

BEYOND OUR IMAGINATIONS

African Women's Realities



EDITED BY:

Simi Afonja

Dedication

**BEYOND OUR IMAGINATIONS:
*African Women's Realities***

Simi Afonja



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CHAPTER SIX

The Praxis of Gender and Community Development in Nigeria

Okunola, R.A. and Aluko, Yetunde

Introduction

With colonisation development in countries such as Nigeria was interpreted from the standpoint of the Western intellectual tradition. In this context of colonial experience and history, indigenous strategies for survival prior to contact with European civilisation were seen as inferior and "uncivilised." Thus, development became a comparative word and the specific environmental circumstances of each nation's experience were neglected. For these nations to modernise, they had to make conscious efforts to transpose western structures through modernisation by design (Morse *et al*, 1969). In the centre periphery relationship inherent in these relations, foreign standards became the yardstick for measuring progress. Modernisation was based on a top-down strategy guided by a development paradigm dominated by economists and which Kaplan (1999) summarised as the "delivery of resources."

The top-down approach was replicated at the national level and rural areas have had to struggle to "catch-up" with the urban areas in a race umpired by the western-trained elite who took over and continued the policy of the colonial administration. At the community level (periphery of the periphery), people looked up to the centre of the periphery

not only for developmental prescriptions but also for practical guidance in the implementation of the specific projects undertaken. The administrative structure that emerged was designed for this "delivery of resources" paradigm. Thus, community development that should have meant the application of a community's social heritage, skills and knowledge in the mobilisation of the material and human resources for the improvement of the lives of the people and the transformation of their environment, became externally oriented and directed. Guided by the top-down strategy, Western elite talked to the community members who, to them, badly needed to be "modernised."

This approach found methodological convenience in the existing social institutions as entrance into communities was negotiated through the traditional political elite down to the family level. In this process, the "superior" development experts gave programmes and projects to the "inferior" community members within the context of national development with little reference to the community's specific experiences. Literature has, however, demonstrated that this approach to community development created a development crisis that was replete with corruption and bad leadership. Summarily, it has been shown that the trickle down effect of the approach failed to take place. Leaders, political leaders in particular, became more responsible to their western mentors than they were to their citizens. Aside from the fact that poverty soared, traditional structures were relegated, the emerging culture of silence left the grassroots worse off in terms of development.

Within this emergent framework, the top-down approach was also replicated at the community level whereby community leaders became responsible to the "development experts" but the latter also worked through them. This

somewhat bastardisation of the rural patriarchal social structure (Eke, 1980:11) meant that men represented the interest of the home (as *baale*) and community (*baalê*) in the Yoruba communities or among the Hausa – the *maigida* at home; the *maiangwa* at the community level; and the *nanyi* and *ndiissi* amongst the Igbo. In this social arrangement, the roles and voices of women that had hitherto liberated them were suppressed or caged. It also required a major paradigm shift for this approach to change in favour of the bottom-up approach that also encouraged the phenomenological approach and resort to qualitative methods of research. This shift has been well demonstrated by feminist and postmodernist studies and through cross-cutting issues such as poverty, the environment, health, etc. Though there are different paradigmatic positions, discussions and debates in qualitative research, the common theme running through them, especially in feminist methodology, is that women's diverse situations and the institutions that influence decisions concerning the female gender should be problematised. This problem has been taken up at several levels and has resulted in some methodological initiatives such as that of the Socio-Economic and Gender Analysis (SEAGA) of the FAO (1993) and the discourse on gender mainstreaming in social research, especially those relating to grassroots development.

The literature presents a wide range of definitions of the Participatory Learning Approach to Community Development (Razavi, and Miller, 1995, Stiefel and Wolfe, 1994:5; World Bank, 1994; Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Saxena, 1998; and Akerkar 2001). Cornwall (2000) in resolving the various terminologies, biases, omissions and contradictions, suggests that the Participatory Learning Approach can be held to be an inter-disciplinary set of ontological and

epistemological baseline, methods and practices which underpin full-fledged involvement of conceived and perceived stakeholders. With the aid of manageable resources in enquiry, decision-making process, policy designing, planning, programming, implementation, adjustment, monitoring and evaluation as well as reprocessing of, if the need arises, sustainable oriented development projects could be achieved. Participatory Learning Approach (PLA) is, therefore, an integrated pathway that draws into itself actors and practitioners with available required resources to actively contribute their quota towards sustainable development for the advancement of any social setting.

This chapter is a contribution to the discourse on participatory practices in gender and community development. Empirical data are presented showing the gap between theory and practice negating the expected empowerment of women at the community level.

The Problem

Within the backdrop of the crisis of development arising from the top-bottom strategy and the imperative of making community development people oriented, several initiatives emerged with concepts such as sustainable development and the empowerment buzz words in development theorising. In the emerging praxis, development was interpreted as helping people to gain an understanding of themselves and thus taking control of their own future (Kaplan, 1999:15). In facilitating resourcefulness, which is the driving motive of the new trend, the methodological approach changed from talking to the grassroots from an expert position. The old order, in which data were extracted from the grassroots and processed outside their milieu for development decisions to be implemented by them, had to

be jettisoned. The emerging methodological approach collected and processed data with the grassroots. The final decisions and implementation of development projects are thus in the hands of the people. Recognising social des-aggregations, the new approach gave voices to various stakeholders in the community in particular to women, youths and other identifiable minority groups.

A Test of Gender Participation in Community Projects

The new framework assumed that theories would emerge from specific problematised environment before policy and action in the interest of the minority or the subordinated would be carried out. However, there are doubts that this popular methodology has realised its aim and given voices to the voiceless. The empirical study reported in this chapter investigated the extent to which the participatory learning approach to community development has given voice to women at the grassroots level. The project assessed the process of implementation of the PLA methodology in community development from a gender perspective and explored the methodological constraints that inhibited women voices in community development. Solutions to these constraints are offered.

The study was carried out in four communities selected for the Community Based Poverty Alleviation Programme financed by the World Bank under the Community Driven Development package.¹ The four communities that are under focus are: Amaize (Abia State); Araromi Ekiti (Ekiti State); Danwarai (Kebbi State) and Okuha Obanyi (Kogi State). Entry into the selected communities was facilitated by the Local Government Community Development Officers and the Community Leaders and in each community;

various Participatory Learning Approach (PLA) tools were adopted for data collection. A logical framework was developed that detailed all activities designed for the ten-day stay in each of the communities.

A community meeting preceded all other activities after the entry formalities. Here the community members were informed about the objectives of the study and the dialogue process commenced with all identified stakeholders' meeting reminiscent of a village square setting. Day two to day ten were reserved for intensive interaction (using the PLA tools, especially as refined under the Socio-economic and Gender Analysis (SEAGA) in the community by the five-member facilitating team that included the community development officer, two females chosen from within the community and a desk officer from the state's Community Based Poverty Alleviation Agency). The team expanded as it became necessary in the course of the study. The 11th to 14th day were reserved for mopping up and a final community meeting to resolve the differences and conflicts arising from the entire process. Descriptions and content analysis were adopted in the discussion of our findings.

In all a total of sixteen Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were carried out in the four communities with an average of ten respondents per session. Four major categories of stakeholders participated in the FGDS; adult males, adult females, male and female youths. In the course of each session, a peer wise ranking of needs of the community as perceived by each group was developed. In addition, a total of thirty-two in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted across the study sites. Respondents for the IDI were drawn from leaders of identified stakeholder groups within the community. Two community meetings were mandatory per community. Data from these sources were supplemented

with observations, group interviews, especially with women groups outside the community meetings. Grapevine discussions were also held informally in canteens and drinking joints in the community.

This "democratic" process, prescribed by the community driven development strategy, produced a community based peer wise ranking of needs and identified projects to meet such needs. Based on this outcome, a community proposal was developed for each community for possible funding by the state agency for community based poverty alleviation agency. One of the major components of the proposal is the demand that each community make available (or show concrete evidence in the form of bank account deposit) ten per cent of the total cost of the proposed project as counterpart funding. The Community Development Association (CDA) in each community coordinated the development of the proposal on behalf of each community. The CDA executive is constituted at a community meeting. In addition, the community meeting is expected to elect a project implementation committee as well as a project monitoring and evaluation committee for the chosen project. Here gender considerations were to be given priority.

The Loss of Women's Voice

The findings of post community meetings suggest that this methodological approach believed to be participatory is not in reality what it was expected to be. It created room for the subsuming of one gender at the expense of the other thereby defeating the aim of the emergence of the PLA tools. This conclusion stems from the results obtained from other PLA tools such as the in-depth interviews, informal interviews and grapevine discussions outside the formal procedures. Generally, at the one-to-one level, the prioritised needs of

women differed from the picture that emerged from the peer-wise ranking of the women at the group level. For instance, an interviewee at an informal session in Amaise community said:

We women need market where we can sell and buy. The availability of market will empower us economically and permit us to buy what pleases us.

Another female respondent in Danwarai community observed thus:

Please, we women need micro credit to enable us increase our businesses, and employ more labour to work on our farms.

At another informal session with a woman in Okuha Obanyi community, the respondent reported thus:

While it is true we need a bridge, we women need schools so as to empower females educationally. The non-availability of schools has accounted for our sufferings. Therefore, school is more important for women now.

The gender dimension to needs perception was equally visible in Araromi Ekiti as a female respondent argued:

Given the topography of our community, the issue of drainage and the link bridge is paramount, but we women will equally wish for micro-credit scheme where it is possible... and a bigger market too.

The above quotations suggest that the tools available do not adequately express the needs of women. Thus, an explanation for such variations in the choices of the women can be traced to the culture of patriarchy and male dominance that muted their voices. At the FGDS where women identified their needs as same with men, they merely expressed the

men's view as passed on to them by their *baale*, *maigida*, and *manyi* through the process of socialisation. In spite of the fact that the tools were designed to give voice to the voiceless, the men were in control of the dialogue. The exclusion of women was sometimes through networking. This information networking was co-ordinated by the Community Development Association (CDA) in order to present a united and common need for the community.

The exclusion of women's voices was tied to the financial control of the projects. The study revealed that the men through the CDA raised or sourced for the 10% counterpart funding that was a precondition for the funding of the project under the Community Based Poverty Alleviation project. Thus, they tended to dominate the decision about the projects to be funded. The importance of male power was evident in all communities. But in Danwarai community (Kebbi State) the youths refused to "play ball." They demanded for a secondary school and articulated their position very clearly at the community meeting. This angered the adults, especially the men, and they threatened to withdraw their 10% fund as well as the land needed if the secondary school was approved. Due to the crisis that arose from the position of the youths a series of reconciliation meetings had to be held that eventually saw the road sponsored (as it were) by the elders through. The women in that community did not have enough power to carry their position that far. Rather, they more or less allied with the men (their husbands). They sent delegates to calm down the youths. In one of the peace meetings, the head of the market women said to the youths:

Please, my sons, let the wish of your fathers prevail so that we can have peace.... And also, so that we do not miss this opportunity. Remember that they are your fathers and our

leaders, they know more and they have the resources.... you will also become elders in future.

One obvious explanation of the women's powerlessness is poverty. In this context, the men who were also the "policy makers" usually held sensitive positions in the community. For instance, when a female respondent from Danwarai was asked independently why she towed the line of the men during the community meeting, she answered:

Why won't we say the same thing like our men? Should we say anything different, there will be trouble for us, as our husbands will not give us peace at home. This talk is between you and me... Please do not reveal that I told you this.

A similar position came from Amaizae:

Peace at home is much better and should be rated higher by any sensible wife above community matters... na home person go sleep... any argument in the village square with your husband can be problematic at home.

The situation was the same in Okuha Obanyi as a woman argued:

Well, what was eventually chosen will benefit us women on the long run, although if we have our way as women, we would have preferred another thing.

The opinion of a woman in Araromi Ekiti sums it all up even though the peer wise ranking by women agreed with that of men:

There is no doubt that our husbands respect our viewpoints and are always interested in our well-being... but we also have to defer to them in some circumstances, especially for peace to reign at least in the house.

An inference from the above is that women are conforming and concurring to the male idea of development. Thus, a bandwagon effect is created.

However, the case was different in Araromi community where the women agreed on the same need with their male counterparts. Even at the individual discussions and interviews, their position was still the same with those of the men. One likely reason for this consistency may be the enlightenment programmes that have been implemented in the community over the years that created awareness among women. The awareness might have been "wrongly" created through the educational, political and media experiences to which they had been exposed. At school the teacher — a representative of western education — wrongly informed the students about community needs. She suggested that politicians define peoples' need for them and the media informs people what the media thinks. The people's voice was absent in her conception of communities' needs.

These case studies suggest that rural women are disadvantaged in the participatory learning and action process compared to men. PLAS do not take the power structures in the communities into consideration and end up excluding women from development.

Conclusion

In this study, we have been able to show that while the methodological tools of the participatory approach to community development has been able to transcend some of the problems inherent in the top-down approaches, the absence of women's needs in community development plans of action shows there are still gaps in actualising the perspectives and needs of disadvantaged groups such as women. It is clear that while the hitherto political "minority"

is able to make its voices heard, the emerging PLA tools and the procedures require consensus on the community's position on its development needs. In this context, the patrilineal social structure has been found to be resilient to change. The role of the Community Development Associations in the information networking has also been shown to be very decisive. In this respect, the submission of a woman trader in Danwarai is meaningful. She said:

... You know that if the wall does not open up, the lizard will not have access into the building.

Here, "unity" is being used as an "opium" to subdue the options of women. Besides, the need to give the picture of unity within the community is also the need for peace in the domestic domain. Contradicting the family head, in most cases men, is seen as abominable. This traditional value thus renders less potent the promises of the participatory approach and the inherent methodologies. There is, therefore, the need for the introduction of affirmative policies to development such that women are allowed to take full decisions as regards their own well being independent of the men even in the same community. The women, like most marginalised groups, also deserve self-determination. They should not be bugged down by measures of central tendency in a politically unequal social setting. The community meeting, for example, is often the final arbiter in community needs assessment under the participatory approach. Under the bottom-up approach to community development, a more fundamental adjustment is required.

At the mobilisation and needs assessment levels (even at all other levels), local mores on women's public role as well as the social constraints which limit women's participation in the public domain in the community must all be

understood and incorporated into any strategy designed to invite and encourage active participation of women. The local myths about women's lack of importance to village economies need to be stamped out. Information on women and the roles they play in society and economy must be improved. In the communities, women's productive and reproductive roles are privatised and their contributions to household productivity are seen as "mere" housework. This male bias in local knowledge must be eliminated.

Furthermore, if women are to be "really" mobilised to participate in community development activities, such must be those that women see as high priority, not the ones valued by community men in a community meeting directed by patriarchal values. At this stage, compromise may have to be sought between what women value most and what men will initially permit (or value). The type of compromise envisaged is not feasible within the context of community meeting as is currently being practised by development experts on the field. Thus, the sub-summation of women into "community" is masking the distinctiveness of women experiences and subsequently eroding their inclusiveness. The power imbalances and intra-household relations further constrain the abilities of women to participate hence their failure to carry through their voices.

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