

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Women in the development of Ibani (Opobo) kingdom: 1990 to 2000

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**Advancement is one common goal of groups and nations. Its direct effect on society cannot be over-emphasized, hence the argument for the holistic contribution from every segment. In Opobo kingdom, a community described as disadvantaged, the low participation of women in the development and advancement of the kingdom is regarded as a bane militating against the complete advancement of the society. To ameliorate this, this paper examines the impediments and posits a change of attitude if the challenge of advancement is perceived as a collective effort of all stakeholders.**

**Key words:** Advancement, impediments, Opobo kingdom, women participation in development.

## INTRODUCTION

The phrase “educationally disadvantaged states” was coined in the 70s, but could be considered to be a relative term. Indeed within a so-called advantaged state, an area or a group could be conspicuously disadvantaged and Opobo was educationally disadvantaged, within the advantaged old Rivers State. Opobo is comparatively disadvantaged, in quite a lot of areas.

The author should make it clear that when we talk about advancement, we mean advancement in all aspects of life, in all ramifications, in all endeavours. It includes not only politics, but education, business and the arts (which include areas like music). This we shall address beginning with female education.

## FEMALE EDUCATION IN OPOBO

The importance of education in the advancement of a people cannot be over-emphasized. When you educate a woman, you have educated a whole nation. Education policy in Nigeria published in 1977 was the outcome of efforts that evolved through series of historical developments. One of such initiatives is the 1950 universal declaration of Human Rights which asserted that everyone has a right to education (Denga, 2000: 1). This propelled countries of the world to universalize basic education. Complementary to this is the 1961 African Ministers of Education Conference at Addis Ababa that set 1980 as the target year for all African countries to achieve Universal Primary Education (Bassey, 2000).

Other efforts in Nigeria include a succession of policies that have been introduced by different regimes-military and civilian. The most current however, is the Universal Basic Education (UBE) launched by the Obasanjo led civilian administration on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 1999.

No matter the basis for assessment, the Yoruba are the most sophisticated and advanced of all the culture groups in Nigeria (Koroye, 1989). This is because they largely had, embraced education very early. Thus, many Yoruba young men and women, belong to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> generation of educated people in their families. The levels the women attained, endowed them as wives, mothers etc with good foresight to encourage their children and wards to embrace education and attain greater heights. Can the same be said of the Opobo woman? The author doubt it. Sadly for Opobo kingdom, only a negligible percentage of the girls, who avail themselves of secondary education, eventually have something good to show for the five or six years of schooling. This is particularly so, for the girls at home (those who do not reside in the urban centres with their parents or guardians). Why is this so? This group the study terms the “rural girls”. This is because the majority of all population lives in the rural areas. What happens to the ambition of the rural girl? Majority of them seem to be satisfied with the N.C.E Why can more of them not get into Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO), University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital (UNTH) school of nursing; University of Lagos (UNILAG); University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN), University of Jos (UNIJOS), University of Benin (UNIBEN)? Why can some

not aspire to get into University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT), University of Calabar (UNICAL), University of Uyo (UNIUYO) or some other tertiary institutions? There are even cross border education and conference lectures taking place with people in different nations (Jaja and Opara, 2006). Why must a large percentage aspire to become seamstresses, teachers etc.

The better life programme for rural women was envisaged to improve the lot of the rural women (though the urban women bettered their own lives instead) (Alkali, 1984). One had hoped that the rural girls would benefit from the programmes, seminars, workshops and campaigns, where girls could be guided and counseled with regard to carrier choice. Unfortunately, everybody seemed to forget that it is these rural girls that will, transform into the rural women.

The possibility of organizing such guidance and counseling programmes now falls on the Local Government. Talks and seminars could be organized, aimed at encouraging our young girls to be more ambitious. Forums could or should be created in which our young girls should be made to understand and accept that good education is a key to a lot of things. The desire to compete with girls from other places should be aroused in them. Role models of women, who have succeeded not only in their carriers, but as wives and mothers, should be used to drive the point home. There is the need to stir up in their spirits a burning desire to help put Opobo/Nkoro Local Government Area on the success map of Nigeria. The young girls could be taught that it is possible to be good wives and mothers, in addition to being successful in their chosen carriers as accountants, lawyers, medical doctors, judges, magistrates, university professors, nursing sisters and hospital matrons, bankers, pharmacists and top civil servants. These are not the exclusive preserve of the boys or a few lucky girls. Ambition is what is required in most cases to achieve that. Nature or God has a way of providing or fulfilling what one genuinely and selflessly desires. Scholarships and bursaries can be awarded at the local government level. Philanthropic groups or individuals could award scholarships and bursaries to girls who show special talents as an incentive for our girls to aspire higher.

These days, female children even after marriage, are doing wonderful things in their fathers homes and taking even better care of their parents than the male children do. What then happens after our girls would have acquired laurels educationally? It behooves all citizens, who are in positions to help, to assist them to get good job placements or take off in whatever way possible and begin to rise from there. It will be a gross disservice to the girls and indeed the community to do otherwise.

### **POLITICS AND THE IBANI (OPOBO) WOMAN**

It is unfortunate that Nigeria's political terrain makes it very unattractive for a large percentage of Nigerian

women, especially the politics of the 80's and beyond. During the first republic, politics was practiced on a softer note and so women were gracefully accommodated and we had women like Chief (Mrs.) Margaret Ekpo and Mrs. Janet Mokelu. Party politicking was not so much a cut-throat affair and many husbands were not afraid for their wives, as they went on party campaigns or regional/state or national conventions of their parties. "Money bags" did not necessarily hijack everything for themselves and their chosen few. The kidnapping maiming arson and killing was unknown then. Regrettably, Opobo women did not make any showing during this gentle period in Nigerian politics.

In suggesting a stronger political participation for our women, the first problem envisaged is our men. How much will Opobo men be prepared to concede to their women? How far would the men go to make politics cleaner and safer for their novice or inexperienced women, at the local government level? Will men be ready to see women, as citizens, whose franchise and bright ideas about governance can be made use of instead of remaining buried in their kitchen hearths? If we are sincere about the advancement of Opobo, we cannot make use of only 5% of the women folk and congratulate ourselves that we are making progress.

Even in the Muslim north, women are deliberately encouraged to make state and national limelight. Opobo will have to start projecting its womenfolk before state or national notice can be taken of them. Appointments are made from the local government levels through to the state level. Will the Opobo menfolk be prepared to give their women such chances? Will the men be prepared to send a woman to a forum like the Constituent Assembly or its like, if we find she might do better than a man? We shall have many of such materials after we would have greatly invested and improved upon the educational levels of most of our girls and women, as earlier suggested. Can we allow a woman to try it out as local government area chairman in the next dispensation? Some of our women are quite capable and ambitious, but fear being drowned by sheer male chauvinism and so prefer not to come out. These are women who can hold on their own when it comes to competing with women and even men from other parts of the state and country. Women like Mr. Eugenia Pepple popularly known as Ma Ayadede was one Opobo woman that was bold, confident, intelligent, educated and a born leader, but unfortunately she played no party politics, but made mark as a women leader and social mobilizer. Such women, if given a chance from home base, could help put not only the Opobo woman, but all Opobo kingdom on the national map politically.

As we strive to advance our society, we should thinkout the possibilities of helping to evolve more politically conscious Opobo womenfolk. As one Nigerian musician sang, "give women a chance". The challenge is that of change for the better. We in Opobo must give our women

a chance to serve the people.

### **IBANI (OPOBO) WOMEN AND BUSINESS**

Business is an area, where the Opobo woman has not made an in-road. Is it the availability of seed money to take off that is responsible? Or is it that business is somewhat basically alien to women? Whatever the reason, it is time to have a rethink. In today's world, a place cannot claim to have fully developed, if it has not made it in business. It is business that practically opens up places, such as the establishment of industries, small, medium or large scale. The Ibani of Bonny is a good example (Jaja, 2006). By business, one does not mean buying and selling only. Jaja (2003: 219) had shown that Opobo women engaged in long distance and local trade. There is business in medical or pharmaceutical practice; there is business in farming as Jaja and Brown (2002) had shown. No wonder the colonial government exploited farming (Jaja and Orji, 2006). The Better Life Programme would have formed the nuclei for the building up of some businesses for our rural women here in Opobo. In Elele, Ogoni and Ogu/Bolo, women were taught soap making, cloth dyeing, animal husbandry and the like. Women therefore formed themselves into groups to establish such small businesses and now the growing girls, some of whom might be described as the rural women of tomorrow, are fast learning the skills and will keep the businesses going in future. It is therefore clear that the women do not need millions to get into business. They do not all need to live in the urban centres to be business women. All the women of Opobo need are to have somebody to mobilize, teach and guide them as to what they can get engaged in. And the role men have to play is to provide encouragement and capital that will help the women start off. The women need a leader, who is sincere, honest and dedicated that the programme can be entrusted to. There are also men who are philanthropic enough to want to help realize such a goal. The local government itself could champion the cause and not only provide some money for it, but also help to co-ordinate and mobilize the necessary funds.

As for Opobo women abroad (that is, living outside home in the urban centres), they should try and draw inspiration from women of other areas, who are in business. Once there is a will, there will always be a way. Opobo men should encourage their wives in every way possible including to get into business. Brothers, uncles, relations, should also encourage their female relations whether married or not, to get into business and help set them up. This is how it happens in other places. Opobo men who are in positions to facilitate the flow should help women to get started. Whether or not they know them before and most importantly without strings attached. That way we can truly become our brothers' and sisters' keepers. Then and only then, can Opobo women stand

up to be counted when it comes to developing our area. The women can then confidently form sororities and associations of all types that would help carry out several types of projects, for the development of various sections of Opobo. The bottom line therefore, is that, the men alone cannot develop Opobo. The women have a role to play and business is one of the surest ways of achieving this.

### **THE IBANI (OPOBO) WOMAN IN MISCELLANEOUS AREAS**

Miscellaneous here refer to music, football and other activities that could launch individuals to limelight/celebrity. Music by female Nigerian artistes and stars like Onyeka Onwenu and Nelly Uchendu, to name just a couple of them, have variously thrilled us. These women have made their mark by utilizing their talents well and have had the support of their families, to enable them reach their present status. Unfortunately, the Opobo woman like many African women had not reached the level of self-reliance, with strong determination to succeed without men through individual effort. This is the embodiment of the "New woman". According to Stageman (1974: 92)

*"The new woman represents a theory of personhood where the individual exists as an independent entity rather than her kinship relations, where she has a responsibility to realize her potential for happiness rather than to accept her role, where she has indefinable value rather than quantitative financial worth and where she must reason about her own values rather than fit into a stereotyped tradition".*

This portrait is at cross-purposes with the African values that are often oppressive and submerging. The Opobo woman is yet to reach this level of self-realization of course. We all enjoy being entertained by women. The question is, are we prepared to give such moral and other support to our wives and daughters and other female relations if they show such talents? Are we willing to allow this feminist idea blossom? Would we not try to make them drown such talents by telling them it is only wayward girls who get into show business? The result of such negative disposition is that such girls may become condemned to doing things that they were not talented to do, and would thereafter live miserable lives. Girls that have such talents should be encouraged to develop them to full potential. Menfolk should counsel and guide them to utilize their talents fruitfully and decently. Role models and accomplished personalities in the chosen line should be used as reference points and inspiration to challenge them to exceed and perfect their talents. Images have been shown to be very effective in illuminating history (Jaja and Brown, 2005).

Female football is another area that has thrown up stars. The team members of Rivers Angels and Bayelsa queens are peoples' daughters. Today, these female players are household names like those of J. J. Okocha, Kanu Nwankwo, Peter Rufai, Rashid Yekini, Emmanuel Amuneke; Nigeria's female team has made an impact internationally; these young girls are now national heroes and naturally millionaires. Can we in Opobo allow our girls to be tomboyish enough to play football with the boys at their tender age? Will we not try to snuff out the talent, just at its nascent stage? That could be one way of helping to put Opobo on the map, who knows?

The author's advice is no matter what "strange" talent your daughter or female relation has, be careful to examine it properly, analyze the pros and cons and think of ways the talent could be developed.

In this paper, the relevance of the woman to the advancement of Opobo kingdom was analyzed. The problems militating against effective participation were discussed including the role of the woman in societal advancement.

In conclusion, the author submits that in striving to develop Opobo, the woman has a very significant role to play. She must march along with the man, for no one single half can successfully stand alone. It is nature's law that two opposing halves must make a whole that the thesis must join with the antithesis to produce synthesis, which is more stable. When two points meet, the third point is made manifest. So it is, with the advancement of Opobo; the womenfolk must complement the menfolk to manifest the third point, which is Opobo's success.

The study have examined the role of the woman in the advancement of Opobo under four subheads:

a. Education: Opobo indigenes should aim at giving the young girls good education and encourage them to attain greater heights by becoming medical doctors, engineers, accountants, lawyers, university lecturers, high grade nurses and top civil servants.

b. Politics: Opobo should start projecting more of her women in politics, by first giving them chances at the local government level and thereafter project nationally, those who have talent and ability to represent the community well.

c. Business: For true socio-economic advancement, a community must make it in business and in this regard, women should be encouraged and helped to embrace business on whatever scale, small, medium or large.

d. Miscellaneous: Budding talents among our young girls in areas like female football, music and the arts generally, should not be nipped in the bud but encouraged and guided to reach the limelight. This, it is hoped will address the missing-link in the complete advancement of a disadvantaged society.

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