economic empowerment. Moreover, women's increased participation in paid work has not seen a matched increase in men's share of unpaid work within the home. The gender division of unpaid domestic work is remarkably resilient around the world and continues to shape the terms on which women are able to take up paid work. It limits the transformative potential of employment – both in agriculture and elsewhere – for the position of women within the home and in the wider society.¹⁸

Policies and legislation that recognize and translate agricultural labor into decent work and ensure international labor standards and rights (including freedom from sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination) and equal remuneration for rural women as well as men is essential for rural women to fully enjoy the benefits of their labor and take full advantage of economic opportunities. This needs to be supported by rural and other institutions that enable women to transform their agricultural work into economic empowerment through, for example, recognizing and guaranteeing their rights to land and other productive resources and access to services. This means, in part, strengthening institutional resources and capacities to translate policies and legislation into action in rural areas along with investment in the needed infrastructure. Women are constrained in translating their agricultural work into economic empowerment and poverty reduction due to: discriminatory customary and statutory laws and practices that favour men's over women's access to land and other productive resources; harmful practices (e.g. early marriage that limits girls' education), and; domestic violence and lack of control in decision-making processes

(e.g. in the intra-household decision-making on income expenditures). While many of these forms of discrimination are increasingly addressed by national policies and legislation (e.g. laws against early marriage and violence against women), in practice, new policies and new or revised laws have proven hard to enforce.¹⁹

Translating women's agricultural work into economic empowerment requires transforming gender relations at all levels – including in institutions through women's increased representation and participation, and in communities and households with increased decision-making power, voice, and sharing of benefits. In recent years, many NGOs, United Nations agencies, and different governments have undertaken different initiatives to engage men actively in transforming gender relations in communities and households (e.g. CARE's *Abatangamuco*, “Bringers of Light” program in Burundi, and Oxfam/Novib's work supported by IFAD, on women's empowerment in the coffee value chain work in Uganda). Greater alliances to strengthen approaches to engage men in transforming gender relations at all levels have also taken hold, including the global “Men Engage Alliance.”²⁰

Conclusion

Women economic empowerment and poverty reduction has been of great concern to global economies most especially in African countries, Nigeria inclusive. Most of the world's poor are women and poverty cannot be reduced if women are not economically empowered. Women's economic empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development, (eradication of poverty) and pro-poor growth. Achieving women's economic empowerment requires sound public policies, a holistic approach and long-term commitment and gender-specific perspectives must be integrated at the design stage of policy and programming. Women must have more equitable access to assets and services; infrastructure programmes should be designed to benefit the poor, both men and women, and employment opportunities must be improved while increasing recognition of women's vast unpaid work. In justifying the analysis one can relate it to the Arab saying that: “if woman had not been created there wouldn't have been sun and moon, no agriculture and no fire”. This is more applicable to Africa most especially in the rural areas of Africa.

Endnotes

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