Women Development Associations and Women Empowerment in Ukum Local Government Area of Benue State

Becky Ade Aliegbba & Shiaondo Mtsa

Abstract

This study examined the impact of Women Development Associations on women empowerment in Ukum Local Government Area of Benue State. The study adopted liberal feminist theory as theoretical framework. The survey research design was employed where 360 respondents were sampled from a population of 3460 women in 25 Women Development Associations. The study employed two instruments for data collection; a self-designed structured questionnaire and interview guide. Data collected was analyzed using simple percentages and frequencies presented in tables. The findings revealed that women development associations’ activities are geared towards empowering their members in the area of fund-raising, effective management of finances for members, capital formation and voter education and access to decision making positions especially their enablement to speak with one voice to ensure decision in their favour. It was found that the major challenge which affects Women Development Associations in effective empowerment of women is financial incapacitation. This paper therefore, recommends that, the government and Non-Governmental Organizations should provide grants to Women Development Association to enable them overcome their financial challenges and empower their members effectively. Workshops should be organized to sensitize the leadership and members of the Associations on leadership techniques, skills and styles in order to enhance their effectiveness in the management of their affairs.

Keywords: Women, Development, Empowerment, Association & Local Government

Introduction

Women through different structures such as associations influence and contribute to their empowerment process. This is very significant to the extent of drawing the attention of most people to a point of consideration and need to create equal opportunities between women and their male counterpart. The Nigerian women have a recognized place in society which makes it possible for many of them to rise to positions of political, economic and social eminence.

The Nigerian woman has proved to be more than a mere bench-warming spectator even in the midst of the male-dominated congregation (Gusim, 2012). Women have proved their strength and competence in all spheres even in male dominated professions and the rise of women to lead several professional male-dominated environments gives hope, as their achievement is a pointer to the capability of the Nigerian woman. Three of such male dominated professions noted include the Nigerian Medical Association, the Nigerian Bar Association and the Institute of Chartered
Accountants of Nigeria. Hence, the steady advancement of women in contributing to the nation’s socio-economic development and their progressive prominence in the national scheme of affairs have to a large extent, impacted on women empowerment through the subsequent creation of the National Commission for Women and a ministerial portfolio for Women Affairs. This provides additional avenues for the promotion of women-related issues and the enhancement of the role of women in national development by way of a statutory body and a Ministry (Gusim, 2012).

Despite these strides, women’s access to positions of influence and power is still restricted and their occupational choices remain narrow. It is clear that in Nigeria, the structure of power is entirely male dominated, placing women at lower levels of decision-making (Tahmasebifar, 2005). Thus, the issue of low participation of women in decision-making has become one of the focuses of several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and community based Organization (CBOs) with many exclusively formed by women while others target women empowerment.

Women development associations therefore, proves to be inevitable in empowering women and have been recognized as a very important tool for the empowerment of Nigerian women. Arum (2010) found that women Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s) have ventured into areas that were previously ignored by government. Such areas include the fight against male domination in politics, decision making process, and financial control, among others. Women Associations can be found in different levels or areas across the world. It can be found in the villages, towns or at the state and national levels. Ukum Local Government Area of Benue State is not an exception. A preliminary investigation by the researchers in Ukum Local government revealed that, there are 25 women associations in the Local Government with the primary mandate of empowering women through different activities to augment the efforts of government. This paper therefore, seeks to examine women development association as an inevitable tool for women empowerment, in Ukum Local Government Area, Benue State.

Women Development Associations

Women development associations could be referred to as a conglomeration of women who come together under certain rules and objectives. When the conglomeration is strictly female, then it can be safely adjudged a women association. If the aims and objectives of such a women association reflect the tenets of fostering the advancement of women folk or their society at the behest of women, it is then a women development association.

Concept of Women Empowerment

Generally, empowerment according to Batliwala (1993) goes beyond mere change of mind-set but a visible manifestation of that change in the life of an individual. Women empowerment has attracted the attention of many scholars. Okpoko (2002) argued that women empowerment came into popularity with the feminist movement whose demand was that women become empowered to take control of their own lives; to set their own agenda of what to do and how to do things that affect them. Stromquist (1995) sees women empowerment as a socio-political concept that involves cognitive, psychological, economic and political dimensions. The cognitive component involves women’s understanding of the causes of their subordination and marginalization and appreciating the need to make choices that may go against cultural or social expectations. The psychological component refers to women’s belief and confidence that they can
improve their condition through personal and collective effort. The economic component refers to access to income outside home through work that provides income independence. The political component involves the ability to understand one’s situation and mobilize for change.

Onah (2011) cites two other sources as follows: Women empowerment is the development of the mental and physical capacity, power or skills in women, for them to operate meaningfully in their social milieu, thereby experiencing a more favourable level of social recognition and subsequently enhance their economic status. Women empowerment is the process through which women, who are currently most discriminated against, achieve gender equity (Mayoux, 2005). What one immediately notices from these definitions is that women empowerment has not been referred to as the extension of public appointments to undoubtedly highly qualified women. The above definitions implies that women empowerment is seen from economic, social, legal and political perspectives; “Economic Empowerment”, which implies a better quality of material life through sustainable livelihoods owned and managed by women, “social empowerment” means a more equitable social status for women in society, “Legal Empowerment” suggests the provision of an effective legal structure, which is supportive of women’s empowerment and “Political Empowerment” entails a political system favouring the participation in, and control by women of the political decision-making process.

Karl (1995), stated that there are four stages of the empowerment process with regard to women and these include awareness; capacity building and skill development; participation and greater control in decision-making; and action for change. Garba (1999), added two more stages which include capacity and skill assessment, and evaluation stage, in order to facilitate a more systematic analysis of the empowerment process that is more applicable to the empowerment of Nigerian women.

**Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopted Liberal feminist theory. Liberal feminist theory is among feminist theories propounded by Wollstonecraft (1985). Liberal feminism is an individualistic form of feminist theory, which focuses on women's ability to maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. Its emphasis is on making the legal and political rights of women equal to men. Liberal feminists argue that society holds the false belief that women are, by nature, less intellectually and physically capable than men; thus it tends to discriminate against women in the academy, the forum, and the marketplace. Liberal feminists believe that "female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world". They strive for sexual equality via political and legal reform.

The Liberal feminist theory is relevant to this study because, liberal feminism from Wollstonecraft perspective centers on vindicating women in the society as having the same potentials as men. Thus women development associations are seen as instruments to harness the potentials of women. This implies that by empowering women their hidden abilities will be tapped resulting to change in the lives of women and the society at large. This means, women need only to be vindicated in order to utilize their full potentials.

**Methodology**

This research work utilizes the survey method. The study was conducted in Ukum local government area of Benue state with a population of 183,022 (Census, 2006). The
population of this study consists of 3460 women in twenty-five (25) women development associations in Ukum local government area of Benue State (Ukum Local Government Council Divisional Social Welfare Department, 2017). The sample size for the study is 360 respondents. This sample size is determined using Taro Yamane’s formula based on a population of 3460 of the twenty-five women development associations in Ukuma Local Government (See Appendix).

This research employed both primary and secondary methods of data collection. The instruments of questionnaire and interview were used to generate primary data. Data collected through the questionnaire from the field was evaluated using simple percentages and frequencies presented in tables while simple descriptive analysis of questions raised through interview was done to complement the findings from the questionnaire.

**Results**

Based on the analyzed data the result is summary in the table below which dwells on the basic themes of the study.

**Table 1: Result Summary on Women Development Associations and Women Empowerment in Ukum Local Government Area, Benue State**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives of WDA</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fund-raising and the effective management of finances</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By providing a medium for the expression and exchange of views</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protection and fulfillment of equal rights for women</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Impact of WDA on Economic Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact of WDA on Economic Development</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Removing market restrictions</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital formation</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>68.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suitable environment for investment</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removal of mindset involving gender roles attached to business</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Impact of WDA on Political Empowerment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact of WDA on Political Empowerment</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voter education</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting at elections</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support members seeking elective posts</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All of the above</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The role of WDA on Political Decision Making**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The role of WDA on Political Decision Making</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The members speak with one voice</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>62.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The members hold different opinions</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The association has no voice</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Challenges of WDA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges of WDA</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership crisis</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial crisis</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership crisis</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All of the above</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>351</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Field Survey (2018)
Data Analysis

The first section of the table is on objectives of women development associations in Ukum Local Government Area: The presented result implies that women development associations in Ukum Local Government Area have varying specific objectives however, the prominent one is fund-raising and the effective management of finances for members.

This finding is consistent with that of Beatrice Atondo, who averred that:

our association is organized mainly to assist our members get little capital to start or enlarge their businesses, we put our money together and give one member at a time and contribute and give to another like that… till it goes round all the members.

The table also revealed that women development association in Ukum Local Government empower their members economically mostly through capital formation.

Their association helps members financially, because the members contribute money to a common fund and then give it to a member who in turn puts it in her business which improves the economic wellbeing of such a member.

Another interview with Mrs. Shagba Josephine revealed thus:

Our association assist members especially those registering newly to find shops in strategic places where they will have high patronage, and do their businesses very well.

The table further showed that women development associations empower heir members in diverse ways of politics especially through voter education.

In an interview with Adagba Mary, she revealed thus:

I belong to two associations, all of which help me politically; first, it helps me to have access to political heavy weights in our community. The association also appoints me as leader which aid me have access easily with the political class.

An interview with Madam Tor-Dzenda also revealed that:

The associations helps a lot concerning party politics, it directs us, the members to support and vote mainly for our members so that they occupy important seats in government and this helps us a lot. If our members are not running for any post, the associations direct us to vote those who can care for women if they gain the mandate. And by so doing all of us become actively involved in party politics.

The result on the table also revealed that women development association have significant impact on women decision making in the society especially as it aid the members speak with one voice.

Consistent with the above is an interview report with one of the member, Mrs. Nyior who revealed that;
The women associations that I belong make each and every woman to air out her views in the meeting especially when an agenda is thrown on the flow, by so doing almost all the members try to bring her point, as a contribution. This compels most of the women to be active in decision making. Like myself, I can now participate in any gathering that I found myself in, because I know fully well that my little input may be of help to many.

In the same vein, Madam Atser Member revealed thus:

Our association is of importance when it comes to decision making in Ukum as a whole, this is because the association is strong such that anything thing that comes in the area whether political, social, economical and other wise, our association most be involve because it represents almost all the women folk. And hence we always speak in one voice our contributions use to be significant in the society.

The table finally showed that women development associations face a lot of challenges which affect their effectiveness in empowering women. The major challenge was that of leadership and financial crisis.

There are many problems everywhere, like in our association those problems are many, quarrelling among ourselves, shortage of money, our leaders are not doing well, and in fact there are so many problems that I cannot mention all.

Also, interview with Mrs. Tyavbee Nguhiden revealed that:

The most pressing problem the association face is that of inadequate funds. The little funds that the association raises is too meager to carter or empower her members, so we keep on looking for ways to resolve this. Also, we lack membership, people in our association are not many, as such, what we raise cannot help us much. Another issue is that of poor leadership, those people that we put as leaders are not doing well they practice a lot of favouritism which is killing our association, they only help those that matter to them. However, inadequate funds remains the major problem of our association.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that the main aim of women development association’s was to provide a forum for free and open discussion which facilitate and increase the contribution of women to public life, motivate members to achieve change in society for the benefit of women and to develop and strengthen relationships among women within and outside their immediate community. This finding is consistent with that of Ogunleye (1997) that WDA mobilize and organize rural women into cooperative groups in order to develop their traditional knowledge in savings mobilization, credit delivery, health, food security, civil responsibility and conflict management; diversify economic opportunities available in rural area by promoting rural crafts, processing of agricultural produce and creation of jobs for artisans and the youths; offer training to members on programme management; increase the productivity and earning capacity of the rural families for better
quality of life, and to ensure economic, social and political empowerment of women.

The study also found that, women development associations empower their members in different aspects such as capital formation, creating of suitable environment for investment, removal of gender roles stereotypes attached to business and removing market restrictions. The study findings also showed that, Women Development Associations politically empowered her members through voter education. This finding tallied with that of Iyabo (2000) who found that women associations like Women in Nigeria (WIN) also fights for social justice by raising consciousness amongst people about the subordinate position occupied by women in Nigeria. The study also found that women development associations in Ukum aid their members in decision making in the society especially enabling members to speak with one voice.

A further finding of the study is that despite the various ways women development associations empower her members, it is also faced with some challenges which affect their effectiveness in empowering women. The major challenge is that of financial crisis. This finding tallied with that of Adegoroye (2008) who confirm that lack of finance and access to loans militates against women economic empowerment. Magaji (2007), also find that credit influences autonomy and affects most of the women empowerment indicators significantly.

Conclusion
Based on the findings, the study concludes that, women development associations are inevitable in empowering women politically, economically and socially. However, their effectiveness is challenge by factors such as leadership crisis, financial crisis and membership crisis. This notwithstanding, given its imperativeness in the society, there is need for urgent attention to be given in order resolve these challenges for the empowerment of women and the betterment of the society in general.

Recommendations
Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations are put forward:
1. Government and Non-Government Organizations should provide grants to Women Development Associations so as to enable them overcome their financial challenges and empower their members effectively.
2. Workshops should be organized to sensitize the leadership and members of the Associations on leadership techniques, skills, styles, and so on in order to enhance their effectiveness in the management of their affairs.
3. Women Development Associations should be politically oriented through seminars, workshops, public lectures among others in order to boost their empowerment role politically.
4. Leadership of Women Development Associations should endeavour to build a cordial relationship between and among members so as to prevent the challenges of membership crisis.

References


Appendix

Sample Size Determination

The formula: \[ n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2} \]

Where:

- \( N \): given population
- \( e \): margin of error
- \( 1 \): constant

To determine the sample size using this formula: thus,

Total population = 3460

Sample size \((n) = \frac{3460}{1 + 3460 (0.05)^2} \approx 358.549\)

So, \( n = 360 \)

Thus a total of 360 respondents constitute the target population of the study.