

The Role of Women in Nation Building

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PROTOCOLS

First, let me thank the organizers of this award for inviting me to make these remarks. I also congratulate the awardees for being found suitable to receive the award.

I particularly congratulate the Dean of students of the University of Medical Sciences, Dr (Mrs). Yemisi Jeff-Agboola for being one of the recipients. I know Dr Jeff-Agboola to be a very hard working and resourceful person, a friend to staff and students alike, and today – I can say without any fear of equivocation that within the short period she has worked with us, she has proven to be a towering pillar of strength of the University. I congratulate her and other distinguished awardees and wish them well in their future endeavours.

I have been asked to speak on a subject so dear to my heart – the role of women in national development. The topic is dear to me because I am not only an obstetrician and gynaecologist, but also a researcher and advocate on issues related to the development of women. My mother remains my number one role model, and I see all women as capable of instilling the spirit of encompassing servitude and duty of service that my mother gave to me. For that I will continue to respect all women.

One of my saddest days was last week when I watched the Senate on national television throw out the bill seeking gender equality in a hilarious and yet memorable session. I asked myself whether this was the same Senate that Nigerians voted for in 2015 with the expectation that they would be able to take the right decisions to protect their rights and promote their social welfare and development. After days of reflections, I came to the conclusion that the best approach is to do an analysis to explain why gender equality is critical to national development and to show that gender equality is actually a pre-requisite to national development aspirations, which Senate should promote rather than denigrate. My aim is to show that if our Senators are real patriots desiring the progressive growth and development of this country, then they should be at the forefront of those championing gender equality rather than being seen as part of those inhibiting it. From the way the issue is being discussed, it would appear that people generally believe that women are being done a favour when gender equality is promoted. By contrast, the purpose of this presentation is to show that gender equality is in the overall national development interest, and to firmly propose that no real progress can be made by any country that ignores gender equality.

By definition, gender equality is simple construct that ensures that men and women are represented equally in social, economic and political spheres of life. This ought to be a natural expectation since the Almighty Lord in His Infinite Wisdom bestowed on the world a near equal sex ratio, and also ensured that both sexes have the same mental capability and socio-psychological fitness. Although in some human capacities, males could be said to be superior to females, there are also several capacities where women are inordinately superior to men. So, on balance nature has provided for both sexes to be equal in the totality of skills needed to navigate the social corridor of human existence.

It can therefore never be in the interest of any country if one part of the gender equation is ignored or relegated to the background in terms of representation in various aspects of life. What is known as the gender development index is the extent to which a country promotes equality in achievements between its men and women. Countries with high gender development indices (which mean that achievements between men and women are near equal) have been known to do better in overall development. By contrast, countries with low gender development index (those with wide disparity in achievement between men and women) have continued to remain at the bottom of the development ladder. Another construct is gender empowerment index, which means the extent to which women are represented in social, economic and political spheres of life. Again, countries with high gender empowerment index are those with high rates of representation of women in economic, political and social domains, and they often fare better in overall development and human living indicators.

Neglecting women in socio-political representation can never be in the interest of countries or communities. It is only in the interest of individuals who chose to do so. A common phrase is that “no one can clap with one hand”. By contrast, clapping with both hands is the physiological normative, and it often results in a better outcome. The poor representation of women in key areas of national development is similar to a country trying to clap with one hand. The results can only be predictably capricious and catastrophic.

Appointment based on meritocracy is the foundational basis of development. If appointments are based on merit, the best persons will be selected to lead key positions, and this would result in better developmental outcomes. This is what happens in developed countries, which accounts for their higher rate of development. We are not asking for affirmative action to get women into positions, because if affirmative action is used, it often results in the wrong

women being put in positions. What is being argued is that if appointments to these positions are based on merit, women will naturally do well as compared to men. The situation where most positions are fought for in this country with iron-fist audacity, and with high temerity and mindlessness of purpose, it can only lead to the marginalization of women who do not have the power and agency to fight for those positions the same way that men do.

The bane of our democratic experience has been the total entronement of “man-know-man” politics, the exclusion of a high performing segment of the populace, the marginalization of the marginalizable, godfatherism, and transcending ethnic bigotry. In all of these, women suffer inordinately more than men because they are inherently unable to deal with the situations as men do. To prove that the social and political exclusion of women is not just a result of socio-cultural disaffection for women, even the fight between men and men for socio-political space has become fiercer. At the end, only the highly muscular with greater physical assets wins the fight, with little room for thoughtfulness, high reason and astuteness. Indeed, over the years it has become increasingly evident that brawn rather than brain has taken over Nigeria’s socio-political firmament, and being physically assertive, militant and noisy has become a highly celebrated national ethos. By contrast, those who are internally reflective and thoughtful and who have considerations for orderliness, high intellect, candour and reasonableness are being increasingly excluded from all spheres of our socio-political life.

Clearly, one of the major challenges facing this country’s development is the continued marginalization of a highly competent and effective segment of our population unable to contribute to national development because of the physical, social and cultural restrictions placed on them. Women have been most adversely affected by this phenomenon, and unless the situation is

changed, this country is unlikely to achieve true integrated national development. Nobel Laureate and renowned international economist Amartya Sen once said “development if not engendered, is endangered” – which eloquently illustrates the importance of gender equality in the development of nations.

If one of the mandates of the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is to “see to the development and good governance of the country”, then it must immediately reverse its stance on the gender equality bill without further delay. Inequality is currently seen as one of the remaining challenges facing human development. It is for that reason that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals passed in 2015 for promoting global development between 2015 and 2030 includes two goals (goals 5 and 10) aimed at promoting “gender equality” and “reducing inequalities” overall. These two goals are critical to attaining the other 15 goals, including goal 3 designed to promote all indices of good health. As a medical doctor of several years’ experience, I cannot see this country achieving any of these goals, and indeed its desire to attain accelerated development, if it ignores the equality of opportunities between men and women. I therefore most respectfully request all arms of the Nigerian government to ensure that women are given equal rights to opportunities, so that women can contribute meaningfully to the growth and development of the country.

I thank you all for listening!