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COUNSELLING: AN ADVOCACY FOR BALANCING GENDER DISPARITY FOR SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

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Abstract
Gender disparity has become an issue for global concern, especially in developing societies like Nigeria. Worried by this prevailing scenario of gender disparity, this paper examines counseling as an advocacy for balancing gender disparity for sustainable national development. The paper, through extensive literature review, unearths several challenges to sustainable national development arising from the lopsided treatment meted out to women thus hampering their contributions to national development. The paper, relying on the immense roles of counseling and the counselor as an advocate, recommends effective gender mainstreaming and balancing using workshop, seminar, symposia and the likes to effectively position women in popular potentials in sustainable national development.

Keywords: Counselling, Advocacy, Gender Disparity, Gender Equality, Sustainable National Development.

Introduction

The challenges of building pathways to sustainable national development and balancing gender disparity have been a problem facing many countries of the world. The centrality of gender equality, women's empowerment and the realization of women's rights in achieving sustainable development has been increasingly recognized in recent decades. Promoting

gender equality is now globally accepted as a development strategy for reducing poverty levels among women and men. The attainment of gender equality is not just as an end in itself; it has evolved as a human right issue, and a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development (Federal Women of Foreign Affairs, 2006). It further states that African governments have equally responded positively to the burden of under-development by instituting continent-specific development goals and strategies. These initiatives are linked with other international agreements, precisely the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Some of these goals include the promotion of gender equality, and empowerment of women. This recognition is evident in a number of international norms and agreements, including principle 20 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, adopted in 1992, in its statement regarding the full participation of women being essential to achieving sustainable development. Rio 20 Declarations states that women have vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development.

The centrality of gender equality has also been articulated in the outcome document of the United Nations conference on sustainable economic development, titled ''The Future we want'', adopted in 2012, which included recognition of the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment across the three pillars of sustainable development, namely: economic, social and environmental, and resolved to promoting gender equality and women's full participation in sustainable development policies, programme, and decision making of all levels, (General Assembly Resolution 66/288, Annex). Dipo-Salami (2009) reports that gender equality is very central to sustainable development and very critical to the new paradigm on inclusive and sustainable development in both the long and medium terms. It explains further that gender equity and women empowerment help to mitigate the effect of the current global crises. The marginalization of women which has resulted in gender disparity around the world is a reflection of bad economy because studies have shown that countries with greater gender equality tend to have lower poverty rate (Dipo-Salami, 2001).

General disparity is a challenge that impedes efforts towards attainment of sustainable national development. In order to meet these challenges, a right based and gender-specific approach is necessary. As gender disparity is the major cause of poverty and impediment to sustainable development, it becomes very pertinent to balance the disparity, which cannot be achieved without the services of a professional counselor. Balancing gender disparity means creating employment opportunities, improving the social and economic situation of marginalized groups among others, having access to social services, engaging in entrepreneurship and having control over productive resources. Based on this, gender equality in the labour market is generally explored by analyzing opportunity of employment and wages for men and women. Thus, gender disparity is balanced through initiating gender equality, such as female education and women's share of employment; hence, this can have a positive impact on economic growth and development. Sequel to the above assertion, Kabeer and Natali (2013) state that balancing gender disparity is dependent on the district composition of women's employment and labour market division, instilling gender discrimination among other factors. In agreement to the above statement, Parmanyer (2015) expresses that gender discrimination in employment practices is rising on the radar scream. Quoting Parmanyer in extensor, unless gender equality is attained, it will hinder sustainable

development. However, the underlying causes of discrimination can be addressed through promoting changes in legal structures, including property rights provisions, inheritance law, divorce laws and family codes, and engaging in cultural exchanges and communication campaigns through counseling services to influence public opinion towards more gender equity, ensuring labour representation and minimum wages for women in agricultural and manufacturing industries. These strategies must not ignore the crucial role of men, who may require compensation or offsetting initiatives if they tend to lose status from the reforms (OECD, 2006). Moreover, for all these to be achieved counseling services need to be effectively integrated to provide the needed motivation and driving force.

In addition to eradicating gender disparity, attention should be paid to the practical and strategic needs of men and women; hence, this could be done by engaging the services of a professional counselor. Through this means, a road map to gender equality would be drawn by incorporating counseling programmes and planning, which will involve families, schools, organizations, government, and religious groups. In order to streamline the patterns for curbing gender disparity, these programmes will effectively strive for equal access to different kinds of resources (natural, political, economical and educational) and equal control over resources and benefits in order to achieve sustainable national development. Significantly, guidance and counseling will serve as a reflection in increasing awareness through seminars, sensitization, radio jingles, symposia, among others on gender equality and empowerment of vulnerable groups, which are important criteria for promoting sustainable national development.

Conceptual Insight

The counselor perspective

Most societal problems arise as a result of poor handling and lack of expert ideas to the solution. In all areas of life, counselors are needed to aid and solve the ever growing problems of society; for instance, the problem of gender disparity can be handled, redressed and ameliorated through counseling services. This can be done by a professional counselor, through family orientation, school/church seminars, government and organizational symposia and public sensitization. The counselor will enumerate the need and importance of gender equality right from the core family bases through school orientation, radio sensitization, among others. However, school counselors should rise to the responsibility of creating gender awareness in schools for a better school environment and society. According to Egbo (2008), a counselor is a professionally trained person, who has acquired the necessary skills and strategies in helping people out of their problems at all levels in life. Counselors are needed in the course of seeking survival and solution to their problems because, most times, these problems are many for human solutions, hence, the need arises for people who are more knowledgeable and better equipped with skills and techniques to handle the problems. Syed (2017) sees a counselor as an individual who understands the feelings of a client and treats it as a fact, keeps all information confidential, facilitates discussions on the issues in question, builds self-esteem of the client, reassures if the client is insecure, solicits the client's own feelings and ideas for solutions, shows empathy and care to the client, has patience, does not get distracted during interaction with client, builds confidence, and considers the client's long and medium term goals.

Guidance and counseling is defined as a planned and organized work aimed at assisting trainees to understand themselves and their abilities; develop and achieve psychological, social, educational, and professional compatibility, and also to achieve objective within the framework of teachings (Syed, 2017). In that connection guidance is the process of guiding, supervising, directing a person for a particular course of action while counseling is defined as a therapy in which a person (client) discusses freely his/her problems and shares feelings, with the counselor, who advises or helps the client in dealing with the problems (Syed, 2017). It focuses on a person's strengths, environmental interactions, educational background, career development and personality. The counselor pays ample and apt attention to the client's problems with empathy and confidentially discusses clearly the root of the problems and proffers possible solutions to the issues. The counselor helps the clients to x-ray the possible consequences of an action, and chooses the right decision towards a particular course of action. This guide will help the client to remain intuitive, affirmative and optimistic in the future. Based on the context of this research work, the counselor needs to implement identification of and follow up strategies for client gender-based approach with clients. counsellors should work with families and communities in creating awareness of gender-based approach towards balancing gender disparities. They should help families, society and government to understand the long term consequences of gender disparities, which are geared towards poor/low sustainable national development. Counseling as an advocacy for balancing gender disparities for sustainable national development cannot be overemphasized as it eradicates gender discrimination for a better future. Sustainable national development could be achieved through balancing gender disparities with the help of a counselor who can form parents' fora in schools in order to reach a large number of parents as care givers on the issue of gender discrimination. When parents rob minds in such fora, it will have an impact towards reducing discrimination.

Counselling is also a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education and career goals, (American Counselling Association, 2014). Counseling is the process of helping individuals discover and develop their educational, vocational and psychological potentials thereby achieving an optimal level of personal happiness and social usefulness (Ejike, 2014). The principal goal of counseling is to focus on building psychological strength and wellbeing and to resolve specific difficulties. Clients are assisted to take greater control of their lives by developing new perspectives and understanding, and to manage difficult emotional experiences more effectively and to think and behave in new ways (Conradie, Smit & Malan, 2016). These areas include; personal, social and psycho-social counseling, which have become very important in promoting well being, alleviating distress, enhancing coping skills, social support/social integration and enhancing sustainable national development. Counseling helps to improve the self-image and self-esteem of youths and foster achievement in their life traits. Counseling empowers every individual irrespective of gender to participate fully in and benefit from the socio-economic development of the nation. In summary, counseling is, therefore, perceived as a specialized helping process whereby information is disseminated to a group or to individuals so as to effectively engage them in interactions that will lead to finding solutions to their problems as well as making decisions for a better and more stable future.

Gender

The most popular understanding of the concept of gender presently revolves around the issue of role assignment because society has culturally defined roles individuals should play in terms of their gender. Nnadi (2018) defines gender as the assignment of roles based on masculinity or femininity because society culturally perceives gender to be roles individuals should play in terms of their sex. For instance, strenuous jobs are meant for males and household jobs are meant for females. Nnadi's definition of gender draws from Arusi (2017) who considers gender as a set of attributes which social, cultural and psychological, along with characteristics, qualities, behaviour, roles and responsibilities, which are assigned to females and males in different societies. Arusi avers that gender determines the status of male and female as being superior and inferior. In other words, gender is a culturally defined role individuals play in society as a result of values, norms, customs and laws. Oxford Advanced Dictionary of Current English 8th Edition, views gender as the fact of being male or female, especially when considered in regard to social and cultural differences. Eze and Okoro (2010) in Ezeokeke (2019) describe gender as a specially constructed phenomenon that is brought about as society ascribes different roles, behaviour and mannerism to the two sexes. Adams (2018) defines gender as culturally and socially constructed differences between men and women as indicated by terms such as gender affairs that vary from place to place and time to time. Ezeokeke (2019) further states that gender is used to analyze the roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs of men and women in all areas and in any given context. Additionally, Syndy (2020) defines gender as the social roles that men and women play and the power relations between them, which usually have a profound effect on the use and management of natural resources. He further states that gender is not based on sex, or the biological differences between men and women. Gender rather is shaped by culture, social relations, and natural environments, (Syndy, 2020). WHO (2018) concur that gender is the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles and relationships between groups of women and men. According to WHO, gender varies from society to society. Congruence to the above definition, UNESCO (2018) describe gender as the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, our society and cultures. The concept of gender also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, attitude and likely behaviour of both men and women. It needs to be noted that gender roles and expectations are learned, thus they can change over time and they vary within and between cultures. Anchoring on the above, UNESCO, affirm that gender roles could be modified through systems of social differentiation such as political status, class, ethnicity, physical and mental disability and age analysis. It reveals how the subordination of women can be changed or evaded. Acknowledging gender differences is not enough, but more importantly is recognizing counseling as an advocacy for stimulating and facilitating efforts to overcome constraints and taking advantage of opportunities to promote gender equality. Sex is a biological make up or composition of organism or individual this biological make up can include the presence of some organs or hormones like virginal, penis, progesterone and testosterone. Gender been a social construct should not be misconstrued with sex.

Gender Disparity

Gender disparity entails differences in women's and men's access to resources, status and well-being, which usually favour men and are often institutionalized through law, justice and social norms (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020). Gender disparity, according to

Lumen (2020), refers to unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender. It arises from differences in socially constructed gender roles. Gender disparities often stem from social structures that have institutionalized conceptions of gender differences through marginalization of some groups of people. Gender stereotypes are possible explanation for gender inequality and the resulting gendered wage disparity. Human Rights Watch (2017) define gender disparity as the unequal and biased gender-specific treatment between two sexes.

Gender disparity can be viewed as gender inequality or gender discrimination which refers to unfair rights between male and female based on different gender roles, which leads to unequal treatment in life (Uche & Ejike, 2016). Contextually, gender disparity simply refers to the lopsidedness, disequilibrium and differentials in the roles attributed to both males and females and which is always skewed in favour of males as against females.

Sustainable National Development

Sustainable National development is geared towards present and future achievements. National development, according to Tolu and Abe (2011), is the social process by which a nation harnesses, and mobilizes all resources (human and material) available to it for the purpose of positively transforming its environment and ultimately improving the qualitative, social, economic, and political life of its citizenry. It is a comprehensive procedure, comprising the joint work and endeavours of people. Diprete and Buchanan (2013) observe that for any nation to be termed developed, there must be equity in gender wage labour, zero gender discrimination and complete gender equality. Therefore, a nation's development and its sustainability depend wholly on the practice of gender equality and gender mainstreaming in all facets of life activities.

Sustainable development, on the other hand, has been defined by many in various ways. Wanamaker (2018) defines sustainable development as economic, social and environmental development that ensures the well being and dignity of humans, ecological integrity, gender equality and social justice, now and in the future. Ufobi (2018) views sustainable development as a holistic approach and temporal process that lead us to the end point of sustainability. Therefore, it defines sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need. In congruence to the above assertion, Garofoh (2014) sees sustainable development as a construct, which envisions development as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generations. Iloh (2015) sees sustainable development as a requirement for balancing environmental, societal and economic considerations in the pursuit of development and an improved quality of life. To achieve sustainable development, government has to recognize the services of counselors in helping to eradicate gender disparity in the country.

Sustainable national development is geared towards the realization and enhancement of individual potentials in the national economy, which would also contribute to the development of a nation and such development, should be sustainable over time (Noor, Ramayah, Hasliza & Syed, 2017). The most interesting aspect of sustainable development is the fact that it puts into consideration the present conditions of people as well as not

compromising those that come later. Therefore, the concept of sustainable national development remains the modern parameter of measuring development. In another definition by Munasinghe (2004), he asserts that sustainable national development is a process of improving the range of opportunities that will enable people and communities to achieve their aspirations and full potential over a sustained period of time while maintaining resilience of economic, social and environmental systems. A nation is said to attain sustainable development when it has reached a level of equilibrium in economical, social and environmental factors of her economy. But when there is high degree of hunger, poverty, insecurity, dysfunctional education among others, in any nation, as a result of gender disparity, the idea of sustainable development cannot function effectively and this may yield to numerous challenges.

Related to the above, sustainability, in simple terms, is the ability to exist constantly. It refers generally to the capacity for the biosphere and human civilization to co-exist. It may also be viewed contextually as the process of people maintaining change in a homeostasis balanced environment, in such a manner that the exploitation of resources, the direction of investment, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.

Relationship between Gender Disparity and Sustainable Development

Achieving sustainable development through gender mainstreaming has been increasingly recognized in recent years; hence, gender equality has become a fundamental factor for achieving sustainable development goals worldwide. However, linking gender disparity and sustainable development is very important as the two tend to address moral and ethical conduct of society. In achieving a just and sustainable development, there is the dire need to strike a gender balance, enforce human rights, and dignify women. Secondly, there is also the need to adjust existing unequal economic, social and environmental hitches and stresses on women and girls, which frustrate the enjoyment of their human rights and their vital roles in sustaining their families and communities. Thirdly and most notably, it is vital to build up women's agencies and capabilities to create better connection between gender equality and sustainable development outcomes. Indeed, there is evidence of synergies between gender equality and economic development. For example, when women have greater voice, participation and access to public resources, they are more likely to be allocated towards investments in human development priorities, including child health, nutrition and access to employment (Chattopadhyay & Dulfo, 2004). Ensuring women have access to and control over agricultural assets and production resources are important for achieving food security and sustainable livelihoods (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation (FAO, 2011). Female headed households spend a far larger share of their income on food, health care and education, so that financial assistance to mothers has greater beneficial effect on family health than income in the hands of fathers (World Bank, 2001). Investing on women and girl child education, health and access to assets and jobs has a multiple effect on productivity, efficiency and sustained economic growth in developing countries (World Bank, 2006).

Empowering women and promoting gender equality are crucial to accelerating sustainable development and putting a stop to all forms of discrimination against womanhood is not only a basic human right, but also has tremendous effect across all other developmental areas.

Sustainable development cannot be achieved without gender equality. Gender equality is the way of sharing resources, programmes, and decisions fairly to male and female without any form of segregation and addressing the imbalances in the benefits available to male and female (Pathonia, 2017). The result of gender balance is not farfetched from having a strong and viable society. Regrettably, women have been consistently eluded from taking part in decision making, governance and political aspirations. The discrimination that exists in segregation of power structures cause gender imbalance, group marginalization, suffering and conflict (Tchouassi, 2012). Moreover, the problem of poverty, flooding, ethnic crises environmental pollution, corruption and inequality in income distribution have been on the increase (Adejumo & Adejumo, 2014). Based on the review of existing literature on gender and sustainable development, it (appears the problem of poverty, vulnerability, environmental degradation, sustainability and political participation affect overall economic policy. It is against this background that this study was carried out to address counseling as a means for balancing gender disparity for sustainable national development.

Relevance of Guidance and Counselling in balancing gender disparity for Sustainable National Development

Counseling is uniquely relevant and important in balancing gender disparity for sustainable national development. It is the driving or motivating force that helps students develop positive attitudes to appropriate national issues, work and learning, counseling helps students to acquire the skills of collecting, collating and using appropriate information; it assists students in acquiring, as early as possible. the positive image of self through self understanding, self direction and skills in problem solving and decision making, among others. Under the Universal Basic education system only good guidance counselors can help children with their choice of subjects, career and schools/universities. Students look up to the school to help them realize their life goals, develop their intellectual abilities and build up moral, social and career aspirations in accordance to their personalities. All these obligations can be achieved through proper guidance and counseling. Therefore, the importance of guidance and counseling in balancing gender disparity for sustainable national development cannot be overemphasized. Sustainable national development through balancing gender disparity cannot be overruled and cannot be overly achieved without the services of a professional counselor. Ikenna (2019) states that counseling services offered to families, schools, churches, public through conferences, sensitization, symposia, seminar, among others are better ways of addressing the challenges of gender disparity for sustainable National Development. Congruence to the above assertion, Jude (2015) asserts that greater gender awareness with regards to counselor not only benefits men and women but also increases overall economic and social gains.

The importance of achieving gender equality and attaining sustainable national development is clearly stipulated in the outcome document of United Nation Conference on sustainable Development as follow:

> *''we recognize that gender equality and women's empowerment are important for sustainable development and our common future. We reaffirm our commitment to ensure women's equal rights, access and opportunities for participation and leadership in the economy, society and political decision making. We underscore that women have*

> *a vital role to play in achieving sustainable development policies; programs and decision-making at all level"*(General Assembly Resolution 66/288, annex, page 31 & 45).

However, when women participate in governance, there is a greater chance that policies will reflect more closely the needs of all citizens. Indubitably, women and men bring different perspectives to decision making, and lack of women in governance limits the effectiveness of the state and its policies and diminishes its representational quality. Studies example UNDP (2007) show that when women are well represented in decision making bodies, the overall quality of governance tends to rise and levels of corruption decrease. Owing to somewhat different priorities, women in governance are more likely to work towards passing laws that benefit families, women, children, and traditionally marginalized groups. In a survey of women holding political offices, their responses show a different view of politics and of society than their male counterparts. They gave greater emphasis to social welfare, legal protection and transparency in government and business. They tend to introduce more legislation, reinforcing labour rights, social security, education, land redistribution, and electoral initiatives (IPU, 2008). Greater transparency and more open participation in political processes is an important part of women's empowerment in governance.

Balancing gender disparity for sustainable national development is important as it saves national budget, fulfills the needs of people, conserves natural resources, helps in the coordination between the natural resources and people, and conserves natural resources for future generation. More importantly, it ensures improved quality of life for present and future generations because if we use resources wisely today, tomorrow's generation can enjoy good quality of life.

Recommendations

In order to effectively sustain national development through balancing of gender disparity, counselors should be more dedicated to their work and should draw the attention of curriculum planners to provide organized curriculum with goal oriented objectives and aspirations for effective counseling in the country.

Parents' fora should be organized to reach out to a good number of parents and to educate them on the issue of gender discrimination and its possible disadvantages.

Government should map out financial assistance through budget in order to solidify the roles of counselors in the country.

Group counseling can also be organized for individuals who are victims of gender discrimination since it permits adolescents to process their individual and collective experiences, learn coping strategies and feel less isolated.

Counsellors can create gender awareness in schools through the following ways:

(1) Initiate behaviour change programmes like life skills education and positive youth development programmes.
(2) Training peer leaders to conduct workshops for other students with counselors always there to participate and provide guidance.

(3) Implement identification of and follow up strategies for gender-based violence within their practice. Work with families and communities in raising awareness of gender-based equality.
(4) Have information on gender-based equality approach and healthy relationships, such as brochures, files and fact sheets.
(5) Group discussions on gender inequality issues, disadvantages of gender inequality and ways to avert the consequences.

Finally, periodic workshops, seminars, conferences and symposia should be organized for students, parents and society at large. This will go a long way in balancing gender disparity for sustainable national development.

Conclusion

This paper, incontrovertibly, establishes the significant place of counselling in balancing gender disparity for sustainable national development. Therefore, bearing in mind that sustainable national development is a fundamental objective of the government, there is the dire need for recognizing, maximizing and facilitating the services of guidance and counseling through finance and motivation. This will go a long way in balancing gender disparity for sustainable national development.

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