

Adult Literacy Education as An Empowerment Tool for Poverty Reduction Among Women in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper looked at adult literacy education as an empowerment tool for poverty reduction among women in Nigeria. It also looked at the various concepts associated with the study and examined critically the roles of adult literacy education in poverty reduction aimed at empowering the women. The conclusion of this study recommended that there is the need to create awareness on adult literacy education as an empowerment tool for poverty reduction among women and that there is the need for political will and commitment on women empowerment and development.

Keywords: Adult, Literacy, Education, Empowerment, Poverty Reduction, Women, Nigeria

Introduction

The rural communities of Nigeria are faced with complex socio-economic problems ranging from deprivation, illiteracy, poverty, dearth of basic social amenities like electricity, good road, portable water, housing, good schools and hospitals. Poverty is a multi-dimensional problem among the women in the country. It excludes, mutilates and kills women. From the above scenario, it seems that the cause of poverty among women is as a result of lack of women empowerment.

Women make up to two thirds of illiterate adults in Nigeria (Egunjobi, 2005). According to the EFA Global monitoring report, Nigeria has one of the world's largest illiterate populations. The report further has it that 31% of women in Nigeria are literate (UNESCO, 2002). While that of men is 54%. According to Akomolafe (2012), the national literacy rate for female in Nigeria is only 56% compared to 72% for male. Because of the illiteracy rate, women in Nigeria are the poorest of the poor (Oduola and Olaniran in Anyikwa, Okebiorun and Sheidu, 2016).

According to Akande (2016), women form part of the disempowered groups, which also includes street children, the elderly, the orphaned, the physically challenged, the rural and urban poor, minority ethnic groups, refugees, victims of

epidemic diseases and non-literate adults. Akande further noted that women fall into this disadvantaged group both politically, socially, economically, religiously and legally. This is attributed to the national culture. Culture is an impediment to early women education, in spite of the wide awareness given to education. For instance, in some parts of Nigeria, cultural and religious backgrounds have prevented the women folk from direct participation in community development, as well as access to education. They are restricted to the house or domestic activities. A critical example is the Muslim religion which does not allow free access of most of their women to neither education or to actively participate in the process of developing the society which they belong. Also, Tinker and Bramsen in Akande (2016) noted that in most cultures of the world, women are known with domesticity. While the men are associated with mobility, power, superiority and opportunity in the supra-domestic sphere.

Hence, there is the need for a renewed reflection and urgent action to redress it. This paper therefore, sought to examine adult literacy education as an empowerment tool in reducing poverty among women in Nigeria. To guide the study, the conceptual framework that is associated with the work, which includes literacy, poverty and women empowerment are examined.

Result

Literacy has no precise definition. According to Patrick and Ijah (2013), UNESCO for over the years has been struggling with the task of giving a consensus and generally acceptable definition of literacy. However, for the purpose of this paper, literacy is seen to be the ability to read, write and compute with functional competence in an official national language, in order to meet the requirements of daily living. In a broad sense, literacy is the ability to acquire and exchange information via the written form; reading an easy passage and writing one's name or simple message which enables an individual to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his or her culture or group. Since literacy is the heart of basic education for all, it will eradicate poverty, reduce child mortality, curb population growth, achieve gender equality and ensure sustainable development, peace and democracy (UNESCO, 2002).

Poverty has various definitions and is a complex phenomenon that takes many forms (Akande, 2009). Poverty is perceived using different criteria. This has led to numerous attempts in defining poverty, with each definition trying to capture the perception of the authors as to what the term is.

Narayan and Petesch (2002) succinctly posit that poverty may look quite different, seen through the eyes of a poor man or a woman. This is reflected in the differences in the various definitions, as poverty is considered to be a relative term. Narayan Petesch (2000a and 2000b) see poverty to be lack of voice, power, independence, well or ill being, regional, gender, etc.

According to Englama and Bamidele (1997), poverty is a state where an individual is not able to cater adequately for his/her basic needs of food, clothing and shelter, is unable to meet social and economic obligations, lacks gainful employment, skills, assets and self-esteem, and has limited access to social and economic infrastructures, such as education, health, portable water, and sanitation, and as a result has limited chance of advancing his/her welfare to the limit of his/her capabilities.

Poverty could denote a state of deprivation as was captured by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) guideline on poverty reduction (2002). But Akande (2009) reported that poverty is synonymous with deprivation. Such deprivation is mainly on material which has to do with low income and consumption levels, results in poor nutrition, inadequate clothing and low-quality housing (White, et. al., 2001).

Poverty to mean deprivation encompasses not only material deprivation (measured by an appropriate concept of income or consumption) but also low achievements in education and health (World Bank, 1999).

Okoh in Kazeem and Aghedo (2015) noted that poverty is a state of deprivation in terms of both economic and social indicators, such as income, education, healthcare and access to food, social status, self-esteem and self-actualisation. In the opinion of Oronsaya and Omage (2016), poverty is the lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in the society and it affects the role of women in their development and that of the societies.

Poverty in Nigeria is caused by political instability, lack of accountability, mismanagement and corruption, poor economic policies, poor policy formulation, implementation and evaluation, ethnic and religious conflicts and lack of involvement of the poor. Because of a strong correlation between gender empowerment measures and gender related development indices and its human development indices, the prevalence of poverty among the females is much (Iheduru cited in Anyikwa, et.al; 2016).

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2002), female poverty is more prevalent and typically more severe than male poverty. The organisation sees the cause as a result of violence by men on a large scale, illiteracy, structural gender inequality, political and social exclusion of women in their communities.

According to World Bank (2000 and 2001), empowerment “is the expansion of assets and capabilities includes health, education and housing. According to Narayan and Petesch (2002), empowerment has to do with the removal of formal (laws, rules and regulations upheld by states, markets, civil society and informal institutions barriers like norms of social solidarity, sharing social exclusion and corruption.

John Hopkins University in Indawaba and Mpofu (2006) see empowerment to mean a person’s ability to take effective control of one’s life in terms of being well informed and equipped with education, finance and relevant skills to take

decision without any external influence. Lending credence to the above definition, Akande (2016), deduced the four basic elements of empowerment as control of one's life, access to information and education, access to finance, and access to skills for decision-making related to one's situation.

Empowerment improves quality of life and human dignity, good governance, pro-poor growth and project effectiveness and improved service delivery. Empowerment could also mean self-strength, control, self-power, self-reliance, own choice, life of dignity in accordance with one's values, capacity to fight for one's rights, independence, own decision making, being free, awakening and capacity (Narayan and Petesch, 2002). It focuses on gaining power and control over decision and resources that determine the quality of one's life and structural inequalities that affect the entire social groups rather than focusing only on individual characteristics

UNICEF (2001) see empowerment as women's success, awareness of causes of inequality, capacity to direct one's own interests, and taking control and action to overcome obstacles to reducing structural inequality. UNDP (1995) posits that empowerment focuses on inequalities in economic and political participation and decision-making power and power over economic resources. Rowlands (1997) see it as involving a sense of self-confidence and capacity, relational, implying ability to negotiate and influence relationships and decisions

According to Stromquist in Oyebamiji and Adekola (2008), empowerment is a process of changing the distribution of power both in interpersonal relations and in institutions through society. But Indabawa and Mpofu (2006) see it as the process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy in communities through identification and removal of conditions that reinforce powerlessness

Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty (1995) see empowerment as access to productive resources and the capacity to participate in decision that affect the least privileged. Kabeer (1999 and 2001) see it as the capacity to exercise strategic life choices, which has to do with access to resources, agency and outcomes. Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.

The empowerment of women as part of the disadvantaged groups will create a more just world in which the needs of diverse groups are attended to (Indabawa and Mpofu, 2006). It will also raise an awareness to change the course of history by rectifying the damage done to the women's psyche, and of much importance to liberate women from their historically pre-determined status of subordination and inequity (Nzumalo, 1990).

Considering the unique roles of women in the societal development, there is need for women empowerment. Women empowerment has to do with the recognition of women's contribution and knowledge, helping(their) self-respect and dignity, enabling them to be more economically independent and self-reliant,

reducing their burdens of work, especially at home and promoting their qualities of nurturing, caring and gentleness (Bhasin, 1991).

Various legislations have been made and conferences held on women empowerment by government and non-governmental agencies. These efforts were aimed at actualizing the quest for women empowerment in order to sensitize women to become aware of the need to have self-pride, self-esteem and self-confidence (Akande, 2016).

These initiatives of the government were further encouraged by the United Nation decade for women (1976 -1985), the world conferences on women of 1975, 1980, 1985 and 1995; held in Mexico City, Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing respectively and the world conference on Education for All (EFA) held in Jomtien in 1990, and the world education forum in Dakar. These conferences were aimed at addressing issues affecting women in the society like violence against women, women's rights, reproductive health, agriculture, politics, democratisation and governance.

According to the philosophy of these forums mentioned above, each member state should promote women's economic independence which includes the creation of employment, access to resources and credit, the eradication of poverty, malnutrition, poor health and illiteracy. In Nigeria, these forums served as an eye opener to much discrimination against women especially in the area of access to education. The outcome of this experience was the emergence of a blueprint on women education which later culminated into the national policy on education (FRN, 2004). It needs to be mention that the forums also reaffirmed that no country's development can be judged satisfactorily if women do not fully participate in community life, in society work and in work (Adepoju, 2004).

Empowerment enables women to have control over resources and decisions affecting their lives. Also, to develop mental and physical capacity in women, for women to have the power or skills to operate meaningfully in their social milieu. Thus, creating a more favourable level of social recognition and subsequently enhance their economic status (Anyikwa, et.al; 2016).

Adult Literacy Education Roles in Poverty Reduction

Poverty reduction has to do with the restructuring of the society so that the impoverished will disappear, the immense absolute numbers decreases to minimal exceptional cases, or racism or sexism. Poverty is a global phenomenon that affects every continent, nation and people. In Nigeria, because of highest level of poverty the country is faced with the lowest level of socio-economic development, highest level of social insecurity, violence, unrest and generally unacceptable low standard of living (Okwakpam, 2004). In order to reduce the high poverty rate among women in Nigeria, calls for the use of adult literacy education as an empowerment tool.

The federal government of Nigeria has since the 1960s introduced poverty alleviation or reduction programmes centred on education. Such programmes dealt

with training to improve skills, income generation, increased accessibility to credit, improved health care services and the provision of greater welfare services to the poor. These programmes were aimed at creating economic self - reliance through harnessing all available human and material resources within the rural populace in particular and the entire citizenry in general.

In 1983, the federal government stepped up measures to fully integrate women, in particular and the rural populace, in general into the development process. Which was a way of moving from a piece meal approach to a more co-ordinated and purposeful one. For the purpose of this paper, mention will be made of the Directorate of Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI), Better Life for rural women programme, Family Support Programme (FSP) and the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP.) which were women empowerment strategies employed by the federal government.

In 1986, the federal government established the Directorate of Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI). The objectives of the directorate include identifying involving and supporting viable local community organizations in the effective mobilization of the rural population for sustained rural development activities. The establishment of this directorate was aimed at promoting greater community participation and economic self-reliance of the rural community towards rural economic sufficiency and integrated rural development.

This directorate could not do much in poverty reduction among women as a result of some factors like over-ambitious in scope and the programmes were spread too thin. It was further grounded in corruption; proper co-ordination of the entire sector was not achieved, lack of technical depth in most projects and people at the local government level do not have the opportunity to participate and own the projects.

The federal government also established the Better Life for rural women programme as a poverty reduction strategy among women. One of the objectives of Better Life for rural women programme was on economic buoyancy of the rural people, particularly women. The programme was aimed at mobilizing and motivating women to take positive steps towards solving their problems through self- help effort and by seeking the support of designated government agencies. Also, the objective of the programme was to generally elevate the lifestyle of the rural dwellers that have been deprived of modern comforts and amenities of life for long. The programme was designed for the rural populace, especially women to support and encourage them to improve their efficiency, effectiveness and output in their various fields of endeavour. The programme was intended to create economic self-sufficiency among women. The programme through its loan scheme encouraged women to form co-operatives and established various cottage industries.

To further reduce poverty among the Nigerian women, Mrs. Maryam Abacha initiated the Family Support Programme (FSP), which was aimed at economic efficiency of the rural populace especially as it concerns family units.

Mrs. Maryam Abacha believed that family as a core unit in any society, if economically secured and peaceful, the larger society would be a better place to live in. This programme later metamorphosed to the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) in 1997. The programme provided micro-credit and training to individuals and co-operatives for agricultural production and processing, cottage and small-scale industries at village level as a means of providing employment. Indeed, the programme was a tool for economically empowering the family in order therefore to maintain and attain the set objectives of the programme, while implementation is made as practicable as possible (FRN, 1997).

The programme failed to address the poverty reduction issue as a result of non-supervision and monitoring of the loans and projects by the participating banks and poor loan recovery. These strategies failed to address the issue of poverty reduction through women empowerment as it had no educational component. Realizing the importance of education in poverty reduction strategy, the Presidential Panel on Streamlining and Rationalization of Poverty Alleviation institutions and agencies in its report of 1999 comprehensively listed and classified education as one of the programmes for poverty alleviation or reduction. According to the panel, adult and non-formal education, nomadic education, migrant education and family support basic education programmes are strategies for poverty alleviation or reduction in Nigeria.

According to Akande (2016), adult education is a primary means of ensuring poverty reduction. As it offers the possibility of change for better living through its emphasis on the urgent need to cope with the problems inhibiting community development. Since this paper centres on adult literacy education, we will concentrate on adult literacy education as part of the adult education system.

The empowerment of women through adult literacy education programmes gives them the opportunity to the art of reading, writing and computation. It also enables them to acquire relevant skills for greater productivity. Their performance in adult literacy education programme interacts with all other components of development process. In addition to the contribution of adult literacy education to career development, the amount and type of education that a woman has, influences her approach to work and family roles. It is in this regard, that the women's relative increase in education is first seen as a change. Secondly, a change that has affected her role as an educator of her children. Similarly, adult literacy education produces self-reliant women in the development of others and those who without necessary waiting for the change agent take decisions about their development.

Since women falls under the disadvantaged group, adult literacy education affords the women the opportunity to adopt parental investment strategies designed to maximize the life chances of their children. The life chances have to do with the probability of survival, health and economic success brought about by urbanization and economic development. Parental investment strategies have to do the decision to bear fewer children, allocation of resources to each child, material goods and

access to parental attention for each throughout the years of immaturity and financial sponsorship in young adulthood.

Adult literacy education affords women the skills of reading, writing and computing, it leads them to conscientization and liberation from those elements of the society that put them at a disadvantaged position (Onyeozu, 2007). Adult literacy education is the key for individual and national development, the key which unlocks the door of modernization and ensures improved living standard of people and protect the fundamental rights of children and adults.

Furthermore, adult literacy education affords the women the opportunity to provide useful forms of instruction, encouragement, interaction and exposure, transmitting skills and shaping their children's psychological development in distinctive ways. A family with a literate mother receives better educational reforms than that of an illiterate mother, where the child does everything out of ignorant, depending on another people's advice which might be right or wrong. The literate mother gives stratified follow-ups of their children from the beginning of education to the higher institution, acting as a guidance counsellor.

As a matter of facts, adult literacy education makes the women to be more concerned and knowledgeable about obtaining educational credentials for their children, supervising their school attendance, transferring them to better schools, arranging supplementary tutoring when necessary; and providing them with contacts helpful to obtain employment. Confirming the above, Mundi (1999) observed that education is a very potent force that is capable of promoting sustained economic growth and development; which in tune leads to changes in attitudes, self-perception and high productivity.

Although, it is aimed at the individual, only to make him a more productive person in order to add to national productivity, adult literacy education is usually for national development, rather than individual purposes. It's liberates the mind from the bondage of dependence. Regarding to Indabawa and Mpofo (2006) asserted that:

“there is a growing worldwide consensus that literacy and adult education are a means for people to overcome poverty and exclusion, establish and reinforce democracy, achieve justice and comprehensive peace, enhance economic and social well-being and improve health and ensure food security”.

Studies on literacy campaigns revealed that women after attending the literacy classes are in a position to meet the authorities without fear and also in a position to explain and demand their social needs. Another, benefits they are achieved are awareness about welfare programmes, participate in village development activities, decision-making in home affairs, political participation, demand of appropriate wages from employees, savings, child care and children education. Taken together, education determines the social and political perception

of rural people, their patterns of interaction with Government functionaries and their role in rural development (Prinsloo, 1999).

For democracy environment, the provision of adult basic education and training is linked to the development of human resources within national developments, aimed at restructuring the economy, addressing past inequalities, and the building of a democratic society. It also serves as a catalyst for political and ideological change. No political or development processes can succeed without literacy education. It is a tool to democratize society and enlist popular participation in decision-making process. Literacy education constitutes steps towards the acquisition of attitudes and productive skills conducive to the enhancement of the quality of life. In Cuba, President Fidel Castro used literacy education as a means by which the poor and the deprived became aware that they are not receiving a fair deal from the fruits of development, and also as a means of making them influence their own future and to politicize the work force for development.

Otherwise, adult literacy education also imparts greatly on national development. Development is a flexible process in both human and material situation. Many scholars conceive development exclusively in economic sense, which is why they use Gross National Products (GNP) Gross Domestic Products (GDP) of a country to determine her economic prosperity. Development involves man directly or otherwise. Akande and Ogunrin (2014) noted that participation of women in adult literacy education programmes affords them the opportunity to improve their standard of living by enhancing their ability to access food, portable water, clothing, shelter, basic health services and nutrition, basic education and communication.

Some literature describes that adult literacy education plays an important role in the attainment of substantial life achievements even if the result is not the transformation of the social order or even significant social mobility for the participating individuals (Fingeret and Drennon, 1997). It is a contributing factor in meeting various needs and sources of satisfaction for those who are able to draw on print communication as an important resource in life management and personal edification. It also represents an important symbolic sense of achievement in a social setting so heavily laden with print communication (Demetron, 2002). Adult literacy education improves and empowers women socially, economically, and culturally, as to enable them contribute meaningfully as a useful and the acceptable member of society. Social, political, economic, moral and intellectual decadence can overwhelm a woman who refuses to learn new things or improve on her knowledge.

There is therefore the need to acknowledge the fact that society is never static but in a constant state of flux and complex dynamic growth. Women are faced with the increasing problems brought about by the growth in population, increasing unemployment, technological advancement, accommodation, etc. To address these problems, adult literacy education gives women the tool with which to tackle problems as they emerge. That is, they learn to live in the present, re-orientate and

adjust their lives to ensure a balance in the ever-changing environment. Their participation in adult literacy education programmes will solve these problems. As a matter of fact, adult literacy education is one of the major ways of successfully harnessing the human potential. Adult literacy education results to empowerment with the acquisition of the essential knowledge and skills that make it possible for individuals to engage in activities they require for effective functioning of self, groups, community, improvement and livelihood (Aghedo and Abey-Fashae, 2016).

The participation of women in adult literacy education programmes enables them to share their experience of life with companions, of serving known purposes and of choosing and enjoying. Adult literacy education helps the women to develop their innate abilities in such ways that life becomes more fulfilling or satisfying to the individual. It also develops the spiritual and intellectual resources adequate for the solution of women's numerous problems and thus the community is enriched by such display of increased skills and knowledge. It also increases their knowledge and gives them the opportunities to self-actualize, think positively, and apply the knowledge gained in tackling real life problems and other emerging societal problems.

In the field of education itself, adult literacy education affords the illiterate women the opportunity to learn how to read and write, especially in their local languages. It helps make female drop outs productive participants by exposing them to adult literacy education programmes. It affords them the opportunity to rediscover themselves. In addition, adult literacy education programme helps women to usefully employ their leisure and recreation for worthwhile and rewarding activities rather than involving in gossip and related unprofitable activities. UNESCO (2006) stated that people with literacy and numeracy skills are more productive and enjoy better quality of life.

More benefits from adult literacy education are aimed at improving the growth, development and awareness of literacy education participants in social, cultural, ethnic, economic, and community relations (Aderinoye and Adepoju, 2001). It affords them access to economic and financial independence thereby alleviating poverty (Okukpon, 2005). The above makes adult literacy education to be the first step to manpower development in any nation. At last but not least, adult literacy education has positive impact on human capabilities, as it creates a sense of identity and feelings of confidence, enhances productivity, broadens earning opportunities, reduces poverty, improves participation of people in their community and democratic space (Raya, 2009; ASPBAE, 2006; Patrick & Ijah, 2013).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Having discussed extensively on adult literacy education as an empowerment tool for poverty reduction among women in Nigeria, it is hereby recommended that:

1. There is the need to create awareness on adult literacy education as an empowerment tool for poverty reduction among women through the use of the mass media.
2. There is the need for political will and commitment by the federal, state and local government on women empowerment and development.
3. Women should be more interested in programmes designed to improve their lives and the well-being of their families.
4. There is need to encourage potential entrepreneurs among women to boost rural industrialisation.
5. Adult literacy education programmes for women empowerment should include basic literacy education, post-literacy education, functional literacy education, remedial education, income-generating/vocational education, continuing education, extra-mural education, leisure education, liberal education, distance/correspondence education, worker/labour education, agricultural extension education and community development education. These forms of adult literacy programmes will enhance skillful and productive potential of the women.
6. That non-governmental and voluntary organisations should be involved in poverty reduction among women in Nigeria.***

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