

SPORT AS AN INSTITUTION FOR GENDER STEREOTYPE CHALLENGE AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A REFLECTION ON NIGERIAN ELITE SPORTSWOMEN AT THE OLYMPICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a documental research based on literary review on the role of sport in challenging gender stereotype and serving as an institution for women empowerment in Nigeria. Women are always looking for how to address certain social issues and problems that affect them. Women empowerment is a social issue which women all over the world are clamoring for. Women have initiated and are still initiating movements geared towards ensuring that they have control over their socio-economic and political lives. Women have adopted several strategies including education to ensure that they achieve their goals. One of the strategies that could be used for women empowerment is sports. Sport is an empowerment avenue for all. Sport has also challenged gender stereotype that women are weak and inferior in social organizations. Among the areas that reflect one's empowerment are physical, economic, and social lives of the individuals. Sport empowers its participants including women physically by enhancing their strength, endurance, flexibility, power, agility; economically through salaries, match allowances as officiating officials and match commissioners, endorsement fees, and socially through interpersonal relationships, self-efficacy, friendship, among others. Among the challenges facing women empowerment through sports in Nigeria that were discussed include sexual harassment of women in sports; poor media coverage of women in sports; inadequate, substandard, and poor condition of sports facilities and equipment for women; poor funding of women's sports; inadequate motivation of women in sports; societal negative attitude towards women participation in sports, among others. Recommendations were made to improve the sports atmosphere for women, which will ensure women's maximization of the opportunity of being empowered through sports.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Sports, Gender stereotype.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a documental research based on literary review of the role of sport in challenging gender stereotype and serving as an institution for women empowerment in Nigeria. The subdivisions of the paper are introduction, meaning of gender, stereotype and gender stereotype, gender stereotype and

sport, meaning of empowerment and women empowerment, levels of empowerment, and Nigerian elite sportswomen at the Olympics. The paper is equally subdivided into the role of sport in physical, social and economic empowerment of women, and problems confronting women empowerment through sports in Nigeria (poor media coverage of

women in sports; sexual harassment of women in sports; inadequate social support for women sports; gender inequity and inequality in sports leadership positions; inadequate, substandard, and poor condition of sports facilities and equipment for women; poor funding of women's sports; inadequate motivation of women in sports, and societal negative attitude towards women participation in sports).

In a patriarchal society, gender dominance, discrimination and inequity are encouraged. Patriarchy relations manifest in heterosexual women's economic dependence on men (Hartman, 1997). The worldwide women's movement over the past thirty years has emphasized that females be treated as human beings when they have opportunities to develop their intellectual and physical abilities (Fasting, 1996). Women's struggle for empowerment could be seen in their series of conferences, for instance, the fourth world women conference held in Beijing China, from 4 - 15 September, 1995.

Sports scholars like Nelson (1994), Kane (1998); Pohl, Borrie, and Patterson (2000) rightly observed that one issue concerning women and sport has been sports ability to deconstruct traditional gender stereotyping, norms, and behaviours through the empowerment of women. As Birrell and Richter (1987);

Hargreaves (1999), argued that sport is an oppressive activity instead of an empowering activity for individuals in the minority group (such as women), many sports scholars (Blinde, Taub, & Han, 1993; Blinde, Taub, & Han, 1994; Pohl, Borrie & Patterson, 2000) maintained that women personally can make sport or other physical activities a very empowering experience.

Empowerment, according to Czuba and Nanette (1999) is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their lives. Sport sociologists have affirmed sport as a tool for empowerment. Realizing the empowerment potentials of sport, Fasting (1996) noted that some women of all ages pursue their interest in sports. Sports, in sport sociology perspective, according to Coakley (1998), are institutionalized competitive activities that involve vigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by individuals whose participations are motivated by combination of physical enjoyment and external rewards. Women always anchor on the outstanding performances of sportswomen at international competitions to contest and argue gender stereotype in the traditional society. Commenting on women sports performance, Dada (2005) stated that Nigerian women athletes have won more medals than their male counterparts. Women medal

profile at international sports competitions such as Olympics which challenges the gender stereotype where women are seen to be weak, independent, emotional, and non-competitive.

The feminist scholars advocate for empowerment in the personal qualities gained by women to aid in betterment of their lives at individual, group, and societal level. Personal or individual empowerment is a prerequisite for group and societal empowerment. Pensgaard and Sorensen (2002) noted that empowerment in sport has mostly been studied at the individual level. This could be because empowerment at individual level is foundation for empowerment at other levels. Even at the sports sector, individual sportsmen and women are empowered before the group and societal empowerment. Empowerment easily reflects on physical, economic, and social lives of individuals including women. Gibson (1991) noted that the development of qualities such as positive self-esteem, perceived competence, self-efficacy, an internal locus of control, personal satisfaction, a sense of connectedness, and an improved quality of life facilitate empowerment at the personal level. This paper therefore express how sports had challenged gender stereotype and discussed the role sports can play in physical, economic, and social empowerment of women in Nigeria.

Meaning of Gender, Stereotype and Gender Stereotype

According to Igbuzor (2006), gender is the socially and culturally constructed roles for men and women. Stereotype refers to a fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality (Hornby, 2005). Hence, gender stereotype is a fixed idea or image that people have about men or women which is not often true. It is the socio-cultural expectations from men and women in a given society. Highlighting the stereotypical expectations of men and women, Fiebert and Meyer (1997) stated that women are expected to be gentle, sensitive, emotional, and talkative; while men are to be competitive, independent, unemotional, and objective.

The Nigerian society is not an exception in gender stereotyping. In the society, women are seen to be weak, incompetent, unskilled, unintelligent, too emotional, not objective for public social positions but only good at domestic activities in the family and home. Due to gender stereotyping, according to Tavis (1994) women have been known to feel inadequate, worthless, trapped, and overall have low self-esteem. This situation necessitated Nigerian women and their colleagues worldwide to strive

towards violating and disproving the societal norms. Nigerian women's popular saying that "what a man can do, woman can do it better" is geared towards showing that they are not weak and inferior even in the area of sports.

Gender Stereotype and Sport

In the sport context, societal norms are challenged and violated for women to be successful and empowered. Sport is an empowering institution for athletes irrespective of gender. Sport is a ground that has been used to disagree with the societal stereotyping norms as many women have gone outside the limits of the norms. Many women have proved to be objective, competitive, and independent at national and international sports competitions such as National sports festivals and Olympics. For an athlete (male or female) to be successful or empowered, certain traits, characteristics, and behaviours must be present. This is in line with Tuffey's (1995) statement that the characteristics of a successful athlete reflect the necessary characteristics of successful athlete, regardless of sex or gender. This is not far from Anshel (1994), and Cote and Salmela (1996) idea that to be a successful female athlete, it is necessary to possess the same traits, characteristics, and behaviours as male athlete. According to them, successful female athlete needs

to be aggressive, competitive, and confident, and so forth to be successful. There is a link between successfulness and empowerment.

Sport experts (Blinde, Taub, & Han, 1993; Nelson, 1994) noted that stereotypes of women as less capable, less physically skilled, weak, helpless, and lack decision making skills that are necessary for organized physical activity lead many women to ignore sport or to believe that they were not physically able to participate. In sport, women were able to display, what at the time were considered inappropriate gender behaviours such as aggression, competitiveness, and independence. Women were allowed to sweat, get dirty, get hurt, be muscular and physically fit while participating in sport. Sport served as a place where women could transgress from the strict and rigid gender norms (Blinde, Taub & Han, 1993; Kane 1998).

Meaning of Empowerment and Women Empowerment

The definitions of empowerment by scholars are different but related. Rappaport (1987) viewed empowerment as a process by which people gained mastery over their lives. Blinde, Taub and Han (1993) defined empowerment as the process by which individuals in a disadvantaged social group develop

skills and abilities to gain control over their lives and to take action to improve their life situation. Wallerstein and Bernstein (1988), and Gutierrez (1990) noted when an individual becomes empowered, he or she becomes proactive and takes personal responsibility in improving his or her life situation and wellbeing. In the context of this paper, empowerment is the social process of enabling women to discover, develop, and strengthen their skills and resources which are geared towards gaining power and control over their lives through sports. This paper also discusses women empowerment as the process of making women self-reliant, independent, confident, strong-minded and have total control over their lives through sports.

Levels of Empowerment

Empowerment is a multi-level construct. According to Rappaport (1987), and Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988), empowerment occurs at individual or psychological, group, and community levels. Zimmerman and Rappaport, (1988) viewed psychological empowerment as the connection between a sense of personal competence, a desire for, and a willingness to take action, in the public domain. Individual empowerment, according to Zimmerman (1995), comprises intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural components. The

intrapersonal empowerment is how one sees himself or herself which manifests in a perceived control and self-efficacy, motivation to control, mastery, personality, cognitive, and motivational aspects of perceived control. The interactional empowerment provides a bridge between perceived control and taking action to exert control, encompassing how people think about and relate to their social environment. The behavioural component of individual empowerment refers to actions taken to directly influence outcomes in one's environment.

Group empowerment refers to a group's perception of influence and control within a larger community (Wallerstein, 1992). This is a situation where the group may control the actions of members of the group. Bandura (1997) affirmed that a strong belief in a group's self-efficacy may override a weaker personal self-efficacy. Empowerment at the community level is connected with empowerment at the individual and organizational level (Wallerstein, 1992). Community empowerment (Bandura, 1997) assumes that people strive for and desire political influence. Sherill (1998) explained that community empowerment represents a global structure, which focuses on the advancement of a certain group into positions of societal or political power in society.

Nigerian Elite Sportswomen at the Olympics

History has it on records that Nigeria first participated in the Olympic Games in 1952 at Helsinki from July 19 - August 3. Women have been participating in Olympics and Nigerian women are not left out in Olympic history. For instance, the relay team of Beatrice Utondu, Christy Opara-Thompson, Mary Onyali, and Faith Idehen at 1992 Barcelona Game won bronze in 4 x 100 metres relay. In the 1996 Atlanta Games, Chioma Ajunwa won gold medal in long jump, and Olabisi Afolabi, Fatima Yusuf, Charity Opara, Falilat Ogunkoya won silver medal in 4 x 400 metres relay. In the same 1996 Atlanta, Mary Onyali won bronze medal in 200 metres, with Falilat Ogunkoya also winning bronze medal in 400 metres (Wikipedia Foundation, 2009).

At Sydney in Australia 2000 (Sept. 15th to Oct. 1st) Olympic Games, Ruth Ogbeifo won silver in weightlifting. In the same 2000 Sydney Games, Glory Alozie made a record in 100 metres women hurdles by winning silver medal. In the records of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, Blessing Okagbare had bronze medal to show for her participation in long jump, with Franca Idoko, Gloria Kemasuode, Halimat Ismailia, and Oludamola Osayomi who won bronze in 4 x 100 metres relay. Olympics Games are highly competitive and for Nigerian

elite sportswomen to compete and won medals is a challenge to the societal assumption of women as weak, non-competitive, and emotional.

The Role of Sport in Physical Empowerment of Women

Women who were traditionally perceived to be less capable, less physically skilled, helpless and weak (Nelson, 1994) are empowered through physical qualities, which are required for self control in one's daily living. Such physical values and attributes which sports could contribute to women sport participants include improved muscular strength, cardio-vascular endurance, cardiorespiratory endurance, agility, flexibility, power, improved reaction time, speed among others. Sport empowers women by developing their strength to run, walk, jump, to cater for their daily needs, and escape from dangers in the hostile environment.

Researchers have reported that active sportswomen possess improved physical attributes (strength, endurance, flexibility, agility, speed, etc.) than inactive sportsmen. It is no doubt that for female athletes like Chioma Ajunwa, Blessing Okagbare, Glory Alozie, Mary Onyali, among others to make historic marks in Olympics, they must have been empowered with physical fitness attributes through sports.

The Role of Sport in Social Empowerment of Women

Blinde, Taub, and Han (1994), Nelson (1994); Pohl, Borrie and Patterson (2000) noted that sport can serve as a social networking arena that allows women to come in contact with other women. Women's feeling of low self-esteem and inferiority in the past seems to have changed. Today, Nigerian women thrive and win medals in sport which demands competitiveness and aggressiveness. The self identity of female athletes has been improved in modern sports world. Sport has exposed women to establishing social relationship with other athletes, sport associations, sport officials, fans, spectators, sport managers and administrators.

Theberge (1987) opined that traditionally, contact with other women has been limited, for most of the women's work has revolved around the family and home. The author further emphasized that both team and individual sports have provided women with the opportunity to come together and work together towards common goals. This simply means that sport has served as an extension of women social environment which was traditionally taken to be limited to the family and home. Sport mobility has made female athletes to tour many countries of the world to

interact with other social environments outside their homes. For instance, Nigerian elite female athletes have socialized themselves in Barcelona, Atlanta, Sydney, and Beijing due to Olympic Games. Sport expands one's social environment. With sports, women who are in the past felt trapped, now feel free in their social relationships. With the view of athletes being agents of socialization, the social value of sportswomen increases. Many people, and corporate bodies or organizations establish friendship with sportswomen. Government also partner with sportsmen and sportswomen in inculcating right values to its citizen. They are now seen as agents of social change in the society. Elite sportswomen have had the opportunity of meeting with the presidents of nations of the world (Tavris, 1992).

The Role of Sport in Economic Empowerment of Women

Unless women's economic security is strengthened, it will be difficult to eliminate poverty, and achieve gender equality or realize genuine progress on the United Nation's Goals (Negash, 2006). According to Negash (2006), increased income controlled by women gives them self-confidence, which helps them to obtain a voice and vote in household decisions, economic decisions, fertility decisions, and land use and conservation

decisions. Elite athletes including female athletes are sometimes rewarded with millions of dollars or pounds. They are paid endorsement fee for associating their names or performance with some products. Some manufacturers associate themselves with athletes to market and promote their products. For instance, sports wears, t-shirts are designed using an elite athlete's identity, thereby attracting endorsement fees for the athlete. Sport has contributed to economic empowerment of athletes and female athletes are not exempted.

Women economic dependency on men may be ameliorated through sports. Athletes including female athletes are among the highest income earners in the world, thus portraying economic empowerment ability of sport. Sport as an international career has made it possible for elite female athletes to be paid with foreign currencies. Sportswomen receive financial allowances for competitions either from their nation, club side, team or association. Apart from getting economic and financial entitlement as a female athlete, other women assume positions in sports industries which economically empowered them. Sport positions like coaches, sport referees, sport organizing secretaries, sport marketers, sport analysts, sport officials, sport journalist (sport reporters, sport announcers or commentators),

workers in sport facilities, equipment and supplies manufacturing industries, are opportunities that have economically empowered individuals including women.

Problems Confronting Women Empowerment through Sports in Nigeria

A lot of problems confront women in sports and tend to discourage them from sharing with the empowering experience and potential of sports. The problems include:

Poor media coverage of women in sports

Media coverage of good performance of athletes is a way of motivating and marketing the athletes to the sports world. Athletes including female athletes feel more delighted to continue participating in sports. Sports information is made available to the public through print and electronic means of the media. There has been a difference in the way media personnel, and sports commentators report or speak about female athletes which are different from the way they report male athletes. The commentators attribute male athletes' outstanding performances as a mark of their athletic skills, overall dedication and remarkable amount of courage and that of the female athletes' performances to luck or the guidance of a strong male influence (Eastman & Billings,

1999; Eastman & Billings, 2000). Wensing and Bruce (2003) reported that there is less coverage of women's sports than their male counterparts. Male athletes are more glorified by media than the female athletes. In most cases, male athletes are praised and female athletes criticized. Women's sports are not given due coverage by the Nigerian media. A review of Nigerian national newspapers and magazines shows biasness and poor coverage of women sports, and this does not encourage women to continue their participation in sports.

Sexual harassment of women in sports

Sexual harassment is a violation of human rights. Sexual harassment is a social problem that thrives in every human organization including sports. Women are mostly the victims of sexual harassment which is often perpetrated by men. Supporting this, Elendu (2009) reported that southern Nigerian universities female athletes mostly experience sexual harassment, and is mostly perpetrated on them by male athletes, sports administrators, and spectators. This ugly experience of sexual harassment by women in the course of their participation in sport has made some of them to cease from participation. Sexual harassment of sportswomen has forced many women back to their homes, and never to engage in sports outside their homes.

Inadequate social support (parents, siblings, friends, peers, role models) for women sports

Sportswomen expect support from their social environment. These sportswomen expect some encouragements and cheering from their parents, siblings, friends, peers. Some parents and other social groups with their negative attitude towards women participation in sports do not give these sportswomen their consent. This discourages sportswomen, as those who are already involved in sports may be left with no option other than to pull out, and those yet to participate cease to think about it.

Gender inequity and inequality in sports leadership positions

Sports leadership positions are dominated by men with very few women. Sports policies and decisions are taken by these leaders. More women are likely to be involved in sports when they see for instance retired elite sportswomen who serve as their role model in sports leadership position. The sports leadership positions are dominated by men.

Inadequate, substandard, and poor condition of sports facilities and equipment for women

Athletes need not just sports facilities and equipment, but adequate and standard ones that are in

good condition. Most of the available sports facilities and equipment are substandard, and in poor condition. Training with these facilities and equipment exposes athletes to a lot of injuries. Injuries as a result of poor condition of facilities and equipment scare some women from sports. On the other hand, men show their dominating power by driving women away from sports facilities when they (men) want to train. This embarrassment makes some women to retire from sports.

Poor funding of women's sports

Sports require huge amount of money for the payment of athletes', coaches' and officials' allowances, procurement of sports equipment, construction and maintenance of sports facilities. In Nigeria, women's sports do not attract financial support like their male counterparts both at national and international competitions.

Inadequate motivation of women in sports

Sportswomen are not properly motivated, as could lead to their drop-out in sports. This has earlier been expressed by Nikos, Anne-Marte, Chris, and Katie (2004) that lack of motivation in sports or exercise context will make individuals not to take part in sports. Motivation is needed for individual to participate or continue to participate in sports.

Societal negative attitude towards women participation in sports

Though the societal negative attitude towards women participation in sports in Nigeria is gradually changing, but women's sports have not been given proper attention. Sports are still seen as a masculine activity. Most Nigerians still perceive sport as an activity that makes women muscular, affects a woman's menstruation, and other physiological changes that endangers the reproductiveness of women. The society expects women to concentrate on child rearing, and other domestic activities than to be involved in sports. This does not encourage women who have interest in sports to participate.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Sport has challenged the gender stereotypical assumptions and expectations of the public. Women should consider using sport as one of their empowerment strategies as it has been affirmed to be an empowering experience. In order to sustain the empowering opportunities in sports for women and to encourage more women to participate, the following recommendations are made based on problems discussed on this paper facing women's sport in Nigeria.

1. There should be zero tolerance of sexual harassment of women in sports settings. Sexual harassment prevention policies should be made and implemented throughout the country.
2. Adequate and standard sports facilities and equipment should be provided for women to use.
3. There should be gender balance in appointment of leadership positions in sports. More women should be absorbed into the sports positions in Nigeria. They should be appointed as minister of youth and sports, commissioners of youth and sports, sports officials, match commissioners, sports analysts, sports reporters / commentators, referees, sports administrators, organizers, sport association secretaries, among others.
4. There should adequate enlightenment programmes (campaign) for adequate social support of women in sports especially from the homes, offices, schools, peer groups, three tiers of government, private sectors, and individuals.
5. The society should change their negative attitude towards women participation in sports.
6. Sports programmes should always be organized for women at the grassroots levels.
7. The mass media should always give wide coverage of women participation in sports. The mass media should not be bias while covering sports irrespective of the gender.
8. Proper and adequate motivation should be provided for women who participate in sports, such as cash rewards, scholarship, job offer, and recognition should be given to sportswomen.
9. Sports enthusiasts should form non-governmental sports organizations, and sports clubs for women.

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