



An Evaluation of The Contributions of Women Organisations to Community Development in Nigeria and Factors Affecting Their Effective Participation in Community Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluated some areas where women organisations have contributed immensely to community development in Nigeria and also interrogated some challenges faced by women organisations in community development. The radical feminist theory provided the theoretical underpinning of this study. The qualitative methodology was adopted for this study and non-numerical data obtained from articles, books and other online sources were analysed with content analysis. The study concluded that the challenges facing women organisations were multidimensional and subsumed under socio-cultural constraints; economic/financial constraint; political constraints and informational constraints. To address these challenges, the paper recommended that Nigeria's literacy levels require improvement, and it is crucial that young girls in the North are encouraged to attend school. Also, adult literacy programmes should be driven by government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations, and the private sector; women entrepreneurs and organisations should have access to micro loans, grants, donations and other financial supports to aid them in carrying out their programmes, projects and activities within their communities and women should be more engaged in politics, as this would provide a veritable platform for them to channel their concerns and have their voices heard.

Keywords: Women, Women Organisations, Community and Community Development

INTRODUCTION

Women are a vital asset and active partners in community development, sustainable development and nation building. They are also agents of change in community development and national development. As expressed by Yawa, *"in every nation of the world, women are said to be at the heart of development as they control most of the monetary and non-monetary economic activities in the society such as agriculture, child bearing, wage labour and trading in market places"* (Yawa, 1995 as cited in Nyong and Archibong, 2018, p.3). However, the structure of most societies like that of Nigeria does not provide a level playing field for women to excel in all facets of life due to patriarchy that tends to favour men more than women. This is evident in the under representation of women in policy making and governance (Afolabi, 2019). According to Beijing Affirmation Platform for Action, women are to constitute 30% in political representation and appointment in governance (Beijing Affirmation Platform for Action, as cited in Yidau, Tafida & Yusuf, 2021). Unfortunately, this policy is not judiciously implemented to give women better representation in governance. For instance, in the 10th Assembly, there are only four (4) female senators in a senate of 109 senate seats or members. That is about 2.7% of female lawmakers in the senate. In the House of Representative of 360 seats, there are 16 female House of Representative members. That is 4.7% of female lawmakers in the House of Representative. This amounts to 4.2% of female representation in the 469-member National Assembly. In addition, U.N Children's Fund (UNICEF) revealed that the out-of-school- children population in Nigeria currently stands at 18.5m, of whom 60% are girls. The consistent attacks on schools accompanied by kidnappings perpetuated by criminals could explain the high figure (UNICEF, as cited in Voanews, 2022).

Unsurprisingly, the need for equity, equality, social justice, freedom of women and disadvantaged among other factors gave rise to the formation of women's organisations in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Examples of such instrumental women's organisations in Nigeria are the Federation of Nigeria Women's Societies (FNWS) birthed in 1953 to champion for women to enjoy political participation in all legislative arms and the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS) founded in 1959 to patronise all women organisations in Nigeria was an agent for checking authoritarian governments, strengthening women empowerment, reducing the social anarchical and unsettling effect of market forces (Olojede, 2008 & Soriola, 2007, as cited in Afolabi, 2019).

Further, empirical and theoretical studies have shown that women's organisations have contributed significantly to community development in areas of empowerment, provisions of social infrastructure, agricultural development, environmental sustainability, advisory role, property rights and conditions of service, human capital for labour (through reproduction) partnerships with other bodies like Local Government among others (Nyong & Archibong, 2018; Yidau et al., 2021 & Afolabi, 2019; Mba, 1997 & Elmhirst & Resurrection, 2012). Two examples of contributive women organisations to their communities abound-The Women Environmental Programme International (WEP International) who engages in eco-friendly activities such as planting of trees and environmental sanitation exercises planted tree seedlings across Nigeria to tackle climate change (<https://wepnigeria.net/tree-planting-campaign-across-nigeria>) and the Nigerian Women Association of Georgia (NWAG) that award scholarships to Nigerians both home and abroad (<https://www.wemakescholars.com/other/nigerian-women-association-of-georgia-nwag->). It is instructive to note that this paper evaluated some areas where women organisations have contributed

immensely to community development in Nigeria and also interrogated some challenges faced by women organisations in community development. In a bid to achieving the set objectives, the paper was divided into six (6) sections. The sections were conceptual clarifications of community, community development and women organisations; contributions of women organisations to community development in Nigeria; the theoretical framework of radical feminism; methodology; factors affecting women's participation in community development, conclusion and recommendations.

Conceptualisation Of Community

Vogl (2009) defined community as *"the development of bonds between a group of people... or feeling a sense of unity with one's co-workers."* Vogl perceives community as a sense of belonging. Bettez (2013) sees communities as a group of people with shared values. She opined that *"Communities are comprised of those with whom we share the same values, beliefs, and worldviews..."* (Bettez, 2013). *"Communities are defined primary by territorial dimension as in the case of neighbourhoods..."* (Capece & Costa, 2013). Capece & Costa view community from the prism of territoriality. According to Rothblum (2010), *"if community is defined as support, then presumably what these women are yearning for is help during times of hardship"*. He sees community as a support system.

A broader definition of community in the context of community development was provided by Goel (2014, p.3), *"which includes place-based, interest-based and other forms of new and emerging communities. For example, web community, face book or other social media community and online groups that traverse physical boundaries and relate with unknown people in diverse locations"*. This is why Theodori (2005) distinguishes between territory-free communities (groups of people, i.e., *"the Internet community"*) and territory-based communities." From the above definitions of community, it can be discerned that a community could be territorially bound or territory-

free with group of people with shared values. Community also provides a sense of belonging and could be a support system for a group of people.

Conceptualisation Of Community Development

Forgeard (2021, p.2), defined community development as "*a group of activities and programmes that empower communities to bring about social change in their own lives*". She further enthused, that, "*community development is a concept for improving communities through sustainable practices that include social responsibility, environmental stewardship, political participation and economic stability*". Similarly, for Buye (2021, p.2), "*community development empowers people and groups within the society to have capacity to improve their lives. Community development is a positive change and value-based process which aims to address imbalances in welfare and power based on inclusion, human rights, social justice, equity and equality*".

Further, "*community development is a set of values, practices, which plays a special role in overcoming poverty and disadvantage, knitting society together at the grass roots and deepening democracy*" (Community Development Challenge Report 2009 as cited Buye, *ibid.*). In other words, community development addresses social malaise, fulfill the role of social cohesion and propel development. According to Hasan (2022, p.2), "*community development is a process that brings people together to address social and community issues affecting them*". In line with Hasan, Barley (as cited in Yidau et al., 2021, p.31), "*perceived community development as the provision of social amenities and infrastructure by an individual, group, organisation or government for improvement to community as a support or assistance that is triggered by economic, political, social and physical environmental adversities*".

From the foregoing, community development can be said to be a collaborative effort of individuals, groups, organisations and government. Thus, it is an embracing concept. Community development is value based and has underlying principles which include community participation and collective action, ethos, mutual respect, diversity, honesty and integrity, secure human rights, enhance quality of living, community assets/capital and resources mobilisation, sustainability and resilient and empowerment (Hasan, 2022 & Forgeard, 2021). The "felt" needs of the community must be identified and not assumed need of organisations, private interests or government, if cooperation among members of the community and accomplishment of the objectives of community development are to be realized (Green, 1963). In other words, the realisation of the objectives of community development must be based on the "felt" needs of the people. In addition, community development is geared towards solving socio-cultural, economic, political, environment problems. Thus, it is a problem-solving approach that should be adopted by governments, if development is to reach the nooks and crannies of any country. Community development also is a social change programme or approach that improves and empowers individuals and groups within the society.

Conceptualization of Women Organisations

"Women organisation is an association of women who have come together for their own interest and that of their community" (Winakin, 1998, as cited in Yidau et al., 2021, p. 40). *"Women organisations were organisations funded by women or men that were established for the enhancement of women's liberation, gender equality and social justice in the society"* (Olojede 2008 as cited in Afolabi, 2018, p.4). More so, women organisations were organisations that believed that women's rights could be secured by addressing the broader issues of human rights of women and men in oppressive society. (Afolabi ibid.). She went further to give examples of such organisations which included Non- Governmental Organisations

(NGOs), Community Based Organisations (CBOs), Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and other organisations that had the political and social development of women at heart. Therefore, women organisations can be summarised as an interest and community based organisations, funded by either men or women. These organisations are established for addressing inequality, social injustice, marginalisation of girls, women and disadvantaged in an oppressive society. Finally, women organisation is one of the developer of methods and practices of community development just like the Local Government, a tier of Government.

Contributions Of Women Organisations to Community Development in Nigeria

Generally, women have played significant roles within their families and communities. They are important in economic, social and political areas and have tried to influence government policies on matters such as the franchise for women, educational opportunities for girls and property rights and conditions of service for women which determine the status and roles of women in society (Mba, 1997). Women and girls also through natural reproduction have provided human capital inform of labour to industry and commerce. Without women, there will be no labour resources in communities around the world including Nigeria (Elmhirtst & Resurrection, 2012). This shows how women are critical to industrialization of any society. Women organisations have contributed immensely to the socio-cultural, economic and political development of Nigeria. In fact, they have contributed to all aspects of human endeavours. Women organisations have contributed in areas such as politics and governance, agriculture, food production, education, commerce, health, civil education and information and sustainable development (Nyong and Archibong, 2018). Fubara (1995, as cited in Nyong and Archibong, 2018) argued that women organisations have also played critical roles in combating poverty, changing consumption pattern for

health reasons, protection and promoting of human health, helping in managing the ecosystem, protection of our natural environment, strengthening farming, promoting education, strengthening and promoting business among others. Correspondingly, women through their organisations have brought success to communities in Nigeria in the areas of infrastructure amenities provision to communities, renovation and furnishing of town halls, equipment of churches and schools in the villages and help in the cleaning of communities environment through regular sanitization exercise, building of community library, granting of loans to community based entrepreneurs, award of scholarships to children in the community especially indigent students and exceptionally good students (Ihem-Avoaja, 2013). Put differently, women organisations have assisted in the provision of social and physical infrastructures. Such as the provision of relief materials to the displaced, free medical services, award of scholarships to diligent students among others. The Women Environmental Programme International (WEP International) who engages in eco-friendly activities such as planting of trees and environmental sanitation exercises planted tree seedlings across Nigeria to tackle climate change (<https://wepnigeria.net/tree-planting-campaign-across-nigeria>) and the Nigerian Women Association of Georgia (NWAG) that award scholarships to Nigerians both home and abroad (<https://www.wemakescholars.com/other/nigerian-women-association-of-georgia-nwag->) are instructive in this regard.

Additionally, women organisations have provided advocacy to enlighten members of the public on societal issues such as gender-based violence and girl child education. Mirabel Rape Crisis Center (MRCC) is one of such organisations that supports victims of rape and sexual assault and provides survivors of sexual violence an opportunity to gain access to forensic, medical, legal and counselling services. (Sundata Post, 2016, as cited in Yidau et al., 2021). Girl Child Concerns (GCC) is another organisation that is dedicated to

elevating the lives of youth's especially young girls through improved educational activities (<https://www.girlchildconcerns.org/>).

Finally, women organisations have assisted in food production and sustainability of families. The African Women Power Network (AWP Network) had been helping women farmers on their entrepreneurial skills, increase family productivity and household income. (Sundata Post, 2016 as cited in Yidau et al., 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical orientation for this study was the radical feminist theory, a variant or stream of feminism. It is radical because it seeks to dismantle patriarchy rather than making adjustments to the system through legal changes. (Lewis, 2020). "*The theory holds the view that, patriarchy and sexism are the most fundamental factors in the discrimination and oppression of women and ignore all other forms such as race, colour, age, religion, ethnicity, culture, geographical location, disability, caste and economic and social classes; patriarchy, is based on psychological and biological factors rooted in the society*"(Nachescu, 2009 cited in Mohajan, 2022, p.15). In a technical sheet prepared by Cottais, (n.d.) and translated by Feldner (<https://igg-geo.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Technical-Sheet-Radical-feminism.pdf>), patriarchy was referred to the system, in which, the male social group holds the economic and political power, whether in the family or within the society and has control over the female social group (over their bodies, work and sexuality, etc.), resulting in the total subordination of women to men.

On the other hand, sexism is defined by attitudes that reinforce a gender hierarchy that disadvantages women (Glick and Rudman, 2010). This definition is deficient because it sees sexism from only the perspective of women. Sexism could also be defined "*as individuals' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, organisational, institutional and cultural practices that either reflect negative assessments of*

individuals based upon their gender or support unequal status of women and men" (Swim and Hyers, 2009: 407 cited in Becker, Zawadzki & Shields, 2014, p. 603). Swim and Hyers' definition is more complete as it views sexism from both the perspective of men and women. Though, it must be emphasised that sexism is more focused on girls and women because they are most affected by the patriarchal structure of many societies.

This paper was anchored on this theory because it can be argued that women have contributed immensely to community development and national development in areas of empowerment, political development, agriculture and food production, advisory roles, environmental regeneration and partnerships (Nyong and Archibong, 2018 and Yidau et al., 2021). Their contributions are not widely acknowledged, credited, or recognized due to the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society, which is unfortunate. This is evident in the descriptive representation of women in politics and decision-making arena rather than substantive representation. Descriptive representation means that woman is underrepresented in decision making and governance while, substantive representation means that women are adequately represented in decision making and governance (Afolabi, 2019). However, some reasons for the descriptive representation of women are highlighted by Kasomo (2012). They include obnoxious social norms, political exclusion, economic lopsidedness, social and systemic practices. (Kasomo, 2012 cited in Afolabi, 2019). Finally, the lack of adequate data to analyse the contributions of women in National Development is an albatross to the visibility of women organisations (Nyong and Archibong, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative methodology, utilising a systemic review of relevant literature from books, journals and online sources. Content analysis was then applied to this body of work to pinpoint key areas where women organisations have contributed to community

development in Nigeria. Furthermore, the analysis extended to identifying and summarising the factors that influence the effective participation of these organisations. This comprehensive approach allowed for the formulation of an informed conclusion regarding their roles and challenges.

Factors Affecting the Effective Participation of Women Organization in Community Development

Kamuzora (2024) highlighted education, marital status, family size, income level and access to credit as critical factors hindering women's active participation in community development. Umar & Mustapha (2024) identified micro credit, material support, cash donations and monthly contributions influenced women participation in economic activities while donation of funds, political awareness and sensitization campaign of voter's registration influenced women participation in political development activities in Sokoto State of Nigeria. Arop & Adak2 (2024) pointed out that the inability to access finance and property ownership, lack of awareness and training and prevention from taking decisions in the community as constraints to women participation in Kakwagom-Boki Local Government Area of Cross River State. More so, financial and cultural factors were pinpointed as significant factors hindering women participation in community development projects in their respective communities (Obiqua, Olabisi & Ede, 2023). Bett (2024) noted that cultural values (male chauvinism), resources, family responsibilities as determinants influencing women participation in community-based projects in Kipsonoi ward, Sotik sub-county, Bomet county of Kenya. Poor orientation and lack of education, poverty, cultural values, believes and traditional practices and believes as major factors militating against women participation in promoting community development activities in Pankshin Local Government of Plateau State (Saleh, Sati & David, 2022). According to Njoku and Mbah (2021), serious constraints to women empowerment were poor access to productive

resources, lack of quality education for rural women poor political representation, sex stereotyping, greater risk aversion, low participation and membership of association, cultural practice, gender roles and multiples roles played by them. Fekede (2021) argued that economic, religion, political and cultural teachings and attitudinal discriminations as factors limiting women participation in community-based development projects. The above reveals that these challenges are multidimensional and could be summarised or subsumed under socio-cultural constraints (sex stereotyping, gender roles, male chauvinism, attitudinal discriminations and multiples roles, religion); economic/financial constraints (lack of education, income level, cash donations, monthly contributions, lack of access to credits, property ownership and poor access to productive resources); political constraints (lack of political awareness and sensitisation campaign of voter registration and low membership of association) and informational constraints (lack of awareness and training).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study evaluated some areas where women organisations have contributed immensely to community development in Nigeria and also interrogated some challenges faced by women organisations in community development. The paper concludes that these challenges were multidimensional and subsumed under socio-cultural constraints; economic/financial constraints; political constraints and informational constraints. To overcome these challenges, the paper made the following recommendations:

- i. Nigeria's literacy levels require improvement, and it is crucial that young girls in the North are encouraged to attend school. Also, adult literacy programmes should be driven by government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations, and the private sector. The famous quote from Malcom X remains relevant and instructive to all "*Education is the passport to the*

future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today'' (Malcom X, as cited in Antoinette Wiley, 2021).

- ii. Women entrepreneurs and organisations should have access to micro loans, grants, donations and other financial supports to aid them in carrying out their programmes, projects and activities within their communities.
- iii. Women and girls should be empowered so that they could contribute their quota to the overall development of their communities and society at large. Skills acquisition for girls and women, mentorship opportunities for women leaders and mentorship networking would provide veritable platforms for them to equip themselves with the right skill sets and share their experiences with others.
- iv. Women should be more engaged in politics, as this would provide a better platform for them to channel their concerns and have their voices heard.
- v. There should be stringent enforcement of policies to protect women's right including law against violence, discrimination and forced marriage.

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