

Literacy And Women Empowerment For Sustainable Development In Nigeria

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of literacy education as a catalyst for women empowerment in Nigeria for sustainable development. Available records showed that women constituted more than fifty percent of Nigerian population and for any sustainable development in Nigeria to be achieved this greater percentage of the population need literacy and education for income generation skills and vocational training. The general aim of the paper is to describe how literacy education can play a vital role in women's empowerment, which will in turn lead to sustainable development.

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Introduction

In most developing countries, women especially the illiterate tend to be more affected with ignorance and poverty. In any society, women should play a central role in shaping future generations, physiologically, emotionally, morally, spiritually and intellectually, but when women are not educated and empowered, they are not free and their choices are limited and so, are unable to perform this central role, a failure which has dire consequence for future generations (Bisi and Biola 2004). Nigeria women, despite being more than half of the population, this numerical strength has not affected their age long inferior status the society bestows on them.

For individual empowerment and national development, it is imperative that women should acquire some elements of education. Literacy among women will open many opportunities for them which can lead their contribution to national development will be felt.

Development of any national is link with women's productivity. Where women are educated, they change the behaviour of the generation that is necessary for a better life. Literacy and education of women lead them toward equality and improvement, which in turn help in the process of national development as it changes their image and their role within the society. It is therefore highly necessary on the part of a nation to make women educated. Literacy education empowers women by improving their living standard. Literacy among women leads to better economic opportunities and advancement of women in different fields of human endeavour. Literacy education is the basic strategy for women in order to fulfill their roles as full members of the society. This article is base on secondary sources

available in journals, internet, working papers, official reports and programs.

A Debate – Literacy and Empowerment

The concepts of literacy and women's empowerment have been the major focus of academic debate in developing nations because of the awareness of the importance of the linkages between literacy education and empowerment. Assessment of literacy program impact is particularly difficult and the patterns have always been argumentative in many ways and that is why the literature reviewed in this paper reflect the above concepts and paradigmatic prepositions. "Literacy" and its companion concepts "empowerment" is the centre of contemporary discourse. Literacy is the ability to write and numerate with understanding, and being able to use the skill in one's daily socio-economic activities (Stella, 2010). The need for literacy education is informed by the fact that purposeful occupational achievement and satisfaction is ensured by deep self-awareness and understanding which can be achieved through the provision of effective and functional basic literacy education (Abdulrazaq 2006).

Writing on literacy skill as a means of empowerment Chlebowska (1990) stated that literacy training should contribute to higher earnings and improvement in the living conditions of rural women by helping them to escape from poverty, marginalization and inferiority complex thereby contributing to national development. It may not be wrong therefore, to say that literacy education could be one of the first steps in a process of enabling women to take control over their lives, to have equal participation in society and eventually to free themselves from economic exploitation and

patriarchal oppression. Odi (1993) agrees that literacy skills empowered the women because the skills gave them a new pair of eyes with which they used to see, their plight, their lives and how to improve on their present plight. Literacy skills empowered the women to organize themselves to fight for their rights and privileges. Through literacy, training women from different communities have come together as collectives toward the overall goal of achieving gender equality as well as sustainable comprehensive community development. As women experience powerlessness in and through the interaction of multiple social, political and economic institutions, the self-reliance for women's development aims to empower them. Thus, an important aspect of literacy training is the implicit assumption that through active participation in the process, women will gain, generate and acquire, and improve their 'position' within the family and the society.

The defiance that literacy education can make to human life is easy to see. Empirical work in recent years has brought out very clearly how relative respect and regard for women's well-being is strongly influenced by such variables as women's ability to earn independent income, to find employment outside the home, to have ownership rights and to have literacy and to be educated participants in decisions within and outside the family (UNESCO 2003). Indeed, even the survival disadvantage of women compared with men in many developing countries (which leads to such terrible phenomenon as tens of millions of "missing women") seems to go down sharply – and may even get eliminated – with progress in women's empowerment, for which literacy is a basic ingredient. These different factors (such as female literacy and education, women's earning power, their economic role outside the family) may at first sight appear to be rather diverse and disparate influences that somehow work together, but what they all have in common is their positive contribution to women's voice and agency, through greater independence and empowerment of women. The diverse variables which have emerged from statistical studies as being favourable to women's security (such as literacy, economic opportunity, et-cetera) thus can be seen to be part and parcel of a unified empowering role (UNESCO 2003). When women are illiterate, their ability to understand and invoke their legal rights can be very limited.

The term "empowerment" is a familiar term used in many development agencies that enhances an individual or groups capacity to make decisions and transform those decisions into desired outcomes (Abbot 1995). To our understanding, empowerment

is simply a process where there are adequate opportunities for the people to develop their potentials and contribute to the development process. It is a process whereby people are able to have power, increased skills and knowledge, have the ability to make choices, which will at the end help them solve their problems and make life better. Empowerment brings about awareness and capacity building leading to their participation to better decision making.

The term "Women empowerment" has become popular in the development field since 1980s. It is vividly recognized that women empowerment is essential for sustainable development and reduction in poverty in developing countries (Klasen, 1999). Women empowerment through literacy training as the focus of this paper is a process whereby women are able to learn skills and organize themselves to increase self-reliance and to assert their independent right to make choice and control resources. Literacy education is a participatory process of awareness and capacity building that begins at the level of home and community, leading to their participation in decision-making power and control and to transformative actions that enable individuals or groups to change balances of power in society (Karl, 1995).

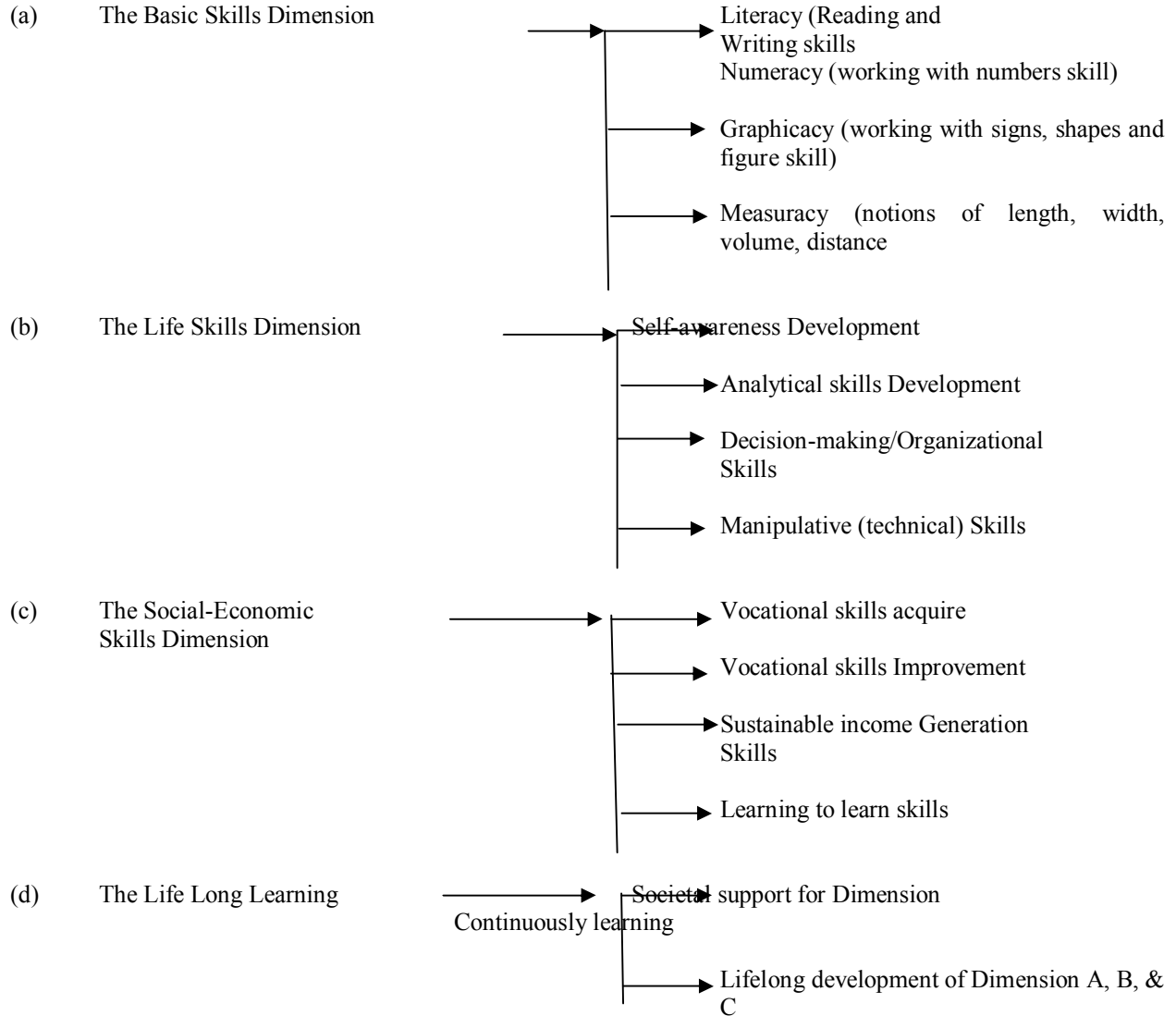
This paper believes that women empowerment through literacy training serves as a powerful instrument for Nigeria women to achieve upward social and economic mobility and power. Women empowerment through literacy education would be able to develop self-esteem, confidence, realize their potentials and enhance their collective bargaining power and to improve their well being and self-reliance. Women empowerment through literacy education has dimensional focus and envisages greater knowledge, social and economic resources and greater autonomy in economic and political decision-making process (Kabeer, 2005). Employment through literacy education signifies harnessing women power by developing their potential and encouraging them to work towards attaining a better way of life through confidence and competence.

Literacy as a Tool for Women Empowerment

Literacy is indeed one of the fundamental instruments of women empowerment. The key to rapid and effective development is literacy education not just in literacy, but in life, in agriculture, in hygiene, in domestic living, in cultural values, in democratic organization, in self help, and so on. Theorists and academics continued to perpetuate myths about literacy and empowerment. Literacy was for years presented as the magic bullet that would solve almost all the ills of the world and single-

handedly lead to development especially that of women, equity and justice. Obanna (2004) noted that the basic skills that may be required of an empowerment scheme deserving functional literacy include basic skill, that is, literacy, numeracy, organizational skills and technical skills. Others are socio-economic, comprising vocational skills acquisition, vocational skills improvement, income generating skills and learning to learn skills. The

author further confirmed that empowerment is a lifelong learning skill for social support, continuous learning, life skills and socio-economic skills. The functionality of a literacy undertaking is the extent to which it is able to empower the beneficiary. Four major dimensions needed to enhance the functionality of a literacy program for women empowerment.



Dimension of functional literacy adopted from: The dilemma of Education in Africa by (Obanya Pai 2004)

The focus of empowering literacy is not on the mechanical transfer of literacy skills and knowledge. Literacy education is a dynamic process of learning in which women gain access to knowledge and skills to critically reflect on their social reality and take collective action to transform it. It is a strategic intervention for empowering women in the wider struggle against inequality and injustice in society. Literacy for poor women is essentially, advocated as a means for acquiring knowledge and skills through which they can begin to understand and analyze unequal gender relations in society and changes the nature and direction of systemic forces that marginalize them. Thus, literacy education is a critical component of the strategy for women's empowerment. It is an education that would enable women to obtain access to the intellectual and human resources they need to transform the material and social conditions of their existence (Silawal, 2003).

Literacy Training and Women Empowerment in Nigeria

In recent years, various efforts have been made, and still being made to empower women so that they can run their own lives and be part and parcel of the socio-economic and political agenda in the society. In 2007, the government of Nigeria joined hand with policy-makers and literacy practitioners from all over the world to see how literacy education can be transformed into a national priority. The literacy classes conducted under literacy campaigns have given Nigeria women especially rural women opportunity to improve their lives and giving them a chance to meet other women and learn collectively. The acquired skills enhanced their ability to solve family problems and learn new skills. The promotion of educational opportunities for women in Nigeria has been an important part of the national endeavor in the field of education in Nigeria. Though these endeavors did yield significant results, gender disparity persists with uncompromising tenacity. It is with this concern that the national policy on education (2004) launches National Literacy a mission of imparting functional literacy to women. Total literacy campaigns launched since 2004 under the Gegis of National Policy on Education emphasis on making efforts to:

- 1) Create an environment where women demand knowledge and information empowering themselves to change their lives.
- 2) Inculcate in women the confidence that change is possible, if women work collectively.
- 3) Spread the message that education of women is pre-condition for fighting against their oppression.

- 4) Highlight the plight of the girl child and stress the need for universalisation of elementary education as a way of addressing the issue.

Literacy campaigns have heightened social awareness among Nigeria women regarding the importance of education both for themselves as well as for their children. Literacy training has provided illiterate women who do not have access to formal schooling with a great opportunity for reading, writing; increasing awareness levels and skills training. Literacy education has thus promotes gender equity and have sought to empower them as to decision making about themselves, their families and their communities. Participation of women in literacy programs has opened several opportunities for neo-literate women to step out of the households and involve in some enterprise or a new vocation. In almost every part of Nigeria today, literacy programs have gone beyond the transaction of mere literacy skills and have served to enhance knowledge and skills for better management of expenditure and improving purchasing power. In today's world: the literacy skills needed by an individual to fully function in all areas of his personal, social, economic and political life contribute to develop under transform of increasing complexity (Nelly, 2009).

Women Literacy and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Women who comprise more than half of human resources are the key agent of sustainable development. The contribution of women and their role in the family as well as in the economic development and social transformation are imperative. Empowering women through literacy training not only enhance national productivity, generate employment but also help to develop economic independence, personal and social capabilities among rural women. The following are some of the personal and social capabilities developed as the result of participation in literacy education programs among women.

- Economic empowerment
- Improved standard of living
- Self confidence
- Sense of achievement
- Increased social interaction
- Engaged in political activities
- Involvement in solving problem related to women and community
- Decision- making capacity in family and community

Education plays a significant role in the economy of any society. Education should contribute to economic development, equalize opportunities

between social classes, reduce disparities in the distribution of income and prepare the labour force for a modern economy (Kriefer, 1985).

Regardless of the level of development achieved by the respective economies, women play a pivotal role in agriculture and in rural development in most countries not only do Nigeria women produce and process a larger percentage of agricultural products but they are also responsible for much of the trade in these and other goods in many part of the country. Magbogunse (1991) identified the eight cardinal elements of sustainable development as they affect women, for example education, health, culture politics, agriculture, enhanced environment, quality and peaceful co-existence. Nigeria women take active part in agriculture. In a study of women's participation in agricultural production in Northern Nigeria's rural area, Ahmed (1991) found that women were active participants in the process. According to him, about 90% of the women interviewed had farming as their main occupation. Women can be described as an indispensable group in the development of any nation. Women have the potentials necessary to evolve a new economic order, to accelerate social and political development and consequently transform the society into a better one. Nigeria women have been contributing their quota to the development of the nation.

Conclusion

Education is the basis for the full promotion of women. Considering the efforts of stakeholders in women development in Nigeria, there is need for more provision in the area of women education and empowerment. This paper made the following recommendation and if judiciously and religiously pursued, will therefore, bring about improvement in women's well being and the attainment of their individual and national development.

Recommendation

- 1) To empower the women in Nigeria, enhanced literacy educational opportunities are considered expedient. The primary tool to achieve socio-economic empowerment, literacy education should be used in a more effective and practical way as to make real progress towards the attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria.
- 2) There is every need for increased commitment to literacy, especially for girls and women as investing in women's literacy carries very high returns. Globally, illiteracy is a worrisome problem and literacy skills are becoming more necessary than ever before. Stakeholders in Nigerian educational

system should reshape non-formal education and education system for national development.

- 3) It is also important to set up literacy programs that respond in multidimensional ways. Offer women not only cognitive skills but also effective community building skills needed to bring about sustainable development.
- 4) All stakeholders in women affairs and development should focus on the provision of both formal and informal education for them as well as improve their working conditions.
- 5) Government should be seriously concerned with policy formulation of women empowerment especially against practices that are detrimental to women's wellbeing.
- 6) Stakeholders in women development in Nigeria should use literacy training as spaces for the development of individual and collective identities that build upon the respect for all learners.
- 7) Total literacy campaign should be launched to create an environment where women can demand for knowledge and information, empowering themselves to change their lives.

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