



An Assessment of Social Welfare Programme of Governors' Wives for Rural Women in Akwa Ibom State: Past and Present

by

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Abstract

Women constitute about half of the population of Akwa Ibom State. With adequate mobilization and sensitization, women especially rural women, could contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of the State. The aim of the study was to assess the Akwa Ibom State Governors' wives efforts through different social welfare programmes from 1987 till 2015, aimed at improving the living standards of rural women in the State. The study adopted a historical and descriptive research drawing data from secondary sources. It was revealed from the study that between 1987 – May 1999, the then Governors' wives welfare programmes for rural women centred on sensitization, mobilisation and enlightenment campaigns. It also revealed that from May 29, 1999 to 2015, the programmes took a different dimension as it became an avenue for implementing social and humanitarian programmes which resulted in physical and material changes in the lives of rural women in the State. Based on the findings, it was recommended from the study, among others, that the scope of this welfare programme be expanded to include more rural women.

Keyword: Assessment, Welfare programme, Governors' wives, Akwa Ibom State.

1. Introduction

Women throughout the world have benefited from various welfare programmes embarked upon by governments, non-governmental organizations, agencies and well-meaning individuals. This is especially attributed to the role of the United Nations as a platform for issues concern to women. These entail programs geared towards creating awareness for employment of women through education and awareness generation, widening of potentials for economic development, enhancing the quality of life, accessing

empowerment opportunities, facilities and amenities, improving standard of living and positive transformation in the overall aspect of their life (Bernard, 1981).

The role of women in any society is as important as that of men. This was highlighted by Staudt (1987) that from ancient times, women have born men, without women, men could be incomplete. They shoulder the greater part of the problems in the community, and the custodian of culture. In South-Eastern Nigeria for example, particularly during the pre-independence era, women's authority structures function as women's court, market authorities and overseers of village welfare. Women managed their own affairs in kinship institutions, age grades, secret and titles society. In respect of perishable goods, market women fix prices, settle quarrels among traders and impose fines to enforce their will. This is what upholds here in Uyo, capital of Akwa Ibom State.

In Sierra Leone, women's secret societies called Bundu, protected women's right and served as political support bases and training grounds for women chiefs. In Cameroon, Bamileke female farmers belonged to the mensu, a woman society composed of the best cultivators. Among the Kikuyu in Kenya, women's age segmented organizations matched those of men's and performed a wide variety of functions, including judgment, mutual aid and disciplinary action among women (Staudt, 1987, Ibok and Daniel, 2013).

Today, it is obvious that in Nigeria and by extension Akwa Ibom State, many factors work against women, especially rural women, in their participation in socio-political and economic spheres which would have enhanced their social well-being. Some of which are systemic gender biases which take the form of customs, beliefs and attitudes that confine women mostly to the domestic sphere, laws and customs that impede women's access to credit, employment, education and medical care, marginalization, domestic violence, denial of inheritance right, loss of self-esteem and powerlessness. To overcome these hindrances, governments, non-governmental organizations, civil societies groups and well-meaning individuals have embarked on different welfare programmes to enhance the standard of living for women especially the rural women. In this study, therefore, an attempt is made to assess such welfare programmes for rural women as implemented in Akwa Ibom State by the various Governors' wives.

2. Study Area

The study area is Akwa Ibom State. Akwa Ibom State is one of the 36 states in the Nigerian federation. It was created on 23rd September, 1987, it is the tenth largest state in the country with 31 local government areas. Akwa Ibom State covers a total area of 7,246.499 square kilometres and therefore has a population density of about 475 per square kilometres. The State is situated at the South-Eastern corner of Nigeria and, it lies approximately between latitudes 4°32' and 5°53' North and longitudes 7°21' and 8°25' East. It is one of the few states in Nigeria with sea coast as border (in the south). It is bounded in the North by Abia State, in the West by Rivers State and in the East by Cross River State (Ekpo and Umoh, 2007, Ibok and Daniel 2013).

Akwa Ibom State has a well articulated policy aimed at promoting gender equality and women empowerment especially for rural women. In the State, women constitute about 56% of the population meaning that with adequate mobilization, women could contribute more meaningfully to the development of the State. But this is far fetched as women especially rural women in the state are faced with major challenges such as growing feminization of poverty, the burden of HIV/AIDS pandemic, disadvantaged legal status, poorly developed social welfare scheme, unfair inheritance practice, harmful traditional practices against women, domestic violence against women etc. To overcome these challenges, there have been serious attempts by governments and various organisations, especially by Governors' wives in the state towards improving the living standards of rural women (Ekpo and Umoh, 2007).

3. Theoretical Framework

Social welfare programmes are programmes designed for the general good of the whole society without any reference to a particular evil or evils, and without any distinction between high and low, rich or poor. This is usually expressed in the contexts such as welfare state, welfare activities, child welfare, women welfare etc. The word "welfare" stands for the general good of a community or communities. Welfare programmes are meant for the poor and the needy, the helpless and the under-privileged, the underdeveloped, and the unfortunate who require to be attended to. Welfare activities are meant to supply this attention and care, so that they may attain average standard of life and activity. So any government worth the name has to look to the welfare of the people, especially the poorest and the helpless (Ekpe and Mamah, 1997).

In some countries, governments have formulated and implemented various social welfare programmes meant for alleviating delinquency, destitution, disease, unemployment, starvation, squalor, ignorance and illiteracy among women. In Nigeria, there has been a series of welfare programmes aimed at creating social order such as: National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Peoples Bank, Community Bank, Mass Transit Programmes and National Commission for Women Affairs and Directorates for Social Mobilization (MAMSER) (now Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, NOA) etc. Additionally, social welfare aims at the social wellbeing through a series of coordinated programmes such as family planning, adult education programmes, community development programmes, national extension services etc. These programmes are government sponsored, and sometimes with the cooperation of the citizens (Mumah, 1997).

Welfare generally is seen to be non-profit motivated services aimed at satisfying basic needs of the less privileged provided by individuals groups or government. It is social when the services are articulated for group and community interest for the purpose of improving the living condition of the citizenry (Dolhoff, 2012). Social welfare programmes are designed to protect adults and children from degradation and insecurity from ignorance, illness, disability, unemployment and poverty. Welfare programme is not a state monopoly, but also involves residual intervention that begins from the family and

groups of common interest, individuals etc. So a welfare programme entails organised activities of voluntary and government agencies by which a defined minimum of social services, money and other consumption rights are distributed to the individuals, families and groups for the purpose of preventing, alleviating or contributing to solution of recognised social problems, so as to improve the wellbeing of the individuals, groups and communities directly (Robert, 1998, Umar and Tafida, 2015).

4. Statement of the Problem

The importance of welfare programmes for women cannot be overemphasised because women as a group, have been identified as lacking power to control their lives. This, therefore, necessitated the emergence of feminist movement whose demand was that women become empowered to take control of their lives; to gain the ability to do things, to set their own agenda of what to do and how to do things that affect them. The justification of this is that, economic empowerment of women increase the productivity of women and thereby raises the gross national product. Also, since women income is spent substantially on family feeding and upkeep, any increase in such income will reflect positively on the family nutritional status and health standards. The same is true of women education. A woman's education is known to be negatively correlated with fertility rate, infant mortality and positively correlated with improved family nutritional status, as well as children's educational attainment, meaning that education and economic empowerment programme for women is a necessary condition for social and economic progress of any nation (Okeke, 1995).

Commenting further on the welfare programmes for rural women, Okeke cited above, draws inspiration from the Better Life Programmes for Rural Women which was directed primarily at enabling rural women acquire income-generating skills. This took different forms ranging from training workshops and seminars organized by government agencies and nongovernmental organisations for the purpose of equipping women with necessary knowledge and skills needed to improve their living standards. In most cases, these were done in collaboration or with the support of women organizations such as National Women's Commission mostly in conjunction with the "First Ladies" be it the President wife or the governors' wives across Nigeria (Okeke, 1990 and Okeke, 1995).

Efforts at improving and empowering the rural women is not limited to economic, social and cultural emancipation; it also includes reviewing of laws on the status of women especially those obnoxious laws that put women in subjugation. The reviewed laws included those on family inheritance, widowhood practices, land acquisition, civil service fringe benefits and maternity leave for unmarried women. These have removed some of the deprivations and inequities women suffered and enabled them enjoy some measure of equal status with men. Thanks goes to women groups and organisations such as Women in Nigeria (WIN), Governors' wives initiatives in organising seminars and symposia to create public awareness on the social, economic, cultural, legal and political status of women. Sometimes they receive government and non-governmental support by way of financial aids (Okeke, 1995, Carloni, 1983).

In the light of the above, in Akwa Ibom State, the proponent of women rights focused mainly on women liberation, emancipation and empowerment. The maxim is that “people should discard old ways of seeing women’s problems and women should redefine themselves”. The focal point is on societal and institutional changes in politics and practices so that equal and more opportunities could be available to women. So the efforts of governors’ wives at empowering rural women in the state are necessary to create awareness, mobilize and sensitize them to enhance their participation in rural and national life (Charles, 2010).

5. Assessment of Welfare Programmes of Governors’ Wives for Akwa Ibom Rural Women: Past and Present

The policy environment for gender equality in Akwa Ibom State has its import from the National Policy on women which was adopted in the year 2000. The policy articulates gender mainstreaming in the relevant sectors of the economy. The policy thrust for achieving gender equality in Akwa Ibom State includes the elimination of barriers and impediments, cultural or otherwise which could inhibit the full realization of the potentials of women and their repositioning to contribute optimally to the development of Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria (Ekpo and Umoh, 2007).

Women constitute about half of the population of Akwa Ibom State - So with adequate mobilization, the women especially rural women could contribute more meaningfully to the output of the state. This can be made possible by embarking on women oriented projects to provide opportunities for rural women to enhance their income-generating capacity and their quality of life. Such projects are the establishment of entrepreneurial development centres as well as micro-credit schemes for rural women to boost their socio-economic empowerment, etc.

Since the creation of Akwa Ibom State in 1987 till now, governors’ wives popularly called “First Ladies” have embarked on social interventions intended to enhance the social wellbeing of women especially in alleviating distress and poverty as evident in various social and economic rehabilitation activities. This has indeed helped in the social and economic emancipation of women. It is worth saying that the governors’ wives welfare programmes had a humble beginning. The empowerment programme started with Babangida’s government when the wife, “First Lady” floated the “Better Life Programme for Rural Women (BLPRW)” in 1987. This was adopted as soon as the State was created. From then till now, the various programmes identified with each first lady have mobilized, sensitized and empowered women especially rural women which have manifested in their improved socio-economic lives.

In assessing these programmes from the inception of Akwa Ibom State in 1987, it is seen that the initial effort was to create awareness, mobilize and sensitize women to enhance their participation in rural and national life. For example, Mrs. Tunde Ogbeha (1987) welfare programme specifically was to mobilize, recognise and empower the rural women. She created awareness and stimulated the consciousness of rural women especially widows towards knowing their rights to social factors such as health, housing,

food, environment and political leadership. Mrs Aisha Yakubu Bako (1995) in her effort, promoted social welfare services for motherless babies including worm detestation.

In 1992, Obonganwan Imo Isemin initiated various welfare programmes for the benefits of rural women such as Uforo Community Bank, Door-Step Health Programme, Uforo Farms, Nka Uforo Iban Investment Limited etc. Also, Mrs. Iyabode Adewusi (1997) through her family support programme promoted maternal and child health services, immunization services, agro-processing and cooperative societies. She also carried out several humanitarian services such as rehabilitation of destitute and widows in rural areas.

With the emergence of democratic rule in 1999, First Lady Nnenyin Allison Attah's empowerment programme particularly in the area of health, was based on the assumption that women are the immediate care givers to their husband, children etc. Her welfare programme encouraged women health education about diseases such as HIV/AIDS, hypertension, diabetes etc and how to prevent them. During this period, women were equally enlightened on their right to satisfy personal needs (Etuk, 2011).

In 2007, First Lady, Ekaette Unoma Akpabio welfare programme tagged "Family Life Enhancement Initiative (FLEI) played an important role in the lives of disadvantaged group in the state. The welfare programme took a proactive and practical step in solving women problems especially rural women. The main focus was to provide education and livelihood alternatives for less privileged, make resources available for their day-to-day upkeep and rehabilitate existing structure. Most important, her Shelter Support Programme (SSP) has put a roof over the heads of rural women across the State thereby enhancing their socio-economic wellbeing. For example, her FLEI programme revealed that about 4,500 women farmers were given the sum of ₦250,000.00 each as soft loan in conjunction with Ministry of Women Affairs (Williams, 2015).

Also, since May 29th 2007 to 2015, more than eighty (80) widows from the 31 Local Government Areas have been provided with a well furnished homes as well as a small cash grant to start a business of their choice. Asides, Unoma Akpabio through her FLEI, has over the years distributed economic empowerment tools to widows, orphans and persons with disability to help them earn sustainable livelihood. These empowerment tools ranging from hair dressing equipment, palm oil and cassava, processing mills, sewing/weaving machines and catering equipment in addition to cash grant. This has created much impact on the lives of Akwa Ibom rural women than before (Williams, 2011, First Lady 2012, Williams, 2015).

6. Conclusion

Social welfare generally means the full range of organized activities of voluntary and governmental organizations that seek to prevent, alleviate or contribute to the solution of recognised social problem. Over the years, Governors' wives have embarked on social welfare programme intended to enhance the social functioning of rural women in the state. The assessment of their welfare programmes show that from 1987 when the state was created upto 1997, shortly before the enthronement of democratic rule, the main

objectives were on the enlightenment, mobilization and giving full recognition to the activities of rural women. Intervention/empowerment programmes were not vigorously pursued, but their humble beginning served as a catalyst or foundation to whatever that have been accomplished today.

However, from May 1999 to May 2015, the welfare programmes took a different dimension especially in 2007 as such programmes became an avenue for implementing social and humanitarian programmes. The practical realities of this programme resulted in the physical and material changes in the lives of rural women. The issue of women empowerment became prominent and real. Through various programmes, rural women were not only sensitized or mobilized as the case was then, but were given opportunity to “catch fish on their own. They are not only visible now but have equally created more impact in their families, communities, state and Nigeria at large.

6. Recommendations

- i. The scope of these programmes should be expanded to include more rural women.
- ii. The beneficiaries should be those in dire need of such help for the impact of the programmes to be felt.
- iii. The programmes should be well coordinated so that it will not be hijacked by the elite women in the state.
- iv. The programmes should be evaluated from time to time for proper fine-tuning.
- v. The incoming governor’s wife should ensure continuity of the existing programmes.
- vi. The programmes should not be used to score political point rather, it should be purely humanitarian.

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