

WOMEN AND WORK PLACE CONDITIONS IN NIGERIA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This paper examines the issues, challenges and prospects in the working conditions for women in the workplace. The paper is based on secondary sources. Adopting Liberal Feminism, the paper analyses women's participation in the labour force and their respective conditions of work. Literature indicates that despite the Millennium Development Goals and Beijing Platform of Action, there are still disparities in conditions of work and income levels between men and women doing the same work, women are excluded from certain occupational categories and progression to the top management level is slower for women than for men due to marriage and family burden. Some of the challenges identified include: gender discrimination, sexual harassment, lack of access to agricultural inputs, etc. The paper recommends, among others, that the governments should ensure the enforcement of the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women.

Key words: *Gender discrimination, Income disparity, Lack of access to land, Marriage and pregnancy, Sexual harassment, Women, Workplace*

Introduction

In pre-colonial societies, women held basically complementary, rather than subordinate work-position to men, which is based on power and seniority rather than gender. Some women achieved impressive status in the economic and social realms of life particularly among the Yoruba in Nigeria. The beginning of colonial rule brought the European notion that women's work was in the home, nurturing the family. Women remained at home while the men went out to the farm to work, but they were never idle at home. They engaged in manual processing of food crops and other farm produce in addition to their housekeeping

chores. With the introduction of western education, westernisation, modernisation and paid employment, men as well as women drifted into the modern sector of the economy (Makuochukwu, 2013). Education, for instance, prepares one for wage employment, most especially, in the formal employment.

Formal employment is a significant source of income and a privilege in Nigeria. Access to it gives regularity and predictability to income streams for individuals. Formal employment permits families to develop income- or consumption-smoothing strategies, especially, in urban

areas, and opens up access to other assets like bank finance that often depends on having a regular job. The ability to accumulate an old age pension depends on regular wage employment, as well as access to social security, union representation, communications and other educational benefits (Ruwanpura cited in British Council Nigeria (BCN) 2012).

Women are expected to work within their homes while men work in the public sphere. Makuochukwu (2013) stated that there have been visible changes in the perception of women, principally because they have greater opportunities for education now than before and therefore participate in work activities outside the home. Such women, especially the economically sound ones, have better opportunities for entrepreneurship and to earn higher wages, lifting themselves and their families out of poverty. EFINA's survey (cited in British Council Nigeria, 2012) shows that about 10.7 million adults (men and women) in Nigeria have access to wage income linked to regular formal sector jobs in the public and private sectors.

In every patriarchal society, including Nigeria, women are marginalised and oppressed in the labour market and in the workplace. Men and women are not treated the same in the work place. There is disparity between men and women. Channar et al. (2011) reveal that gender discrimination in the work place decreases satisfaction, motivation, commitment and enthusiasm level of the employees, and increases their stress level. It can also lead to depletion of their contributions to economic growth of both the organisations that employ them and the nation. The main objective of this paper is, therefore, to examine the issues, challenges and prospects in the working conditions for women in the

workplace and proffer a way forward. The posers that this paper will address are thus: What are the issues and challenges in the working conditions for women? How can these challenges be overcome? The paper is based on secondary sources such as journals, books, reports, theses, newspaper reports. Search for the literature was carried out through the internet and twenty-eight items were used in this manuscript.

Theoretical framework

This analysis is premised on Liberal Feminism. The main view of liberal feminists is that all people are created equal by God and deserve equal rights. The Liberal Feminists believe that oppression exists because of the way in which men and women are socialized, which supports patriarchy and keeps men in power positions. Liberal feminists believe that women have the same mental capacity as their male counterparts and should be given the same opportunities in political, economic and social spheres. Their view is fully espoused in the work of Jaggar (1983). According to Jaggar, liberal feminism focuses on issues such as equality in the workplace, in education and in politics. Liberal feminists create and support acts of legislation that remove the barriers for women. These acts of legislation demand equal opportunities and rights for women, including equal access to jobs and equal pay. Liberal feminists believe that removing these barriers directly challenges the ideologies of patriarchy, as well as liberates women.

The next section will discuss the following: Women's participation in labour force, workplace conditions, issues with the workplace conditions and challenges in the female labour force participation. These will illuminate the

extent of the issues and challenges involved in women employment.

Women's participation in labour force

Before discussing women's participation in the labour force, let us consider the sectors of labour force. There are two sectors of labour force i.e. formal and informal sectors. Formal sector or modern sector or organised sector covers the public sector and medium/large private sector enterprises. It recruits labour on a permanent and regular basis for fixed rewards. It is typified by difficult entry, large-scale operation, regulated market and possession of formal education. These features are said to be accountable for the predominance of women in the second sector, informal sector.

The informal sector or informal economy refers to activities and income that are partially or fully outside government regulation, taxation, and observation. The informal sector is defined by the 15th ILO International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) (1993) as private unincorporated enterprises that are unregistered or small in terms of the number of employed persons (Husmanns, 2004, ILO, 2010). They are small scale enterprises; family businesses, enterprises engaged in agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing, pottery, trade etc. The main attraction of the undeclared economy is finance. This type of activity allows employers, paid employees, and the self-employed to increase their take-home earnings or reduce their costs by evading taxation and social contributions. It also provides a cushion for workers who cannot find a job in the formal sector but can entail a loss in budget revenues by reducing taxes and social security contributions paid and therefore the availability of funds to improve infrastructure and other public goods and services. It invariably leads to a

high tax burden on registered labour. Because employment opportunities as wage-earning workers are often denied women as a result of family responsibilities, lack of skills, social and cultural barriers. Self-employment or setting up of their own enterprises may be the only possibility for women to get access to employment and to earn an income. Consequently, in many countries, especially in developing and transition economies, women represent the majority of entrepreneurs in micro enterprises and the informal sector.

In Africa, women have traditionally played important roles and from pre-colonial times have been economically active and productive (Akyeampong and Fosack, 2012). However, Fapohunda (2012) asserts that analysis of women's employment in Africa is constrained by unreliable data, as well as by problems in defining what constitutes economic activity for women, particularly in the agricultural and informal sectors. Despite these limitations, the Labour Market Trends Survey of 2003 estimated that about 64% of African women were in paid employment by 1990.

Nigerian women, either in rural or urban setting, have played significant roles in the economy of the nation. According to Fapohunda (2012), apart from being mothers and wives and taking care of domestic sector, Nigerian women have contributed substantially to the production and distribution of goods and services in the pre-colonial era. McIntosh (2009) notes that the Yoruba, right from pre-colonial times, lacked the gender distinctions prevalent among the British, and so both sexes shared labour roles outside the domestic setting, working together in production, commerce and the service industry.

By 2006 census, women in Nigeria constitute 49.2% of the total

population (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2009) yet very few of them are engaged in modern employment. Iweagu (2015) reported that female employment in the Nigerian civil service was historically said to be lower than male and goes further to demonstrate that despite the great improvement over the years, very few women relative to men secure jobs. Out of these few, a sizeable number of them are temporarily employed. There are staggering figures about the rate of female participation in the labour force. Labour force comprises people aged 15 years and above who meet the International Labour Organization's definition of the economically active population. Iweagu (2015) reports that the rate of female participation in the labour force increased from 12% in 1971 to 70% in 2004 whereas World Bank Group (2017) reported that the percentage of female population aged 15 years and above in the labour force increased from 47.2% in 2000 to 50.4% in 2017. Onyejeli (2010) notes that about 66% of the Nigerian population was in the labour force in 2007 and out of these, the proportion of adult women was 38.7%, a rise from 38.1% in 2005 and 37.0% in 2000. For adult men, labour force participation has been declining from 73.7% in 2000 to 71.7% in 2005, and then to 70.6% in 2007 (Onyejeli, 2010).

Comparing these staggering statistics with other countries, it is observed that Nigerian female population in the labour force is lower than some countries and higher than others particularly some Muslim countries. For instance, in 2014, Nigerian female labour force participation rate was 48% compared with 86% in Madagascar, 85% in Malawi, Ghana 68% and 62% in Kenya (World Bank Group, 2016). South Africa has a lower percentage of employed female than Nigeria in 2014 with 45%. We

have lower rates in North African countries e.g. in Morocco and Tunisia, the female labour force participation is 27% while the lowest is found in Algeria 15%. These North African countries are all Islamic nations. Similarly in Nigeria, female rate of participation in the labour force is lower in northern part of the country where Islamic religion predominates than in the south.

Women's participation in the formal sector employment in Nigeria is low (Fapohunda, 2012). The pattern of relative distribution of the Nigerian modern sector workers by industrial sector shows that female participation is highest in the services sector and lowest in building and construction sector, more specifically, female participation is concentrated in the trades, restaurants and hostels sectors, and community social and personal services all of which fall under the informal sector. NBS (2009) reported a survey conducted in conjunction with Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) in 2007. According to the report, among the employees in public administration and defence in 2007, there were 73.9% men and 26.1% of women. Similarly, in electricity, gas and water supply, 22.7% of women and in extra territorial organisations and bodies were 24.3% of women. Percentages of employed women are also greater than those of men in manufacturing (52.5% against 47.5%), health and social work (50.8% against 49.2%).

Majority of women are employed in the informal sector. The Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) 2003 Annual Reports indicated that about 46% of the female labour force was employed in the informal sector, mainly in petty trading and home-based processing and manufacturing, where they had little access to official sources of credit or information. An International

Labour Organization (ILO) Report reveals that in 1996 in the African region, agriculture offered the highest employment opportunity for women (33%), services (27%) and industries (16.9%) (Fapohunda, 2012). The agricultural sector is further segmented into cash and subsistent cropping, the former dominated by men while a vast majority of women are found in the non-monetized sector. This indicates labour market segmentation. Fapohunda (2012) reports that Nigerian women have worked side by side with men in agriculture with some marked divisions of labour between them.

In Nigeria, the 2006 Census reveals that 67.6% of employed women were enumerated as sales workers while 8.4% were craft and production workers. In 2007, 36.5% of women were employed in agriculture, hunting and forestry compared with 63.5% of men. There is a colossal percentage of women in hotel and restaurant business, whole sale – retail trade with 75.3% and 65.6% respectively (NBS, 2009). Women engage in informal finance activities to assist their families, businesses, their communities and nation in general. Women are relegated as second-class citizens in Nigeria, but it is these same women that sustain their families in urban and rural areas.

Workplace conditions

Workplace conditions are dynamic, changing from time to time. In the 1940s, considerable prejudice affected the relatively few women who sought employment (Fapohunda, 2012). The labour code then prescribed a lower salary for single women than men, and women had to resign their appointment on marriage. In some cases, the husband had to give his permission to allow his wife to continue in paid employment. Ighodalo,

(1990) observes that women had to resign their appointment if they wanted to go on maternity leave.

Later, the Nigerian Labour Act 1974 has provisions relating to female workers in Part III, Sections 53 to 55 in three main areas. These areas are maternity protection, night work and underground work. The Act provides in section 54 that a pregnant woman should enjoy 3 months maternity leave (i.e. 6 weeks before and 6 weeks after confinement) and if she is absent from her work in pursuance of maternity leave she is entitled to not less than 50% of her wages. Under this section, a nursing mother is entitled to half an hour twice a day during her working hours to nurse her baby. A woman should not be dismissed if absent from work for a period of time due to illness arising from pregnancy or confinement. Recently, the duration of maternity leave for federal public servants has been increased to 16 weeks, though the law has not yet been passed. Lagos State Government recently took a giant leap by extending the maternity leave of its female employees to a total of six months, to enable them give the required attention to their new born babies in their first few months of life (Ogunbiyi, 2014). Also, and for the first time in the country, the Lagos State Government has granted a 10 - Working Day Paternity Leave for male employees who may want to join their wives to achieve good parenting (Ogunbiyi, 2014). However, both the extension of maternity and the 10 - day paternity leaves would apply only for the first two births of the couple after which the female employees revert to the old three months while the male employee ceases to enjoy such privilege.

Section 55 prohibits the employment of women for night work except for nurses and the like and women holding responsible positions of

management who are not ordinarily engaged in manual labour. Section 56 stipulates that no woman shall be employed on underground work in any mine except women holding positions of management who do not perform manual labour; or women employed in health and welfare services; or women who in course of their studies spend a period of training in underground parts of a mine; or any other woman who may occasionally have to enter the underground parts of a mine for the purposes of a non-manual occupation.

Issues with the workplace conditions

Issue of marriage and pregnancy

In some establishments women are not allowed to get married or pregnant because it is thought that it will reduce their productivity and of course profit (Salaam, 2003). Furthermore, some employers do not take kindly to unmarried female employees who get pregnant although the Labour Act does not distinguish between a married and unmarried woman. However, in the public service unless a woman is married, she will not be paid during the period of maternity leave.

The banks prefer to employ single women but when they get married, some banks dismiss them. Mordi *et al.* (2012) discovered from their assessment of women working in the Nigerian banking industry that in a majority of banks, there was a tacit stipulation from the employers for early-career female managers not to get married within the first two years of employment, and if they were married, not to get pregnant because female bankers with children were said to be caught up in conflict between family life and career. In this type of situations, legal protection granted by the constitution and the Labour Act has little or no effect. It is even worse in the informal

sector such as domestic services where the vast majority of women are employed.

Income disparity

Makuochukwu (2013) points out that there is a disparity between the income of men and women and that this is due mainly to a range of barriers, including reproductive roles and lack of access to productive assets. All these combined to account for the observed gender disparities in income. Other income disparities can be traced to workplace gender discrimination in both the private and public sectors (British Council Nigeria (BCN), 2012). For example, the pay gap between male and female bank managers is significant (BCN, 2012). Income disparity can also be caused by lack of equality of opportunity in various spheres of life including education, employment, health and access to productive assets. It has been revealed that although the pay gap between women and men with tertiary education has reduced, women still earn 20% less than men. This is supported by British Council Nigeria (2012). It reports that men have a higher mean income than women comparing different education levels. This income inequality reflects unequal opportunities to earn a living. The cost of pay inequality is enormous, especially, as it affects the children of the family. It is good economically to ensure wage parity between men and women.

Exclusion from some occupational categories

Studies show that women are discriminated against and excluded from certain occupational categories (Channar *et al.* 2011, Makuochukwu, 2013). In Nigeria today, women are excluded from certain occupational categories due to formal barriers as well as informal barriers to entry.

The formal barriers which continue to hinder the entry of women in such occupational categories include: lack of educational or technical training, labour laws and training customs. The informal barriers include: customs and religious practices, difficulties in combining domestic and labour market activities, management and workers' attitudes etc.

Slow progression to the top management cadre

Few Nigerian women are engaged in top management cadre of formal sector establishments simply because majority of them lack the educational qualifications necessary for such positions or due to gender discrimination. For instance, only about 6.2% of those who were employed as either General Managers or Managing Directors in 1986 were women (Makuochukwu, 2013). The proportion of women in the senior cadre in the formal sector is very minimal. This is noticeable in the industries and the civil services; statistics indicate that in the Federal Civil Service, which is the greatest employer of labour in Nigeria, women are mostly found in the junior categories. In the universities, very few women have become Vice Chancellors or Deans of Faculties (Nwanna, 2006). Similarly in the polytechnics, few women have been Provosts or Rectors.

Challenges in the female labour force participation

Gender discrimination

Salaam (2003) points out that Nigerian women, like their counterparts around the world, face a lot of discrimination that limit their opportunities to develop their full potential on the basis of equality with men. The 1999 Constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of sex. Also, women

employment rights are protected under the Labour Act as discussed above. Nevertheless, the reality is that Nigerian women are far from enjoying equal rights in the labour market, due mainly to their domestic burden, low level of educational attainment, biases against women's employment in certain branches of the economy or types of work and discriminatory salary practices (Salaam, 2003).

Progression to the top management cadre

For those who are educated and working in the formal sector, the challenge is to move up the corporate ladder. Salaam (2003) asserts that women self-advancement has been curtailed by the burden of reproduction, particularly in Nigeria with a very high birth rate as well as the cultural roles associated to women - role of child bearing, child raising and homemaking (Seshni and Sita, 2011). For instance, by 2007, 20.7% of women were Permanent Secretaries and 20.1% were Judges. We have similar situations in the universities. Women have now caught up with and in some subjects surpassed men in university enrolments; yet the number of women heads of universities remains small globally (Nwanna, 2006). Among the Vice Chancellors of Nigerian universities, only sixteen women have been appointed in 128 universities as at 2014 (Aina, 2014). This is referred to as the "masculinisation of the academics" (Aina, 2014). According to her, the explanations for the persistence of gender inequalities in the Nigerian university system include the extension of patriarchy and other gender stereotypes in society to academia that has remained male-centric; the failure of governments (federal and state) to pay attention to gender priorities in education budgets; and institutional and environmental factors such as gender

unfriendly teaching and learning environment and gender-based violence within the university system. Overcoming this equity hurdle will require institutional changes, including greater transparency in the way leaders are selected.

Sexual harassment

Female workers are continually harassed sexually by their male superiors in exchange for one favour or the other e.g. promotions and salary increase. Banks employ young females into their marketing departments to use their bodies to woo customers for their business organisations. This is what Salaam (2003) calls "corporate prostitution". When women want to retain their jobs, they do not mind becoming the objects of sexual satisfaction of their bosses or employers.

Lack of access to land

For those involved in informal economic activities, the challenge is to create access to more formal economic participation. They do not have access to land. Women's access to land, a key productive asset, is limited by patrilineal inheritance (from father to son) and by virilocal residence (BCN, 2012). Although the Nigeria Land Administration Act is egalitarian on paper, further work is required to operationalize the Act. Women can only use land at the benevolence of their husbands and brothers or even sons if they are grown. For women who engage in agriculture, they have limited access to agricultural inputs. Women tend to be disadvantaged, because when compared with men, they do not have access to obtaining credit facilities and so are rarely engaged in the production and marketing of lucrative cash crops, such as cocoa, which tends to be a male preserve (Salaam, 2003).

For women who are employed in the formal sector particularly in the banks,

their challenge is how to strike a balance between domestic duties and their work. They are constrained by the reproductive roles they play. As a result, majority of the women occupy low level posts that offer them the flexibility they need to manage their households while working in the formal sector. They therefore spend most of their time doing unpaid household work (BCN, 2012). In a situation like this, education on its own does not necessarily improve their prospects for better paid formal employment.

Unfair tax deductions

Males in paid employment are permitted to deduct expenses incurred on behalf of dependents; but women, because they are perceived to be dependents themselves, are not permitted the same deductions, even when they are the sole bread winners.

Prospects

Several policies have been formulated to further increase female participation in the labour market with the most predominant being the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The overall policy environment for promoting gender equality and equity has improved over the years. An innovative approach to mainstreaming gender issues has started with five pilot Federal Government ministries – Agriculture, Health, Communication Technology, Water Resources and Works. Under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (FMWA&SD), these ministries are creating and delivering gender-responsive programmes and women-aligned services (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Furthermore, BCN (2012) points out that strategic objective 55 of the Beijing Platform of Action calls for an increase in the productive capacity of

women by providing “access to capital, resources, credit, land, technology, information, technical assistance and training so as to raise their income and improve nutrition, education, health care and status within the household”.

Recommendations

Government should monitor and ensure that Labour Act and other legislations including international instruments such as CEDAW and Beijing provisions are enforced to eliminate sexual harassment and discrimination against women in the workplace. The public sector at both Federal and State levels should consider policies and incentives to ensure that women fill 50% of public sector posts. Government should make policies that every establishment should have a crèche for nursing mothers and they should be allowed to work less hours than others. Government should conduct a gender audit to ensure equity in recruitment, promotion and pay. Government should identify measures to ensure that women fill at least 35% of top management cadre as prescribed by Beijing Affirmative Action. Policies should be formulated and enforced to permit women to inherit land. The Nigeria Land Administration Act should be implemented and publicised, to expand women’s access and entitlement to land. Universities should consider gender mainstreaming as a tool for institutional and social transformation in the system. Banks should make their services more accessible to women by designing products and services to meet the needs of women from different religions and wealth groups. Taxation policies need to be amended to ensure they achieve gender equity that are legitimate, and are consistent with the government’s commitment to gender equity.

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