

PRESS FOR PROGRESS: ENHANCING WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND DECISION MAKING, BY NOHWO FRED, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ECO TRACE AND BENIN RICHARD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CODAF.

*Report on International Women's Day 2018,
Held at Our Lady of Visitation Nursery and Primary School Compound,
Oleh Delta State.*

INTRODUCTION

Clara Zetkin was, by all definition, an ordinary German living in Germany in the year 1910. Although, she was a leader of the 'Women Office', under the Social Democratic Party, an office very well revered in that society at the time, but little was known of her beyond the shores of Germany until she suggested the celebration of International Women Day (IWD) to be marked once every year. History records that her suggestion for the marking of IWD was to push for the rights of women throughout the world. Although, Clara's suggestion was not the first time the idea of women's day was to be muted. Two years earlier (1908) 15 000 women gathered in the city of New York. The occasion was to demand for voting rights, better pay and shorter working hour for women. In 1909, the first National Women's Day was celebrated on the 28th of February in line with Socialist Party of America's declaration.

In line with Zetkin's suggestion, a conference of one hundred women from seventeen countries was held and the outcome was the upholding of her suggestion. That marked the birth of IWD. A few countries and specifically Australia, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland celebrated the maiden International Women Day in March 19th 1911. In 1975, the United Nations moved to recognize that day and in 1913, the IWD was moved to March 8th. It should also be noted that the former President of the US further proclaimed the month of

March as the month to celebrate women.

If there is one reason why the rich nations should celebrate IWD, then the poor nations have one million reasons to celebrate that day. The reason is simple. One look at our immediate society will produce these reasons. A mother, with a baby strapped to her back, another stringed to her left hand while the right hand seek to keep in place a delicately balanced bunch of firewood on her head; weaving in between streets in a journey that has lasted several hours with barely an ounce of food in her stomach. Another runs, with a piece of cloth strewn across her chest, the almost lifeless legs of her baby dangling aimlessly by her side as she dashes across the street; her destination is the local maternity. The two analogies may seem diverged, but there is clearly a confluence of purpose: to save life.

Development, as we have come to know today, began first with man himself. The preservation of life, as we all know, outweighs every other consideration of human development. The Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs clearly underpins this. Human development is that approach to development that focuses on People, Opportunities and their Choices in life.

The first approach is on people and how to improve their lives based on prevailing political circumstances inherent in such society. Thus, the above analogies above become handy in dealing with this strand – as it will be for the other two – of human development. The nations of the world are ranked based on their HDI performance into very

high, high, medium and low. Majority, if not all African nations are categorized under the last category; Low. This is not surprising. It is a direct result of our political thinking and practice. The nonpartisan attitude of vast majority of Nigerians and especially the women folks in the political arena has a huge effect on the country ranking. Statistic shows that only a handful of women participate in elective offices. Indeed, the 2011 election indicates that only a paltry 9.1% female indicated interest in contested positions compared to over 90% accorded her male counterpart. In comparison to other African countries such as South Africa's 43% and Rwanda's 65%, the Nigeria female outing depicts a dismal outing and begs to be changed.

A peek into the political activities of the woman in Nigeria from 1999 to date shows that not much has been done on the part of the woman. Rather it has been a case of waiting to be spoon fed by the man politically and hence economically. Statistics available indicates that between 1999 and 2011, average of 2.9%, 1.8% and 11.7% of women have been elected as State House of Assembly Members, Local Government Chairmen and Councilors respectively. Yet, the National Gender Policy which was created on the 15th of August 2008 bequeaths 35% Affirmative Action to the Nigerian woman. This is aside from the fact that she constitutes a greater number of registered voters in the period under review. Can one say that the woman has fared well given the foregoing statistics? The answer to this question can only be in the negative.

Opportunity as an angle of human development refers to the creation of freedom which allows an individual the necessary room to maneuver and by which a given goal is achieved. The Beijing Declaration reaffirms "Equal Rights and Inherent human dignity of women and men and other purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations ..." To what extent has the Nigerian woman leveraged on that platform in spite of the complementing position of the 35% Affirmative Action and indeed the massive campaign of "Women For Change" of the Patience Jonathan era? For how long does the Nigerian woman want to be seen and addressed as the lesser of two equals? Is this situation in existence because of the dearth

of opportunities upon which the ambitions of the Nigerian woman can be leveraged?

Udodinma Okoronkwo-Chukwu of the Nigerian Television Authority, Abakaliki who notes that colonialism is responsible for the state of the African woman. In his opinion, colonialism which opened the door to western education is responsible for limiting the powers of the woman by "... hounding them to the home front while their male counterparts were empowered through education and leadership positions ..." This assertion is debatable. While it is true that history records the holding of the woman in subjugation, modern society have, however, placed more opportunities in the way of the woman in recent decades. It is important to note that the plight of the woman have gained currency since the 1975 Conference of Women held in Mexico City and the successive one every five years and particularly the unequivocal declaration of the Beijing Conference and the subsequent move towards global gender inclusiveness. These conferences have advanced the place of women in the world more than envisaged in the turn of the century. It appears that the woman has become complacent with her role in modern day society as "belonging to the other room" while the man takes the centre stage in political engineering. If this is the true position of things, then this is against the natural character of women to always make greater whatever is thrown their way.

Human development is hinged on choice as much as it is on Opportunity. The Nigerian woman seems to have exercised her freedom of choice in this democratic dispensation since 1999. However, that freedom has done very little in enhancing the place of women and indeed community development and decision making. This is the backdrop upon which her role in community development has been discounted in the past eighteen years.

The time has come to change the lukewarm attitude and embrace community development that invariably should see a new political equilibrium and intensive decision making in our society. One sure way to do that is to get back to the drawing board and begin the political mapping of our communities to ensure greater participation among women in our political life. The local government is one sure place to start

from; being a recruiting and training point in our democratic setting it promises – if properly harnessed by the Nigerian woman – to serve as the entry point into the Nigerian political stage and a viable option for community development and decision making. For too long, the Nigerian woman has spoken more in whispers, now is the time for her to take her rightful place in the Nigerian political arena. Therefore it's time to cast one critical look at her political performance since 1999 and come to one unmistakable conclusion, that her performance has been very low. The realization of that position should, therefore, form the springboard upon which her stand in the forthcoming elections in 2019 should be hinged.

Year in year out, we witness a gathering of this nature to celebrate the woman. But it seems that the enthusiasm generated by the Beijing declaration has fizzled out and what is left is merely a yearly exercise, a ritual to commemorate that day. Have we forgotten Ese Oruru who was abducted from Bayelsa State and married off in Kano? Have we forgotten the alleged marriage of Senator Ahmed Yerima to a 13 year old girl? Have we forgotten that no matter how generous anyone can be, the best bargain is invariably that which is demanded? The time has come to ensure the effective development of our core values. It begins with the development of our communities through an effective decision making mechanism, the time to change the assertive posture of the male is now.





MARCHING WITH WOMEN ON MARCH 8, 2018

This year's women day makes a strong call to "Press for Progress". "A strong call to motivate and unite friends, colleagues and whole communities to think, act and be "gender inclusive". In collaboration with Eco Assurance and Rural Transformation Centre (Eco Trace) and Our Lady's of Visitation Nursery and Primary School, we on March 8, 2018 gathered about forty-five (45) women and ten (10) men from different backgrounds together to examine Critical challenges women face and we collectively called for action and lasting solutions with the aid of the media. In order to address the pressing issues in our chosen location for the event we focused on issues around "Press for Progress: Enhancing Women's Participation in Community Development Decision Making" which gave women the opportunity to express their concerns in their various communities as regards to their exclusion from participating in decision making. The event featured welcome addresses, goodwill messages and a presentation well taken by prominent women and men in the society working to advance the

rights of women generally. Addressing the women, Rev. Katerine Oparaji of Our Lady of Visitation Nursery and Primary School lamented lack of concern for women, noting that many people are not conscious about the International Women's Day and that whenever women are celebrated the world is celebrated. She encouraged women to celebrate themselves because "women" have amazing personalities, hence their achievements must be celebrated. "Women don't retire from services" she stressed. Encouraging the women, she hinted that, they should look forward to what they can achieve before the next International Women's Day is celebrated in 2019 and advised that CODAF and EcoTrace advocacy efforts need to be supported and strengthened. How women are treated in the western world is far different from the reality on ground here in Nigeria as a developing country. Women are still being marginalized at the community level Oparaji reiterated, while calling for a special intervention program to address the exclusion of women from decision making and governance.

Building on the strong call made by Rev. Oparaji Katerine, the Executive Director of Eco Trace, Nohwo Fred gave a long history of how women have been celebrated globally dating back to

twentieth century (1908) and overview of women's achievement in different categories and different parts of the world. While calling for the entire month of March to be used to celebrate women globally he lamented the obvious exclusion of women from holding political offices noting only few women in the society are giving the opportunity to contest owing to the fact that women have the highest record of registered voters. He called for gender balanced society where women and men are given equal opportunities and therefore tasked women to wake up and take up their rightful position in the society.

Building on the strong call made by Rev. Oparaji Katerine, a goodwill message from Oduh Edafe Unuezi reawakened the hope of women in strengthening their commitment to a better society. Oduh Unuezi, who spoke prophetically as if he was giving a sermon in church, tasked the women not to be discouraged, that the doors for women to play active role in politics and decision making are already opening while citing the achievements of women leaders globally and the history behind their emergence. While making case for the women that participated in the event that they can still lead in political offices if they are determine to lead, he applauded the tremendous progress and achievements of Nigerian women particularly in Delta State who have excelled in leadership and activist roles. Women such as Prof Grace Alele Williams, Mrs Amkio Lulu Briggs, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala and noted that “indeed, Delta women have blazed the trail in women empowerment”. “The recent kidnap of innocent girls from their school - Government Science and Technical Girls College in Dapchi, Yobe State, shows a lack of care and protection of our young women and mothers of tomorrow”. Oduh Edafe challenged the government to do everything possible to get the girls back from the hands of the terrorists while wishing the women a very blissful 2018 International women day celebration. He concluded by submitting himself to the care, protection and support for women and pledged to champion their course in terms of empowerment and gender justice.

Princess Tessy Mukoro while making presentation titled: “Press for Progress: Enhancing Women's Participation in

Community Development Decision Making” stated that the Nigerian census of 1991, places women at 49.7% of the nation's population. But in 2006 the National Population Census revealed that women make up to 48.78% by the various censuses, yet women are under- represented almost in all aspects of the nation's economy such as, Politics, Education, Agriculture, Business etc. She frowned at the preference given to male over female children even at birth lamenting that the exclusion of women starts from the day a women is born into this earth as she is relegated to the societal role of home keeping to the detriment of their wider participation in community development. “In this area woman are often excluded from participating in policy formulation and decision making process even in issues that affect them directly. Many reasons explain this: cultural rules, inferior status the society accords them, women depending too much on men even in matters they can handle without stress”.



Concluding her presentation on a very applaudive mood, Tessy Mukoro made the call that it is time for women to be independent with thoughts and deeds but it has to start with the way they see themselves. She informed them that “as women you deserve love, respect, attention, affection because you are special, unique, strong, industrious, powerful, intelligent, smart and have a say in issues that concern the world” and encouraged them to be liberated from mental slavery.

The program toed a different path when the women were told to express their concerns on challenges they are faced with in the society. Mrs. Ivwurie Efosa lamented lack of support from her husband for her to participate in politics at the same time Mrs. Omotekoba Victoria advised all

mothers to train up their daughters to have interest in politics and leadership positions as a way of covering for the privileges they never had in participating actively in decision making. The forum also called mothers to train up their male children to have values for women and hence help their wives to succeed politically while enhancing their leadership potentials.

A captivating story was told by Mrs. Catechist Otuagoma on how she struggled to have a level of education. At a times when the girl-child education was accorded little value and being the only girl in the family, her parents directed all attention at the training of her male siblings to her utter negligence. The story according to her, was to encourage women to break out of the yoke of discrimination and marginalization against women.

Being the first child of her parents, she was denied the right to education, as it is a traditional belief that girls are not expected to be trained since they will bear someone else's name when they get married. She said, while her four younger brothers were attending school, she and her mother were busy with the farm work or her parents would make her sit at home and do the entire domestic works. She felt like a slave in her father's house. Her brothers

had already finished their University Education and she didn't even know how to spell her own name which to her was a very big embarrassment. To make matters worse was the part where she uses her hand to thumb print in place of signature. One day, while alone at home, she cried loudly and told herself that she cannot remain like this, she went to a nearby school and enrolled herself as a student and today she's a teacher.

She further appealed that, there should also be more programs like this to help sensitize the men folks to know the importance of educating the girl-child in our society, as it a great disservice to humanity for the girl child not be educated.





AN ENCOUNTER WITH A FEMALE HUNTER

The Community Development Advocacy Foundation (CODAF), a non-governmental organization marked the 2016 World Environment Day with various actors in the society. The theme for the event (Zero Tolerance to Illegal trade on Wildlife) was a very unique one because it attracted participants from all sectors, academic, religious groups, farmers, government officials, traders association, and Nigeria Hunters Association. Of all the groups that were present at the World Environment Day Event at Ogba Zoological Garden, Benin-City, the presence of the Nigeria's Hunters Association was quite thrilling to us. The famous Hunters of about one hundred (100) persons made it known that they had new means of Hunting and selective exploitation among them. The means they have been using to checkmate illegal hunting are through provisions of guards for their forests and imposing an outrageous fine on defaulters of their rules.

An interesting experience we had with the hunters was when we encountered a-Sixty (60) year Female Hunter, Ms, Felicia Ogbo, who hails from Ora in Owan West Local Government Area of Edo State. She was the only female member among the 100 Hunters

that participated at the event. She worked as a civil servant in the early seventies but later she left the service into farming since it was more productive then. Ms, Ogbo is a single mother to a daughter after losing her husband to the cold hands of death after few years of being married together.

CODAF field officer that interviewed the female Hunter confirmed that she has been in the hunting business for well over forty (40) years. Speaking on why she picked up interest in Hunting, Felicia



Ogbo told our Field Officer that her interest of going into hunting came up during her adventure into the forest to collect herbs for soup making, she said the first animal she caught in her life was Pangolin which was caught with her bare hands and a piece of rag, based on a story she had been told by her Grandmother who was not a Hunter but an experienced old woman that understood the characteristics of various animals that “Pangolin folds and become harmless each time it encountered a human”.

Each time she takes on her herb collection journey into the forest, she is usually blessed with either a dead animal that probably escaped from the attack of a Hunter or a trapped animal in a point of no return. Being a lucky woman she collected numerous Antelopes, Rabbits etc from this process.

Having killed various animals from her adventures into the forest for herbs, her interest to go into full-time hunting was enhanced when she came across an abandoned locally made gun in the forest.

She placed moral values into her hunting adventures by ensuring that she avoids the shooting/killing of female animals, pregnant and nursing animals were inclusive. The idea behind this is that, when the population of female animals is on the decline then, the generation of such animal species is threatened. As a female hunter in the Association of hundreds of other hunters, she ensured that this principle of not hunting female animals was adopted as one of the regulations of the Nigeria Hunters Association with heavy fine on defaulters.

She stated clearly that “for one to go into hunting he/she must first understand how you, as a hunter, fit into the greater scheme of conservation. Hunting is like going to school, one is faced with the challenge of first knowing the names of animals as well as their history, their cultural values and their habitat at every giving time.

Ms. Felicia lamented that their position in conservation of wildlife is overlooked by government because government tend to see them as major culprits in extinction of wild

animal species. ”We are very happy that we are getting this platform to express our concern; we are willing to be engaged by the government for them to learn from our passion for wildlife conservation” Felicia Ogbo stated. Speaking further she said the major culprits are the Multinational Corporations, the land grabbers and destroyers of our forest are Government not the Hunters. The female hunter noted that their local laws are still valuable and that they work with it.

Government should engage hunters by empowering them to continue to conserve wildlife, with the available local norms and the laws set up by Forestry Commission are sufficient.

Concluding, she called for their capacity to be strengthened so that more awareness can be raised while they recruit professional hunters who will abide by their principles.

A SPEECH PRESENTED BY ENGR. ODUH E D A F E U N U E Z I AT THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2018

I want to sincerely thank Community Development Advocacy Foundation (CODAF) for putting this program together and Our Lady's of Visitation Nursery and Primary for hosting this epic event.

As the world marks this year's International Women's Day, I'd like to use this medium to congratulate our women on this occasion. The International Women Days is celebrated on the 8th of March every year across the globe, commemorating the political social and economic achievements of women, as well as act as a catalyst for change when it comes to gender equality

This year's theme - press for progress to help accelerate gender parity is very apt. It reminds us and highlights the fact that despite the seeming progress made so far, there is still so much left to be done. I'd like to appreciate the tremendous progress and achievements of Nigerian women particularly in our beloved state who have excelled in leadership and activist roles. Women such as Prof Grace Alele Williams, Mrs Amkio



Lulu Briggs, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala
Indeed, Delta women have blazed the trail in women empowerment.

Overtime, and even till this day, women have had to live with and surmount various challenges. At the home front, women are mothers, everyone of us men and women alike, were given birth to by women, they are also wives - dutifully meeting the conjugal needs of their husbands, not to forget that our women act as cooks - providing nourishment for their husbands, children, relatives and friends. Despite this fulltime household job, the woman today is also actively engaged in a delicate balance jostling the onerous responsibilities of the home and a regular job at the office / business enterprise. This no doubt, highlights the incredible strength and grace of the Nigerian woman. Added to this is the stereotyping of women in some Nigerian societies which depict a lack of appreciation of the work the Nigerian woman does.

Other challenges today, include the recent kidnap of our innocent girls from their school - Government Science and Technical Girls College in Dapchi, Yobe State, showing a lack of care and protection of our young women and

mothers of tomorrow. I therefore like to use this medium to call on the government to do everything possible to get those girls back from the hands of the terrorists.

I therefore re-commit myself today to the care, protection, and support of women and pledge to champion the course of women empowerment and gender justice.

I wish you a very blissful 2018 International women day celebration



CODAF is focused on environmental and community development advocacy work in Nigeria to bridge the communication gap between policy makers and the grassroots.

Thematic Areas

Community Action

Agriculture

Environment

Gender And Youth
Action

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