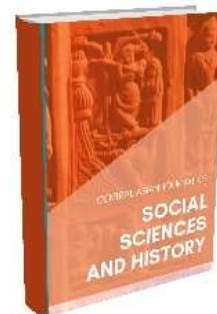




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The Nigerian State and Affirmative Action on Women Empowerment: The Igbo Experience, 1999 – 2015

Alex Amaechi Ugwuja

Department of History and International Relations, Paul University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.
ugwujalexander@gmail.com

Mfon Ekpootu

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, University of Port Harcourt
Rivers State, Nigeria
mekpootu@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract:

Since 1999, efforts have been made by the Nigeria's administrations to broaden the participation of women in politics. Findings indicate that this 'Affirmative Action' on women was propped from without – mostly by the United Nations MDGs. That notwithstanding, the result of the government's Affirmative Action has been mired in contentions and arguments. Quantitatively, more women have been appointed ministers, commissioners and a host of other appointive positions. More women have also jostled for elective positions in government. However, the qualitative implications of Affirmative Action on women empowerment especially, as it affects the country's rural women appears to leave much to be desired. Using rural Igbo women as a case in point, this study appraises Nigeria's efforts at engendering gender equality from 1999 – 2015. With the Igbo experience, the study argues that

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government policies on gender equality ends up being beneficial to a few educated urban – dwelling women to the neglect of the vast majority of poor, uneducated rural women. The study canvasses a refocusing of attention – away from the state; as indeed, the state may not wield the magical wand needed to demolish gender inequality. A synergy of civil society organizations, faith – based institutions, progressive traditional institutions as well as the government is herein advocated as a remedy. The study adopts the thematic and analytic methods of Historical Research with data for the study drawn from primary sources as well as extant secondary sources in journals, newspapers, magazines and textbooks.

Introduction

Mainly through the efforts of the United Nations and its affiliate bodies, Non-Governmental Organizations and women interest group, women’s rights have been brought to the forefront of national and international agendas. This global activism is demonstrated in the quest for Affirmative Action for women empowerment, which has given rise to new gender-based policies. Affirmative Action describes policies, which seek to counterbalance discriminatory acts against historically disadvantaged groups including women. As a strategy for empowering women and the disposed social strata, it continues to draw a lot of debate with regards to its definitional fuzziness as well as its efficiency/performance (Holzer and Neumark, 1999; Kaletski and Prakash, 2016). Holzer and Neumark see such difficulty in definition as stemming from its not having a single coherent policy but rather ‘an amalgam of components of other legislations and court rulings’ (Holzer and Neumark, 1999:2). Affirmative Action spans a wide array of spaces involving labour market, education, politics and government. Its multifaceted nature thus inhibits a tidy definition. It is appropriated in different ways by different actors and across different operational space. Its ability to redress discrimination is also keenly debated. Critics argue that it could lead to the sacrifice of merit as preferential treatments are given to women and thus result is ‘reverse discrimination’ (Holzer and Neumark, 2008:2). Others in favour of Affirmative Action argue that it could lead to a more equitable distribution of societal goods and enhance a better representation of marginalized groups like women (Kaletski and Prakash, 2016:1).

The fact that women are grossly and unfairly marginalized is no longer new; it has also become trite to situate the development challenges of the Nigerian state on the fact that women who constitute almost half of the nation’s population are disempowered by a plethora of factors. These factors have received ample elucidations in feminist scholarship generally and thus, need not bother us here. However, suffice it to observe that there is a huge gap in the socio – economic and political development of the genders in Nigeria; women are still significantly disadvantaged in managing and accessing assets or financial services. Morolake Omonubi McDonnell asserts that “politically, Nigerian women are a

negligible and unorganized force, with little political involvement. Economically, they constitute the majority of the peasant labour force in the agricultural sector, while most of the others occupy the bottom of the occupational ladder and continue to be channeled into service and domestic occupations”¹ This asymmetry, indubitably facilitates a higher level of socio – economic and political powerlessness for women. This relative powerlessness in the genders clearly retards the country’s development at all levels.

The realization of the gloomy implications of the foregoing for the overall development of the Nigerian state actuated the Nigerian government to make affirmative policies and legislations, (first, by creating the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development) which is aimed at fostering gender equality in the country. Nonetheless, it may not be categorically submitted that these affirmative actions have adequately addressed the challenge of gender inequality in Nigeria. Important too, is the fact that myriad of suggestions and recommendations have been made by scholars aimed at correcting the seemingly intractable *status quo*, yet women continue to remain disempowered in Nigeria and elsewhere, especially in the Third World. The logical question that arises is: what is the ultimate panacea to the issue of the disparity between the male and female genders in Nigeria? Put differently, how can the task of women empowerment be achieved in Nigeria?

Using Igbo women as a case in point, this study appraises Nigeria’s efforts at engendering gender equality from 1999 to 2015. With the Igbo women experience, the study contends that government policies on gender equality end up being beneficial to a few educated urban – dwelling women to the neglect of the majority of women who are uneducated and impoverished in rural areas. Possible actions for the remediation of this problem are made in this study. For ease and convenience, the study is divided into six sections. The introduction is followed by the conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The third section geo – historically surveys Igboland and Igbo women. The fourth section historicizes the women empowerment discourse in Nigeria. The penultimate section x – rays the Igbo women experience with regards to the government affirmative actions since 1999. The study is brought to an end in the sixth section which also contains the recommendations.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

It would be useful here to explain some of the basic concepts used in this study. Conceptually, the term ‘affirmative action’ refers to a policy that takes factors such as race, colour, religion, sex or nationality into consideration in order to benefit an under – represented group in areas of employment, education and business². In the case of women, Fidelia A. Duru notes that affirmative action is an action of consensus policy pursued to address the discrimination, preferred against women³. In the Nigerian case, therefore, affirmative action would imply all the actions, statutory and otherwise, engaged to combat the subjugation of women and hence, empower them. This is borne out of the fact that gender inequalities within the overall society and across all sectors reflect the wide disparities between women and men which, in turn, contribute to uneven development and the feminization of poverty. Among the 70% of the population estimated to be living below the poverty line, over 45% are projected to be women⁴. Income and purchasing power is estimated to be around US\$1,495 for men as compared to

US\$614 for women and men have greater access to high-paying, secure employment⁵. For example, 76% of Federal Civil Service workers are men, whereas women make up 24% of the workforce and occupy less than 14% of the overall management positions, despite the appointment of women to the position of permanent secretaries (beginning in 2000 and in line with affirmative action initiatives)⁶. Additionally, approximately 17.5% of Nigeria's medical doctors are women whereas 82.5% are men. These disparities have a significant impact on the capacity of women and men to contribute to the economic growth of the country and efforts to reduce dependency ratios within family units. Other indicators of gender inequalities include disparities in participation within the formal sector which stands at 87% men with 11% women compared to 30% men engaged in the industrial sector. The extractive industry with annual business volume of over US\$42m has almost zero level participation of women⁷.

Empowerment, on the other hand, connotes the elimination of all forms of barriers that inhibit the realisation of a group's expectations in the overall development of their potentials. R. Sako views empowerment as the process of strengthening the existing capacities and capabilities of a disadvantaged group in society so as to enable them perform better towards improving themselves, their families and society as a whole⁸. In this study, women empowerment is taken to mean the process and machinery which enables women – who have been so long an under – represented group – to develop their capacity in order to achieve their potentials. There appears to be a consensus amongst scholars that women empowerment as a movement has three objectives:

- To challenge, transform the ideology and practice of women's subordination
- To transform the structures and institutions which have upheld and reinforced this discrimination namely, the family, the media, patriarchy, law among others.
- To gain access and control over material and knowledge resources⁹

It is, however, instructive to observe that despite these laudable goals and strategies of women empowerment, only a little result is noticeable, as women continue to be disempowered through a plethora of ways. This present study, as stated elsewhere, is an attempt to explain the persistence of this anomaly in Nigeria.

Furthermore, it is needful to conceptualize the term “woman” because according to Ngozi Ojiakor and Alex Ugwuja, “womanhood has variously meant several things to different peoples. Some have even gone the extreme point of conceiving the woman as an afterthought, an appendage to the man, and virtually an accidental event given to the man to be used at will”¹⁰. A woman, notes Fidelia A. Duru, is referred to as,

*An adult human being who biologically, is capable of bearing offspring. She is an adult female person, as distinguished from a girl or a man. A woman is an independent female human who has the power to give birth to a new life as we acts as the backbone and nervous system of her family*¹¹.

It is to be known that a woman is “a human being, endowed with all the capacities and talents required to effectively function and make an impact on all levels of life within the society”.¹² The above viewpoint implies that human beings are equally created and endowed to effectively participate in the life of the community. In the light of the above, Women are, therefore, to be seen as well-adjusted to be effectively and dynamically involved in all levels of the social process as they actively participate in the life of the community.

For the purposes of a theoretical framework, the study anchors on the Cultural Feminist Theory. Generally, feminist theories were developed to explain the reasons for the seemingly intractable gender inequality¹³. There are several types of feminist theories: Liberal feminist theory, Marxist feminist theory, Radical feminist theory, Cultural feminist theory, Standpoint feminist theory and so on. Nonetheless, the Cultural feminist theory is considered more explicatory and prescriptive to the problems of a gendered society such as we live in and it is hence, adopted.

The Cultural feminist theory argues that men’s oppression of women is so universal that the best way to resist it is to form a woman – centered society and creating a woman friendly culture, ethics and religion¹⁴. Several feminist writers and activist have left valuable imprints on the Cultural feminist theory. They include: Simone de Beauvoire, Cynthia Epstein, Judith Butler and others¹⁵. The justification for this theory derives from the fact that it encourages the conception of the plights of women as being not imposed as it were, by nature but by cultural practices erected and sustained by patriarchy and the agencies of socialization. Thus, the remediation of these plights would be made possible only when there is a consciously planned movement and machinery aimed and solely focused on reversing the trend. This theoretical postulation has no doubt, informed philosophical grounding of the affirmative actions on women empowerment in Nigeria. The challenge, however, is that only a few women, especially the urban women benefit from most of the affirmative action’s undertaken by the Nigerian governments since 1999. (This thesis forms the crux of this present study and shall be given ample elucidation subsequently).

A Geo - Historical Survey of Igboland and Igbo Women

The homeland of the Igbo is found in the east and west of the Lower Niger. In today’s Nigeria, the Igbo people live almost exclusively in the states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. The Igbo are also found in parts of Delta, Rivers, Benue and Cross River states of Nigeria. For the purpose of this present study, the reference to Igboland focuses on Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states which officially constitute the southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria. This study area is bound to north by Kogi and Benue states; to the east by Cross River State; to the south by Rivers and Akwa – Ibom states and to the west by Delta State¹⁶. The Igbo occupy a geographic space of approximately 11, 310 square miles or 29525 square kilometers¹⁷. By 1963, the population of the Igbo officially stood at 7. 227.559, with a population density of 711 persons per square mile. Additionally, the 1991 census in the country tallied the people’s population at 10.774.966, with a population density ranging between 250 and 7, 712. It is instructive to note that out of this figure females accounted for 52. 20 percent while males accounted

47.774 percent¹⁸. By 1999, the population of the Igbo living in the five main Igbo states had risen to 20 million. By extension, the population of the Igbo could be said to be bigger than most of the micro states of Europe.

With regards to the economy, Ngozi Ojiakor notes that historically, 60% of the Igbo were farmers and the basic food crops include: yams, coco – yams, cassava, maize and rice²⁰. Farmers also keep livestock such as goats, sheep and poultry. Riverine dwellers also engage in fishing as well as farming. The social dislocations brought about by colonialism forced most Igbo women and men to abandon agriculture and now engage in trade, industry and commerce; a significant number of them are also found in government civil and public institutions and corporations²⁰.

In the Igbo primordial worldview, women were seen as helpmates to their male counterparts as well as positive agents of development. Accordingly, U.D. Anyanwu notes that Igbo tradition demonstrates that women as mothers are welcome agents of procreation²¹. In the Igbo pantheon, goddesses often receive more adulation than gods. No one can refute the universality and importance of the goddess ‘Ala’ in the Igbo cosmology. In line with the above observations, Ngozi Ojiakor avers:

Right from the dim beginning, the Igbo theory of life reckons with the positive value and role as well as the input of females for the achievement of desired goals, by other members of the society. Thus, names like Nneka (mother is supreme) and Nneamaka (mother is good) among others, are usually given to children²².

Taking the argument a notch higher, the late doyen of Igbo history, A.E. Afigbo contends that ... in the Western World women did not have such good fortune... African women had an honoured and recognized place in society which made it possible for gifted ones amongst them to rise to political, economic and social eminence from which they led and dominated not only their fellow women, but also the common run of men...²³

Accounting for what went wrong and how Nigerian women came to their present low-status *vis à vis* their positions in contemporary society, Morolake Omonubi - McDonnell posits that colonialism is to be blamed. She contends that “colonialism was a disengaging experience that obliterated and stifled the voice of the African women. The colonial strategy of circuitous control created a gender-oriented executive establishment that endures in spite of decolonization”²⁴. The British government’s socio-economic approaches according to Omonubi – McDonnell, handicapped women and the political arrangement further empowered men to rule women and this accounts for the current disadvantaged status of Nigerian women. This current researcher agrees with the above observation and further submits that this situation has persisted not only in Igboland, but in varying degrees, across Nigeria. The next section attempts to historicize the women empowerment discourse in Nigeria since 1999.

Historicizing women's empowerment in Nigeria since 1999

Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society, where men dominate in all spheres of women's lives. Women are in a subordinate position (particularly at the community and household levels), though the level of subordination varies in different parts of the country. The high visibility of women in trade in Yoruba land would seem to ameliorate women's position in society. As in other male-dominated societies, the social relations and activities of Nigerian women and men are governed by patriarchal systems of socialization and cultural practices which favour the interests of men above those of women. This tendency has taken firm roots in Nigeria. Since the 1990s, female empowerment has gained ascendancy on the political corridors; and been a mantra on the lips of government officials but how much of it has been achieved is of course, a different matter – subject to varying interpretations.

During the electioneering campaigns for the 1999 election, the Obasanjo/Atiku campaign team promised to positively remake the socially -dispossessed status of Nigerian women. They pledged to have 30% women inclusion in the new government. Although, the Obasanjo Administration did increase the number of women in government compared with the Shagari Administration, it did not live up to its promise of 30% inclusion of women in the government²⁵.

On the economic sphere, it is on record that the government of Obasanjo encouraged women NGOs to participate in both national and international trade fairs to enhance their economic interests²⁶. To this end, Lewu Yetunde notes that “officials of the Ministry of Women Affairs led a Nigerian delegation comprising members of the National Association of Women Entrepreneurs (NAWE) to the International Trade Fair, in Miami, Florida, USA from 10th 15th May 2000”²⁷. In the same vein, women officials paid a familiarization visit to the site of the Hanover World Exposition from 9th – 12th May 2000 in order to consult with the German organizers of the Expo 2000 and make a first-hand assessment of how other participants were preparing²⁸. The Hanover Expo 2000 which attracted over 40 million visitors from diverse socio-economic and technological interests provided a better opportunity for Nigeria to properly showcase the positive results of its democratic experiment and building of her new international status and the place of women in the economic development of the country.

Additionally, in order to empower women, education programmes were organized through a training workshop under the auspices of the Female Functional Literacy for Health (FFLH). Furthermore, food processing equipment was distributed to some women from 31st July to 5th August, 2000²⁹. The workshop was intended to serve the purpose of improving the health and economic status of women within the family and community. The Ministry of Women Affairs was said to have distributed various food processing equipment to rural women in order to improve their ability to generate income which would, no doubt, reduce their dependency on public funds³⁰. The Ministry of Women's Affairs intervened to improve the health of rural women and also alleviate their poverty in many instances. From 1999 to 2007 when Obasanjo exited the political space, there were several programmes put in place to empower the Nigerian woman; however, most of these programmes were sporadic, and lacked community involvement and therefore, could not be said to have had any significant impact on the lives of Nigerian women.

The Musa Yar'dua Administration was perhaps too short-lived to have made any remarkable efforts in women's empowerment. Notwithstanding, a significant number of women were appointed into government and the president's wife (with no constitutional mandate) trifled with a couple of programmes ostensibly aimed at female empowerment. Additionally, the Jonathan Administration that succeeded Yar'dua had a somewhat impressionable record in women's empowerment. However, a critical evaluation of the programmes bandied about as women empowerment programmes leave much to be desired.

More often than not, the impression was created that women were empowered in the public space in Nigeria since the return of democracy to the country in 1999. Proponents of this claim aver that the Goodluck Jonathan Administration took off in 2011 with the appointment of 13 female Cabinet Ministers, 5 female Special Advisers, 10 female Ambassadors, 16 female Judges of the Court of Appeal; 11 female Permanent Secretaries, 16 female Judges of the Federal High Court, 3 female Judges of the Supreme Court, 6 female Judges of the National Industrial Court; a female Acting President, Court of Appeal and The Chief Justice of the Federation as female³¹. With these records, the casual observer may be tempted to believe that Nigeria is making significant strides in the empowerment of women. On the contrary, the reverse seems to be the case. Adeline Nnenna Idike succinctly captured the real situation when she posits that

The truth of the claim of gender tolerance and women empowerment in these appointments is neither here nor there. To appoint women into positions as if the women are recipients of acts of benevolence is not women empowerment. Are the women not Nigerians? Actually, women empowerment entails that men (and also women) accept to freely elect a woman into public office³².

The fallacy in pretending that Nigeria is making any significant efforts in women's empowerment was somewhat revealed during the People's Democratic Party's (PDP) 2011 Presidential Election. A woman, Sarah Jibril was one of the Presidential aspirants on the platform of the PDP; she got only one vote in the primaries (only she must have voted for herself) and when the party subsequently won the main presidential election and became the party in power in Nigeria; as an act of the Nigerian system's women empowerment (and an act of male benevolence also) she was appointed Special Adviser to the President on Ethics and Values³³.

Idike is not mistaken to have argued that

It was not a great appointment for the Nigerian woman, neither does this suggest women empowerment which government's apologists would want it to suggest. Yet, every major political party in the Nigerian political system parades as part of its structure, intimidating numbers of women that operate under the alias of —women wing. Are these wings not meant for flying? Or are they merely created for male-gender flying? Indeed, empowerment suggests participation with others to achieve goals not exploitation by others in the process of achieving goals³⁵.

Despite a general commitment to the principle of non-discrimination as enshrined in Section 2 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Nigeria falls short of the desired result of giving males and females equal opportunities to advance socially, physically, educationally, politically and economically. Evidences abound that several negative aspects of gender relations, such as gender-based division of labour, disparities between males and females access to power and resources, and gender biases in rights and entitlements, remain pervasive in Nigeria and in the face of all the above, we cannot claim that women empowerment is given serious attention. In tandem with the ongoing, the National Coalition on Affirmative Action (NCAA) argues

The long history of women empowerment in the country is not in tandem with the current situation analysis with respect to all the gender issues suffered by majority of women in Nigeria. All efforts through special legislation, state bye-laws and gender specific policies at all levels of government and by the civil society though note-worthy have failed to deliver dividends of development to women and men equitably. However the continued manifestations of the problems highlighted at the sectoral level demand for the adoption of a different and more pragmatic approach to the policy framework as compared to that of the National Policy on Women³⁶.

What is more, even if we are to agree that women are being empowered in Nigeria, it has often been the educated women and ‘sophisticated’ women politicians and their cronies that mostly benefit from the largesse of our male – dominated system. Clearly, the rural women who are larger in number often benefit little or nothing from the so – called women empowerment efforts. This as we shall see later has been the lot of Igbo rural women since 1999.

The Igbo Women Experience

As stated in the preceding section, women empowerment in Nigeria and with particular reference to Igbo women has not been exactly what it should be. Often, political appointments are mistaken to represent women empowerment. Thus, the appointment of the wives of politicians, their daughters and girl – friends is used as a basis to justify the erroneous impression that Igbo women are nearer to the objective of gender equality. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The above is not to deny that since 1999 efforts were not made by the successive governments in the area of women empowerment. Indeed, the wives of Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo, Musa Yar’dua and Goodluck Jonathan made attempts at initiating programmes and projects (most of which they irritatingly referred to as pet projects) aimed at reversing the ugly situations of women. Additionally, the wives of the successive governors of the five southeast states have variously contrived myriad programmes and schemes which bother on gender equality and women empowerment. However, as stated earlier their overall impacts vis a vis the totality of the Nigerian women has been less than desirable.

More than any other programme, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provided Nigeria

a veritable opportunity to close the gender gap and as well as empower its women. The Millennium Development Goals to which the Federal Government of Nigeria is a signatory, which aims to significantly reduce poverty, inequality and disease, is supposed to be achieved by 2015 presented Nigeria an opportunity to tackle the challenges of gender inequality in the country. Goals One, Three and Five of the MDGs substantially bother on women empowerment. The MDGs would have been seized by the Nigerian governments to tackle the problem of gender inequality in the country but the opportunity appeared to have been missed. The experience of Igbo women with regards to goal three of the MDGs shows that in the five states that make up the southeast, gender equality and women empowerment is still a pipe dream.

We may recall that the third goal aims at promoting gender equality and women empowerment. In the southeastern states of Nigeria, little progress appeared to have been made; since inequality continues to subsist in various aspects of life of men and women in the Southeast. For instance, the proportion of girls enrolled in primary, secondary and tertiary education is still lower than that of boys (about 8 girls to every 10 boys), although there is a positive trend in girls' enrolment for all levels of education³⁷. For primary school enrolment, there was sustained increase in girls' enrolment from 2003 to 2013, while in the secondary schools, a steady increase in girl's enrolment was observed from 2007 when about 9 girls to every 10 boys were in school³⁸.

Igbo women are still grossly under-represented at the highest decision - making levels in the states, such as the State Houses of Assembly. Although, there were some improvement (from less than 3% in 1999 to about 7% in 2003; to 8% and 10% in 2007 and 2013 respectively); nonetheless, the rate of improvement is considered very slow in relation to the 30 women to every 100 men recommended by the Beijing Platform for Action which has been adopted as a national policy³⁹. However, in the issue of appointment of women to political offices, (which as stated earlier, does not conduce to women empowerment), the Anambra State government made some remarkable efforts. This is because about 45% of the key government personnel in the state from 2006 to 2016 were seen to be women⁴⁰. Other states of the Southeast Zone hardly achieved a 20% per cent appointment of women to political positions⁴¹.

From the foregoing, a number of challenges still exist. Poverty is critically identified as a key driver of gender inequality. An analysis of poverty incidence in the region indicated that poverty, especially that of women, was more pronounced in the rural areas than in the urban centres⁴³. Unemployment rate in Igboland also witnessed a rise. Women have clearly been the worse hit; most of them have had stories of employers of labour asking them to do abominable things before being considered for employment.

Furthermore, agriculture, which is life line of the Igbo, especially those living in the rural areas is very central to achieving the goal of women empowerment. However, some challenges have militated

against the effective performance of the sector. These include addressing the dominance of aged people in agriculture, promoting the use of, and increasing access to, modern implements⁴⁴. Others are promoting strong industrial processing technology and linkages, encouraging agriculture sector-market linkages, promoting stable costs of production and stabilizing the constantly declining purchasing power of farmers.

Another notably crucial goal of the MDGs which would have been utilized in fostering women empowerment is that which borders on reduction of maternal mortality. This represents a major challenge; this is because contrary to the fabulous figures claimed by the various government agencies in the states of the southeast, the reality on ground is that two-thirds of Igbo women and three-quarters of its rural women deliver outside of health facilities and without medically-skilled attendants present⁴⁵.

On the bases of the foregoing it is difficult, if not impossible to conclude that the tides of women empowerment have been favourable to Igbo women, especially, the rural women. A.N. Idike drives home the point she contended that women empowerment is vital to sustainable development and the realization of human rights for all. Accordingly, she avers that “where women’s status is low, family size tends to be large, which makes it more difficult for families to thrive. Population and development and reproductive health programmes are more effective when they address the educational opportunities, status and empowerment of women”⁴⁶. It cannot be denied that when women are empowered, whole families benefit, and these benefits often have ripple effects to future generations (Srivastava, 2009:1). This is how sustainable national development is achieved.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Throughout the recorded history of humankind, it cannot be denied that the roles that men and women play in society are not biologically determined -- they are socially determined, changing and changeable. Often, a plethora of cultural resistors are mounted to block the removal of cultural practices that chain women to practices that are inimical to their aspirations for equality. Thus, women empowerment and gender equality has often, especially, since the advent of European colonial incursions remained a recurrent theme in most states of the Third World.

In the specific Nigerian situation and as divulged in this study, the Nigerian state still pays lip service to the question of women empowerment, and is somewhat blindfolded by the tendency of equating political appointments as meaning the same with women empowerment. In any event, even when some efforts were made to uplift the conditions of Nigerian women, the beneficiaries always end up being the educated women and others who live in the urban areas leaving the rural women neglected and uncared. The perpetuation of this anomaly *inter alia* had obstructed any efforts made towards empowering women.

Further, this study identified that a good opportunity to close the gender gap and as well as empower its women. The MDGs would have been seized by the Nigerian governments to tackle the

problem of gender inequality in the country but the opportunity appeared to have been missed. The study thus canvasses a refocusing of attention – away from the state; as indeed, the state may not wield the magical wand needed to demolish gender inequality. A synergy of civil society organizations, faith – based institutions, progressive traditional institutions as well as the government is herein advocated as a remedy.

First, the government should contrive a system of using the Igbo primordial institutions such as the Umuada, Inyomona and other women organizations to champion the cause of women empowerment. The politics and responsibilities of these traditional institutions are well understood by the rural women and therefore these rural women can hardly shortchanged if these organizations are used to drive the women empowerment campaigns.

Second, vigorous support should be given to genuine civil society organizations whose functions are women based. Additionally, faith – based institutions should be utilized to educate rural women on which angle the government’s women empowerment train is taking. Through this way, these rural women most of who cannot read would have the necessary information to appreciate their roles as well as what the government is doing for their well – being.

Third and perhaps, more importantly, the various state governments should learn from their mistakes and should not allow the mistake in the implementation of the defunct MDGs to affect the workability of the SDGs. The Sustainable Development Goals should be implemented with a clear understanding that it provided the needed opportunity to empower Igbo women and thus, bring about the much-touted gender equality.

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