

Extended Abstract

Overtime, apart from cultural and religious factors, the economic status of women in Nigeria had been the major limitation to their development and aspirations. This situation was worsened by the low literacy rate amongst the women folk during this period which had great implication for their socio-political and economic development. Moreover, the gradual decline of the fortunes of Nigeria from the early 1980s and the implementation of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank blueprint for development by the Babangida administration in the form of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), further impoverished Nigerians and in particular the women. Hence the poverty level of the Nigerian woman was exacerbated and her self-esteem further shrunk. On the national level, the problem of the country was ever increasing and compounded. The country was economically emasculated by extraneous conditions. However, some believed that the country could do well by handling some of these problems from within and in her own way instead of relying on the prescriptions of international monopoly finance capitalists or help from other foreign bodies.

The 1980s was the high point of this advocacy and it was within these calls to initiate domestic but effective strategies especially for women empowerment that the Better Life Programme for Rural Women, a concept of the former first lady, Mrs. Maryam Babangida to alleviate poverty and enhance the financial base and economic independence of rural women and women amongst others was initiated. In line with this objective, several poverty alleviation measures were put in place including the establishment of markets, micro-finance houses, and women associations, such as Nigeria army wives association, Police wives associations, etc, to cater for the welfare of women, create business opportunities and access to small loan facilities especially for women. It was within these objectives also that several developmental programmes were initiated in Lagos State which included, the establishments of markets, Community Banks, skill acquisition Centre, small scale businesses, such as craft, tailoring, bakery, establishment of eateries, restaurants, farms and women associations such as the Police wives association Lagos wing, among others. Indeed, the importance of all these measures in any economy cannot be over emphasized. They were all created to provide access to business opportunities, small loan facilities and general empowerment of women.

This study is therefore intended to understand the impact of the programme, its intractable and recurrent challenges using Lagos State as a reference point. The aftermath of the Better Life initiative was that the concept was copied by subsequent first ladies and administrations in Nigeria without the in-depth understanding of the principles and dynamics which underpinned it. This study therefore presents one of the first conscious efforts at investigating and understanding the nature and dynamics, as well as assessment of the overall objectives for which the Better Life Programme was set up. It is also a study that will enrich the literature on women empowerment strategies and their effectiveness. The study is divided into three sections, the first section explores the socio-economic situation of the Nigerian women; the second investigates the socio-economic needs of Nigerian women and efforts at improving their living standard through the Better Life Initiative. This work is a study in women empowerment that covers nearly a decade. It has time dimension; therefore, the historical method is adopted. The methodology covers data collection, analysis and presentation. On data collection, the research is based heavily on primary sources which include, oral information from officials of the Better Life Programme, academics, traders, both men and women and official of Ojodu L. C.D.A., residents of Ikeja Local government as well as a cross section of Lagosians. Official documents from both the Ojodu L. C.D.A office, Better Life Programme Unit and Women Commission shall also be employed. Secondary sources are also employed. They include, journal articles, books from the relevant disciplines amongst others. The work also

draws from other relevant disciplines such as economics, sociology and the health sciences. In analysis and interpretation, the research employs the multidisciplinary approach, the thematic and chronological style. The study commences from 1987, which marks the establishment of the Better Life for Rural Women of the Babangida administration. It terminates in 1999, the beginning of a democratic government so as to place side by side the gain of the military era and the dividends of a democratic regime. In terms of space, the study will limit its focus on Lagos State.