Feminist Response to Econmic Recession in Line With United Nations Advocacy: A Case Study of Some Church Women in Ikwerre Society of Rivers State

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Abstract:

With the present nose-diving into economic recession of Nigeria, a lot of people are getting involved in alternative means of making money outside their usual day to day or monthly paid kind of work to augment family income. This paper therefore discussed various jobs and skills some church women in Ikwerre society are engaged in during this economic recession in order to make ends meet and support their families as advocated by the UN. The feminine gender is known to be highly passionate about the general well being of the family which is the focus of this paper. This study was carried out among some church women in kwerre society. It adopts phenomenological methodology. There was also the use of oral interviews, published materials including the internet materials. Findings are that church women in Ikwerre society have adopted various strategies in tackling economic recession challenges such as: soap making, pomade, tie and dye, Vaseline making, liquid soap, mosquito repellant (tusa-tusa, otapiapia, snipper), disinfectant, Ankara bags, shoes, earrings, bead making, hair bands, plantain and fish roasting (borlle) as well as cocktail, dessert, and some intercontinental cuisines preparations. The study is of the opinion that the efforts by church women in Ikwerre society is commendable as it happens to be one of the ways to tackle financial problems posed by the present economic recession in Nigeria.

Introduction

The importance of money to human society cannot be overemphasized. This is because everything about man's existence revolves around money. Even the Judeo-Christian bible states emphatically that "money answereth all things" (Eccl.10:19). This indicates that without money one is likely to run into problems. Owing to the present economic hardship in Nigeria under the President Buhari's administration, which can be felt in the high rate of unemployment, health, family lifestyle, poverty and so on; it is observed that women and girls are mostly affected. But then women are known for their high-level of ingenuity and entrepreneurial skills which is often driven by necessity. As a result of this, a lot of people including church women are getting involved in alternative means of making money outside their usual day to day or monthly paid kind of work to augment family income. This study examines the strategy women in Ikwerre society adopted to survive the economic hardship brought about by the economic downturn faced by Nigerians in this present dispensation. Some of which includes the act of acquiring craft and skills in the following areas: soap making, pomade, tie and dye, Vaseline making, liquid soap, mosquito repellant (*tusa-tusa, otapiapia*, snipper), disinfectant, Ankara bags, shoes, earrings, bead making, hair bands, *borlle* (roasted plantain and fish) as well as cocktail, dessert, and some intercontinental cuisines preparations. Rather than sit down with folded arms and legs, women in Ikwerre society have taken the bulls by the horns and are willing to put their hands to work in order to tackle the problems of the economic recession ravaging all Nigerian communities including Ikwerre. As Mercy Omoigui (2001:114) puts it "poverty is the state of not having and not being able to get the necessities of life. It is a state of needing help or sympathy". Wotogbe-Weneka (2010:219) posits that, Poverty is a phenomenon that has challenged mankind and defies decisive solutions all over the world irrespective of race, nation, creed, status and level of scientific and technological development. Based on this description it is clear that poverty is a problem which mankind has lived with right from the inception of the world and hence this problem must be tackled, just as the Ikwerre women are doing nowadays.

What is Economic Recession

Economic recession is a period of general economy decline and is usually accompanied by a drop in the stock market, a rise in unemployment, and a downturn in the housing market. Obviously this is a condition that spells out poverty in its reality. Most times in situations such as the one understudied, women are mostly hit. It therefore confirms the popular saying that "poverty is the face of a woman". And so knowing this truth, the Ikwerre women in Rivers State decided not to relax and simply wait for things which have fallen apart to begin to fall in place, but have decided to get busy with a lot of skills and innovations which they have acquired out of their ingenuity to assist themselves and their

families in this period of economic recession. Usually, a recession is less harsh than a depression, but then recession if not urgently tackled can lead to a depression. Most times the blame for a recession is commonly heaped on the federal leadership, often either on the president himself, the head of the Federal Reserve, or the whole government. The fact remains that it is the people being led that are the most hit/affected that suffers the most.

Effects of Economic Recession

Nigeria as it is known by everyone is an oil-rich producing state that depends largely on the proceeds of her oil products. To this end, the nation pays little or no attention to other natural resources that her soil is blessed with. With the recession, oil prices collapsed, the main export product of Nigeria for the first time during 20 years came into recession. As a result, Africa's largest economy lost 2.1% of its profit accrued from oil. This led to the lack of money and economic recession in Nigeria. Against a background of collapse in oil prices, Nigeria began to experience shortage of electricity, falling of oil prices, high inflation rates, as well as the humanitarian crisis in the northern region of Nigeria and the constant attacks of oil infrastructure by militants near the southern marshes and its negative impact on recession in Nigeria's economy contributing in playing major roles in making a country with a leading economy on the continent to suddenly become poor. At the beginning of the present administration led by Muhammadu Buhari, the cost of oil was at about 100 dollars per barrel, suddenly there was a drop in price to about 37 dollars, now it is said to be dangling within the range of 40-45 or dollars per barrel or even something lower. But this is not enough to provide necessary financial flows for a country with teaming population like Nigeria. Consequently, one of the ways out of economic recession crisis for the country can be viewed from the angle of a start up of private businesses by various individuals no matter how little. The Judeo-Christian Bible admonishes thus "Do not despise these small beginnings" (Zech.4:10). Having established this fact, we will then proceed to look at areas in which Ikwerre women of Rivers State have utilized acquisition of skills and arts to approach the economic challenges of the economic recession period in Nigeria to their own benefit.

Ikwerre Women's Response to Economic Recession

It has been observed that the greatest tool to tackling economic recession is through solidarity. African society, Ikwerre inclusive is known for its appreciative communal value which is showcased in the spirit of oneness, care and provision for one another. Through this age-long practice, the Ikwerre society has been able to sustain the poor in their midst and have proverbs that back up this cherished traditional values like: *egbe beru, igo beru* (live and let's live), *oza nye gha nwenea* (don't forget your brother) and *igwe bu ikne* (the group is might). These principles are amply demonstrated by the extended family relation

life styles of the Africans, the Ikwerre inclusive. Although these valued traditions are however almost completely eroded by modern individualism, it has resurfaced in the present economic situation in today's Nigeria by individuals and groups in Ikwerre society. As Akintunde Dorcas (2009:133) observes "when the issue of poverty occurs in a family, it affect not just one person but it affects all". It is based on solidarity and the spirit of oneness that John Mbiti (1969:224) says "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'. And so, in the spirit of togetherness in Ikwerre society, certain women groups in the church have made remarkable efforts to empower women, especially indigent ones with skills and technical know-how to help them fight the problem of poverty brought upon them by the present economic recession. Best examples of churches in this regard includes; the Anglican Church, the Redeemed Christian Church of God and The Greater Evangelism World Crusade. Through craft and skills acquisition programmes Ikwerre women in Anglican Churches have been trained on soap making, pomade, Christmas greeting cards, tie- and-dye, and talcum powder including Vaseline, liquid soap, *tusa-tusa* (mosquito repellant) as well as other minor economic ventures through which their livelihood can be improved.

As the then bishop's wife (Mrs. B.G. Kattey) once remarked,

> *"In compliance with the United Nations Organization's declaration, we launched the international year of poverty eradication in the diocese on December 7, 1996 at St. Paul's Cathedral, Diobu, Port Harcourt. Enlightened speakers spoke to educate us on ways and means of eradicating poverty".*

According to the United Nations Organization "women, like men, require opportunities for developing their intellectual potentials to the maximum".

Some of these potentials can be developed through acquired skills and a mastery of the technological knowhow in tackling the negative effects of economic recession in Nigeria. Furthermore, the UN also agitates for the equality of rights between men and women. Invariably, equality of rights in this sense carries with it corresponding responsibilities; it is therefore a duty of Ikwerre women to make full use of opportunities available to them to perform their duties to their respective families. The UN goes on to argue for the right of women to work and to receive equal pay for work of equal value, to be provided with equal conditions and opportunities for advancement in work, and all other women's rights to full and satisfying economic activity are strongly affirmed. This agitation offers greater possibilities for women to engage in activities that gears towards their self realization advancement through acquiring new skills that will improve their economic statue

through crafts and skills acquisitions, which will further integrate them into the stream of national economic, social, political and cultural life.

To this end, in order to limit the negative economic effect of the recession on women, the Redeemed Christian Church of God First Love Worship Center Parish through her organization for young women and girls "Christ Rules Everything about Me" (C.R.E.A.M) Damsel's Club which is headed by Mrs. Josephine Obinna Nwanma have helped to empower women in this period of recession. The C.R.E.A.M Damsel's Club has trained women and girls in the following areas: Ankara training- women and girls were taught how to make shoes, clutch purses, hand bags, wallets, earrings, and hair accessories using very beautiful African print fabrics to creatively design beautiful accessories. The resource person here was Mrs. Joy Ndukwe - Nwanma. Most of the young girls who were trained saw it as an opportunity to start up mini businesses to help them overcome the economic recession. Since most of the young girls are students, this part-time business has been helping them financially in their education.

In another training session, the C.R.E.A.M Damsels were taught how to make beautiful necklaces and earrings with beads. The resource person was Abekee Larry. Most of the girls and women that were taught on how to make earrings and necklaces turned the art into a business venture as they began to make more of it and sell, which yielded huge amount of profit for their individual sustenance and that of their families. Furthermore, since majority of the girls are of marriageable age it became pertinent to teach them how to cook through which if properly learnt, they can make a living from it by setting up mini restaurants. Based on this idea, the Club trained the young girls on the proper preparation of cocktail, dessert, and intercontinental cuisines. The resource person was Mrs. Josephine Obinna Nwanma. In another set of training, they were taught *gele* (women head gear) tying, makeover, and liquid soap making. The resource persons here were Christiana Barida and Ahanna Jennifer.

Sequel to the need to empower women economically in this recession, the women's wing of Greater Evangelism World Crusade church stirs the ship of different skills acquisition programmes for women of all strata. For the single sisters (Philip Daughters) an instructor Dumo Davies taught them on how to make bags, shoes, and hair bands using *Ankara* (African Print Fabrics), they were also taught how to make necklaces and earring, using beads.

For the general women, lessons were taught on the preparation of Tiger-nut juice by sis Chituru Akpasi. The widows were not left out of this kind gesture. They were taught how

to make liquid soap, tablet soap, disinfectant and mosquito repellant as well as the proper way of making *borlle* and fish with local sauce (roasted plantain and fish with local sauce). The resource persons at this workshop were Happiness Newman and Elder Fabia Thomas. The church also gives loan without interest to indigent women to start up their private businesses. They have also trained some single sisters in the act of sewing such have presently set up their own sewing businesses through the help of the church.

The Anglican churches in Ikwerre Rivers State consider agricultural development as a worthy venture for the purpose of tackling poverty even in the economic recession. To this end they encourage women and youths to engage in palm plantation project which is a very lucrative business. When the palm fruit is harvested, some of it is sold in the market and the proceeds is used to care for the family and pay for other bills. Also, the palm business is lucrative because palm oil is processed from the palm fruits and seeds are cracked then palm kernel oil is gotten from the seeds. No doubt every part of it is useful. The youths and women were also encouraged to grow pineapple orchards. Through these a lot of indigent students among the youths have been assisted financially and have not dropped out of school as a result of the economic recession.

Conclusion

From our observations in this paper, our summation is strikingly precise and clear, that the present economic recession of Nigeria has brought untold hardship to people, the Ikwerre women inclusive. While the vast majority of people suffer from various degrees of the economic recession, women suffer not only economic recession but deprivation as well. As people who are saddled with so many responsibilities, ranging from bearing and rearing of children to building of the home, a lot is expected of women. For this reason women will be doing their families wrong to just sit and idle about during this economic recession period and only wait for monthly salary to come (for the few of them who have white collar jobs) before they can take care of their pressing needs in the home. This paper have been able to show that women who by nature are industrious aligned themselves with churches in order to tap from its largesse to improve themselves by acquiring skills, crafts and technical knowhow to help themselves and their family members. Again, the effort of the church in joining the social crusade of many civil organizations of the country to fight against the poor socio-economic conditions in the land is highly commendable. This socio-economic empowerment of the church is encouraged because without it, the church might lose its relevance to man, the society and the church itself as issues that borders on welfare is one of the concerns of God Himself. This is buttressed in 1 John 3:16 thus,

> *"By this we know love that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him".*

How else can we evaluate a better response to economic recession other than through these ones demonstrated by women of these churches? We only wish that there will be some form of sustenance on the part the women of these churches so that kind gestures like these ones will not phase out. However, the efforts made by Ikwerre women are not exhaustive in strengthening women's economy at periods of recessions. Other private bodies and NGOs should get involved as well. It is hoped that the financial empowerment of women even in this economic recession will help a great deal to minimize or eradicate suffering not only during economic recession but at other times.

Based on the foregoing we recommend that:

1. In other to avoid being plunged into another economic recession in Nigeria after coming out of this one, cognizant efforts should be made by the government to streamline the polity and vary the economy so as to avoid the constant dependence on a mono-cultural oil economy, whose price is subject to the vagaries of world politics
2. The government ought to ensure that there is proper arrangement for the development of the agricultural segment which has been grossly neglected. Some of the rural Ikwerre women of our discourse here can actually benefit from this segment and make a living from its proceeds.
3. The Nigerian society can lessen poverty by guaranteeing a minimum income to the poor and unemployed for decency and comfort. (Like in welfare, pension and unemployment programmes).
4. Entrepreneurial centers should be established by the government and other private sectors where young people will be taught and trained on how to be independent and self reliable.

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