



Women Devaluation and its Implication on their Socio-Economic and Political Advancement in Rivers State

ABSTRACT

This paper examines women devaluation and its implication on the socio-economic and political advancement in Rivers State. From time immemorial, all ethnic groups gave more power and preferences to the men, while the women were relegated to the background. It was revealed that in spite of the concerted efforts of feminist and the government to stop gender inequality and discrimination, the women are still devalued and their socio-economic status are moving at snail speed. On the other hand, the proportion of women in politics or leadership positions in Rivers State are still very few compared to their population and the men. However, it was revealed that their percentage of women in politics is increasing since the inception of democracy in 1999, and their socio-economic status of few women have also increased. It was recommended that all cultural practices that encourage women devaluation and gender inequality should be discouraged. Secondly, the ministry of women affairs in Rivers State in conjunction with other feminist movement should embark on campaigns and sensitization against women devaluation.

Keywords: Women Devaluation, Political Advancement, Gender Inequality, Widowhood Practice, Women Development.

Deedam Dorka Gobless

PhD

Faculty of Social Sciences,
Department of Sociology,
Ignatius Ajuru University of
Education,

Rumuolumeni,

Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

deedamgobless@gmail.com,

deedamdorka@gmail.com

I. Introduction

From time immemorial, all the cultures and ethnic groups in the world including Nigeria gave more power to the men, therefore, creating an unequal, imbalance and lopsided relationship between the men and the women in the society. Tischler (1999) posits that culture has made it abundantly clear that the physiological and biological differences between man and woman define the roles and responsibilities bestowed on them.

Like in the case of other societies in the world, Rivers State is a Patriarchal society, and traditional practices as well as cultural prejudice placed women in deplorable condition, and perpetual bondage. The publication by civil resources development and documentation center (2001) asserts that men were singularly seen as bread winners of the home, they toiled, work hard and engaged in all forms of activities just to provide food and succor for the family. Even at home women were not seen as decision makers, they only act according to the dictates of their husbands, and hence, they are not culturally recognized to take leadership position.

The women folk had been greatly devalued by the men in all the ethnic groups in Rivers State. They were made to play subservient and subordinate roles, especially cooking, washing, of clothes, sewing, nursing and nurturing the children, keeping the house tidy, while their male counterpart dominate the political arena and engage in high status occupation so as to provide the needs of the family.

Evinosho (2000) posits that most Nigerian communities are not wholly responsible to the eradication of discrimination rites and practice that are embedded in its social structure. It is the large

patriarchal social structure that is the veritable medium for discrimination and violence against women and female children. Among the rites or practices that undermine the rights and well-being of Nigerian women/girl children are female genital mutilation, widowhood rites and early marriage.

The women are victims of harmful rites or cultural practices associated with the death of their spouses, inheritance, long period of mourning as a result of the death of their husbands, forced to marry their husband's brothers etc. In spite of the contributions and efforts made by women towards the development and stability of their respective families and the society at large, women are still not given equal rights to participate in leadership positions.

Afolabi (2000) in Deedam, Waabah and Ibeh (2013) puts it succinctly that women constitute over half of the world's population and contribute in vital ways to societal development generally. In most societies, women assume five key roles; mother, producer, home manager, community organizer, socio-cultural and political activities, of these role mentioned, the last was seen as a unique role for the men. According to Brown (1972), these practices are still deep rooted in our communities despite modernization and in spite of the fact that all government in the continent are signatories to the;

Universal Declaration of Human Rights. December. 10 (1949).

Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, December, 16 (1979)

Convention on the Rights of the Child. November, (1989).

The International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Adopted December, 1966 and entered into force in 1976.

The convention against torture and other cruel in-human or degrading treatment or punishment (Adopted December 10, 1984 and entered into force June 26, 1987).

The researcher is enthusiastic to carry out this investigation because the devaluation, challenges and humiliation faced by women in Rivers State are very conspicuous and are at an alarming rate because in spite of all the deliberate efforts of both the Federal and State Governments to provide policies and programmes aimed at improving the condition of women, they are still seen as group of people that cannot be independent nor do certain things without the support of their male counterparts.

Despite the entrenchment of human rights and equality of all irrespective of sex, religion, ethnic group etc., in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as well as the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 including the Beijing Conference of 1985, women are still devalued, they are targets of violence of diverse forms and made objects of ridicule in their respective communities.

In spite of all the concerted efforts made by women to have equal rights with the men, they are yet to be granted equal opportunity and recognition by their husbands, political class and the entire ethnic groups of Rivers State. Neglects, wife battery, mal-treatment, raping, abandonment, forcing women to drink water used to bath their dead husband, stopping them from inheriting their husband's properties are still very high in Rivers State.

Operationalisation of Concepts

In order to avoid all forms of ambiguities, the following concepts are carefully explained as thus;

Devaluation

This simply means the suppression, discrimination, neglect, deprivation and trampling on the fundamental rights of the women. This action forced the women to play subservient roles in the society and reduces them to be puppets in the hands of the men.

Inequality

This refers to the imbalance, lopsided and unequal relationship that existed between the men and women in terms of socio-economic, cultural and political participation in the society. In this circumstance, the women are subjected or forced by culture to play subordinate role.

Patriarchal Ideology

It is the belief that men are superior to their women counterpart, and should control important aspects of the society. In fact, in a patriarchal society, the men are seen as the ruling class while the women are regarded as the less privileged class.

Dimensions of Gender Inequality and Discrimination in Nigeria

In developing countries, investment in education for girls is the single most effective way to reduce poverty (Jay and Clare, 2000). However, the reverse is the case in Nigeria and Rivers State in particular where many girls and women are drop-out of school.

Nigeria was categorized as an undeveloped country in the United Nations Human Development Report of 2005 with regards to equality in educational accessibility. Female Adult Literacy rate (ages 15 and above) in the nation was 59.4, while male adult literacy rate was 74.4%. Female gross enrolment in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions was 57%, while male gross enrollment was 71%.

Ojo (2002), confirms that fewer women than men participate in some socio- economic activities as a result of lack of education. He emphasized that girls make up 60% of Nigeria 10 million out-of-school children and face challenges like child marriage, poverty and discriminatory social norms.

This is an indication that more women in Nigeria and Rivers State in particular are more likely to experience poverty than men because of early marriage, lack of requisite education and skills that can help them to get employment. Women are highly devalued, neglected, undermined and discriminated against because the culture that were handed over to them by their ancestors gave more preference to boys education than girls.

According to Deedam (2018); It is a well-known fact that greater percentage of the rural population in the third world countries, especially Africa, are illiterates and are also ignorant about the values of education. To them, educating the girl-child is not important and it is not also deemed necessary. One of the best ways to prevent the female children from having sexual relationship with boys is to stop them from going to school. Sending them to school will not actually allow them to control their female children.

Women and the Economy

Makama (2003), in Eze (2023), like other women throughout the world, Nigerian women experience a lot of prejudice that restrict their ability to reach their full potential on the premise of equality with males. They are far from having equal rights in the work place, primarily because of their household responsibilities, low educational attainment, and poverty, biased against women working in particular fields or jobs, and unfair pay practices.

Majority of the women in the rural areas are engaged in agriculture and domestic services which attracted little income. In Rivers State, all the ethnic groups do not give power or right to women to own. Property especially land. All the lands belonged to either their fathers or husbands, yet they are using the lands to produce food consumed by their respective families. More importantly, some employers forbid women from getting married or producing children after employment for a stipulated period. The management of the organization believes that giving birth to children will reduce productivity. Some young beautiful girls and ladies are employed so that they can entice their male clients to patronize the organization. This is what some scholars regarded as "corporate prostitution". On the other hand, employers reserved certain jobs for only the men, and the women that are eager to do the work are paid lesser than the men.

Women and Politics

It is an obvious fact the women in Rivers State only voted during election but did not contest election, neither were they given any political appointment. The assertion that women are disproportionately represented among the poor, applies significantly to Rivers State. (ILO Report, 1995). Nwika and Ifenacho (1998), asserts that women battle on daily basis with political marginalization,

financial constrain, child bearing and rearing responsibilities.

Nkechi (1996) in Eze (2023), women involvement in politics in Nigeria has significantly increased over time, but when compared to their male counterparts, it is confirmed that they are under-represented in politics.

Aria (2012) posits that studies have shown that women in developing nations particularly Nigeria are under-represented in business and policy circles while having a larger population and higher level of education. Awajiusuk (2018) asserts that patriarchy has given rise to women being worked upon as mere household wives and non-partisans in decision making process in households not to talk of coming out to vie for political position.

Nwabunkeonye (2019), states that following the way politics in Nigeria is played, it is being perceived that is is for individual that have no regards for human rights and quick at compromising their virtue for indecent gains. Therefore, women aspirants who ventured into politics are looked upon as shameless and promiscuous.

Ngwu (2022), posits that the cultural order puts men above women, the order bestows on man the responsibility to guard the terms and the cultural foundations y which the development of society and the home is founded, while the women guard the home unity and health as well as the integration of society through rearing, including the nurturing of off-springs when they are young.

Specific Ways in which Women are devalued in Rivers State

Women have been greatly devalued, undermined and culturally disempowered in the following ways:

Widowhood Practices

Most widows suffered greatly and are dehumanized because of the ritual test of innocence over their husband's death.

They are always accused falsely by their husband's relatives being responsible for the death of their husbands. Olumati (2012), posits that ordeal of a widow begins with accusation and victimization by the next of kin of the spouse who holds the view that she is responsible for his death. She may be forced to swear before the family shrine or drink the water that was used to bath the man's corpse in order to prove her innocence. At times, the brothers of the deceased person imposed this stringent condition upon the widows, so that they will collect their properties as soon as they refused to swear.

Sexual Harassment and Rape

Sexual harassment and raping are so rampant in our society today. Some people have attributed these actions to the inability of some men to discipline themselves whenever they are close to women. Other attributed it to sexy dresses used by the female folks.

According to Heise (1991) in violence against women, edited by Civil Resource Development and Documentation Center (2002):

Women should wear purdah (head-to-toe coverage) to ensure that innocent men do not get unnecessary excited by women's bodies and are not unconsciously forced into becoming rapist. If women do not want to fall prey to such men, they should take the necessary precautions instead of forever blaming the men.

Female Genitals Mutilation

This is the partial or total cutting away of the external female genitalia (clitoris). This is mostly done in an unhygienic manner by local mid-wives. In some cases, it leads to fatal health complications such as urinary tract infection, hemorrhage etc. A woman or girl whose genital organ is defaced has low sexual libido, and very difficult to reach orgasm. Such woman is deprived of sexual satisfaction and enjoyment, above all, her right is trampled upon.

Child Marriage

This is a situation where a child or girl is married out at a very tender age to someone who is old

enough to be her father. They mostly experienced vesico vaginal fistula during child delivery. A fistula simply means tearing of the walls between the vagina and the bladder due to prolonged labour. Women with untreated fistula constantly drip urine, making them to be social outcasts or nuisance and likely candidates for divorce or abandonment (Civil Resource Development and Documentation Center, 2000).

Refusal to Divorce

In spite of the maltreatment meted on some women by their husbands, they consider it as a sin to divorce; because the Bible says that what God has joined together let no man put asunder. Parents also encouraged their daughters not to divorce, irrespective of the suffering and maltreatment meted on them by their husbands. The parents are of the view that divorce will bring shame to their family.

Rejection of Second Wife by Husband Who Embraced Christianity

According to Anele (1998), in Wika and Ifenacho (1998), African Traditional Religion and Islam approve of the marrying of more than one wife by husbands. This contradicts the teaching of Christian religion. Traditionalist who married more than one wives before becoming “born again” rejected or abandoned the second wife or third wife. This rejected women become frustrated and free for all men to be approached for the purpose of sexual gratification, financial support and to suppress their emotional trauma.

Prostitution or Commercial Sex

This has to do with the act of commercializing sex by the female folk. It’s considered as a way of generating income for survival, and it is mostly patronized by the men. The men including those in position of authority keep patronizing, encouraging and supporting the prostitutes to remain in business. Commercial sex business is regarded by the society as an immoral and despicable business that reduces the personality of the sex worker. On the other hand, the men that constantly patronized them are not devalued neither are they seen as prostitutes.

Wife Battery and Domestic Violence

These have to do with beating, assaulting, bullying and torturing of their wives by the men. According to Civil Resources Development and Documentations Center (2002), the most endemic form of physical violence against women is wife abuse or more accurately abuse of women by intimate partners. Research reveals that women are murdered, physically and sexually assaulted, threatened and humiliated within their own homes by men with whom they should enjoy the greatest trust. Women are turned to punching bags, and are sometimes disfigured or killed by their husbands.

INCEST: This has to do with having sexual relationship with blood relatives such as sisters, brothers, fathers, daughters, sons, mothers, aunties, etc. young girls are usually lured or forced into having sex with relatives against their wishes or desires by men who are physically stronger than them. However, we have also experienced situations where women lured or forced young boys who are close relatives and have sex with them.

The Impact of Women Devaluation on Women Development

It is an obvious fact that inspite of the concerted efforts of both the State and Federal Government, International Organization and women liberation movement to bridge the long aged gap between the both sexes, women are still the most impoverished, exploited, marginalized and devalued group of people in the society and Rivers State in particular.

Tischler (1999) argues that the division of labour and role differentiation by sex are universal principles of family organization and are functional to the modern family. He believes that family function best when the father assumes the instrumental role that focuses on the relationship between family and the outside world. The mother concentrates her energy in the expressive roles which focuses on the relationship with the family and requires the mother to provide emotional support needed to sustain

the family. The male is required to be dominant and competent and the women to be passive.

Based on this assumption and ideology, women who participate in politics are frowned at, and regarded as wayward or deviant since they are required by culture to play subordinate role and not to be in leadership positions. The politicians, who are mostly men, make it practically difficult for women with the intention to contest election to have conducive atmosphere and equal right to contest. They employ cultists and thugs to rig election. Opponents are threatened and their supporters kidnapped as well employing diabolical means to pass election. Women, as weaker sex find it difficult to compete or contest with the men.

The cultural roles bestowed on the women folk, made some employers not to employ women. On the other hand, greater numbers of women are unemployed because they do not have the required qualifications and skills that would have enhanced their employment opportunities. Majority of the women are forced in the informal sector, open markets, shops as sales girls, seams-stress, hair dressers, super markets, filling stations etc.

The men are in greater proportion in the ministries, parastatals, public and private companies etc. at the managerial cadre, more men found with few women, and in the National Assemblies, Presently, only one woman from Rivers State is in House of Senate, and one woman in House of Representatives from Rivers State. In the State of House of Assembly, only four women are there. Women were picked by the former Governor of Rivers State to contest as Vice Chairperson in all the 23 Local Government Area of Rivers State. Research has also shown that the total numbers of women that are counselors in Rivers State are very small compare to the total number of men.

Out of the 84 million registered voters expected to vote in 2019 election, women accounted for also 40 million which constitutes 47.14 percent. (Brady, 2019). Despite forming the bulk of voting population in the country, women representation remains abysmally low in Nigeria. This was evident in the 2019 election where a negligible 11.36% of nominated candidates for different elective positions were women. In the election, 135 women forming 12.34 percent of candidates contested for a seat in the Senate of which 7 (6.42%) were elected (Lawless and Fox, 2020).

II. Recommendations

After a rigorous study, the following recommendations were proffered as solutions to the problems:

The Legal Aid Council Federation of Women Lawyers and other human rights organizations should be more serious to defend and protect battered, abandoned and devalued women.

The Ministry of Women Affairs in Rivers State in conjunction with other feminist movement to embark on campaigns and sensitization against women devaluation.

All cultural practices that encourage women devaluation and gender inequality should be discouraged and abolished in Rivers State.

The 35% affirmative actions for women in terms of political participation should be implemented as specified or resolved at the Beijing conference in China.

The equality of every individual irrespective of sex, religion and ethnic group in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria should be upheld, recognized and implemented.

Roles and responsibilities of the both sexes should no longer be defined or determined by culture and biological differences, instead. Skills, educational qualifications and experience should be considered as yardsticks.

III. Conclusion

Gender inequality and women devaluation are as old as creation. From time immemorial, men dominated the affairs of the society as they played instrumental roles which focuses on the relationship between the family and the outside world. The woman concentrates her energy on the expressive role which focuses on relationship with the family and requires her to provide emotional support needed to sustain the family.

This study reveals that culture and biological differences encouraged women devaluation and gender inequality, but in recent times, the women are struggling to gain recognition and also to have equal right with the men in all areas of life.

However, the total number of women in position of authority and wage employment is still very small compare to the men. In spite of the efforts of the Women Liberation Movement, Government and International Organizations to improve the welfare of women by eradicating all barriers against women, women are still greatly devalued by their male counterparts denied them from climbing the socio-economic and political ladder so as to have equal status with them.

References

- Aina, O.I. (2012). Two halves make a while gender at the crossroads of the Nigerian Development Agenda. An Inaugural lecture delivered at the Oduduwa Hall, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria on Tuesday, 25th, September, 2012, pp 70-75.
- Awajiusuk, M. (2018). Gender Imbalance in Nigeria Politics: A religious-Cultural Approach in Women Development Essays. Ibadan; John Archers Publishers Ltd.
- Bradley, H.E (2019). Beyond SES: A resource model of Political Participation. *American Political Science Review*, 89 (2) pp 271 – 294.
- Brown, C.K. (1972). The Situation of Widows and Elderly Persons at Cape Coast. CDS Research Series No. 25, April. Civil Resource Development and Documentation Center, Nigeria (2002). Violence Against Women.
- Deedam D.G., Waabah, G., & Ibeh, H.C. (2013). Gender Inequality and Women Political Participation in Nigeria: A case study of Rivers State, in *Rivers Journal of Social Studies*. (R. Joss) 8 (7) oct, 2013, PP 95-106.
- Deedam, D.G. (2018). Contemporary Issues in Global Education. Published by Emmanest Ventures, No. 5 Shopping Complex, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt.
- Eze, P.U. (2023). Gender Inequalities and Discrimination against Women in the Private Sector: A study of Airtel Africa PLC and MTN Group Limited in Rivers State.
- International Labour Organization (1995). Gender, Poverty and Empowerment, Geneva.
- Lawless, J.L., & Fox, R.L. (2020). Political Participation of the Urban Poor, *Journal of Social Problems*. 48 (3) PP, 362 – 385.
- Olumati, R. (2012). Widowhood Rites in Choba Community, Rivers State Nigeria in *African Educational Journal*. Vol 5, No.2, Sept, 2012, PP 185-1996.
- Tischler, H.L. (1999). Introduction to Sociology. Sixth Edition. The Harcourt Press, Harcourt Bruce College Publishers.
- Wika, J.N., & Ifeancho, M. (1998). Women in Development: The Evidence from Nigeria. Published by Belpot, Nig. Company. No 55 Ikot-Ekpene Rd, Abak, Akwa- Ibom State.
- Wika, J.N. (1998). Beyond Beijing Strategies for Achieving Global Gender Equality, Pam Unique Publications.