

GLOBALISATION AND THE DEEPENING OF GENDER IMBALANCE IN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the concept of globalisation in the mid-20th century marked yet another phase in the history of the international system. Indeed, the international system is characterized by an asymmetrically imbalanced socio-economic and political relations thus manifesting in the dichotomization of the world into two diametrically opposed levels of development. The reference to North-South relations in the history of international economic and political relations in fact, found credence exclusively in the manifestations of unequal relationships amongst countries. Such concepts as 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' derived their existence in the explanation of the levels of social formations in regions of the world.

Developed countries, otherwise referred to in the literature as countries of the North are so defined by the reality of their socio-political and economic advancement all-manifesting in their sustained creation of wealth. However, the history of the wealth of the North will be hollow and meaningless without that portion which highlights the exploitation of the South by the North through various processes – colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, and neo-imperialism. Enough attention has been paid in the literature to the mechanisms of each of these stages. But as varied as the explanations of these phases are, there is the general impression that each of the phases represents a systematic denigration of the South by the North in order to sustain the state of development in the North. The ease with which each of these phases systematically flow into one another is suggestive of a deliberate design by the North with the intention of exploiting the South perpetually.

Globalisation in this regards, is the successor of neo-imperialism for, rather than seeking mere external manipulations of the domestic economies of the South by the North, globalization sought the integration of world economies, the removal of geographical impediments to trade and indeed the abolition of indigenous restrictions to international trade and finance, a mechanism that aids the perpetuity of inflow and outflow of international capital. This was buttressed by Douglas Kellner (1998:24) when he argued that globalisation can be used as a replacement term for imperialism displacing a focus on the domination of development countries by the over developed ones, or of national or local economies by transnational corporations. With the emergence of globalisation, the age-long dependence of the South on the North has been reinvigorated. Indeed, globalisation emerged within the unequal relationships that exist between the developed and underdeveloped countries, a phenomenon that positions the developed countries more appropriately in the economic exploitation of the underdeveloped countries. This asymmetrically imbalanced system dubbed globalisation portends serious consequences for the underdeveloped world, Nigeria inclusive.

Our concern here is how the phenomenon of globalisation affects women in Nigeria. It is an attempt at taking a gender perception of this concept as it affects Nigerian women. In doing this, we shall adopt the political economy approach which enables us to probe into the depth of the issue, the interconnection of its phenomena and policies. The essence of the political economy approach is to penetrate deep into processes and policies, lay bare their essence and then explain concrete forms of their manifestations in everyday life (Ryndina, 1985).

WHAT IS GLOBALISATION?

Globalisation is a multidimensional concept that has generated a great deal of interest amongst scholars, politicians, investors, and technocrats. The literature is replete with informed analysis of the concept except that a common agreement is yet to be reached on its concise and definite meaning. Central to each of the definitions is the tendency to mirror the biases of the analyst hence the technocrats view globalisation from the point of view of its impact on administration while businessmen adjudged it from the perspective of its impact on movement of capital, interest rate and investment.

Politicians talk about globalisation in relation to democracy and democratization just as issues of human rights and development found eloquent expressions in the writing of informed academics. Lately, there emerged the gender perspective to the concept of globalisation. In short the concept of globalisation is multidimensional and multidisciplinary as it encapsulates all facets of the society. As Douglas Kellner (1998:27) put it, globalisation is necessarily interdisciplinary and describes the ways in which global economic, political and social forces are rapidly penetrating the earth in the creation of a new world market, new transnational, political arrangement and a new global culture.

Globalisation goes beyond global interconnectedness; it equally finds expression in the virtual extinction of the barriers to information technology as well as the increasing erosion of the constraints of socio-cultural and economic arrangements. This is perhaps why Malcolm Waters (1995:3) defines globalisation as a social process in which constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding. Globalisation thus highlights another phase in North/South relations as well as a process “which is strengthening the dominance of a world capitalist economic system, supplanting the primacy of the nation state by transnational corporations and organizations, and eroding local culture and traditions through a global culture” (Douglas Kellner 1998:23). It has thus become a multifaceted process manifesting in all fields of human endeavour. However, globalisation’s general manifestations in all fields of human endeavours have not escaped severe criticisms. As noted by Douglas Kellner (1998:25), the critics include Marxists, liberals, and multi-culturalists who stressed the threat to national sovereignty, local traditions, and participatory democracy through global forces, environmentalists who fear the destructive ecological effects of unchecked globalisation and conservatives who see globalisation as a threat to national and local culture and the sanctity of tradition.

GLOBALISATION AND WOMEN-WHAT NEXUS?

It has been argued that globalisation entails universalisation whereby the object, practices or even values transcend geo-political boundaries; penetrating the hitherto sovereign nation state and impacting on the orientation and value system of the people Aina (1996). This view is suggestive of two major facts. First is the diminished influence of the sovereignty of nation states, second is the democratization of information, culture and value system. The diminished influence of sovereignty of nation-states is disproportional. Its ascendancy is from the platform of unequal relationships (socio-economic and political) amongst countries.

In short the degree of reduction in sovereignty of nation states only follows the logical pattern of the power relations that ordinarily put the underdeveloped countries at a disadvantage. The result of this on the underdeveloped countries is that indigenous responses to issues of critical social, political, and economic relevance merely reflect the desires of the developed world. Put differently, indigenous policies are reflective of external dictates. Hence, such concepts as deregulation, privatization, commercialization, etc, with consequences for the society are derivatives of this trend. Again, the democratization of information, culture, and value system places the underdeveloped countries at a disadvantage for the same argument of the disparity in the levels of development. This manifests in cultural pollution and blurred value systems for the underdeveloped world all with implications on gender. Douglas Kellner (1998:25) contends that critics are agreed that globalisation is bringing about the devastating destruction of local traditions, the continued subordination of poorer nations and regions by richer ones, environmental destruction, and a homogenization of culture and everyday life.

The implication of this is that globalisation portends serious consequences to every facet of a nation’s life in spite of its avowed benefits. As the underdeveloped economies respond to the attractive prospects advertised by globalisation, there is growing realization of the inequalities among and within nations. It has thus become conspicuous that the dynamics of globalisation has great impacts on all facets of life of which gender is a part.

IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION ON WOMEN

Globalisation is viewed from gender perspective in relation to such issues as employment, access to basic education, access to qualitative and affordable health services, economic empowerment and political participation. Questions as to how globalisation impact on these issues are germane to the understanding and appreciation of the problems bedeviling women especially in Third World countries. Indeed, the central thesis in globalisation is the removal of geographic impediments to trade. Emphasis is placed on indiscriminate trade liberalization, and the liberalization of a nation’s financial sector. Protectionism as a tool for galvanizing indigenous development is discouraged.

This logically exposes fledgling domestic industries to competition of the more sophisticated and technologically driven industries of the developed countries. The effect is the complete stifling of local enterprises thus facilitating unimpeded access of the industrialized countries to local markets of the Third World. This invariably leads to the devastation of local industries; particularly small and medium size enterprises that provide the bulk of national employment.

In Nigeria, government attempts at deregulation of the economy precipitated its privatization of the key corporations, hitherto owned and controlled by government with the task of producing goods and services for the masses at subsidized rates. This has resulted in massive cut in employment levels while new job opportunities became scarce. In Nigeria, men constitute the bulk of the industrial work force. The sustenance of the family is largely from the income from this sector while women supplement with earnings from petty trading and sales of farm products. The collapse of the industrial sector as a result of its inability to withstand international competition has snowballed into massive retrenchment of industrial workers. This, no doubt, places an extra burden on women as the responsibility of financing the home shifted from the man to the woman. The sustained increase in the responsibilities of women in Nigeria occasioned by globalisation is not matched with corresponding increase in their income.

Related to the foregoing is the increased impoverishment caused by globalisation, which has more effects on women. It is estimated that 70 percent of Nigerians currently live below the poverty line of approximately 26 dollars per month per person while 70 percent of these are female (Human Development Report 2004:4). The reality is that majority of Nigerian women are founding small-scale enterprises including petty trading and food production. They engage in crafts making, weaving of cloths, animal husbandry and planting, transformation and commercialization of agricultural produce. The incidence of globalisation as reflected in the campaign for financial and trade liberalization unduly exposed this informal sector to competition as most of the goods produced in this sector are imported into Nigeria without any meaningful restrictions. Items such as cloth, craftworks, turkey, chicken and other agricultural produce are imported with impunity. This has resulted in the virtual extinction of the activities in the informal sector with corresponding reduction in the means of livelihood of women in this women in this sector of the economy.

In the formal sector of the Nigerian economy, women's access to employment is more difficult due to some ill-conceived societal biases. In an African Development Report (2000:10), the assertion was made that being a woman in itself is a supplementary obstacle to finding objective jobs. The imperative of globalisation in the informal sector gives more priority to a technologically driven economy with drastic reduction in manpower. As technologies are integrated and products are differentiated, more and more job cuts occur with adverse effect on women. The few number of women in this sector are increasingly losing their senses of job security. The African Development Report (1999) graphically illustrated the adverse decline in Nigerian women labours force which stood at 29.7 percent in 1980, reduced to 28.0 in 1990 and 14.3 in 1994.

The incidence of poverty as reinforced by the consequences of globalisation has serious impact on Nigeria women's access to qualitative and affordable health services and facilities. Unfortunately the drastic reduction in their income arising from virtual extinction of the informal sector and job losses in the formal sector prevent them access to privately provided qualitative health service, which are fee based and in fact expensive. There is therefore the reliance on the available government owned health services, which in most cases are poorly managed and in fact insufficient, a phenomenon which often lead to the overstretching of available facilities. As at 1999, the healthy life expectancy of the Nigerian woman is put at 38.4 while only 51 percent of the entire population had access to health services.

Another important trend in the issue of globalisation is the growing presence and power of transnational companies. In Nigeria, the operations of transnational companies especially in the oil sector have severely diminished the economic sovereignty of Nigeria to such an extent that the transnational companies shaped government responses to the economic and social needs of its citizens. Again, by their operation, the transnational companies often do incalculable damage not only to the domestic economy but the ecology as well. In Nigeria, majority of the women depend solely on the ecosystem for survival as they engaged in such activities as farming and fishing. Unfortunately, the activities of transnational companies especially such oil companies as Shell and Chevron have continued to degrade the ecosystem thus inhibiting women's access to land and waters. This has stripped the vast number of Nigerian women of their means of livelihood.

This is more common in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. The realization of the negative impact of transnational companies on the eco system has often led the Niger Delta women made up of the Ijaw, Itshekiri and Urhobo to protest the total degradation done to their land by the major oil companies. In short, the reduction in free public service provided by government, the high cost of private ones and the damage done to the environment and the communities by the deregulation of such activities as oil exploration have placed extra burdens on women in their roles as home-keepers and care givers to their children (www.eld.ids.ac.uk)

Globalisation also presupposes political liberalization or democratization of regimes. It espouses equal political participation of citizens. Indeed, Nigeria has since embraced the democratization agenda, but without the much expected contribution from women. The fact remains that the economic disempowerment of women consequent upon globalisation has negative impact on political participation by Nigerian women. Consequently fewer women are available to run for elective political offices as a result of their economic disempowerment brought about by trade liberalization and economic deregulation. The vast majority of Nigerian women now refrain from political participation because their economic incapacitation makes it impossible for them to get involved in the expensive enterprise of political campaign, mobilization, and electoral contests.

WOMEN AND GLOBALISATION: STRATEGIES FOR REDRESSING THE INHERENT PROBLEMS.

Globalisation, on doubt, has its own good intention. However, the major exponents of the concept, that is, the industrialized nations, have purposely and strategically channeled whatever may accrue from the global relationship to their own benefit. Thus, the case is that of sieving the wheat from the shaft. The poor countries get poorer with the shaft while the industrialized nations get richer with the wheat. Although, this has been the oppressing and enduring phenomenon, yet the avalanche of problems and the attendant impacts on Nigerian women suggest the need to explore strategies that could redress the problems so as to place Nigerian women in their rightful socio-political and economic positions. There is no doubt that any positive change in this direction will have corresponding effect on men, children and the country as a whole.

Poverty remains the most potent factor militating against Nigerian women. This has resulted in serious limitations in their socio-political and economic relevance. It has made Nigerian women the beneficiary of the ills of globalisation. A concerted effort at formulating and implementing reasonable and objective poverty alleviation measures is therefore a must. This is needed to galvanise Nigerian women from their economic and political enslavement. The poverty alleviation measures of President Olusegun Obasanjo and successive administrations fall short of a true, reasonable, and impactful exercise. Their formulations are denied the benefit of a useful research into the determination of the levels and severity of the problem of poverty as it affects women in Nigeria. It is necessary that the extent of the problem be determined, alternative courses of action examined and the most suitable options chosen.

Deriving from the foregoing is an urgent need for a more nationalistic approach to the issue of deregulation. It is expedient that the nation takes an inventory of those products that could be produced locally, especially in the informal sector and ensure that import ban or restrictions are placed on them. To encourage the women in sustaining their effort in this sector, government should encourage the activities of cooperative societies and make soft loans available to women through these societies. And to stem the degradation of the ecosystem, government should standardize the activities of all oil companies operating in Nigeria in line with internationally acceptable standard. It is equally necessary to expand the political landscape and make it more flexible. As it is, presently, it is skewed in favour of men and puts women at a disadvantage. This has resulted in very few women holding political offices thus limiting the participation of women in serious national issues and policies. The encouragement and increase in women's access to political participation will certainly enable them to contribute meaningfully to national development. It is therefore expedient that an agenda for women empowerment be drawn and incorporated into the national development plan.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is axiomatic that women in Nigeria suffer more in the globalisation process. Their socio-economic circumstances are miserable and very little hope awaits them except a drastic and conscious national response is elicited.

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