

Sustainable Development and Female Participation in a Dynamic Global Community

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Abstract: The discourse x-rays the role females play towards achieving a sustainable development in an upcoming society in the global community. The productions of low income yielding crops which are relegated to the females are highlighted. Issues bothering on gender-imbalance in the education of children in the society which has led to a concomitant decline in the number of females involved in science oriented courses at the tertiary levels of education are discussed. The issues of poverty which forces female children into food vending as a means of enhancing the family economic base also lends a pointing finger at some of the reasons responsible for the decline. Lack of gainful employment of the men-folk, which has inadvertently forced females to take up the role of 'Breadwinners,' thereby short-circuiting the original role of female towards sustainable development are analyzed. Also, the effect of urbanization and lack of crèche facilities in work places which takes a toll on the number of females available to build a virile and sustainable local, national and global scientific community.

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1. Introduction

Women play very vital roles in the dynamics of a growing society albeit in a global community. The relegation of females to the background negates their usefulness as a part in the synergistic mechanism that yields sustainable development.

2. Role of Women in Agriculture

Women play a significant role in agriculture, the world over. About 70 percent of the agricultural workers, 80 percent of food producers, and 10 percent of those who process basic foodstuffs are women and they also undertake 60 to 90 percent of the rural marketing; thus making up more than two-third of the work force in agricultural production (FAO, 1985). In West Africa, up to 80 percent of the labour force in all trade is female. Yet, the role of women in these activities, so important economically, has remained obscure for long because women seldom played any major roles in political activities or decision making processes (Spore, 1993). Despite the fact that women produce much of the food in the developing world, they also remain more malnourished than most men are. In many rural societies, women eat less food than men do, especially when the food is scarce, such as just before the harvest, or when the work load increases without a corresponding increase in the food intake (Roodkowsky, 1979).

Females are most times relegated to the production of low-income yielding crops. Gender focused studies on NTFP (Non Timber Forest

Products) highlight the higher incidence of women's involvement in NTFP activities e.g., 40-50 percent in Ghana and the six countries of eastern and southern Africa (Falconer, 1994). Higher income from products e.g. in western Niger, income from products of the commons was found to represent 27 percent of women's local non-farm income, as compared with 10 percent for men (Hopkins *et al.* 1994). In the employment front, women's employment in forest based enterprises in India was estimated to be approximately 571.533 million days annually of which 90 percent is in small scale enterprises using NTFP (Khare, 1989).

In rural areas of Pakistan, women make feed, collect fodder, clean animals and their sheds, make dung cakes, collect manure for organic fertilizers, pump milk, process animals' products and market them. They also play a crucial role in rural poultry farming where they apply their own methods of rearing and breeding (Nosheen *et al.*, 2008). 79.4 percent of rural women are engaged in agriculture where they work from 12-15 hours a day for various economic activities and household chores (ESCAP, 1997). The role of women in agriculture development is largely overlooked. Women are only passive beneficiaries, and are only recognized by their inferior status in society. Women are not considered strong enough to handle large agricultural tasks (Nosheen *et al.*, 2008).

In parts of Imo State, Nigeria, trading in *Garcinia kola* (Bitter kola) is relegated to the females

as shown in a study by Ofor *et al* (2004). Within the age brackets of 10-19, 20-39, 40-59, and 60->60years, females engaged in the marketing of the produce were 20, 20, 10 and 18.33 % respectively; while the males were 0, 10, 15 and 6.66 percent respectively (n=60). Trade involving the *G. kola* seeds is generally considered a 'woman affair', as was observed by Ruiz *et al* (1999) who enunciated that females are mostly involved in small scale trades involving NTFP while the males engage in more lucrative and attractive trades like timber logging.

3. Gender imbalance in education

Globally, about 565 million women are illiterate, mainly in poor rural areas. Fritschel and Mohan (2001) reports that the failure to educate these women when they were girls' may be due to factors ranging from the need for girls' labour in the home, attitudes that devalue education for girls, fears about girls' security outside the home, and lack of resources to pay for education. In parts of Southeastern Nigeria, the erroneous belief that training the girl child was a waste since the child would eventually end up as another man's 'chattel' was one of the restraints from educating them.

Educating the girl child has far reaching implications in the reduction in fertility since better educated females marry later and have fewer unwanted pregnancies; have higher earning power which may lower the number of children parents want as income earners and also, educated females reduce the infant mortality rate through better childcare. A World Bank study reports that 'girls' access to education creates a better environment for economic growth and that the result is particularly strong for middle-income countries. Thus, societies that has a preference for not investing in girls' education pay a price for it in terms of slower growth and reduced income". This according to Fritschel and Mohan (2001) explains the logic about keeping girls out of school becoming a vicious circle: girls do not get educated because there is a lack of wage-earning opportunities for women, and women who are uneducated cannot get wage-earning employment.

Female primary and secondary enrollment rates and average years of female schooling have generally risen over time. According to King and Alderman (2001), girls' gross primary enrollment rates in East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and Central Asia have reached 100 percent. However, girls' primary enrollment rates have leveled off in Sub-Saharan Africa at around 54 percent, with absolute levels of female enrollment and schooling remaining lower in Sub-Saharan Africa than in other developing regions (female secondary enrollment rates at 14 percent in 1995). In Imo State, Nigeria, the educational

attainment of the captured population of food vendors shows that a majority have only primary school education. The deliberate effort of governments in some parts of the world to encourage female education is seen as a laudable step in re-directing the micro and macro economies of these places towards sustainable development. In a move aimed at curbing both population growth and preference for male children, the government of India announced free and reduced cost education for girls. This program is expected to offer free education at high school level to all girls of single child families; those with two girls and no other children may receive discounts of up to 50 percent and provisions for fellowships of US\$ 45 per month for those undertaking post-graduate studies (Wikipedia, 2005). In some states in Nigeria, free education, free lunch at school are some of the incentives put up by governments to encourage and maintain female enrolment at the primary and post-primary school level.

Closing gender gaps in education—and closing them at a quicker pace—are important development challenges to policymakers in countries of the world, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, that will forge a purposeful direction towards sustainable development.

4. Female children in food vending

Children are generally subjected to one form of labour or the other in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. According to Okpukpara *et al.* (2006), the exploitative child labour occurs when children, especially young ones – between 5 and 15 years internationally or 5 and 17 in Nigeria, are exposed to long hours of work in dangerous environment or are entrusted with too much responsibility without compensating psychosocial reward, or work. These activities are especially frowned at when they are carried out at the expense of schooling; thereby children are not adequately prepared for the future in a dynamic, modern society (Grootaert and Kanbur, 1995; UNICEF, 2004; FME, 2004).

In the year 2000, UNICEF reported that there were 233 million children between the ages of 5-18 years, doing one kind of paid work or the other in urban areas in developing countries (UNICEF, 2004). Heidi (2001) observed that families often rely on girls to help care for younger siblings and perform other household chores and even, in some cases to earn income. Studies by Okpukpara *et al.* (2006), show that female children in Nigeria of Primary (5-11 years), Junior Secondary (12-14) and Senior Secondary School (15-17) ages, whose activity status was 'all work' were 22, 15 and 23 percent respectively, compared to their male counterparts whose status were 11, 13 and 18 percent respectively. On the contrary, the females in 'all school' activity

were 78, 85 and 77 percent respectively, compared to the males whose status was 89, 87 and 82 percent respectively (n=32).

Several factors have been tendered as reasons why parents send their children either to work, school or both. These may include cost of schooling; characteristics of the child, parents, households and community (Grootaert, 1998; Dustmann, 2003). Others are location and distance to formal education centre, but most importantly, poverty and illiteracy reinforced by traditional customs such as polygamy and preference for large family size have been identified as root causes of child labour in Nigeria (Obikeze, 1986; Oloko, 1992).

5. Women as 'Bread winners'

Food security rests on a tripod pillar comprising food availability, or adequate food production; economic access to available food; and nutritional security, which often depends on the availability of nonfood resources such as child care, health care, clean water, and sanitation. Studies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have shown that women's income are more strongly associated with improvements in children's health and nutritional status than are men's incomes (Quisumbing *et al.*, 1995). The men in contrast, retain discretionary control over a higher proportion of their own incomes for personal expenditures. According to Garcia (1991), female income share has been shown to have a positive and significant association with household calorie availability, household budget shares of medical care and child's schooling (important nonfood inputs into nutrition), and preschooler weight for age. It was also found out that the probability of preschooler fever and diarrhea is also lower in families where women earn higher incomes. A study conducted on the welfare effects of male and female incomes in Brazil shows that the positive effect on the probability that a child will survive in urban Brazil is almost 20 times greater when certain income sources accrue to women than to men (Thomas, 1990).

In a study to establish the gender distribution of food vendors in Owerri Metropolis, in Southeastern Nigeria, 68 percent of the respondents were females, while 32 percent were males. Amongst the respondents (n= 50), 64 percent had their female children involved in their petty food vending businesses, while only 36 percent had their male children involved (Ben-Chendo *et al.*, 2007). 12 percent had no formal education, 72 percent had Primary School education while only 16 percent had Secondary School Education. There are several ways by which the food vendors made use of the income made from the ventures. 30 percent of the respondents used their income for the school fees of their children and also for the welfare of the

household. Ten percent of the respondents use their income for the payment of utility bills (electricity, water and rent), and household maintenance respectively. Irrespective of the adverse effect the business have on the schooling and personal safety of their children, 20 percent of the respondents were of the opinion that they were satisfied as the daily feeding of the children was guaranteed.

Given the positive nutritional outcomes associated with increasing women's incomes, poor access to education and other resources that tend to raise income levels thus has serious implications for the growing number of female 'bread winners' for their families. Women's ability to manage these resources is especially important for the vulnerable member of the households, such as children (Quisumbing *et al.*, 1995).

6. Females as House Helps

In 2007, United Nations estimates showed that for the first time in human history, the world was becoming more urban than rural, due to massive rural – urban migration. By 2050, it is projected that world population could exceed 9 billion people, with almost 5 billion urban dwellers by 2030, nearly five-eighths of the projected 8.1 billion world population in that year. With this urbanization trend comes the fact that women often represent the bulk of the informal-sector labor supply, working for low wages at unstable jobs with no employee or social security benefits (Todaro and Smith, 2009).

Most work places cannot and do not provide crèche facilities for their female employees. This creates a scenario whereby these female employees bring their younger siblings, especially the female ones, to act as live-in house helps to them, increasing the urban population further. Some exploitative people acting as middle-men have also developed a flourishing trade whereby they go to rural areas and 'import' young girls between the ages of 10 – 23 years to urban areas to act as house helps in households, to which they assign them. The remuneration due to these young girls is paid directly to the middlemen, who keep a huge chunk for themselves, and 'save' the balance for the girls. The provision of crèche facilities at work places; affordable child care and family-planning services would lighten the burden of women's reproductive roles and permit them a greater degree of economic participation. It will also ensure that the full potentials of the young girls engaged as house helps would be realized when they are engaged adequately in school and other productive activities.

7. Conclusion

Globally, females can play a central role in ensuring that the cycle of transmission of poverty from generation to generation is broken. Women

have been known to be poorer than men globally. They are also deprived of adequate health, education and freedom in most societies. They as care-givers in the home, having the primary responsibility of caring for the children, have in them the potential of transmitting values to the next generation.

Programmes put in place by National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) towards protecting vulnerable groups, specifically women and children, would go a long way towards alleviating the problems females face in a developing economy. These include increased representation of women to 30 percent in all programmes; education, including adult education; access to credit and land; maternal and child health. Education for the girl child; universal basic education; care of orphans and vulnerable children (children affected by HIV/AIDS); prevention and treatment of childhood diseases are also some of the targeted instruments. Addressing the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations, with all the seriousness that it requires, especially with a view towards empowering and investing in women, will bring about the much needed sustainable development in a global society.

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