

## PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES: AUGUST MEETING EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH EASTERN NIGERIA

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### ***Abstract***

*Women are domestic pillars on which the structure of human existence and community development are built. They are responsible for family caring and child rearing which keep all societies going. In spite of their tremendous roles in community development practices, many women are restrained from performing these roles due to some cultural and religious inhibitions, they, therefore, become victims of societal marginalization. This paper advocates that the role of women in community development practices is seen as a catalyst for achieving sustainable development. The paper further examines challenges to women's participation in community development practices and suggests possible ways of ameliorating the challenges. It is recommended that there should be holistic support from community leaders, governments and donor agency in promoting women into leadership positions for development.*

***Keywords:*** Participation, Community, Development, Practices, August Meeting

A woman is a female human being. According to Wikipedia (2012), the term woman is used to identify a female human regardless of age. In societies across the world, there is no community either rural or urban that has existed or is existing without women. This is because they occupy a very central position in each society in the world. Women are the most neglected group in our society today, yet they play a vital role in community development practices such as farming, construction of town halls, markets, church buildings among others. Women are responsible for the production and provision of most local foods in our society. As consumers and producers,

caretakers of their families and educators, women play important role in promoting community development in relation to good quality and sustainability of life for present as well as future generation.

Community development can be conceptualized as change process causing improvement to life activities and programmes, and social relations that aim to meet the needs and aspirations of people of similar historical and cultural heritage living together in their quest to reduce complete dependence on external sustainability. According to the United Nations in 1964, community development means the process by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with

those of governmental authorities, social and cultural conditions of communities to integrate these communities into the life of the nation and to enable them contribute to national progress.

Community development seeks to empower individuals and groups of people by providing these groups with the skills they need to affect change in their own community. These skills are often concentrated around building political power through the formation of large social groups working for a common agenda. Community developers must understand how to work with individuals and how to affect communities' positions within the context of large social institutions. For example, as cited in Anyanwu (1992), the Cambridge Summer Conference (1956) defined community development as:

A movement designed to promote better living for the whole community with the active participation and if possible on the initiative of the community but if the initiative is not forth coming spontaneously, by the use of techniques for arousing and stimulating it in order to ensure its active and enthusiastic response to the movement. (p. 36).

The August meeting concept is an example of grassroots mobilization of women towards community development through self-help. Everywhere worldwide, women are known for their acceptable and responsible leadership role which stands as the reason for the respect usually accorded to them. In Nigeria, there are three major

ethnic groups- Hausa, Yoruba and Igbos. The Igbos live predominantly in South East of Nigeria. They speak common language – Igbo. Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, Abia and Imo are the core Igbo states. Their unity arose out of common traditions of origin, worldview, cultural features and ties, and as a result of practical and integrated coexistence over centuries. One thing that cannot be taken away from the Igbo people in Eastern Nigeria is their love for community associations, especially, the womenfolk with regards to community development drive.

### **Understanding the Issues: Why women's participation in community development practices matters**

In most societies, women assume key roles as mothers, producers, home-managers, community organizers as well as socio-cultural and political activists. Essentially, the 1995 United Nations Report avers that seventy-five percent of the world's population lives in rural areas in the third world. The majority of the population of developing countries in rural areas are women (Cartledge, 1995). The socio-economic problems in developing countries have encouraged different communities to engage in strategies which enable them to uplift their standards of living and promote their social functions. In an attempt to address their community problems, women, in particular, engage in activities that lead to the process of community development project. Traditionally, there has been a perception that community development was a male

activity. Development activities have always existed in most countries with women leading the way. Consequently, since women were never given any recognition for their contribution, it thus appeared as if men were the only ones influential to the process of development.

Women's participation in community development practices has been the focus of intensive debates by most international forums in the past years. Among the forums that have recognized the plight of women in community development drives or practices/processes are the 1995 Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the advancement of women held in Kenya, the Beijing Declaration, and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (2000). The philosophy of these forums reveals that each member state should promote women's economic independence, which includes the creation of employment, access to resources and credit, eradication of the persistent and increasing burden of poverty, malnutrition, poor health and illiteracy among women.

There are vital reasons why women's participation in community development practices matters. The most fundamental reason is that they play crucial roles in both subsistence and commercial food production in our society today. Not only because they are working harder than the average man, but because they are reliable and committed to their tasks (Hunger Project, 2000). Women are responsible for more than fifty percent of all productive activities, even in those households where men are present

(Burkey, 1993). Consequently, the contributions women make have to be taken into consideration, because history shows that families have survived because women were always there and the duties they perform indicated that they are indispensable to their communities development drive. In South Eastern Nigeria, women are dynamic force of economic development responsible for food production for the family and other major community development practices such as town halls construction, church buildings among others through their self-help contributions and donation to enhance societal cohesion.

### **Participation of Women in Community Development Practices: August Meeting Experience in South Eastern Nigeria**

Historically, one thing that cannot be taken from the Igbo people in Eastern Nigeria is their love for community associations which triggers community development. In Igbo communities, women have long had meetings of their own and such congregations have been rightly emphasized as the base of women's political power in traditional Igbo land (Allen, 1972). These women's associations with pre-colonial and ancient roots have given Igbo women strong and powerful political voices and symbolism (Dina, 1983). Irrespective of where they are, they hardly miss the monthly meetings of their associations, where they deliberate on matters of common interest. But, if the Igbos hold the monthly meetings sacrosanct, their women do no joke with the month of August.

It has remained so since the 1940s, when the Church Missionary Societies (CMS) thought it wise to devise a way to get women involved in the affairs of their communities. Its prominence was heightened immediately after the Nigerian civil war, when the displaced Igbo people of the South East – the area then known as “Biafra” returned to homes, communities and towns that had been devastated and ravaged by the war. Schools were destroyed and hospitals were razed to the ground. Expected government help was not forthcoming, and the people known for their resilience, determination and enterprise adopted the self-help method to rebuild their communities. Today, the “August meeting” is a regular occasion in the South East of Nigeria. Every Igbo woman, particularly married women, is expected to attend the women’s meeting on a date agreed upon by all the branches of the organisation.

The former leadership roles by which women became politically significant in Igbo traditional communities are at two inter-related levels: the “Umuada” literally known as the daughters of the community who have married into other villages but retain their ties with their community of birth and “Umuiyomdi” who are the wives of the men of the village whose common bond is their place of marriage. In the Igbo land, both groups maintain order, promote life and create consolidation, joy and solidarity for themselves and for the entire community. This meeting, usually organized during the month of August,

commands the exclusive presence of married women (Ojuwku, 2013).

The reasons such meetings are held in the month of August may not be far-fetched. In the month of August, there is a short period of dry season popularly known as “August break”. This makes August suitable for gatherings. It is the month when most people are relatively free in the area. Being also the month of Igbo traditional new yam Festival, people are free from farm work; teachers and students are also on holidays. Instead of wasting away the time, the women gather from all walks of life, with those abroad sending delegates home to felicitate with their kith and kins, and brainstorm on what to do to uplift their communities (Ojukwu, 2013). These Igbo-speaking women gather in their home towns in a grand meeting that lasts for days to discuss and deliberate on issues that affect them in common.

The modus operandi of the usually week-long event is structured so that women first meet in their villages and wards to articulate ideas based on community development drive. From the second day, they converge at the central venue usually a church, where all the women of the town will commence the five-day meetings to brainstorm on the respective outcomes of their village quarterly meetings, before capping it with a final decision on possible fact-needs project(s) to embark on for the interest of all (Ojukwu, 2013). Consequently, it is soul-lifting that despite the individualistic nature of the Igbo people, this idea of coming together to execute communal project(s) has somewhat enhanced unity

and cooperation, as well as keep the spirit of oneness among the race alive over the years, irrespective of religious beliefs or faith. This has helped in different ways as a veritable tool for community development practices.

In South Eastern Nigeria, women come together from their different places and abode to hold August meetings for some vital reasons. It is a period of re-union for women in diaspora. It is a forum for women, who were married from outside the community to interact with and know more about their people, their customs and traditions. Through this forum, with its seminars and workshops, women have the opportunity to know everything they need to know about womanhood and how to chart new courses of action for project(s) execution where these are needed (Ojukwu, 2013). The gathering gives women the opportunity to be integrated into their community development projects, and having women as stakeholders and not mere observers helps guarantee a speedy and steady community development progress.

It is an avenue for women to rub minds together on various issues affecting womenfolk. Such issues include health matters, children welfare, marriages and family life. Sequentially, spiritual matters are not left out as church leaders are invited to give talks on issues bordering on spiritual matters, family planning, divorce, abortion, temporary separation among others. During August meetings, women discuss and make inputs on community development drive of the local church and the entire community. Through it, women

have fought against cultural malpractices against women, attracting government intervention which results in legislation in some instances. The women in the region conceived the idea of August meeting as a platform to make their contribution to the development of their communities. These women actually have made progress in both projects developments, such as building of civic centers, town halls, market stalls, classroom buildings for both primary and secondary schools, and also engage in settlement of disputes where there are problems usually between town union executives and traditional leaders. These women use the organisational skills to raise money, which is used effectively for the reconstruction of schools, hospitals, civil centres among others. These community development projects are financed through annual dues, levies, donations, fines, sales and income from endowment (Ojukwu, 2013).

The August meeting in South Eastern Nigeria, has not been without its own challenges. These include unnecessary display of affluence and all kinds of indecencies. It is also usually riddled by incessant power tussle. Though the church, which is behind the idea, has somewhat been able to curtail these influences. The women are compelled to wear identical dresses specially called for the usually annual event, and even dictated the type of style in which they must be sown. This has reduced the tendency to show off, as well as checked the temptations for women who lack the means to take to unorthodox means so that they can fit into what their mates and

colleagues are doing. Its imperfections or vainglorious notwithstanding, the August meetings of Igbo people remains an avenue through which the women can fight some of the societal ills with a view to contributing to community development.

August meeting in Igbo land is a force to reckon with since several communities now plan their communal activities to fall within the meeting period. Many state governments now partner with these women groups in project selection in order to identify the felt-needs for the interest of all. The Igbo women have carefully designed this forum to ensure that peace and love reign in their communities and that they keep their dignity intact so as to give womanhood the pride of place it deserves in community integration and development practices.

### **Challenges to Women's Participation in Community Development Practices in South Eastern Nigeria**

In the South Eastern part of Nigeria, there are lots of discriminatory practices against womenfolk for reasons such as beliefs, attitudes, norms and lack of respect for the right of women. This has resulted to the wide gap between men and women in all spheres of life, especially, concerning community development drive. These challenges include:

#### **Women's low level of educational attainment**

Education constitutes the basic constraints to women development in Nigeria as in many third world countries. In South Eastern Nigeria, most customs

often prefer education of child as against the female who is expected to nurture siblings and be married off thereafter. This manifests in the preference of male education and anti-female education, traces of which are still visible in some parts of Igbo land today. This retards women from knowing their rights and it also prevents them from participating in community development practices within their environment.

#### **Home Challenges**

It is noted that no matter the career of a woman, her penury, the care of her home and children should be done with pride and joy. Women in politics are wives and mothers and in fulfilling these various roles, they are likely to be faced with the problem of balancing the interest in the home front with that of their political life. In doing this, the consent of the spouse is a condition for the woman's political success.

Naturally, a pregnant woman or a nursing mother may not be too effective in politics so also the aged. It must be emphasized too that sleeping away from home occasionally on political trips or passing the night in places other than with one's husband or children could be very challenging, especially for young mothers. The truth of the matters is that men cherish the food and companionship of their wives. Consequently, a negative suspicion or disagreement of the husbands at any stage of women in politics could spell doom of that career or ambition, however, determined. This retards women's participation in some vital development drive within their communities.

### **Discriminatory Customs and Laws**

In Igbo land, some customary practices are biased by subjugating women to men and undermining their self-esteem. The overall impact of gender bias, cultural norms and practices has entrenched a feeling of inferiority in women and placed them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their male counterpart in the socio-political scene even in urban centers. These socially constructed norms and stereotypes roles make women overplay their femininity by accepting that they are weaker sexes, overemphasizing the dainty nature of their sex and regarding exceptional achievement as masculine.

Consequently, the influence of these traditional practices places women at great disadvantage and is also still pervasive in Igboland. It, therefore, retards women's participation in community development practices within their communities.

### **Poor Economic Base for Women**

Women cannot own or inherit properties such as land in Igbo land. Women in South Eastern Nigeria suffered from exclusion in all levels of decision-making, especially, involving development projects. In the development practices, women play very little role as they are usually labeled weak and insignificant.

There is also the challenge of technological bias resulting in the displacement of women from certain economic activities. In this regard, nothing is done to retrain women traditional labour in the art of using sophisticated and complex machines in development

projects operations, rather, such vital training are given to men and in the final analysis, women are displaced from some of the activities for which they have been responsible. This retards their participation in community development practices within their communities.

### **Inadequate Implementation of Affirmative Action Quota**

Affirmation action is usually a measure intended to supplement non-discrimination. It is a broad term encompassing a host of policies that support the weak groups in society. They include policies, where deliberate actions are initiated to stop discrimination. A policy process of this kind allows for rules that have the objectives of enhancing equal opportunity for individuals and the improvement in the situation of marginalized groups. In 1978, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This convention has variously been described as the Bible of women empowerment and women's international Bill of Rights (Ojukwu, 2013). Since its adoption, it has become a reference point for the women's movement in the demand for gender equality. Consequently, its poor implementation in South Eastern Nigeria retards women's participation in community development practices holistically.

### **Top-down Planning Approach**

In many cases of community development practices, few top administrators make decisions for the community members. This top-down planning approach often creates more problems than it sets out to tackle. This is because these administrators sometimes know less about community situations than they care to admit before taking decisions on their behalf. The result is that decisions taken may not address the felt needs of the people, may in fact be the direct opposite of the yearnings of the people. It may have only served the vested interest of a few people to the detriment of many others. Getting inputs from the grassroots into development decision may take longer time and require the input of some scarce resources at the outset of a project. Consequently, it is usually worthwhile in the end because the decisions finally taken often address the felt needs of the target group. It also creates the feeling of ownership and inclusion in the decision-making process that is particularly valuable in mobilizing community support and sustainability of the project beyond the term of the primary initiators. Since women are the majority in term of population in any community, their involvement in community development participation using bottom-up approach will ensure grassroot and holistic support by the larger community members. This could promote massive participation in community development practices since women are involved.

#### **Policy-Associated problems**

Idachaba (2000) provides a critical synthesis of policy related problems

including harsh policy environment, design and implementation of workable and desirable community development policies for intended beneficiaries. The desirable consequences of policies, difficulty of infrastructural and other developmental sectors to respond to set of forces in South Eastern region in particular, high rate of policy instability characterized by frequent reversed of policy contribute to poor participation of women in community development drive in the region.

#### **The Way Forward**

From the foregoing, it is suggested that in order to facilitate rapid, conscious and sustained development at grassroots level, the following steps should be taken to enhance women's participation in community development practices.

Community development policies and guideline should be properly identified, planned and streamlined to incorporate women's full participation through enabling laws and implementation strategies to enhance community development drive.

In order to improve the quality of life of the low income population living in the rural communities of which majority are women, on a self-sustaining basis through transforming the socio-spatial structure of their productive activities, the need to set up more microfinance banks becomes imperative to enhance the economic base of women. This increases socio-economic base of women though assistance from micro credit, loan advances will promote women involvement in community development

practices, since they have capacity to contribute to development efforts within their community.

Under leadership cycle, women should be selected among community leaders since they show enough commitments to rural transformation being a pivot on which the overall socio-economic development revolves. This will sustain community development practices holistically.

### **Conclusion**

Community development is a dynamic tool or strategy most nations have emphasized in the process of national development. Its reliance in community participation and involvement of the women folk has been highlighted as a major strength when compared to development initiatives by government without popular input. Community development practices are so involving that virtually all parts of community life can be affected, thereby lending itself to the sustainable development goals imperative.

The actual principle of participation in community development practices in a democratic space is embedded in the psychology of women, understanding and accepting best, those actions, which they are part of. Women's own actions are perfectly normal in any social setting. Thus, they play a part in an action which they agree to and which has meaning to them. Women play vital roles in group dynamics of collective responsibility which they belong.

### **Recommendations**

1. Community development policy and guidelines should be properly identified, demarcated and streamlined by the government of the day to enable the formulation and implementation of community development drive to a success.
2. Women should be selected into community leadership position since they show enough commitments to rural transformation being a pivot on which socio-economic development revolves within the communities.
3. Leadership tussle among community members should be discouraged since such does not augur well for the development of any society.
4. Women should be empowered to increase the socio-economic base through micro credit development activities to feel a sense of belongingness.

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