

Repositioning Women in Service, Leadership and Development in Nigeria: Experiences, Challenges and Opportunities

Journal of Management and
Social Sciences
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Special Issue
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Introduction

The debate on the role of women in governance and development processes has remained salient in scholarly discourse in Africa. The central thrust of the gender question is rooted in giving women greater opportunity to contribute to societal development through increased participation in governance and development processes. The debate interrogates two major fundamental facts about gender question in Africa's public sphere. The first is the numerical strength of women across the nations in the continent. For example, women were credited with 49.2 % of the 2006 Nigerian population census (NPC, 2006) while women constitute approximately 50 % of African population (ECA, 2016). The second is the widely recognized proven competence of African women which they have demonstrated in various areas of human endeavours. At the heart of the gender debate is the thorny question of gender inequality defined in terms of advantages or opportunities available to boys and men relative to the female gender (Burn, 2019).

Gender inequality, though culturally defined and socially constructed, manifests in various social contexts including household, labour and political structures/institutions (Onuoha, 2009). Research findings have established a significant relationship between gender equality and societal progress. In a 2013 Survey conducted by the European Commission, 9 out of 10 respondents surveyed held the opinion that gender equality enhances the functioning of the society (European Commission, 2013). Indeed, there is a consensus in the literature that creative management of women population has the potential to engender economic growth, flatten the poverty curve and enhance societal welfare (Abebe, 2016; World Bank, 2009). However, in spite of the growing

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recognition of the imperative of mainstreaming gender in the development praxis particularly since the turn of the century, women as a 'resource' are still yet to be fully exploited for sustainable development as the female half of global human capital still remained undervalued and underutilized (OECD, 2008).

Evidence across Africa suggests that men effectively dominate governance and development space in spite of the demographic advantage of women (Akorede, 2012). What this suggests is that the obvious low representation of women in governance and development arenas in Africa cannot be explained in terms of their numerical disadvantage or lack of competence. Rather the nature and character of African society particularly the dominance of patriarchy in social order is a major obstacle against the involvement of women in public governance and development process.

Against the backdrop of women's roles in the society being culturally determined (Ikelegbe, 2008), the dominant patriarchal ideology in Africa has meant that women are assigned less roles in the public sphere. Patriarchal ideology gives more respect and recognition to the male gender with a male child perceived to be more socially important than a female child. This tendency of the patriarchal ideology to give more prominent social roles to male persons has been transferred into the governance arena in Africa with men dominating political and governance space at the expense of equally competent women. The continuing dominance of governance structures by men has two immediate implications. First, it tends to suggest that representative democracies are not truly representative given the non-inclusive character of the governance institutions. Second, male-dominated decision-making structures would have little incentives to engage women-related issues such as sexual assault, women labour, domestic violence and women's reproductive rights (Akorede, 2012). The net consequence of this is that women have limited opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives even as traditionally-defined gender roles and cultural stereotyping constrain women's upward mobility (Nwagwu, 2009; Savingy, 2014). Women also suffer discrimination and/or marginalization in development as a combination of factors including low education, poverty and limited economic resources put women at a disadvantage relative to men (OECD, 2008).

While it is acknowledged that gender inequality is a global phenomenon manifesting in varying dimensions and degrees, women's experiences in developed countries and developing nations remarkably differ. Whereas women in the industrially advanced economies made significant progress in the 19th and 20th centuries both in the governance and development arenas, their counterparts in the developing world have remained subjugated and suffer substantial rights abuse (Cohen, 2006; Burn, 2019). One basic explanation for this is that certain practices in developing countries are bound to affect women's access to social, political and economic opportunities. Within the

context of developing and low-income economies, the condition of women is tied to that of the society and this largely depends on women's role in the family as well as their economic and social status.

The current condition of the Nigerian woman who is the central focus of this Special Issue represents a paradox to the extent that while women constitute a sizable percentage of the national population and make significant contributions to national development, they still constitute the highest percentage of the poor and the vulnerable and are the lowest income earners (Ntiwunka, 2014). The last two decades in Nigeria have witnessed aggressive efforts at achieving gender mainstreaming by various stakeholders including donor community, civil society and even state agencies (Nwagwu, 2009). Gender mainstreaming defined as making the roles, responsibilities as well as conditions of men and women integral part of development policy (Thomas, 2004) has long been recognized as a veritable strategy of gender equity (Wright, 2014). To be sure, these local efforts feed into the international initiatives across regions of the world aimed at changing the perception of women within the context of development policy from the status of 'victims' to that of 'independent agents' (Asalatha and Ponnuswamy, 2009). However, these noble efforts are yet to produce intended consequences as contributions to this volume demonstrate. Therefore, pro-active affirmative reforms and aggressive pro-women advocacy are needed to improve the condition of the Nigerian woman.

Women Experiences and Opportunities in Development: Insights from the Literature

A distinction has been made in the literature between sex and gender with the former regarded as universal and biologically given while the latter is perceived to be historically and culturally constructed (Richardson, 2015). This distinction was celebrated during the late 1960s and early 1970s as a conceptual breakthrough that "became one of the most fundamental assumptions in feminist gender theory from the 1970s" (Alsop *et al.*, 2002).

Gender as a concept has continued to etch itself on the front burner of development discourse. Gender matters not only for envisioning development but also for attaining same. This in a way explains why academic interest on the subject is ever growing. Gender loosely refers to qualities associated with men and women that are socially and culturally determined but not biologically defined. It relates to the way in which roles and opportunities are allocated to males and females within a cultural context (Richardson, 2015). As a socio-cultural phenomenon, gender divides people into distinct categories such as male and female or masculine and feminine with each category associated with socially defined attributes such as roles, dresses and stereotypes. According to West and Zimmerman (2007), gender is not the "property of individuals... {but rather} an emergent feature of social situations... an outcome of, and a

rationale for...social arrangements.. a means of legitimating {a} fundamental division... of society”.

Gender has also been described as the existence of two distinct social categories of women and women that are products of unequal relationships (Connell and Pearse, 2014). Scholars have offered diverse perspectives on gender inequality across cultural contexts. These range from materialist, socio-cultural and historical explanations (Khan, 2006). These three approaches aptly capture the Nigerian context. The material structure, cultural values/beliefs as well as historical processes of the Nigerian society favour men at the expense of women. In other words, experiences of Nigerian women typify findings in the literature as an array of cultural, social and economic factors limit the role of women in governance and development. For instance, as Alawode and Adelere show in this volume, while access to credit provides incentive for women to diversify their income sources, most rural women have limited access to credit facilities. Onuoha (2009) has also shown that the highly monetized nature of electoral politics in Nigeria which manifests in the commoditization of voter support puts women at a greater disadvantage than men. In the same vein, Omilusi (2017) reports that perennial electoral violence that characterises Nigerian elections has scared a significant number of women away from the ballot.

Articles in the Special Issue

In the following section, we offer an overview of the contributions on diverse topics exploring the conference theme. The first article in this special issue, by Olutayo, Molatokunbo Oluwaseunfunmi, is entitled “Mother is gold: appreciating mothering from the margin among the Yoruba of south-western, Nigeria”. It explores the shifting perceptions of mother, motherhood and mothering in southwest, Nigeria and interrogates how the emerging different categories of mothers relate with their mothering roles. Despite the constructed unpleasant image of the ‘oppressed’ African women/mothers and the unequal treatment supposedly meted on them in Western scholarship, the author maintains that motherhood among Yoruba women is continued to be appreciated, virtually by the society in general and by those holding that status themselves (mothers) in particular. This constitutes a significant contribution to knowledge to bear and nurture children in most societies. Such an attitude may not be unconnected, of course, to social expectations and status of mothers among the Yoruba of southwest, Nigeria.

Obasoro Caroline and Adebile Ruth’s contribution draws upon historical legacies theoretical framework to examine the story of women participation in politics, and the boundary between gender, women rights and leadership in governance, through an analysis of women participation in the current democratic processes in Nigeria. The authors draw attention to how over the

years, women's right to political administration in society has always been met with strong challenges in most African countries and in Nigeria in particular. Obasoro and Adebile argue that women are relatively deprived of their rights to politics; and remind us of the fact that women are perceived as unequal to men in Nigerian politics and in many other countries of the world. In spite of evidences about the significant roles women played in pre-colonial politics and governance in most African societies, women participation in the affairs of their countries are being challenged and limited through discriminatory attitudes, socio-cultural and religious practices. Obasoro and Adebile's paper advocates for qualitative education for women on effective participation in politics and civic duties, and this the authors argued should start early in school, at different levels of education. They suggested that such education may be through the introduction of gender studies into the schools' curricula.

Looking at the impact of religion, Akinjobi Oluwakemi Hannah discusses women's empowerment and participation in national development and specifically in economy, politics, culture and other areas, suggesting religion has been a strong influence on how women participate in societies worldly and spiritual affairs. Akinjobi exposes how involvement of women in and contribution to national development is understood in relation to dictates of what she called New religion and the indigenous African religion, whilst showing that religion has thus impacted women both positively and negatively. Drawing on Durkheimian theory of religion and adopting secondary data, Akinjobi argued that in spite of the remarkable achievements of Nigerian women, their involvement in politics and economy has militated against their role as members of the family. The author specifically relates this to a theme central to gender relations – arguing that all religions treat women and their expected roles in society differently from those of men.

Income Diversification and Savings Pattern among Rural Women by Alawode Olubunmi and Adelere, Opeyemi is another critical topic focused on women empowerment especially in relations to income and economic power. This topic is central to the overall theme of the special issue because the income level of women determines their standard of living especially in third world countries where most women operate largely in the informal sector. This is why the Alawode and Adelere's chapter becomes handy in the discourse of women empowerment. The researchers examine sources of income-generating activities; income diversification; saving patterns as well as factors influencing income diversification and the effect of income diversification on the saving rate of the women in the study area. The paper finds out that despite the fact that a larger percentage of the rural women studied are farmers with diversified income, their rate of savings is relatively low. This paradox, according to the paper, results from high consumption rate from the income and financial illiteracy prevalent among the rural women. Factors that significantly impact on income diversification of the rural women include membership of cooperative society, credit received and road network while total income,

household size and age also have significant impact on savings rate. The paper recommends that credit availability and monitoring should be intensified in the rural areas to enable the women have financial support. Financial education which will sensitize the rural women to patronize formal financial institutions is as well recommended to improve saving culture among the women. Finally, the study also suggests programmes and trainings that would enhance production processes alongside with provision of social amenities that could boost the rural economy.

Journalism has traditionally been male-dominated profession. Ikechuckwu Eke's article highlights how women's underrepresentation in column writing – while making stunning strides in other areas of journalism – can be understood more clearly when it is conceptualized within the agenda-settings and agenda-building frameworks and its relationship with the media space is fully reflected. The author's comparison of the number of female and columnists shows the predominant subjects of female columnists in Nigeria. Eke demonstrates that female columnists focus their columns on less critical discourse, notably relationships and fashion, and thus concludes that the impacts female columns have on the society are less than those of men. In this paper, Eke also notes that the number of male columnists greatly outstripped those of women and thus suggested that women columnists need to articulate the immense power of their columns to better shape public discourse and empower themselves. Indeed the paper advocated that women need to take advantage of their columns to change the narratives of women either in politics, economy, public or private environments.

Finally, drawing on qualitative approach with purposively selected academics working in four federally-funded Universities in Nigeria, Olutayo Molatokunbo and Adebayo Adedeji's article focused on how female lecturers navigate the gendered STEM path. Using the *leaky pipe* metaphor-which describes the disappearance of women on the career path production line-, the authors query why women outperform men at both the undergraduate and post graduate level but still find it difficult to climb the career ladder in the academia. This, Olutayo and Adebayo noted, manifests in women totally disappearing from the academia or even when they manage to wriggle through, it is cumbersome for them to hold leadership positions. The authors' analysis of the experiences of women in Nigeria's higher educational institutions highlights the challenges women had to wrestle with as academia and the extent to which they had to conform to traditional institutional norms in their career-path. Hinging their explanations on intersectionality theory, Olutayo and Adebayo's exploration into this little charted water of hetero-patriarchal space further shed light on the micro-politics men play within the work environment. They demonstrated clearly the relationships between women negotiating power and career progress; and thus suggest that women who can negotiate with men seem to experience some progress. While the progress women experienced in

this work environment is still at a slower pace than the men, the authors conclude that not all women experienced the leaky pipeline the same way.

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