

Political Orientation and Economic Empowerment as Strategies for Women's Participation in Community Leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract:

This study examines political orientation and economic empowerment as strategies for women participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. The study was guided by five objectives and five research questions. The study adopted the descriptive survey design with a population of 2340 women from different Community Based Women Organizations in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area in Rivers State. The sample size consisted of 1170 women from different community based women organizations in Obio/Akpor local government area in Rivers State representing 50% of the population. This was determined using proportionate sampling technique. An instrument was constructed and designated as 'Political Orientation and Economic Empowerment Strategies for Women Participation in Community Leadership Questionnaire' with reliability co-efficient of 0.84. Mean scores and standard deviation were used in answering the research questions. The findings revealed that political re-orientation and economic empowerment significantly promote their participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area to a high extent. From the findings, it was therefore recommended that Government should assist women to achieve economic viability through

acquisition of literacy and other necessary skills and Government and NGOs should embark on sensitization programs that teach the essence of freedom in relation to development.

Keywords: Political Orientation, Economic Empowerment, Women's Participation in Community Leadership, Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Introduction

Over the years, the Nigerian Government has advanced various empowerment programmes to assist the Nigerian woman. This is as a result of a perceived gender imbalance in our society that has led to the low socio-economic status of women as manifested in low literacy rates, poverty, low employment rates and low self-esteem [1]. Alozie [2] observed that regressive traditional practices and attitudes have drastically limited women's avenues for self-realization and access to education. The inevitable consequence of the situation, according to him, is that women's potentials are grossly under-utilized with far reaching implications for the communities, state and nation.

A discourse of this magnitude demands first and foremost, an empirical foundation of how women in different parts of Africa galvanized themselves into a formidable group towards the articulation of a common cause of action, which of course, would give a searchlight in fine-tuning a workable blue-prints to ensuring women earn and hold their inalienable rights including positions as the case may warrant. Due to the strictness, rigidity, cultural complexities and ascending competitive nature of governance, the women folk have not been actively involved: and when 'they are admitted', the support accorded them is inadequate, epitomized with their small attendance at board meetings, political rallies, voting and political offices. Women participation in Nigerian politics at the grassroots' level is an issue of great concern because women have been relegated to the background politically for a long time, which of course made them lose their rightful place, even in associations of women.

Furthermore, Oladosu [3] noted that the quest for gender equity in social, economic, political and decision making processes are on the increase; and have in fact yielded positive results. Women are now better appreciated and if empowered, they will contribute maximally to community and national development. However, Onyeozu in Kobani [4] maintained that a lot still need to be done to improve the socio-economic status of women so that they can contribute meaningfully to the overall development of the society and contribute to community government through empowerment. Empowerment refers to increasing the political, social or economic strengths of individuals and communities. Empowerment has been defined as a process through which individuals, local groups and communities, identify and shape their lives and the society in which they live. It is a measure of people's capacity to bring about change, which is concerned with analyzing and addressing the dynamics of oppression and assisting groups and individuals to play an active role in the decisions which affect their lives [5].

Hence, orientation is necessary for existing political systems and social as well as economic structures. Women's political knowledge and views serve as pillars for active participation in the democratic environment and act as a catalyst for change in the political process. Updated information on the whole situation keeps women informed and enhances their participation in the decision-making process in the political and leadership sphere. The low patronage of women in politics and public decision-making is a global phenomenon. Throughout history, men have monopolised and dominated strategic decision making positions. Despite the achievement of universal suffrage, increased education and incomes for women, and efforts to increase participation of women in public life, women everywhere remain marginalised and under-represented in those areas of public life where important decisions and policies are made. The few women, who hold relevant positions, often have values and ways of thinking that fit the status quo; therefore, they are not always inclined to improve the status of women. Women form at least half of the population of all countries of the world and perform many important productive and reproductive roles [6]. Furthermore because of their numbers in population, women make up half of the electorate in all countries. By their numbers, women have the capacity to decide on political leadership if there are

elections. However, women are not elected to political office and few are put up as candidates at top level of decision-making positions [7].

Broadly speaking women at all levels of decision-making are under-represented and are poorly engaged in leadership processes. It is an important end in itself to achieve gender equality in leadership. This implies equal right of participation for women in decision-making processes who are otherwise traditionally excluded for various reasons. The political participation of women is a sine-quo-non for the success of modern democracy. Women's political participation: refers to women's ability to participate equally with men, at all stages, and in all aspects of political life and decision making process. It seems evident that formal education should be strongly associated with political participation for women and for men. Political participation matters a great deal for women as a group and as individuals. Whether women work together to protest gender-based injustices or whether they participate in non-gender-specific associations and struggles, the most important group benefit from political participation is influence on decision-making to make public policies sensitive to the needs of the group in question. For groups, participation also builds social trust and capital, and provides a form of democratic apprenticeship; it offers socialization in the norms of reciprocity and cooperation, the capacity to gain broader perspectives on particular problems in order to develop a sense of the common good. For individuals, political participation builds civic skills, while successful lobbying can result in improvements in personal welfare and status. Explanations for the very slow progress women have made in gaining political office around the world have been multi-causal, including: their lack of time for politics due to their domestic obligations, their lack of socialization for politics, their lower social capital and weaker asset base than men owing to discrimination in schools and in the market, their under representation in the jobs that favor political careers, their marginalization within male-dominated parties, their inability to overcome male and incumbent bias in certain types of electoral systems [8].

Women's political participation is most often measured in terms of the numbers of women to be found in formal politics, in positions of public office to which they have been elected. This extremely crude measure is made even more so by the tendency to limit it to the numbers of women in the main legislative house at the national level, excluding not just numbers of women in regional and local government, but numbers of women elected as magistrates, members of the boards of public bodies such as schools or health facilities, and the like. The reasons for using this measure have to do with simple convenience. There are significant data gaps on numbers of women in local governments and other sub-national elected bodies around the world, and there is such wide variation in leadership systems for sub-national communities and public bodies that they are barely comparable.

Women's political participation is best understood more broadly than numbers of women in office, and indeed, more broadly than numbers of women's organizations, as women may express their political interests through participation in a wide variety of political and civic associations. This definition includes voting, campaigning for a party or supporting party work through other means (e.g. policy development, membership drives), contacting policy-makers directly by writing or telephone, protest activities, getting involved in organizations that take a stand in politics, taking part in informal efforts to solve community problems, and serving in a voluntary capacity on local governing boards such as school or zoning boards. This definition is clearly culturally-specific; notions of citizen lobbying of representatives or participating in political campaigns apply best in democratic contexts that lack violence and corruption in political competition (particularly in electoral campaigns), and that have disciplined parties with internal democracy, clear programmes and positions [9].

Because of the patriarchal nature of society where property essentially belongs to men, women lack the economic base which would enhance their political participation. Women and other marginalized social groups in any country in the world hinges critically around the question of poverty, power, politics, and control. Onimode [10] observed that it is the power, policies and system that marginalize, oppress and impoverish, while they control over these elements that empower people everywhere. He stressed further that economic empowerment is a major

component of women's total empowerment and liberation. This is because political, social and cultural empowerments are often wide and incomplete without access and control over resources. Onimode added that national poverty has increased since the mid 1980 and the population of poor women has increased. He added that the number of illiterates in Africa has been rising since the 1980 and most of them are women. For women to be actively involved in politics and leadership, then they need to be mobilized for empowerment both educationally and economically.

Okeke [11] observed that economic empowerment of women will increase the productivity of women and thereby raise the gross national product. She also stated that a substantial amount of women's income is spent on family feeding and upkeep. Because of this, any increase in women's income will reflect positively on the family nutritional status and health standard and thereby raises the life expectancy of Nigerians. Garba [12] maintains that improving women's economic status by providing them with employment, improving their capacity to be involved in income generating activities, access to land and other credit facilities will have serious positive impact on their participation in developmental process. People who own and control assets such as land and housing have more economic security and are more likely to take economic risk that leads to growth and receive important economic returns including incomes.

Women's role in agricultural development can better be appreciated when one considers the view of Williams [13] in which he noted that a country like Nigeria which is predominantly agricultural and where the majority of its population is peasants, a high agricultural productivity is indeed a cornerstone in her economic growth and social progress. Studies have also shown that women now form cooperative societies to give strength to their activities. Nigeria NGO report [14], states that women's poverty militate against their ability to enforce their fundamental rights. Consequently, women lose their self-esteem and sometimes fall prey to other forms of violence such as trafficking in women. According to Oguonu [15] women participation in community development is an important element and a sure way to speedy development of the rural communities in Nigeria. According to Eudora [16] in the wake of the global conference on women in Beijing, China, the world community has witnessed several conferences where efforts have continued to encourage women participation in their societal development. Similar conference was held in Africa in November, 2014 in Dakar Senegal where the African Platform for action was prepared for ratification in Beijing. The platform states the need to accelerate the societal, economic and political empowerment of all women at all levels and stages of their lives using the universal principles of equal partnership between men and women; a fuller and more active participation of women in policy formulation and decision making processes of government; the participation of women in economic, social and political empowerment at all levels on an equal footing with men, women becoming active contributors in and benefiting from all aspects of national development; and priority action being taken for protecting the human rights of girls and ensuring that they receive adequate nurturing, care and education and opportunity for achieving their full potential equally with their brother.

Fadeiye and Olanegan [17] viewed women empowerment as a process of enabling women to develop the capacity to actualize their potentials and that women should be looked at as individuals who possess some hidden potentials for greatness and so should be encouraged to develop such to the fullest. This also has been linked to democratisation, good governance, equality, equity, and human rights. As a means, participation is a process in which people and communities cooperate and collaborate in development projects and programmes. As an end, participation is seen as the empowerment of individuals and communities in terms of acquiring skills, knowledge and experience, leading to greater self-reliance. Participation is an instrument to break poor people's exclusion and lack of access to and control over resources needed to sustain and improve their lives. It is intended to empower them to take more control over their lives [18]. This is why Ebirim, [19] submitted that there is no gain saying, the fact that in most developed and developing countries including Nigeria women are being marginalized, vilified, dominated, discriminated against, exploited and excluded from participating in major public policy formulation and development programmes. In political arena, Ogbogu, (2018), assert that over the years, women in Nigeria have

been relegated to the background and are circumscribed within the political arenas by structures, procedures and ideologies that favour men, as well as the existence of an invisible 'glass ceiling' that block their (women's) upward mobility and full participation.

The issue of women's marginalisation in Nigeria, can be attributed to cultural, religious practice and belief system. Agbalajobi [20] submitted that throughout recorded history in all parts of the world, women have been subjected to domination by men and this domination has been the result of persisting cultural stereotype, abuse of religious and traditional practices, patriarchal societal structures in economic, political and social power dominated by men. She further stated that this form of discrimination is not simply an African or Nigerian phenomenon but a global one. Women empowerment could be regarded as the process of improving the human capital of women for effective participation in all aspects of development of our nation. Women need not be just objects of or beneficiaries of development, but should have equal participation in the development of the nation as well. Given that women form over 50 percent of the world's population, their capacity building is crucial for holistic development. Women's empowerment could also be said to comprise building their capacity or making the best of the lives of women for governance and socio-economic advancement. Lakin (2014) affirmed that improving the education services of women helps to broaden their exercise of civil rights and responsibilities, strengthen their cultural heritage, build-up a sense of national identity, create a better environment for understanding, develop social community networks and give stability to the institutions of democracy. In his own contribution, Son (2017) stated that the gains from education for women and girls extend beyond the family to the entire community.

Empowerment therefore requires an analysis of women's subordination. These can be achieved through the alleviation of the burden of domestic labour, the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the establishment of political equality, improving the economic status of women, freedom of choice and taking measures against male violence and control over women (Molyneaux, 2017). Many strategies had also been put in place to empower women, politically, economically and educationally in Nigeria. These strategies according to Okeke (2013) include widening women's access to education, encouraging their full participation in cash economy, getting women to participate in politics and reviewing laws on status of women. The 1999 constitution provided promotion and protection of women's right in Nigeria. Women and other marginalized social groups in any country in the world hinges critically around the question of poverty, power, politics, and control. Onimode (2019) opines that it is the power, policies and system that marginalize, oppress and impoverish, while they control over these elements that empower people everywhere. He stressed further that economic empowerment is a major component of women's total empowerment and liberation. This is because political, social and cultural empowerments are often wide and incomplete without access and control over resources. Okere (2023) asserts that "the stability of any nation rests on the political awareness and knowledge of her citizens. When women who make up to 50% of the population acquire political power, they will increase the critical mass of Nigeria citizens who have power to steer Nigeria to the right direction. Political empowerment of women will augur well for the development and stability of Nigeria.

Women's participation in community leadership is essential for sustainable development. However, women in Obio/Akpor local government area of Rivers State face challenges that hinder their participation. This challenge includes: lack of education and training; cultural and social norms that perpetuate gender stereotypes and discrimination; limited access to economic resources and opportunities; lack of representation and violence in community governance structures and limited access to information and communication networks

The political context of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area is characterized by a lack of representation and voice for women in community governance structures. Women are underrepresented in leadership positions, which limit their ability to influence decision-making process. To address these challenges, the following empowerment strategies for women's participation in community leadership include: education in community leadership and structure; capacity building to enhance women leadership skills; economic empowerment to increase women

participation and mentorship and role model to promote women involvement; community mobilization/support networks to sustain women participation in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area; social and cultural norms for shaping women opportunities in leadership and inclusive decision-making.

These challenges have resulted in low levels of women's participation in community leadership, even where it is only women affairs which have negative consequences for community development and gender equality. Therefore, this study aims to identify empowerment strategies that can enhance women's participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area.

Statement of the Problem

In the Sub-Saharan Africa, women have continued being discriminated against and disregarded mainly due to outdated social and cultural practices, which have been identified as the greatest challenges to the efforts being made and directed towards empowering women in the region. The discrimination against the womenfolk has been noted to have continued to exist in the contemporary society especially in the developing societies due to women's low socio-economic and political status. Another major source of problem is the over control of some men, preventing or sanctions their wives from participating or partaking in some activities of women in the community. Some men whose wives are appointed or elected leaders of organizations, stopped their wives leadership roles thereby compounding the problems of women organization in the Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State.

Most women in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area prevails in their family, are not allowed to air their views, or contribute to decisions in the family. They also find it difficult to express their views even among fellow women. This reduction of social status results in isolation and unwillingness to participate in any outdoor activity. This category of women cannot accept leadership positions. As a matter of fact, women who are allowed to contribute to family governance and who are involved in leadership roles in their little do seek for leadership positions at the community level. The question that calls to mind thus is, would political re-orientation, economic and cultural empowerment, and widening women's access to education promote participation in community leadership. To provide answer to these questions is the problem of the study.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to examine empowerment strategies for promoting women participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State.

However, the specific objectives include to:

1. Determine the extent to which political re-orientation of women promote their participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area.
2. Ascertain the extent to which economic empowerment strategy promote women participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. To what extent do political re-orientation of women promote their participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area?
2. To what extent do economic empowerment strategies promote women participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area?

Research Method

The descriptive survey research design was adopted for this study. Descriptive survey research design aimed at collecting information about people's opinion concerning the topic under study by the use of questionnaire and description of facts about the situation without manipulating the

variables. The population of the study comprises 2340 women from different Community Based Women Organizations in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area in Rivers State. The sample size of the study is 1170 women drawn from different community based women organizations in Obio/Akpor local government area in Rivers State representing 50% of the population. The proportionate sampling technique was used to derived 50% of the Community Based Women Organization. The research instrument to be used for data collection in the study was self-structured questionnaire tagged “Empowerment Strategies for Promoting Women Participation in Community Leadership Questionnaire” (ESPWCLGQ).

The questionnaire has two parts. Part A which consist of demographic data of the respondents and part B is further designed in section. Each section covers a research question for the study. Responses to the questionnaire items will be structured on a summated four point rating scale of Very High Extent, High Extent, Low Extent and Very High Extent: scored as 4, 3, 2, and 1 point respectively. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the instrument was subjected to face and content validity. It was validated by the researcher’s supervisor and two other experts in Measurement and Evaluation, University of Port Harcourt. These experts critically examined the instrument in terms of relevance of the content and clarity of the statement. Comments from these experts were considered in the final production of the instrument. Reliability of the instrument was determined using the Cronbach alpha method. Reliability for strategies for promoting women participation in community leadership ranged from Political re-orientation (0.802), Economic empowerment (0.753), the overall (0.847). Since the overall reliability of questionnaire is above 0.70 is valid. The researcher and two trained research assistants administered copies of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to the respondents and retrieved after completion on the spot in order to avoid loss of copies. A total of 1170 copies were administered and retrieved. Researcher and assistance went to the respondent at their meeting places. Mean and standard deviation statistics were used in answering the research questions. Remarks on the research questions was made based on the following criteria: Very High Extent 3.50-4.00; High Extent 2.50-3.49; Low Extent 1.50-2.49; Very low Extent 1.49 and below.

Results

The results are presented in tables according to the research questions that guided the study.

Research Question 1: To what extent does political re-orientation of women promote their participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area?

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of the extent political re-orientation of women promote their participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area

N=1170				
S/N	Items	\bar{x}	SD	Remark
1.	Empowerment of women politically enabled women to consulted in planning development activities in the community	3.29	.62	High extent
2.	Empowerment of women politically enabled women to participate actively in political matters in the community	3.27	.63	High extent
3.	Educating community women to know that voting is their civic responsibility increases women participation in voting	3.17	.63	High extent
4.	More women will come out to contest for political positions in their community if they are given proper sensitization	3.06	.92	High extent
5.	Increasing community women awareness on	3.09	.95	High extent

	political matter will make them to participate in community decision making process			
6.	More women will come out to involve in leadership position in their community if they are given the necessary orientation	3.07	.75	High extent
Grand Mean		3.15		

The data on table 1 showed that the items 1-6 had the mean scores that fall within the range of high extent. Thus, were agreed that political re-orientation of women promote their participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area to a high extent.

In summary, with a grand mean of 3.15, it is evident that the respondents agreed that empowerment of women politically enabled women to consulted in planning development activities in the community, empowerment of women politically enabled women to participate actively in political matters in the community, educating community women to know that voting is their civic responsibility increases women participation in voting, more women will come out to contest for political positions in their community if they are given proper sanitization, increasing community women awareness on political matter will make them to participate in community decision making process and more women will come out to involve in leadership position in their community if they are given the necessary orientation.

Research Question 2: To what extent does economic empowerment strategies promote women participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area?

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of the extent economic empowerment strategies promote women participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area

N=117				
0				
S/N	Items	\bar{x}	SD	Remark
7.	Empowering community women with good job will increase their chance of involving in leadership positions	3.12	.75	High extent
8.	more women will contest for leadership positions if they have the financial resource to do so	3.19	.99	High extent
9.	Empowerment of women economically enabled women to set-up small-scale industries in the community	2.94	.93	High extent
10.	More women will come out for leadership positions in their community if they are mobilized economically	2.98	.85	High extent
11.	More women will come out to contest for leadership positions in their community if they are mobilized educationally	2.85	.82	High extent
12.	Empowerment of women economically enabled women to have a voice in the community matter	3.25	.73	High extent
Aggregate Mean		3.05		

The data on table 2 showed that the items 7-12 had the mean scores that fall within the range of high extent. Thus, were agreed that economic empowerment strategies promote women participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area to a high extent.

In summary, with a grand mean of 3.05, it is evident that the respondents agreed that empowering community women with good job will increase their chance of involving in leadership positions, more women will contest for leadership positions if they have the financial resource to do so, empowerment of women economically enabled women to set-up small-scale industries in the community, more women will come out for leadership positions in their community if they are mobilized economically, more women will come out to contest for leadership positions in their community if they are mobilized educationally and empowerment of women economically enabled women to have a voice in the community matter.

Discussion of Findings

The extent political re-orientation of women promote their participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area

The data on table 1 for research question one showed that the items were agreed to be the extent political re-orientation of women promote their participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. This implies that empowerment of women politically enabled women to consulted in planning development activities in the community, empowerment of women politically enabled women to participate actively in political matters in the community, educating community women to know that voting is their civic responsibility increases women participation in voting, more women will come out to contest for political positions in their community if they are given proper sensitization, increasing community women awareness on political matter will make them to participate in community decision making process and more women will come out to involve in politics in their community if they are given the necessary orientation.

This supported the submission of Bolanle, Olawale, and Gbadegesin (2020) whoes results revealed that women are marginalized and feature minimally in government since Nigeria lacks a legislative design that ensures full recognition for women in political parties. Patriarchal attitudes, poor informal network, finance, religion and educational status were found to militate against women's empowerment and participation in politics. The finding is also in line with the findings of Nurain & Abdurashed, (2024) who findings shows that both ministries have women involvement in decision making process, but the implementation of gender mainstreaming approach in decision making process is still minimal. Therefore, this study suggests some solutions to ensure that women participation and the implementation of gender mainstreaming approach exist in the decision making processes. However, the studies emphasize the importance of the empowerment strategies for women's participation in community leadership. Inclusive planning, education and economic empowerment are common themes across studies and the importance of addressing social and economic barriers is highlighted in multiple studies.

The extent economic empowerment promote women participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area

The data on table 2 for research question two findings revealed the extent economic empowerment promote women participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. This implies that empowering community women with good job will increase their chance of involving in political positions, more women will contest for political positions if they have the financial resource to do so, empowerment of women economically enabled women to set-up small-scale industries in the community, more women will come out for political positions in their community if they are mobilized economically, more women will come out to contest for political positions in their community if they are mobilized educationally and empowerment of women economically enabled women to have a voice in the community matter. This finding agrees with the view of Abdulkadir and Johnbosco (2018) whose results showed that over 95% of the respondents who made the majority supported the idea that labour providence capacity by women influences the implementation of community development projects. Over 80% of the respondents who made the majority supported the idea that decision making capacity by women influences the implementation of community development projects. Over 70% of the respondents who made the

majority supported the idea that asset creation capacity by women influences the implementation of community development projects. However, the studies emphasize the importance of the empowerment strategies for women's participation in community leadership. Inclusive planning, education and economic empowerment are common themes across studies and the importance of addressing social and economic barriers is highlighted in multiple studies.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was revealed that political re-orientation, economic empowerment significantly promote their participation in community leadership in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area to a high extent.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Government should assist women to achieve economic viability through acquisition of literacy and other necessary skills.
2. Government and NGOs should embark on sensitization programs that teach the essence of freedom in relation to development; Faith leaders incorporate aspects of equality into their teachings.
3. Policy makers advocate for policies that directly enhance women economic statuses and that the government through the concerned ministries, improves the existing education policies while paying more attention to educating more women since education enhances employment opportunities.
4. An aggressive re-orientation programs that are vital and healthy for the survival of Nigerian democracy which does not necessarily have to come during electioneering campaigns alone should be urgently put in place for the rural women.

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