

THE IMPACT OF LITERACY ON CAREER WOMEN: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Literacy has indeed projected the image of women in our society as nation builders. Their roles are not only the stereotyped ones of nurturing children and taking care of home but also career giants in different establishments. Women have excelled in most professions believed to be male dominated. This paper examines women who have broken the bounds of societal stereotype roles and excelled in their careers. The paper also examines women in leadership positions and assesses how literacy has made them develop professionally, realize their potentials and excel in their careers. The critical examination of some career women in Nigeria reveals that women have indeed reached the zenith in their occupations through life-long learning. They have also made their marks in the annals of literacy development and have left indelible marks in different sectors of Nigerian economy. They have therefore, debunked the stereotypical image of women as homemakers alone.

Key words: Literacy, Education, Career, Career Women, Gender.

Background

In Nigeria, the absence of women in certain careers and their presence in others has been as a result of societal notions. The choice of career pursued by women, over the years, is as a result of three major factors.

The first factor is the demand that women devote their primary attention and energy to their homes and not to public activities.

Two, there are still some traditional and religious biases against women in some sectors. Some religions do not readily encourage women to work or participate fully in developing the country and to be active in communal activities, while some traditional systems restrict the activities of women to particular sectors of the economy.

Three, the issue of sex discrimination prevents some women from pursuing certain careers. Even in certain areas like politics, to be a woman is to provoke prejudiced judgment that one is incapable of fitting in. Thus, women find it difficult to secure the support of men in certain posts, especially political ones. It is therefore, difficult for women candidates in elections.

These factors give rise to constraints women face in their careers. Thus the constraints and contingencies of being a woman shape women's professional lives. There are about three types of constraints which create pressure on women in their jobs. These constraints are not related to the intrinsic nature of the work itself. These are family constraints, constraints of marginality and self imposed constraints. The constraint of marginality creates different kinds of pressure on women. Since some women find themselves in professions believed to be male dominated, they are seen as outsiders or strangers or they are seen as different. Women in such fields are therefore partly rejected. In fact, the realization of the extent to which women are marginalized must have prompted the United Nations (UN) to sign the charter on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are pro-women in the sense that three of the goals talk about empowering women, reducing maternal mortality and encouraging education for all irrespective of sex.

Thus, goals 2, 3, and 5 of the MDGs clearly focus on:

- Achievement of universal primary education
- Promotion of gender equality and women empowerment and
- Improvement of Maternal Health Care

If the Nigerian government works towards achieving these goals by the year 2015, most women would be more empowered in Nigeria. As regards self-imposed constraints, some women also see themselves as helpers not leaders, warm and supportive, not ambitious. Such women cannot take roles that run contrary to their self-established notion. Successful career women are those who are ready to upset the calm order of their feminine nature. Some essays remind us that discrimination needs not breed weak cringing incapacitated creatures. On the contrary women should endure, resist and transcend the hurdles (Biklen and Brannigan, 1980).

In fact, a woman should have complex strength to transcend these limitations. Literacy is the raw material for such guts.

This paper will examine women who have broken the stereotyped societal roles and excelled in their careers. It will also assess women in leadership positions and examine how literacy has made them develop professionally, realize their potentials and excelled in their careers. In order to avoid ambiguity in the use of some terms whose meanings are prone to various interpretations, we hereby specify their meanings as used herein.

Literacy: Literacy is patently not an absolute term. It is 'relativistic', depending on its context of use (Biklen and Brannigan, 1980). In a broad sense, literacy is defined as the ability to read and write. We often speak of literate society, literate individuals, and literate women. Would it then be possible if people considered literate can only decode written symbol or read and write? Thus functional literacy, on the other hand, is being purposefully active and making a practical contribution to societal good. It is not only to prepare people for work, it should also lead them to greater participation in civil life and better understanding of basic human culture.

Career: Career is defined as a person's profession, that is, one's life work. The terminology or concept of Career Women therefore refers to woman occupying strategic and important positions in their various professions. It also refers to women who have achieved social status, self-esteem and feeling of adequacy in their chosen professions.

The Educated Women: A woman is literate if she has acquired the crucial knowledge and skills, which give her the opportunity to engage in all activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in her community. Her being able to read and write gives her ample advantage to use the skills attained to work competently for her community.

The training women receive through literacy makes them attain greater heights, increase their productivity for the nation and also literacy makes it possible for them to use the skills for their own good. Hence Anah (2006) asserts that literacy enhances the ability for people not to meet only their own needs but to excel by broadening their vision and opening up new horizon for productive action.

Thus through life-long learning, women have improved their literacy skills for greater efficiency and productivity. Their acquisition of literacy skills has made them develop competence in different spheres of life.

Literacy has enabled them to develop and realize their potentials as much as the men folk. The acquisition of literacy has indeed strengthened their self-confidence, improved their standard of living and made them play more leading roles in social, economic and political activities. Education refers to the process of teaching training and learning especially in schools or colleges to improve knowledge and develop skills.

Educated women are therefore, women who, through adequate learning and training particularly in schools, have acquired specific skills and knowledge. So education enhances literacy

and literacy enhances education. Thus both of them are tools for professional development.

Gender Roles and Women

Gender is the positioning of men and women in the society (Agbro, 2005). According to Agbro, it is the consideration of dissimilar interest between men and women. It therefore, means that gender issues are not women issues. It is a common fact that each society has its different expectations of men and women. On the contrary, Acholonu (2001) asserts that gender issues arise when in any given human situation, the male is accorded the superior status and role that guarantees him rights, privileges, and opportunities which invariably results in disabilities for the female gender. Formerly in our society certain jobs such as teaching, nursing, etc are done by women. The male-dominated society dictated their choice of jobs and positions in their workplaces while the menfolk dominated key leadership positions. But today a general revolution is going on in various establishments. Women demand for interdependence in pursuance of their duties, rights and obligations (Acholonu 2001). Literacy has brought new opportunities for greater modification of work habits. Hence women have been mobilized and educated to evaluate and appreciate their invaluableity in all formal organizations. As a result of literacy, their roles have gone beyond traditional, societal expectations to take to different careers in different establishments. With their hard work and intelligence they perform very well in different areas where they work. Thus, there is the recent realization of the usefulness of educated women. For instance highly educated women who were formerly labeled as 'acada' are now greatly appreciated as great assets in various establishments and society at large (Acholonu, 2001). Thus, women are power agents of industrial and social change and have equally proved that they are as brainy and as capable as their menfolk. Lampe (1998), as quoted by Agbro (2005), asserts that women are as intelligent as men and that they only differ from men because they are biologically made to give birth to children and suckle them and men do not share the peculiar female structural fitness for some reproductive functions.

Literacy has enhanced these capabilities. The women have also been empowered by literacy to contribute to national development. Literacy has liberated women from every shackle of ignorance, male chauvinistic intimidation and has imbued them with knowledge. Hence, they have left no stone unturned in all sectors including the social sector. Through the non-governmental organizations and other women organizations they have played remarkable and crucial roles in community development. They have championed the cause of the sick, hungry and afflicted. They have also embarked on a lot of community projects like the building of schools, hospitals and other public infrastructural facilities. The literate women have played active and positive roles in the society and social organizations. A good number of Non-governmental organizations are funded and run by women.

Literacy and Career Women

With literacy, the sky is the limit for women in their various careers. Many women have now reached the zenith in their careers. They are now at the top echelon of the civil and public services and in many establishments.

They have excelled in different fields, which were traditionally regarded as male dominated careers. Literacy and life-long learning have made this possible. Today, there are many women occupying strategic positions and are doing even better than the menfolk. Women have indeed excelled in these male dominated areas and have got to the top in their various fields due to their hard work and learning. Their perseverance and literacy have given them this opportunity. Today, they have made an indelible mark and distinguished themselves as lecturers, nurses, doctors, engineers, administrators, etc. In many establishments, women are managers, directors and chief executives. The most peculiar thing about these women is that they have passed through many hurdles and have even performed better than their male counterparts.

Literacy has helped them to achieve all these. They have acquired a lot of skills and knowledge and these have helped in their professional development. Not only that, their literacy and life-long learning enabled them to remain relevant and active in their service to their nation. This also shows that literacy is very crucial for career for career development in our society. These women are popular in their areas and are very skillful and serviceable in their community. Hence, Aruma (2006) asserts:

Literacy is very critical for professional development and job security in the place of work in the contemporary society.

It therefore, means that for the career woman, literacy has the following implications:

- * It gives social values, that is, the ability to achieve self-esteem and feeling of adequacy
- * It gives access to a variety of viewpoints relating to economic and social policies, thus increasing potentials for involvement in community affairs.

So a successful career woman is one who can use all these attributes effectively.

Roles Played by Women in different Careers

The female specie has always occupied the subordinate position, in society especially in Africa, where the socialization process pains them down to housekeeping and child rearing skills while their male counterparts pursue different careers.

Hochschild (1973) in Beklen and Brannigan (1980) noted that the major difficulty women face as marginal people is that they are partly rejected. The career women have to prove themselves not only better than many women but also different from what women are thought to be.

A close observation of this situation in Nigeria reveals that some women crossed the hurdles against all odds. These great women have excelled in various positions usually seen as male dominated due to the fact that literacy awakened the consciousness that they are capable of pursuing any career as human being. A critical review of the activities of women in various occupations reveals glaring marginality and pressure on women.

A prolific example is seen in recent interview of Otumba's Ayora B. Kuforji with the Sunday Punch of 22nd April, 2007. She narrated her experience as UBA Chairman. Her male colleagues refused to accept her as their boss, often referred to her as just a woman. In all these, she saw herself as a graduate of Economics and Chartered Accountant, which qualified her for the post.

This concluding section examines some women who have excelled in their careers through literacy. (Prof) Mrs. Dora Akunyili is an example of one of these women. With a first degree and doctorate degree in Pharmacy and determination, she has excelled in her duties as the Director of National Agency for Food, Drug, Administration and Control (NAFDAC). She has succeeded in sanitizing the production of consumer goods, beverages and drugs in the Nigerian. This feat has saved the lives of millions of Nigerians. Through her intelligence and assiduity, NAFDAC has boosted the nation's economy by encouraging local industries and genuine importers.

A professor of Pharmacy and a post Doctorate fellow of the University of London and a fellow of the West African Post Graduate College of Pharmacists, Akunyjili has indeed reached the peak in her career. She has received more than four hundred and twenty (420) awards locally and internationally. Some of the awards are:

- * Icon of Hope for Nigerians, 2003
- * Integrity Award, 2003 by Transparency International in South Korea
- * National Order of the Federal Republic (OFR), 2002
- * Paul Harris Fellow of Rotary International.

So, with literacy and right leadership, she has excelled tremendously in her career.

Mrs. Cecilia Ibru is another woman who has made remarkable contributions to national development. An astute banker and public intellectual, Ibru has come up with strategies to revolutionize and boost the banking system. This is evident from the fact that Oceanic Bank Nigeria Plc. was one of the first to meet and surpass the N25 billion capital base directed by the regulatory authorities, The Central Bank of Nigeria. Mrs. Cecelia Ibru studied Sociology and Philosophy for her first and second degrees respectively. Right now, she is the Managing Director and Chief Executive (MD/CEO) of the fifth largest bank in Nigeria, the Oceanic Bank Nigeria Plc. Her education and dynamism fortified her to excel in banking and community activities that have improved human development. Notable among Mrs. Cecilia Ibru's achievements is the fact that

Oceanic bank's profit rose from N2.06 billion to N 5.6 billion between 2001 and 2005 (Ebelo, 2007). She is the Director of Total Nigerian Plc., Director, Aero contracts Nig. Ltd., Chairman Public Private Partnership for National Programmes on Immunization etc. Little wonder, Mrs. Ibru received awards in recognition for her hard work. In 2007, she was recognized as the African Banker of the year 2007. Others are: Female Achiever of the year, 2004 and Award for Banking Support and Development in Nigeria in Business Africa, 2005.

Dr. (Mrs.) Okonjo-Iweala is another woman achiever. Right now, she is a Managing Director of the World Bank. She has responsibility for the World Bank's activities in Africa, South Asia, Europe and Central Asia. She was an outstanding Minister for finance and Foreign Affairs in Nigeria under the Obasanjo's regime. Transparency is seen in her good governance and her ability to lead the country's reform programmes on issues of fiscal prudence, transparency in government accounts etc. Her literacy and intellect made her succeed as the boss of Economic Management Team that got the debt relief for Nigeria, 2006. Her role in improving Nigeria's external reserves is unprecedented. Her commitment, literacy and excellence have fetched her lots of honours such as:

Time Magazine European Hero, 2004,

Euromoney Magazine Global Finance Minister of the year, 2005

Financial Times/The Banker African Finance Minister of the year, 2005

This Day Minister of the Year, 2004 and 2005.

Okonjo is thus an icon in financial matters.

Another woman who has also demonstrated excellent leadership qualities and competence as an administrator is Mrs. Oby Ezekwesili. She was the head of Budget Monitoring and Price Intelligence and Implementation Unit, BMPIIU. Mrs. Ezekwesili recorded an outstanding success in BMPIIU when it saved N2billion for the government. This amount of money would have been wasted through dubious contract inflation and over invoicing. Her performance in BMPIIU earned her the un-official title of "Madam Due Process". Mrs. Ezekwesili's acumen and education made her excel in this unit. She was also a successful Minister of Solid Minerals. She created an autonomous mining cadastre and privatized the ministry's liabilities. Right now she is one of the top executives of the World Bank.

These few women have become nation builders as a result of their literacy and intellect. They have indeed led the nation to greater heights through their knowledge and excellence.

Thus, women have become aware of their potentials. They are no longer contented with being cipher. They try to exercise human freedom and recapture their sense of self, instead of remaining nameless.

Women have gained awareness into the pervasive pattern of subordination, limitation and confinement that have hampered and crippled the development of their career. This understanding has developed in them a vision of an alternative way of living in which the individuals of both sexes flourish in diverse ways without restraint imposed by rigid and impersonal sex/gender roles.

Recommendations

Literacy should be encouraged among women as this would enhance the economic lot of women as well as the nation.

The Nigerian Government and the society at large should recognize the potentials in women and appoint them to sensitive positions since they are administratively good. This will help in solving the economic problems of our country.

There is the need for sensitization of women to enable them take up the challenge and fight their way to the center stage of national affairs. It is unwise for women to think that they will get their fair share of national appointment without literacy, hardwork and assiduity.

Women should not see themselves carved out for some specific professions. They should correct the wrong belief that women are only meant for some specific roles like cooking, washing and doing particular jobs like nursing and teaching. They should aim at being engineers, pilots and

scientists.

Job segregation should be eliminated. There should be equal opportunities for both men and women in all establishments.

Segregation should be de-emphasized at family and society level. Women should be given opportunity to realize their potential as they have all it takes to make great impact.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women should strive to excel in their various careers. A literate woman who is determined, focused, assertive and self-confident will succeed professionally.

Hence women need to adjust their programme of activities to enable them achieve fulfillment, and success in dual positions as homemakers and career giants.

They have really excelled in their various careers despite the gender challenges and the limitation. In other words, there is a transformation women gain through literacy that reduces men's dominance over them. Literacy brings independence, which further helps in choice of career. The career women know that they have freedom to choose their careers. Thus they have been able to redefine self and arrive at conclusion that hard work or determination is the watchword for a successful career and not just being a 'man'.

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