

An Appraisal of Women Empowerment Programmes by Adult Education Departments in Two Local Government Areas in Osun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This report is an assessment of the women empowerment programmes available in selected local government areas in Osun State, Nigeria and the involvement of women in the initiation and planning of the empowerment programmes. Two local government areas (LGAs) in Osun State, Ife Central and Ede South were purposively selected for the study. The participants in the study comprised 18 female beneficiaries of skills acquisition programmes selected through convenient sampling method from the two local government areas. Five officials of the adult education departments in the two selected LGAs were purposively selected making a total of twenty-three respondents. In-depth interviews were used to elicit information from the respondents. The study determined that women were not involved in the planning of the empowerment programme, and programmes were initiated and implemented based on needs assessment procedures that were not systematically undertaken. Unlike the Ede South who gave their participants the grants and loans promised, Ife Central was yet to do the same for the women that were involved in the programmes completed since year 2011.

KEY WORDS: *Women Empowerment, skills acquisition, initiation and planning*

Introduction

Despite increased government sponsored activities directed at the empowerment of women in Nigeria, observations show no real improvement in the lives of women in our communities (Featherstone, 2013). Some of the factors that contribute to the relegation of women to the background are socially prescribed gender roles, gender division of labour, and the fact that many women are unlettered in the Western sense (Ekong, 2010). As a result of these elements, women generally have relatively limited free time compared to men, limited access to information, capital, and other resources that could help ensure their economic independence and improve their bargaining power in the public and private spheres (Ekong, 2010; Opeke & Okwilagwe, 2000). It is not surprising, therefore, that they lack social, political, and economic power. Given these deficiencies, when decisions are to be taken in their communities that would affect them and their children, they are usually unable to take part in discussions that will lead to key decisions. The women's views are seldom heard or taken seriously when they are heard.

Realising the need for empowerment of the Nigerian women in general, successive governments in Nigeria, in collaboration with various international organisations like the World Bank, United Nations Development Programmes (UNDP), United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Industrial Programmes (UNIP), have initiated many programmes to meet the needs of Nigerian women. The programmes focus on wealth creation, improved welfare, and increased productivity. Such programmes include those undertaken by National Directorate of Employment (NDE), which was established by National Directorate of Employment Act of 1981.

The NDE's main objective is the designing and implementation of programmes to combat mass unemployment.

Other programmes are those initiated by various centres like women development centres, women's education units from the Ministry of Education at Federal, States, and Local Government levels, and the defunct Better Life for Rural Women Programmes. At the Local Government level, different kinds of vocational skills acquisition programmes are organised for women. However, types may vary from one Local Government Area to another.

In spite of these initiatives, the condition of most women in Nigeria still remains the same (Babalola, 2014). Unfortunately, most of these programmes do not address the needs of the women for empowerment. Thus, many women continue to wallow in ignorance and remain within the culture of silence favoured by society (Aderinto & Akande, 2003; Ojobo, 2016). The author is concerned that programmes and activities designed by governmental and multi-national agencies fail to impact women's lives positively because the processes leading up to executing those programmes are not participatory.

The argument of this paper asserts that there is the need for women in Nigeria to be empowered and liberated. The promotion of women's empowerment as a development goal is based on a dual argument: that social justice is an important aspect of human welfare and is intrinsically worth pursuing; and that women's empowerment is a means to other ends. The author, therefore, attempted to answer the following questions.

- What is the availability of women empowerment programmes in Ife Central and Ede South local government areas?
- Are women involved in the planning and implementation of the available empowerment programmes?
- What problems militate against women empowerment in the areas covered by the study?

Relevant Literature

Although 'empowerment' is a term that has been embraced by a diverse range of institutions and people, few of them share common definitions of the term. While it is seen by some as the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied them; others see it as a multi-dimensional process of civil, political, social, economic, and cultural participation and rights (Kabeer, 2001; Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Moghadam & Senftova, 2005).

Again, while some authors described empowerment as the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes; some see it as the process by which leadership transfers authority and responsibility to the lowest field level in order for people to make implementation and application decisions (Krishna, 2003; Brant, 1996). Narayan (2002) defined empowerment as the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. Also, Page and Czuba (1999) defined empowerment as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives, a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues they define as important. Empowerment programmes should be appropriate and relevant to women's needs. This is why women should be involved in the development of these programmes from the beginning. If women are to gain power, they must participate in the definition of their problems, the identification of potential solutions, the implementation of these solutions, and evaluation of the project(s) undertaken.

Participation has been employed as a tool to enhance women's ability to vocalise their needs and determine their own course of development (Aksornkool, 2005). Fink (1992) and Stromquist (1997) as cited in Aksornkool (2005) observed that "most literacy programmes are gender-blind" (p. 12). This is a reference to the problem of non-recognition of women's needs and interests in programmes that aim to empower women.

Therefore, for empowerment programmes to have relevance, and thus benefit the women for whom they are

intended, they must be woven into the practical, everyday environment in which these women live. Referencing the need to make literacy for empowerment meaningful, Stromquist (1995) as cited in Aksornkool (2005), believes that achieving empowerment is dependent upon developing “a model of learning close to the women’s everyday experience that builds upon the intellectual, emotional, and cultural resources the participants bring to their social space” (p. 10).

Methods of Data Collection

This was a descriptive research that employed a qualitative strategy. The study focused on two local government areas, Ife Central and Ede South Local Government Areas. Eighteen female beneficiaries of adult education programmes provided by Ife Central and Ede South Local Government Areas in Osun State were involved in the study. Although ten female beneficiaries of adult education programmes were selected from each local government through convenience sampling, two of the women were not available for in-depth interviews. Also, although three local government officials were purposively selected in each local government area, one of them was not available for interview. Among the five officials interviewed was a male Executive Secretary who was in charge of Ife Central local government area and a female Executive Secretary who was in charge at the Ede South local government area.

The instrument for the study, a structured interview guide, asked female beneficiaries how they got information about adult education programmes they were attending, and the point at which they started interacting with local government officials. In addition, they were asked to talk about the specific ways in which they had participated in the planning and implementation of the programmes; that is, apart from being learners in the programmes. The major issues that were raised during the interviews with local government officials included the following:

1. The number of women empowerment programmes available in the local governments
2. The actual contents of the programmes
3. The number of women who had benefitted from the programmes
4. The point at which women were invited to take part in those programmes

Data from the interviews were analysed using content analysis.

The Respondents

Only four respondents were within ages 15-21, ten were within ages 26-45, six were within ages 46-55 years, while only three were 56 years and above. Participants’ educational attainments varied: six had no formal education, nine possessed the Senior Secondary School Certificate, while the rest ended formal schooling after they had completed primary schooling and the junior school certificate examinations. All five local government officials had schooling up to university level. The eight beneficiaries interviewed in Ede South Local Government were Muslims while the ten beneficiaries interviewed from Ife Central were Christians. Thirteen of the beneficiaries were married, two were single, and three were divorced. The major occupations of respondents were farming and trading. They also engaged in income generating activities such as tailoring and marketing medications. All participants except three women had a means of livelihood.

Analysis and Discussion

Women Empowerment Programmes Available in the Two Local Government Areas

There were vocational skills acquisition programmes such as soap making, powder making, body-cream making, catering, tie and dye, hair-cream making, insecticide, stove-wick making, mop-wick making, beads making, etc.

The programmes were offered from 10 to 15 days. While all the beneficiaries from Ede South Local Government were given N-10,000 (ten thousand naira) and their certificates immediately after the programme, the participants in Ife Central Local Government got neither money nor certificates. They were promised money and certificates which they were still expecting six months after the training programme.

When the beneficiaries of skills acquisition programmes were asked whether they had indeed acquired new skills, they all answered in the affirmative and expressed joy in their newly acquired skills. When they were asked if they had experienced financial improvement, only six out of the 18 beneficiaries from Ife and Ede had been able to make money from the skills acquired. The respondents from Ife Central local government complained bitterly about lack of access to acquire grants and absence of the certificates they had been promised. They maintained that the two issues had inhibited their capacity to use their newly acquired skills. Some said when they tried to use the newly acquired skills, existing associations stopped them because they could not show any evidence of participation in the empowerment programmes.

In Ife, local government officials listed skills acquisition and workshops, advancing loans and grants, the use of iru (Locust Bean) and how to plant Iru seed, and the widows' programme of 2012 as some of the women empowerment programmes they had provided. Other programmes listed were skills acquisition programmes such as soap making, cream making, beads making, mop-wick making, stove-wick making, and decoration. They were programmes that the participants in the study had mentioned. Officials, in interviews (2016), also mentioned widows' programme which involved giving money, grinding machines, and deep freezers to widows free of charge. Most of the programmes were said to have started since the local government area came into existence and had taken several shapes over the years. The local government officials pointed out that the skills acquisition programmes were for illiterates and had been taking place annually, while workshops were usually organised for the educated.

The real clientele of the skills acquisition programmes were, in reality, different from those the local government officials had in mind. This is because most of the women who had participated in the skills acquisition programmes had some level of formal schooling.

Women Involvement: Planning and Implementation of Skills Acquisition Programmes

The participants in the programme were asked if they were involved in the needs assessment for the programmes; all the beneficiaries in Ede South and Ife Central said they were not involved. They did not know why they had been asked to report to the local government office. When they arrived at the office, they were told about the skills acquisition programmes. They were then asked to choose from the available skills training programmes.

Officials interviewed (2016) in Ife said that the council did rural appraisals at times, by going to people and asking about their needs. The appraisal incorporated gender equality. Through the rural appraisal, the needs of the community members were gathered and prioritised. However, in Ede local government area, when officials were asked if they carried out needs assessment before the commencement of training programmes, the officials submitted that the UNICEF assisted programmes had a plan of action. The needs assessment for such programmes was usually done through the state and through the L.G.A official who would visit communities and ask for their needs. Thereafter, plans would be put in place for the implementation of the programmes, and those selected would participate in the programmes.

When women were asked who nominated them for the programmes, six women from Ede South were nominated by their Community Development Association (CDA) leader while two were nominated by the CDA leader in Ife Central Local Government. Four of the beneficiaries from Ife Central were nominated by the ward leader and two by their political representatives at ward level.

In Nigeria there are 3 levels of government, the Federal, States and Local Government Areas (LGA). The LGAs,

in Nigeria which is the third level of government is closer to the people and is within the people. The 1999 constitution of Nigeria recognises the existence of 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs). Each local government area is administered by a Local Government Council consisting of a chairman who is the Chief Executive of the LGA, and other elected members who are referred to as Councilors. Each of the LGAs is further sub-divided into wards with a minimum of ten and a maximum of fifteen (FRN, 1999). The other four women were nominated by persons such as the Personal Assistant to the Chairman, a mother that works in the local government area, a brother, and someone from the local government office. This conflicted with the process of selection the local government officials insisted they followed.

When the LGA officials were asked how women were selected for skills acquisition programmes, they indicated that women were selected through community development associations (C.D.A) and the women development units (W.D.U). The Community development Council (C.D.C) is the umbrella body at the Local Government level. When there is a programme, the council sends a letter to the leaders of C.D.C. and W.D.U. because their leaders know who to send. When a soft loan is available to be given to individuals through the C.D.A and the W.D.U, the leaders know who would pay back a loan and who would not; so they assist in recommending those qualified to receive the loans, and sometimes assist in getting beneficiaries to refund soft loans.

Problems Militating against the Empowerment of Women in the Study

In the preceding sections, women in Ife Central Local Government pointed out that they could not use the skills acquired because their certificates were not handed over to them. They were not given take-off grants, which are the monies promised to assist them put the skill acquired to an immediate use. However, despite the fact that all the beneficiaries in Ede South were given the take-off grants and certificates after training, some still complained that they could not make money from the skills acquired due largely to their poor financial position. Other reasons given included high cost of materials, lack of market for their products because they live in the rural areas, and non-availability of materials in their village.

They also complained that the grant they were given was too small and not enough to buy materials, especially those that learnt soap making. In an oral interview (2016) with one of the officials of local governments, the position of the women was corroborated. The official stated that only N500, 000 was allocated to his office, and it was nowhere close to the needs of the poor women. He even said local government officials have had to put their feet down many times so that the process would not be hijacked by politicians who may want to dispense the funds as favours to their members only.

In an oral interview (2016) with another official of the local government, the problem of culture that encourages people to spend money recklessly was mentioned. He believed some participants were too materialistic and would not cut their coats according to their cloth. Such people wanted to do the same as persons around them were doing, and this affected and prevented them from doing well economically.

In Ede Local Government Area, although the officials also mentioned many of the problems already highlighted by the local government officials in Ile-Ife, their women's empowerment programmes faced very remote problems that were common to their environment. The officials further stated that most of the participants in their programmes were farmers and were involved in oil palm production. Whenever oil palm was in season, the women would abandon the skills acquisition programmes and the skills acquired in such programmes and go to the farms. Likewise, during the market days, the women would go to the markets.

The Administration of Adult Education Programmes

When asked if there was a department of adult education and whether there was any programme that catered for women empowerment, one of the officials in Ife Central local government in an oral interview (2016) stated that

there was no department of adult education in the local government. The Department of Non-formal Education, under which they managed Adult Education, Nomadic Education, and Early Childhood Education, was available. The adult education unit no longer existed, but the local government was trying to resuscitate it and new centres were being planned for Oja Tuntun Area and Sabo within the Hausa community in Ile-Ife.

Yet another official from the same local government mentioned in an oral interview (2016) that they did not have a department of adult education in the local government secretariat. However, the Department of Social Development took care of the women development unit. Under the women development unit, skills acquisition programmes, the programmes for the aged, and empowerment programmes for the women were organised. Thus, within the same local government, the officials were not quite sure which department or unit had responsibility for women's empowerment programmes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the analyses of the empowerment programmes, the following conclusions were reached:

- 1) Ede South and Ife Central Local Governments had organised and were still organising women empowerment programmes. Most of the women interviewed appeared to be happy with the skills they had acquired.
- 2) Women were not involved in the planning of these programmes which were initiated and implemented based on needs assessment procedures that were not systematically undertaken. Officials usually appeared to be focusing more on ascribed needs, than felt needs. The problem of female farmers abandoning skills acquisition programmes for oil palm production in Ede local government is a symptom of the problems that haunt adult education provisions when officials focus on ascribed rather than felt needs.
- 3) Beneficiaries who were making use of skills they had acquired could not access the needed materials, because they were not available in their locality. They were expensive, where available.
- 4) Also, the process of selecting participants for the programmes did not follow the processes, most of the time, laid down by the local authorities.
- 5) There was some confusion in one local government about the department that was in charge of women empowerment programmes.

Recommendations illuminating from the study are as follows:

1. Women do not need to be objects of development programmes. They need to gain control of the development process; therefore, local governments should involve women and their representatives in the assessment of their felt needs.
2. The local governments need to be re-organised to have a department of adult and non-formal education. That department will then have a women's education unit, and the mandate of the unit will be the initiation and management of women's education programmes.
3. The women's development unit, which is under the umbrella of the social development department of local governments, can attend to other women's empowerment issues, working of course in conjunction with other departments in the local government.
4. Women should be given much needed support when they have participated in specific skills acquisition programmes. The support requires access to credit, the physical space in which to operate, and education that helps them develop good business management skills.

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