

# **ECONOMIC RECESSION, FEMALE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND EMANCIPATION: A STUDY OF OSITA EZENWANEBE'S *ADAUGO* AND AKACHI EZEIGBO'S *HANDS THAT CRUSH STONES***

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## **Abstract**

*Women's economic wellbeing is one area in which the male chauvinists' antics have been concealed. Maybe it has not yet occurred to many women that in the face of financial deprivations, they are tied to the apron strings of men. This paper evaluates the need to emancipate the woman from economic bondage and the denial of the right to eke a living for herself. Unequal pay, poor pay, capitalist exploitation through non-payment of wages for work done, and in some cases, outright denial of the opportunity to work by the male folks constitute the area of discourse that this paper looks at. Furthermore, the need for women to earn money to save the family and make sacrifices in cases where the breadwinners are unable to meet up informs the analysis of the primary data; Osita Ezenwanebe's *Adaugo* and Akachi Ezeigbo's *Hands that Crush Stones*. The paper is hinged on a theoretical framework of socialist feminism and Marxist feminism, which questions the circumstances of the female's inability to excel in an unequal society. It is submitted that given the socio-economic circumstances in which the citizenry is constrained, there is urgent need to consider options that make it critical for womenfolk to assiduously contribute a quota of their productivity for the sustenance of the society.*

**Keywords:** Recession, Women, Emancipation, Empowerment, Society, Development

## **Introduction**

The prospects of women's socio-cultural and financial independence, especially one in which their fate is tied to the man's authority like is the convention in Africa will arguably leave womanhood perpetually in bondage. There is the bondage of lack of education for the female child, inability to choose one's spouse, conspiratorial denial of inheritance, the maltreatment by the man when power-play comes into the equation, cultural scape-goatism and a guinea pig for religious and cultural taboos. When a woman finds herself within these socio-economic and cultural limitations, with little or no power to undo the status quo, she needs to be emancipated. In this wise, emancipation can be defined as the efforts or process of procuring economic, social and political rights and equality, often for a disenfranchised group. In the same regards,

economic emancipation can be defined as the freedom to determine one's own financial position and future against the current and future circumstances capable of militating against ones wellbeing.

In a bid to emancipate women from entanglement of poverty and economic enslavement, the freedom from culturally inflicted pains and social vices, there is need for a radical redirection of their fate. Therefore, the freedom to earn decent wages which guarantees a better security of life and all that is dear to oneself and dependents cannot be taken lightly. The unflinching conviction fuelling this drive towards economic emancipation is that it grants women greater control of their personal and social life. It also helps provide women with social status and identity which men have deprived them of over the years. The economic emancipation of women ultimately leads to greater productivity, poverty reduction and rapid development as shown by research in the societies that have succeeded in reducing gender gaps.

### **Literature Review**

In an attempt to focus on the concept of economic emancipation of women in Nigerian drama, Osita Ezenwanebe's *Adaugo* and Akachi Ezeigbo's *Hands That Crush Stones* influences the direction of critical commentary as the welfare of the female gender is addressed. Women make up a large percentage of the human population. According to statistics available from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), women make up 40% of the workforce, and women aged 18-65 years are actively involved in the workforce, women also work 65% of the work hour globally. The empowerment of women is key to achieving economic emancipation for women and the nation at large. According to the 7<sup>th</sup> Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, "there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women". The empowerment of women is the key to building a developing economy. It is said that when you educate a woman you educate a nation. Thus, women are the most powerful force of transformation and progress there is to be harnessed for socio-economic prosperity.

The African woman is faced by discrimination on all sides which adversely affects her productivity. The rights given to women are less emancipatory and more limiting compared to those assigned to men. According to Uma and Fatima Baby, "unequal gender relations imply that men not only can exercise greater power than women in almost all spheres of human functioning but they have also culturally and often legally more sanctioned power over women and have a greater of and access to resources and information" (1). This contributes to the poor and discouraging status of women in the society. In the light of the above, it is said that patriarchy reinforces women subjugation and exploitation. Corroborating this point is Reeves and Braden when they posit that, "dominant cultures reinforce the position of those with economic, political and social power, and therefore tends to reinforce male power" (4). When men have a cultural, economic, religious and political advantage over women, what follows is a situation where women are rendered powerless on all spheres in the society.

A critical look at the Nigerian nation shows that women are powerless on the principles of social stratification, leaving much to be desired with regards to their

fundamental human rights. In furtherance of this notion, Ayodele Ogundipe defines the three principles of social stratification as power, property and prestige (37). It is argued that, the Nigerian man is entitled to greater share of resources as they are culturally regarded as superior. For example, in J. P. Clark's *The Wives Revolt*, the men feel they are entitled to the greater share of the compensation money given to the village by the oil company, not because they worked for it, but simply for the fact that they are called-Men? There is no basis for such arrogation of power and resources given the fact that men and women are literarily, born the same. There is no attempt to share equally between both sexes as the women are regarded as second class citizens and as part of the properties owned by the men. Ogundipe reiterates the fact that because women in general lack power, prestige and property:

The position of women in various systems of stratification determines their life choices and chances. Prestige confers status and honour. It is a purely relational sociological concept, which depends on the respect others are willing to show. Status is based on the socio-economic stature of the individual: an income, occupation, education and social class. Since most women in the Nigerian society are at the lowest socio-economic, educational and social class levels, they have little prestige. Women lack access to other objects signifying success. They lack access to land, to credit, to owning property and to other sources of wealth (37).

The poor widows in Ezeigbo's *Hands That Crush Stone* are the poorest of the earth, the reject of the society. They are forced to do the work that no other person will do, earning slave wages to be able to feed to stay alive. Working under dehumanising conditions they are exploited, abused and ridiculed in their quest for survival. This captures aptly the state and condition of many poor women in developing countries. The struggle for women emancipation is conceptualised in the feminist movement. Feminism is a woman centred ideology that covers issues ranging from gender discrimination, women oppression and exploitation as well as women empowerment. It desires an end to the oppression of women and the achievement of self-fulfilment of the individual woman. According to Emma Goldman,

Emancipation should make it possible for woman to be human in the truest sense. Everything within her that caves assertion and activity should reach its fullest expression; all artificial barriers should be broken, and the road towards greater freedom cleared of every trace of centuries of submission and slavery (219).

Feminist writers and literature have done much to enlighten women on their rights and privileges, to promote the education of the girl child, to encourage participation in politics and advocate equal representation of both sexes in the corridor of power. Yet, there is the need for the economic emancipation of women to be

encouraged and their activities recognised and promoted for the total development of the society. Socialist feminism views capitalism as a social and cultural totality. The subjugation of women is based on the same forces that promote capitalism. While Marxism addresses itself to the class dynamics of a capitalist society, feminism addresses itself to the inequality between the sexes. The focus of this paper is therefore to highlight the importance of economic emancipation of women especially as the economy of many countries around the world is in recession. It also notes the strategies suggested by the playwrights in the plays understudy for women to achieve economic emancipation and to promote the socio-economic development of their society.

Women are generally recognised as the backbone of any society. They play multiple roles of mothers, daughters, wives and sisters. Often times they are saddled with the domestic responsibilities of the home and care of the children. Women also are at the receiving end of unfavourable policies and cultural beliefs. Women often bear the brunt of inequality, oppression, financial dependability, economic exploitation, domestic and gender based violence and other social ills. Ezenwanebe notes that, “critical appraisal of women in modern society shows they are oppressed, marginalised and subdued to an ignoble position vis-a-vis the men” (186). By using strong female protagonist and addressing salient issues that affect women, these playwrights seek to correct female marginalisation and project strategies that promote women emancipation and empowerment. It can be said that women are economically disadvantaged and therefore lack the political power to change their lots. The role of women in economic activities is largely subsistence and mostly consists of unpaid labour. Polygamy which is highly promoted in the traditional African society is based on the need for labour and as a manifestation of a man’s wealth. The agricultural economy needs a consistent available labour which was easily found in women as wives and their children. Hence, when a man marries plenty wives, it is to help out on his farms and increase his fortune, and prestige is only secondary in this situation. Women also engaged in other domestic occupation such as processing of the farm produce, weaving, pottery, dyeing, soap production and trading. Rita Okecha notes that the Nigerian woman is a crucial factor of production as they are largely responsible for the bulk production of crops, processing, preservation and the distribution of farm yields from the farms to the urban area (153).

It is a fact that many women are employed in low paying jobs or run small home stead businesses. The little income earned is channelled into care of the children and home. In many cases especially in polygamous homes, care of the children and the required financial obligation for their upkeep is left in the hand of the woman. Women and children are regarded as a disadvantaged group as they are the most affected by unfavourable policies. Lack of economic emancipation makes her unable to challenge the status quo and obtain political power. Unable to generate wealth due to their low social economic status, they often remain dependent on their husbands and men. This financial poverty is one of the reasons women settle for less and remain in abusive marriages and relationship. The women in Ezeigbo’s *Hands That Crush Stones* are willing to settle for slave wages doing slave work. In layman’s parlance, this is known as, “igedu work” – a work no other person will do. They do not even make demands for

the minimum wage stipulated by the government; their demand is a little increase on the wages paid by Chief Mbu which can barely cover their needs.

The play points out that women the world over are exploited and manipulated by the men. This is because patriarchy ensures that the laws favour the male-folk. Many cultural belief and practices subjugate women to very lowly status. A good example is the law of inheritance which often excludes women from inheriting lands. Widows are also denied access to their late husband's properties and wealth leaving them at the mercy of ruthless capitalist. Women are also forced to do work that are not necessarily financially rewarding but one that would grant them time to care for their families and home as they often play the multiple role of wives and mothers. Their earnings often go into the running of their home leaving barely enough for her personal needs. In the course of their jobs they are faced with abuse, violence, economic deprivation, oppression and exploitation. Reeves and Braden state that:

Women are generally expected to fulfil the reproductive role of bearing and raising children, caring for other family members, and household management tasks, as well as home based production. Men tend to be more associated with productive roles, particularly paid work, and market production. In the labour market, although women's overall participation rates are rising, they tend to be confined to a relatively narrow range of occupations or concentrated in lower grades than men, usually earning less (8).

Ezeigbo's *Hands That Crush Stones* tells the story of poor widows who crush stones with their hands to earn a living. The women embark on a strike action to force their employer Chief Mbu to increase their slave wage. Chief Mbu, apart from being a chief and the custodian of the culture and tradition of the people; is also the local government chairman. He abuses power in an attempt to crush the poor helpless widows and employs violence, manipulation and emotional blackmail to crush the industrial action embarked on by the poor women and widows. Finally, the women are able to have their demands met through the intervention of Madam Udentia, the political opponent of Chief Mbu. Chief Mbu gives in to the demands of the women only to score a political point with the press.

The women in Ezeigbo's *Hands That Crush Stones* are poor helpless women, majority of them are widows. They are faced with limiting conditions and challenges that make economic emancipation a pipe dream. Handicapped by these situations they are forced to subsist on hand-outs from the ruthless capitalist Chief Mbu. The capitalist class owes its existence to the continued exploitation of the working class. Paying less than what they deserve and have worked for, workers are caught in a wage trap, leading to continuous antagonism between the capitalist and the working class. The debilitating conditions faced by the women in *Hands That Crush Stones* are not much different from those faced by the African woman in a developing country. These challenges stand as strong barriers to women's economic, political and socio-cultural empowerment and

emancipation and automatically retard their contribution to national development. Rita Okecha notes the following limitations:

- a) High level of illiteracy;
- b) Lack of access to basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter and security;
- c) Lack of expertise and specialised skills;
- d) Poor leadership;
- e) Cultural and traditional practices which are harmful to women;
- f) Lack of access to credit facilities and loans;
- g) Non-existence of assessable loans;
- h) High interest rates from money lenders;
- i) Lack of assets suitable to use as collateral;
- j) Low level of skill acquisition;
- k) Violence against women;
- l) Sexual and reproductive rights denial; and
- m) Lack of access to seek justice and redress (154).

Education is the key to economic empowerment and emancipation. Due to the low level of education attained by the women in *Hands That Crush Stones*, they are easily exploited and subjected to discrimination and oppression. Investment in the education of the girl child is often low compared to that of the male child. Poverty is the leading cause of poor education. The women stone crushers are forced by the hunger to engage in manual labour that needs no skill or expertise. Crushing stones is the only work they can find to do as it is work rejected by other people. According to Uto, “only widows accept to do such slave work”. Frustrated and pushed to the wall the women seek ideas to alleviate their suffering and hunger. Amina suggest that they send out their children to the streets to beg. This shows the loss of dignity a woman who has no economic power experiences. Financial poverty makes women settle for less than ideal. They lose their self-worth and dignity in the bid to make ends meet. Poverty forces these women to take drastic decision. All income generated by the women is channelled into feeding themselves and their children. Their first concern is the wellbeing of their children. The women worry about feeding their children while the strike last. Left with no choice they are ready to give up on the struggle and return to the wretched condition of work. This type of condition will not arise if the women are financially empowered and economically emancipated. They become pawns in the hands of politicians in a bid to feed.

The women promise to vote madam Udentia and to campaign for her if she fulfils her promise to give them foodstuffs. This exchange of vote for the reward of food is one tactics that Nigerian politicians aptly employ. This approach has evolved to what is called, “Stomach Infrastructure”, in some quarters. Okecha notes that financially independent women are useful to their families and fellow women (153). When women are empowered economically they can influence policies and cease to be marginalised. The important role played by women especially market women, during election are highlighted based on the importance and regards with which they are treated. The

widows are able to see Madam Udentia only after they had informed her body guards that they are from the Market women Association. This shows that women are important not only in canvassing votes but in the economic development of the community.

Women are indispensable in the development of any nation. They play important role in the economic growth of the nation. Despite the multiple roles of mother, wives, teacher, nurse, counsellor, advocate, farmer, petty trader played by women, their contributions to the development of the nation are undervalued and poorly appreciated. Bradshaw et al. note the importance and contribution of women to the development of the nation. Citing the research backing The World Bank Gender Mainstreaming Strategy launched in 2001, it states that, “this research highlighted that societies that discriminate by gender tend to experience less rapid economic growth and poverty reduction than societies that treat male and females more equally; and that social gender disparities produce economically inefficient outcomes” (4). Women are regarded as a cheap and reliable source of labour. However, the harrowing situation that leads them into such conditions is not often taken into focus.

Objectification of women as a form of property is evident in their status. All the women are wives, all except two are widows, and they are forced to do menial jobs, performing services for Chief Mbu a patriarchal male. These widows are regarded as the most wretched set of people because they have no man to protect and provide for them. The dependency of women on the men for welfare intensifies underdevelopment and chronic exploitation. They are faced with physical violence, emotional torture and low prestige. Chief Mbu as the Local government chairman is the representative of the government at the grassroots level. He is supposed to provide economically viable environment for the women to flourish. However, because he is a selfish capitalist, his personal interest and profit comes first before that of the women he is supposed to protect. The women are brutalised by the policemen acting on the orders of chief. This proves the Marxist concept that the source of power in the society lays in the economic infrastructure and the forces of production owned by a few. The capitalist class controls directly or indirectly the means of organised violence such as the police. Chief Mbu owns the stone quarry where the women work; he controls the police and manipulates the press in his favour. At all point, the widows (women) are at the receiving end.

In Tess Onwueme’s *The Reign of Wazobia*, Wazobia the regent employs the economic empowerment of women as a means to sustainable development of the society. She projects that an empowered woman is an enlightened one. Wazobia rejects the degradation of women to the lowest social strata. She abolishes harmful widowhood rites and unfavourable practices. All women are equipped with the tools of trade, commerce and education. Violence is employed by Chief Mbu to weaken the resolve of the women and to break their spirit. Singlebone, who is Chief Mbu’s bodyguard and thug beats up Kemi and threatens Uto who is old enough to be his mother with equal violence. Chief Mbu also orders a policeman to use teargas on the innocent and armless women. It is interesting to note that chief Mbu uses his power to manipulate assault and frustrate the poor women. These women are unable to seek redress because they are economically disadvantaged. Their interest is to earn enough to feed on and feed their families. They have no self-aspiration beyond feeding and are trapped in bondage. The

practical gender needs of these women are income earning opportunities, food, safe water, adequate living conditions and healthcare. The lack of these basic needs is as a result of the subordinate position of women in the society. Violence limits a woman and makes her vulnerable. In the quest for social well-being women are exposed to various forms of violence on the job and in the home. Violence against women impedes development and is a threat to economic development. Gender based violence is carried out by the opposite sex (Chief Mbu, Singlebone), while help comes from an empowered woman. Not only is Madam Udenta economically empowered, she is also able to seek political power and command respect because she is educated and informed.

In Ezenwanebe's *Adaugo* the protagonist Adaugo suffers in seeming dumbness but uses her earnings as a clerical officer to save her family from disaster and starvation. Despite the various challenges she faces, Adaugo is able to show that an economically empowered woman is a blessing to the family and the nation. Such a woman is not helplessly nor tied by frustration to a miserable fate nor is she a pawn in the hand of politicians. Adaugo shows through her resilience the important and complementary role a woman plays in the home and society. Adaugo experiences prejudice from her husband who does not want her to work for fear that she is his defying his position. This is an understandable but unfounded fear amongst African men who believe that once a woman starts earning money she becomes uncontrollable. Thus, to maintain patriarchy, the African woman is denied power, opportunity and prestige. However, as the times change there is urgent need for a change in gender relation. The times demand that men and women receive equal opportunities and existing gender roles be reviewed in the developmental process. Ezenwanebe notes that, modern life erodes and redefines the traditional roles and duties of the man as provider and protector as well as the supervisory role of the woman as mother and housekeeper thereby raising concerns on the family structure and survival (7). At the point of economic distress the woman come to the rescue of the family. A woman's loyalty always lies with her family. At all points in time she considers the welfare of her children and the family.

A similar situation is seen in Emeka Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral* where the women collectively resist the exploitation and the harassment of the men as well as the unity of the family which is threatened. As stated by the playwright in the introduction of the dramatic text, *Adaugo*, the demands of modern life has made it mandatory that the woman is no longer a weak vessel but rather a partner in the economic, social and cultural pursuits of life. With increased threat to the main source of income, many women have moved from mere supervisory roles to the major performers and providers of the family. Adaugo, through wisdom and hard work, is able to keep her children in school, save her marriage and her home. The poor economic climate puts a lot of stress on the men and even more on the women. But with increased access to education, paid jobs and a higher standard of living, women can gain more political, economic and legal power. Despite the limitations faced by the Nigerian woman, some of these women have been outstanding in their contribution to the society. These women, such as, the late Professor Dora Akinyuli, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and many others serve as inspiration to other women caught in the bondage of hostile socio-cultural and economic environment. The contribution of these empowered women



makes huge impacts on the society and can determine the rate of development achieved by the society. It is mandatory to state that healthy gender relation between both sexes will lead to utmost development of the society in all ramifications.

## **Conclusion**

The death of a partner should not spell doom, hunger, or servitude for the family and the wives. Women have become properties men possess because of their economic dependence on men. The economic emancipation of women leads to the betterment of life for women, the children, the family and the entire nation. As the recession lingers, it is mandatory that women receive better and equal opportunities. Gender gap should be closed through equal opportunity, equal pay, access to loans and better condition of work. There is need for the cooperation of the government, NGOs and other international bodies to collaborate in empowering women and helping them achieve their maximum potentials. The collective effort of these bodies as well those of the members of the society, women and men inclusive will lead to sustainable national growth and development.

There is additional need for the protection and the enforcement of women rights. Although these rights are entrenched in the constitution under the fundamental human rights, the enforcement of these rights are negligible. The neglect of women in all aspect of the society is detrimental to the socio-political and economic wellbeing of the nation. Women participation in public service should be encouraged. Education of the girl child should be made mandatory and enforced at all levels. Collective efforts by women through Self-Help Groups promote cooperation and the achievement of mutual goals for development. Cultural factors, which stand as hindrance to women empowerment should be tackled not only in conference rooms and in books but practically at the grassroots level. There is urgent need for reorientation towards the role and position of a woman. That one is born a woman does not translate to one being automatically subordinate. The roles played by women as wives and mothers are important and worthy of respect. A woman's contribution to the welfare of the family and children should be appreciated and not taken for granted.

Emphasis should be on integrating both the traditional and modern roles played by women. More income generating opportunities, greater control over resources and improved access to credit facilities should be provided. Women should be granted equal opportunities as they have been recognised to be more pragmatic and concerned when it comes to the welfare of the family. It has also been observed that women are more credit worthy this should encourage granting them more access to loans to promote their small scale businesses. Bradshaw et al. cite that the if women farmers access to productive inputs and human capital were at par with that of the men, total agricultural output is expected to increase by 6% to 20% (4). This shows the huge difference women contribution makes to national development. These strategies are not only beneficial to the women, but to the children, the family and to the society. The empowerment of women is essentially an emancipation process that leads to the general welfare of all and the socio-economic development of the nation at large.

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