



## The Role of Women in Development

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### KEYWORDS :

#### INTRODUCTION

The role of women in an economy, especially in developing countries, has been extensively studied. Although some published works on this have been criticized for bias as it emanated from feminist groups. There is no doubt that the contributions of women are critical in the development process (Ihimodu, 1996). According to the United Nations (1993), women constitute a majority of the world's population but they receive only a small proportion of its opportunities and benefits." It further asserts that there is no country in the world in which the quality of life of women is equal to that of men. This implies that women are generally 'the weaker sex'.

The United Nation's Report (1989) notes that one, out of three households in the world, has a woman as its breadwinner. This indicates that many households depend solely on women, with regard to their responsibility for the household, children and the elderly. A greater part of the work in the health sector is done by women. They recognize the importance of local living conditions and the environment for the general well-being of a society. There are also indications that women may be more altruistic than men. In other words, they tend to put other people's needs before their own. This means that women are more likely to be receptive to the needs of others, including the weaker groups during the budget preparation phase.

Unfortunately, the contributions of women to the development process have remained under-estimated. Official statistics rarely measure these contributions. It is clear that not only the unpaid household responsibilities represent their work. The arming and marketing activities of women represent a significant contribution to the well-being of low-income rural households. In Sub-Sahara Africa, women produce between 70% and 75% of food crops, although their productivity is significantly lower (by around 10% - 15% on average) than men's according to the IFAD (1993), their potentials are considerable if these figures are considered in the light of the current gender imbalance in terms of access to and control over economically productive resources. Taking advantage of their potential productivity, improving the situation of women would lead to a considerable increase in food production. This will, no doubt, substantially reduce one of the causes of food insecurity in the whole region (Kankwenda *et al*, 2000).

It is obvious from the above that women's contributions are quite enormous. Consequently, any attempt at promoting development must recognize women's needs, efforts and peculiarities and incorporate these into its strategies.

#### Women's Constraints

In spite of the overwhelming contributions that women have made and are expected to make to the socio-economic development of their respective nations, they are still faced with many constraints that tend to limit their activities. However, the constraints, according to Ihimodu (1996), appear to be common the world over but seem to be more severe in developing countries.

According to Overseas Development Agency (1994), women face social and legal constraints which inhibit their access to land, credit and productive assets. It is for this reason that rural women throughout Nigeria organize local informal savings and credit associations to pool resources and provide small loans to members.

Other constraints that have contributed to the problematic situation of African women, according to Kankwenda (2000) are:

- (i) Status within the family as wife, mother and labourer;
- (ii) Under-enrolment of girls and low literacy rates of women (8% in 1990);
- (iii) Precarious reproductive health, aggravated by exhaustion, malnutrition, close pregnancies, early/late pregnancies in life,
- (iv) Mass migration of young productive men thereby increasing women's work-load in and outside the home;
- (v) Insufficient inclusion of the female dimension in the design of development projects and programmes;

The above stated constraints have to be overcome, if women are to contribute maximally to societal growth and development.

#### Women's Struggle to Achieve Basic Rights and Identity

Women's struggle for human rights and identity are often posed in psychological and ethical terms. Afkhami (1995) notes that the rights are sociological. In other words, they are time-bound, geared to levels and complexities of consciousness resulting from historical change. Although the immediate connecting points of identity are moral and psychological, women's identity depends particularly on changing properties of political culture such as values, beliefs and aesthetics that have to do with the dispositions of power in the community. Given their powerlessness throughout history, whenever women have become self-conscious as individuals with rights of their own, they have had to search for an identity other than the one assigned to them by social order.

The existing social order assigns women the role of mothers, wives and sisters under the jurisdiction of fathers, husbands, Sons and brothers. Their main function in traditional societies is that of procreation, childrearing and domestic chores. They are seldom educated, nor involved in the decision-making process. In some others, they do not inherit nor participate in activity outside the home.

Like all victories however, according to Schuler (1995), acknowledgment of women's human rights by the international community, represents as much as a commencement as it does, a culmination of a process. The struggle for basic rights by women therefore is a process that involves the vigorous articulation of these rights through the building of consensus within the entire human rights community.

However, expounding the scope of human rights to include women's rights does not happen in a vacuum. The act of identifying, exploring and articulating these rights, in the words of Schuler takes place in a context of tension where concrete economic, social and cultural changes create new needs that require new perspective and new answers. Today a complexity of economic and political forces at play in the international arena has created an environment that is adverse to the fill and effective realization of these rights and poses a major challenge.

The factors are multiple: changing economic conditions: the interventions of international financial institutions and the processes of global re-structuring of the economy. These have resulted in the withdrawal of the state from responsibility for providing basic services for her people and an erosion of state accountability to citizens.

#### CONCLUSION

It is therefore recommended that women should strive to build national and local consensus among women groups and relevant non-government organizations (NGOs) in order to strengthen their

lobby and advocacy efforts. Indeed, women need to negotiate a space for themselves so that they could effectively participate more meaningfully in national decision-making process than they have done in the past. Changes take time, even when the benefits are obvious.

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