

ENGENDERING WOMEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH GRASSROOTS EDUCATION

BY

O. M. OGUNBIYI

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM STUDIES,
LAGOS STATE UNIVERSITY OJO, LAGOS.

&

J. O. AJIBOYE,

DEPARTMENT OF TEACHER EDUCATION,
UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN.

ABSTRACT

*The role of women in development programmes is now being given greater attention than any other times before. This increase in awareness came as a consequence of the realisation of the potentiality of women as agent of nation building and national development. This paper highlights the effects of sex discrimination against women and the negative impact of low status of women in political participation and other life situations. The paper further examines the intricate relationship of women and development as it concerns rural grassroots women in Nigeria. In concluding the paper, it was asserted that effective women participation in political programmes in the country is *sinequa non* to their advancement. This could only be engendered through an effective grassroots women education.*

Introduction

Recently, there has been an increase in the realization of the crucial role of women in population and development and the emergence of a life-cycle approach to gender issues. The first United Nations world Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975 and the consequence declaration of that year as the International Year of Women, began a process of reappraisals and recognition of women as being at the core of development efforts (UNFPA, 1995).

The UN decade (1976 - 1985) for women further highlighted the effects of sex discrimination against women and the negative impact of low status of women on maternal mortality and other life situations. In 1980, a second conference was held in Copenhagen during which a programme of action to integrate women in development was drawn up. Furthermore, in 1985, the 3rd World Conference on Women adopted the 'Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (NGLS)' for the advancement of Women. This strategy provided for a framework which was aimed at promoting the achievement of the goals and objectives of the UN decade for Women, which embodied three principal foci - equality, development and peace. In the real sense of it, the NGLS actually demonstrated the commitment of the international community to the elimination of gender-based discrimination. The most recent of these conferences on women was the Beijing Conference of 1995.

The activities of pressure groups around the world which led the United Nations to focus on the status of women has served to sensitise governments and peoples around the

world to the fact that women are a disadvantaged minority and that their human rights have for long been ramped upon. (James, 1994).

In Nigeria, the ministry of Justice and Local women's groups are working to ensure that the imbalance be redressed. Presently, the government at the Federal Level has established a Ministry of Women Affairs, to focus mainly on gender based issues as it affects women. The ultimate aim of establishing this ministry is to improve the quality of life of women and enhance their status through effective mobilization and participation. Similarly, programmes such as the Better Life for Rural Women and the Family Support Programme are designed to uplift the status of women in the country and geared towards increasing women participation in all facets of life activities.

Despite all these programmes put in place, it is surprising, however, to find that the pace of the increase in women participation in political activities in the country still leaves much to be desired. This ugly situation according to James (1994) could be largely ascribed to the attitude of people towards women. As pointed out by James (1994), it is still not surprising, that, despite the overwhelming evidence that mothers are the first teachers and have shaped the thinking of generations past and present, the prevailing attitude towards women among a number of ethnic groups is that 'they should be seen and not heard; that they are incapable of thinking for themselves and are prone to irresponsible behaviour'.

One can assume then, that it is this type of reasoning that has led to early marriages of girls and to the confinement of young women in the homes of their fathers and husbands. Of importance is also the fact that, even among those ethnic groups in which early marriage and confinement are not practised and in which women make a considerable input in the family income, there are social and legal constraints that prevent them from participating fully in all spheres of national life.

Why Political Participation?

It may be convenient at this point to ask for the reason why women need to participate in politics. In ensuring that women are well integrated in development issues, emphasis is now being placed on women participation in politics (UNFPA, 1995). The main reason for their development is to have effective advocacy of women development programmes. The assumption is that when women occupy political positions, they will be able to articulate better issues that affect them. In essence, to influence government policies and programmes in favour of women, they must be ready to participate in the politics of the Country.

However, when we consider the present situation in the country, the number of women occupying political positions is highly negligible. It may be interesting to do an examination of the various strata of government to confirm this observation. At the local government level, the number of elected women chairmen may not be up to five out of the four hundred and ninety (490) Councils in the country. Presently, no Military administrator in the thirty six (36) states is a woman. At the Federal level, of all the Cabinet ministers which may number up to thirty (30), only about two at most three (3) of them are women. This is the present state of the art in the country, and this clearly indicate the level of marginalisation of women in politics in Nigeria. To ensure increase in women political participation, it may be suggested here now that a concreate programme of women education, especially at the rural grassroots level is necessary.

The Need for A Grassroots Political Education For Women

The important role of female education as a powerful tool for behavioural change has been recognised (Makinwa - Adeburoye, 1988). Education could be considered an important

parameter for assessing the quality of life and indeed, the development process, in any nation. The notion of quality of life derive from the contemporary understanding of development as a process involving qualitative (rather than more quantitative or growth) changes among a population (UNFPA, 1995). Such qualitative changes according to the UNFPA (1995), come through assured access to the basic necessities of life both at the level of the individual and the society; paramount among which is access to information and education. The Third Nigerian National Development Plan (1975-1980) also stated *inter alia* that:

education has always been highly rated in our national development plans, because it is the most important instrument of change, and, one may add, the most important resource for development.

From the above discussions, it has become obvious, that education remains the most viable option in getting people to examine their beliefs, and values regarding social issues, and to accordingly modify their practices.

However, because of the high rate of illiteracy among rural women in Nigeria coupled with a high incidence of drop-out rate of girls from schools, it has been found that the formal school system may not be adequate in getting rural women mobilized for effective political participation. Let us stress this point further by stating that, whereas serious in-school approach has been devised to reach girls/women who are attending schools, no such concrete effort is being made to reach a large percentage that is out-of-school (both illiterates rural women and drop-outs). The reality, however, is that their regiment constitutes a very large percentage of the Nigerian women population.

The ingredients of their grassroots political education will compose largely of social mobilization through grassroots women social organisations. The rural women organisation such as the Family Support Programme, Cooperative Societies, Family Compound groups etc. could be used as mechanisms through which political oriented education can be introduced. Although, this approach may not sound new, but recent development in the efforts to mobilize women for national development give them added momentum.

It is important to make it clear that any political transition programme being planned in Nigeria or any other African country, can only succeed with the co-operation of women. We recognize the fact that women have a lot of contact and access to the largest section of the population, particularly the rural population with no radio, television, schools etc. (Gulima, 1988). The new direction in the activities of the women organisations, most especially, the Family Support Programme has made them an excellent mechanism through which politically oriented education could be organized.

In concluding this paper, it is important to stress that while we recognize the contributions of some governmental organisations set up to mobilize the citizenry towards political participation, we doubt very much the mechanisms being used presently. The use of the television and radio as the media of mobilisation has not been particularly found to have much effect on women especially the larger majority in the rural areas. It is therefore imperative that an alternative mechanism as the one being proposed in this paper be explored to ensure increase in women participation in Nigerian politics.

REFERENCES

- Gulima, A. A. (1988). Population Oriented education. In *NERDC (ed.) Perspectives / Population Education*, Vol. 1, 63.
- James, S. (1994). The role of women in determining the destiny of the nation in population development. *Population and Development in Nigeria*. Lagos: Population Information and Communication Branch (PICB), March, 119-126.

Makinwa - Adebuseye, P.K. (1988). Female Education and Fertility. In NERD (ed.) *Perspectives in Population Education*, Vol. 1, 29 - 36.

Nigeria, Federal Ministry of Information (1975). *The Third National Development Plan (1975 - 1980)*, Lagos: Government Printers.

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (1995) A Mid-term Review of UNFPA - Supported Activities in the area of Population Policy and Strategies Development in Nigeria.