

Women's Studies

Women Empowerment: Its Relation to National Development and Human Rights

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Adanna Chinedu Madu is the author of *Women Empowerment: Its Relation to National Development and Human Rights*. Madu was born in 1965 in Kafachan, Plateau State, Nigeria. She is a legal practitioner, human rights activist, public speaker and consultant. She holds a Bachelor of Law degree from the University of Benin in Nigeria. She later went to the Utrecht University in The Netherlands where she got her Master's of Law in International and European Protection of Human Rights degree. She is Director of Rights Initiative for Justice, an NGO which exists to empower women for sustainable development, and is involved in advocacy campaigns on human rights issues and good governance. She has made several presentations and written many papers. Some of her works focus on rape and sexual violence, persons with disabilities, the emancipation of Nigerian women in the political terrain, etc. She is also the author of the book titled *She is A Woman: A Story of Her Unfair Treatment and What We Can Do about It* (Madu, 2020).

Book Review

The book discusses the plight and travails of women, especially rural women, in Nigeria. It reveals that in traditional Nigerian society, women are socialized to believe that they are unequal to men and are expected to be obedient daughters and good wives whose responsibilities are to do house chores, give birth, and cater for the needs of their in-laws, husbands and children. Women are entitled to developmental opportunities that they require to fulfill their aspirations in society. The book highlights various ways through which women can be empowered to be properly situated in society (Madu, 2010). Apart from the introduction, the book is comprised of eight chapters.

Chapter 1 focuses on rural women and describes them as illiterate, poor, timid, and lacking in basic facilities that aid good living and notes that the social and economic deprivations to which rural women are exposed account for the prevalence of the violence against them. The failure of the government at all levels contributes to the social and economic deprivations of rural women in Nigeria; hence, the abject poverty, child labor, rampant death occasioned by their victimizations through several evil practices that pervade the rural areas. Some of the causes of domestic violence in rural areas include low level of education, lack of productive resources, poverty, high fertility rates evident in the large number of children per family, lack of exposure, and inequality in social status (Madu, 2010).

Marginalization of rural women, and girls especially, in terms of their poor access to

education is a key driver of human trafficking; a situation whereby they are deployed to cities to serve as domestic workers. This is to raise income for the households and expose young girls and women to sexual exploitation and infectious diseases. The practice of trafficking women and girls for dehumanizing purposes is socially unacceptable and should be jettisoned (Madu, 2010).

Chapter 2 describes the customs and traditions that constrain the development and welfare of women in Nigeria. Some of these practices are highlighted as follows: (a) *Female genital mutilation (FGM) or female circumcision* is practiced in almost all societies in Southern Nigeria. The practice involves the public parading of females in their nakedness and a crude surgery of the girls' sexual organs with the use of crude unsterilized tools, in an inhumane and barbaric manner. The practice exposes the girls to torture and excruciating pain, prolonged bleeding and, when not properly managed, infections that sometimes result in death. (b) *Stoning of women to death* as punishment for adultery is a practice that is common under the Shari'ah law in the northern part of the country. Although the global outcry against this religious practice is resulting in its gradual decline, it is still practiced among some Muslims in Nigeria. The practice is a harsh punishment that denies the children of victims the opportunity of maternal care. The practice also affects others who experience the stoning of women, as it creates unbearable psychological and physical shock in the victim's relatives and concerned passers-by. The act is the height of subjugation and oppression of womanhood, especially as men do not receive the same punishment when they commit the same crime. (c) *Early marriage* is a socially unacceptable practice that is hindering the development of women. It is commonly practiced in the northern part of Nigeria. The practice terminates the ambition of young girls who are forced into early marriage before they achieve their aspirations (Madu, 2010).

In continuation, (d) *Torture of widows* is the other extreme of early marriage, a harmful practice that exposes women in Southeastern Nigeria. The deliberate act of asking the widow of a deceased man to drink the water used to bathe her late husband to prove her innocence or guilt over the death of her husband is a fundamental violation of the woman's right to life, dignity, liberty, fair hearing and violation of the freedom from discrimination. (e) *Blaming women for the misdeeds of their husbands, in particular*, when their husbands are infected with diseases such as human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS). The cultural belief in some parts of the country is that the man's infection is due to the promiscuity of his wife. (f) *Exposure to violence*, especially during cultural festivities where violence erupts, women and girls are usually at the receiving end of such violence. Such exposures threaten their daily socioeconomic activities, as the fear of being attacked limits their engagement in socioeconomic opportunities. (g) *Cultural discrimination* in the restrictions of women and girls from having physical contact with masquerades in some communities in Southwestern Nigeria also leave them in perpetual bondage, due to fear of being punished for violating customary taboos (Madu, 2010).

Chapter 3 examines the factors that contribute to violence against women. They include the following. (a) *Illiteracy/lack of formal education* exposes women to harmful cultural practices and the inhumane treatment meted against them, whereas educated women are empowered to resist such treatments due to their appreciation of womanhood. One way to enlighten rural women is to revive the cinema shows that were previously used for mass education in communities. (b) *Poverty* is a precursor of violence against women in Nigeria, with about 70 percent of women living below the national poverty line. Poverty drives some women to prostitution and demeaning menial jobs. The establishment of skills acquisition programs, provision of small loans to small-scale businesses, and making jobs available for women can

address their poverty situation. (c) *Lack of modern infrastructure* such as electricity, radio, television, etc. makes women gullible to the oppressive and retrogressive tendencies of a primitive society. The provision of these social amenities will help to liberate rural women from the shackles of ignorance, illiteracy, and disease. (d) *Superstitious beliefs* that engender most of the harmful practices of violence against women are based on unverified facts that are devoid of empirical evidence and without any scientific methods (Madu, 2010).

Chapter 4 deals with how violence against women is encouraged by cultural beliefs. Women are constantly exposed to assaults, rape, ritual killing, mistreatment, killing for being accused of witchcraft, and sexual harassment. Even though both the penal and criminal codes that operate in Nigeria contain sections that identify assault as a criminal offense, many women continue to be victims of assault due to their refusal to accede to demands for sex or friendship. Rape is a dehumanizing form of violence against womanhood, as acts of rape deprive women of their pride, which disappears in the full glare of the rapists (Madu, 2010).

Women are also exposed to the wicked edges of sharp cutlasses and brutal murder, a practice that results in the untimely deaths of a countless number of women whose body parts are sourced for ritualistic purposes. They are also mainly associated with witchcraft; and when accused, they are usually stoned, stripped naked, flogged, or beaten to death. Due to fear of these harsh punishments, some women allude to witchcraft against their will as a way of avoiding the intimidation to which they are subjected. Whether in the workplace, schools, or in their homes, women continue to endure sexual harassment because of the fear of being dismissed, demoted, or even denied development opportunities (Madu, 2010).

Chapter 5 describes how the state and federal governments contribute to the violation of women's rights in Nigeria. Cases of the military invasion of Odi community in Bayelsa State and Zaki-biam in Benue State, where the military committed the worst human violation in the history of Nigeria; and the killing of men, women and children on the orders of the federal government are referenced in the chapter. The affluent in society have also contributed to the violation of women's rights in Nigeria. Rich men exploit the dignity of young girls for a pittance; and in the process of satisfying the lustful desires of these affluent men in the society, body parts such as the breasts and genitals of many women have been cut off for ritual purposes (Madu, 2010).

The laws and policies that are geared toward protecting the rights of women in Nigeria are weak. The National Human Rights Commission lacks the independence to prosecute human rights violations because the leadership of the Commission is appointed by the President based on the recommendation of the Attorney General of the Federation. This implies that the Commission may not be patriotic in its mandate where government officials are involved in violations of women's rights. To ensure fairness in the dispensing of the Commission's duties without bias, its membership should be drawn from civil societies and the Nigerian Bar Association, and the funding of the Commission should not be by the government but, rather, from the consolidated revenue of the federation. Also, the Commission should be able to independently adjudicate complaints on behalf of victims (Madu, 2010).

Chapter 6 considers the role women play in Nigeria's democracy. Compared to the 1960s 1970s, women in Nigeria today have become more politically active as they are known to form movements that challenge decisions of electoral umpires that do not reflect the wishes of the people at the polls. Women's associations exist to fight injustices in society. The increasing number of women in the legislative houses (House of Representatives and the Senate) that were once terrains dominated by men speaks to the improvement of women's participation in governance positions in Nigeria. Nonetheless, the inequality gap still exists in terms of their

participation in comparison to men. The changes in the economic lives of women since 1999 could be attributed to the political participation of some women who agitate for the development of ordinary women (Madu, 2010).

Chapter 7 suggests ways of achieving women's empowerment. This should begin from the home by changing cultural notions that define domestic chores as the sole domain for women as these roles have to be shared between girls and boys. Women's empowerment can stem from the home through the systematic emasculation of customary practices and beliefs that have hindered their development from time immemorial. Women in the agricultural sector can be empowered by the introduction of mechanized farming to enhance their capacities, as this will help to upgrade their subsistence agricultural practices to commercial farming and, in the process, contribute to the economic growth of their families and the country (Madu, 2010).

Religious institutions can contribute to the empowerment of women through the re-modification of doctrines and beliefs that are inimical to the development of women. Women's engagement in skills acquisition, small-scale businesses for women empowerment, literacy campaigns, and adult education should be explored by religious institutions for women's empowerment. Gender stereotypes can be removed by giving both boys and girls leadership roles in schools, while schools should avoid socializing students into believing that some professions are meant for a particular gender (Madu, 2010).

Chapter 8 enunciates various local and global efforts that have been made toward eradicating violations of women's rights. International and local organizations have been in the frontline of emancipating women from societal and government oppressive policies, discriminatory practices, and cultural inhibitions. When the government emulates the efforts of various NGOs, gender-related problems will be addressed in Nigeria. Although Nigeria is a signatory to many treaties that are geared toward protecting women's rights, the country, however, has failed to domesticate most of these treaties into laws and the constitution, both at the national and state levels (Madu, 2010). Unless these laws are incorporated into the country's constitution, a ratified treaty cannot have the full backing of the law within Nigeria.

The strength of the book lies in its elaborate review of the importance of women's empowerment for national development and how the protection of their rights, either in the socioeconomic or cultural spaces, is key to their self-development. A weakness that is observed in the book is the allusion that men are the promoters of female prostitution, a situation that, in fact, rests more on the structural and cultural decadence of the value systems in the society. A survey by Ajagun (2005) found that greed, broken homes, and distorted value systems are the major sustaining factors of prostitution in Nigeria.

Book's Greatness

I consider the book great because of the attention it gives to empowering women in Nigeria, a need that persists today, given the myriad of social deprivations rural women suffer, which constrain their contribution to national development. Although the presence of the book on the Internet seems limited, it, nevertheless, deserves to be ascribed great due to its content. A search on the Internet on October 20, 2021, reveals only about 60 results on Google.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The books reviewed here provides evidence on common experiences of women, including

exposures to various discriminations, inequalities, and social deprivations, either directly or indirectly, and highlight the need for situating women's aspirations within developmental contexts in a way that reflects their realities, and not the societal construction of either the person of the woman or her experiences. Based on the commonalities of the issues surrounding women that are highlighted in the review, I therefore make three recommendations.

First, women in Africa and, indeed, globally, should be understood within the contexts of their experiences and this should be the yardstick in the design of policies that affect women. Second, marginalizations that limit the aspirations of women, either social deprivations for the rural poor women or denial of opportunities for self-expression for the educated woman, should be addressed at all levels given their contributions to development. And, third, the rights of women should also be protected at all levels in order to address the growing violence to which women are exposed.

References

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