Better Life for Rural Women Programme: An Agenda for Positive Change?

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Résumé: *Cet article nous fournit une analyse évaluative et savante du programme pour une meilleure vie des femmes rurales (BLP) initié par le gouvernement militaire nigérian en 1987 dans une perspective analytique des relations de genre. En plaçant le programme dans le cadre d'une approche de l'avancement des femmes, il examine les perspectives et les expériences des voies d'accès au développement des femmes et évalue en même temps la gestion, l'idéologie et les bénéficiaires du BLP. Il montre les limites et les déficiences de cette grande approche de l'avancement des femmes qui ne parviennent que sommairement à accéder au bien-être et aux besoins liés au genre. L'article met en garde contre les dangers de programmes qui rendent des hommages peu sincères à l'émancipation de la femme et qui sont déficients sur le plan institutionnel en faisant remarquer qu'ils peuvent créer d'importants effets négatifs et défavorables sur les luttes des femmes.*

Introduction

The ripple effects of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women; the global feminist attention to women's issues and the agenda of funding agencies have led to increased attention paid to women's issues by various women's groups and many African governments. In Nigeria, as in many other parts of Africa, there has been a strong campaign for the proper recognition of women as producers of goods and services and as reproducers and of the need for increased access to resources they require to improve their activities and status. One of the responses to these calls for advancement of women was the establishment of the Better Life For Rural Women Programme (BLP) in September 1987. To date, it is one of the most extensive and highly expensive programmes intended to improve the plight of the Nigerian Rural Woman. As a result, it has received both local and international attention, especially in the media. However, while it has attracted many criticisms in the media, it has received little scholarly evaluative analysis.

As a women's development programme, BLP also needs an assessment of its potential for meeting women's needs. Using a gender analytic

Africa Development Vol. XX, No. 4, 1995, pp.69-84

perspective, this paper reviews BLP and its potential for bringing about a positive change towards the advancement of women. The article begins by giving a brief description of rural women and discussions on some conditions that impinge on their status. To place the programme in the context of an approach to the advancement of women, perspectives and experiences of women's development approaches are discussed. The paper then highlights the objectives, administration and activities of BLP. Thereafter, an assessment of the programme from the perspectives of its ideology, administration, personnel, and the experiences of the beneficiaries and its ideology is made. Finally the paper concludes by emphasising the importance of examining gender relations and control in achieving sustainable and positive move towards the advancement of women.

Perspectives on Rural Women

Most of the writings on women's experiences and marginalisation in developing countries have stressed the serious implications of colonialism for women's status. Even though many societies in Nigeria were historically patriarchal, women occupied important economic, social and political roles. In the pre-colonial period in South Western Nigeria for example, while women did not have equal economic and political status with men, women held certain rights in the public domain. As Johnson (1986) noted, such rights included the freedom to pursue, control, and defend their economic interests, adequate representation on governmental and community decision-making bodies and participation in discussions of public policy. However, while many socio-cultural factors encouraged the contribution of women in the society on the one hand, many customs, traditions, religious practices as well as legal constraints prevented women from realising their potential (Awe 1989).

Colonial experience and conditions further marginalised women. By neglecting women's education, refusing women the right to vote until 1950, and not appointing them to governmental decision bodies, the British alienated women from economic and political arenas. This neglect and consequent stronger sexist biases have permeated our cultural discourses, social institutions and individual psyches and have been reproduced over the years. The bias and sexist stereotypes are not limited to men but are also found among women, who have many times been described as the custodians of cultural practices and the stronger perpetrator of sexist practices. Therefore, sexist stereotypes, with its lenses of androcentrism, gender-polarity and biological essentialism (Bem 1991) have persisted into the postcolonial period and underlie the continued marginalisation of women relative to men.

In the past two decades, the fact that rural women were relatively less educated, poorer with less access to modern conveniences, and thus

constituting a vulnerable group has been documented (Adekanye 1988). As in many parts of Africa, Nigerian rural women contribute significantly to the national economy by engaging in food production, food processing and distribution, in addition to their domestic and reproductive roles. The food processing usually involves time consuming and energy sapping activities with the use of traditional food processing technologies (Dolvo 1988). Until the late 1980s, despite the women's contribution, agricultural development policies and other rural transformation programmes have ignored the contribution of the women. The policies are either explicitly gender-blind or appear to be gender neutral but many in reality are gender biased. For example, Adeyokonnu's (1981) study of women's involvement in government promoted or encouraged projects (as a means of rural transformation) revealed that women constituted less than 10% of all co-operative members in Nigeria, with women's membership even lower in the North.

While one may argue that many rural women are poor, it should be noted that many rural men are also poor (Adekanye 1987). However, in addition to the sex biases of development projects, gender-differentiated aspects of prevailing socio-cultural factors and political and economic factors contribute to the poorer status of women relative to men. These include the young age of girls at marriage, polygyny, high bride price, illiteracy, misconceptions that women's roles are primarily reproductive and dependent, the restrictive effect of Islam on women's roles, and the consequences of some cultures' widowhood practices. Therefore, the general situation is that 'women's position is structured from relations of gender and relations derived from the economic organisation of the society' (Afshar 1991:1).

In analysing the plight of women, the changing economic and political circumstances of Nigeria must be considered. According to Awe (1989) during the UN Decade for Women some governmental response to women's issues in Nigeria included a unit for Women and Development in an 'all purpose' Ministry of Information, Youth, Sports and Culture. This arrangement did not improve the lot of women and the machinery set up to implement the objectives of the decade were inadequate. One of the changes with the greatest impact so far is the Structural Adjustment Programme which Nigeria began to implement in 1986. Recent writings on the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) and the effects of economic recession have emphasised the adverse effects of SAPs on the status of women. Women as producers, home managers, mothers and social (community) organisers particularly the poorest among them, 'have borne to a disproportionate extent the brunt of the ensuing hardship' (Afshar and Dennis 1992). By attempting to halt inflation, gain economic efficiency, improve balance of payment through free markets, SAPs have been said to

have contributed to the feminisation of poverty (Stewart 1992) specifically, rural women have been affected in several ways:

- SAPs are male biased because the economic sphere which is defined as marketed goods and services excludes women's unpaid reproductive labour, and the value of women's labour in general.
- Increase in female headed households as men take up work in urban centres.
- Severe reduction of family income that may impose increased demands on women's time to stretch income to meet the family needs.
- Increase in time and resources spent on health, education and basic services because SAPs have greatly affected the availability of these services.
- Women have taken on many roles previously fulfilled or 'supposed to be filled' by the state and now act as local social organisers to contribute to mutual survival in their communities.

Thus, considering the complex experiences of the rural women, who not only contribute significantly to the development of the nation but also make up a larger proportion of women, a programme that can in reality 'better their lives' will indeed accelerate the development process of a nation like Nigeria.

Women's Development Approaches: Issues and Experiences

Many feminist writings have emphasised the inadequacies and indeed the effects of early development attempts based on transfer of technology, institutions and attitudes from the West to developing nations. Originally, the role of women in development was neglected in early development attempts. However, the inclusion of women that started gradually was based on the assumptions that women are passive recipients of development and that women's reproductive roles as mothers, housewives and homemakers were women's most important roles in the society. The welfare approach (Buvenic 1983, Moser 1993) centred on mother and child health care, family planning, nutrition and home economics and an exclusion of productive roles. Adopting a top-down strategy of distribution of free goods and services the approach is politically safe and not threatening because it does not challenge women's subordination. The Women in Development (WID) approaches resulted from a critique of the welfare approach. It was influenced by the work of Ester Boserup (1970) and other anthropologists who emphasise that despite the fact that women were key contributors in the economic system, their neglect in development plans left untapped their potentials.

Boserup thus recommended an integration of women into the development process. Generally, the WID approaches are based on the

rationale that development process would continue much better if women were fully integrated into it rather than left to use their time unproductively (Moser 1993). It must be noted that WID has experienced a shift in emphasis across the years from 'equity' to 'antipoverty' to efficiency and 'empowerment'. Equity and empowerment approaches were considered threatening because they challenged women's subordination by focusing on equity for women in development and empowerment for them through greater self-reliance respectively. An antipoverty approach recognises the productive role of women and seeks to meet the short-term needs of women to earn income. The most popular approach of WID is the efficiency approach that seeks to ensure more efficient and effective development through women's economic contribution (Moser 1993).

The more recent dimension to women and development that emphasises gender and the need to examine the role of women in relation to men and vice-versa is the Gender and Development approach that stresses gender relations as an important consideration in designing the development process in developing countries. The major issues in this approach are subordination and inequality that must be addressed through the empowerment of women toward equality and equity with men in society.

Since its institutionalisation WID has strongly influenced the agenda of many development agencies and developing countries' policy of women. Indeed by the end of the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985), many African nations had set up structures to integrate women in development. These structures ranged from women's divisions, departments, bureaux (e.g. Kenya), commissions (e.g. Nigeria), councils (e.g. Ghana) and ministries. While their degrees of success differed from one country to another, many of these structures have not successfully broken into the existing state organs and structures to achieve the integration of women into various spheres of development. Also, many of the structures are not very powerful, rather they only pay lip-service to women's issues, and have not succeeded in establishing a process of co-operation between the ministries to influence decision-making (WID 1992).

In Nigeria, there are some governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which focus on rural women's issues. The governmental structures include WID units, Women in Agriculture units of Agricultural Development Projects, and Home Economics Units of State Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources. The activities of these units are co-ordinated by different bodies. NGOs vary in type and institutional affiliation and they include charitable, religious, humanitarian and co-operative organisations (Olawoye 1991). They generally assist women in rural areas to gain access to credit, information, and provide basic social services. In a country like Kenya, women's issues have had a strong impact on the women. The existence of active women's groups and the

complementary role of the women's bureau have promoted the women's movement. For the Kenyan movement, the focus is on the betterment of women and dealing with policy and practical problems from the perspective of a more recent thinking of gender and development (Mazingira Institute 1992).

There is a growing trend in some African nations for the establishment of parallel national organs or structures by first ladies for leading women's affairs. Mama (1992) has identified this prominent phenomenon as 'femocracy' among first ladies. Femocracy is defined as 'an anti-democratic female power structure which claims to exist for the advancement of ordinary women but is unable to do so because it is dominated by a clique of women whose interest derives from being married to powerful men rather than from any actions or ideas of their own' (1992:6). In Ghana, the first lady Mrs Nana Agyeman Rawlings spearheaded and ran the women's movement that was separate from the existing structure. In Nigeria, BLP was established alongside the existing structures and programmes in the federal and state ministries. What is BLP and what are its objectives? How is it run and to what extent can it be an organ for positive change?

The Better Life for Rural Women Programme

Objectives and activities

The plight of the Nigerian rural woman was made a national issue by the BLP. Inaugurated by Mrs Maryam Babangida, wife of the then President of The Federal Republic of Nigeria, BLP was designed to improve the lot of women and their contribution to national development. BLP at its time of inception had the following objectives (*Daily Sketch*, October 28, 1990):

- To stimulate and motivate women in rural areas towards achieving a better and higher standard of life, as well as sensitise the general populace to the plight of rural women;
- To educate women on simple hygiene, family planning, the importance of childcare and increase literacy;
- To mobilise women for concrete activities towards achieving specific objectives including seeking leadership roles in all spheres of national life;
- To bring women together and closer for a better understanding and resolution of their problems through collective action;
- To raise the social consciousness of women about their rights as well as social, political and economic responsibilities; and
- To encourage recreation.

In what ways did the BLP seek to achieve these objectives? In scope and in content, BLP stated five areas of operation. The first involved an attempt to

eliminate or reduce factors that were perceived to be hindrances in execution of women's development programmes. Factors identified included illiteracy, low level of awareness, lack of adequate information, poor health and sanitation and little or no access to social amenities. To increase literacy, BLP was said to have organised adult education classes focused on basic literacy, business studies, home economics, embroidery, sewing, knitting, etc. Seminars, lectures and workshops were also organised on husband and child care, water treatment, personal hygiene, family planning, civic responsibilities and toxic effects of mosquitoes. Other activities BLP was said to have organised included enlightenment programmes on issues such as infant immunisation (*National Concord*, July 23, 1991). Many of these activities took place in BLP women's centres located in state capitals, thereby inaccessible to rural women.

The second area had the ultimate goal of making the women more self sufficient through income generating activities. This was supposed to be done by identifying a community's needs and encouraging the women to work as a group. But in reality, the programme had a predesigned list of some broad factors that were thought to be needed and thus could be provided for communities. The chairperson was then at liberty to decide the focus of the programme under her control. Thus it was not unusual to find irrelevant machines (agricultural) located in communities where little or no agricultural activity took place (*The Guardian*, August 28, 1992). In most cases, the identification of the women's needs was subjective and tended to perpetuate their subordination. For example, the chairperson of a state in the middle belt of Nigeria stated as follows:

> I will want each woman to have a separate farm of her own, just as our mothers used to have in the olden days; behind her house where they plant vegetables and other crops which they can easily harvest to subsidise the family feeding (*The Guardian* February 19, 1992:27).

Third, BLP proposed to provide financial and technical support for harvesting, processing and preservation activities. To this end there were claims that BLP provided seedlings, herbicides, tractors hire services and fertilisers to female farmers. As was discussed further on in this paper, many of the services said to have been provided were tokens, inadequate or non-functional. Fourth, BLP was used as an avenue to mobilise women towards increased participation in the Primary Health Care (PHC) Programme. PHC involves the Expanded programme on immunisation (EPI), oral rehydration therapy (ORT), potable water and basic sanitation, family health and family planning. Finally BLP proposed to establish a data bank for the purpose of providing better disaggregated and more informative data on rural women.

Structure of BLP

In terms of organisation, BLP had five levels of structure; the national, state, and local government organising committees, the village/community co-ordinators and grassroots mobilisers. At the national level, the wife of the president was the chairperson of the committee which was made up of a team of highly placed elite women. The membership of this team cut across different professions such as law, the mass media, banking, medicine, engineering, etc. As the highest decision making level of BLP, it was responsible for designing, co-ordinating, supervising, implementing and publicising the programme. They also monitored the activities of the different parts of the country. While the state and local government organising committees were not as large as the national, they were charged with the same responsibility at their respective levels. The chairpersons at the state and the local government levels were the wives of the state governor and local government chairmen. At the community and village levels there were co-ordinators, ward representatives and grassroots mobilisers. These were usually relatively more educated or respected women in the community and it is not uncommon to find male representatives in such committees. Other members of the committees were sometimes representatives from departments and ministries of health, community development, education, agriculture, etc. At all levels, the committees were responsible for publicity of BLP, however this was more elaborate at the national level.

Although BLP started initially under the Directorate for Food Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), the establishment of the National Commission for Women (NCW) in 1990 was intended to provide a broader dimension to the issue of advancement of women and also to serve as an institutional casing for BLP. It is a machinery for promoting policy, action and programmes aimed at enhancing participation of women. The decree establishing the Commission has been described as the initiation of the 'journey to a true empowerment and inclusion of gender planning in all facets of national development' (Okediran and Olarinde 1991). However as Mama (1992) noted, despite the establishment of NCW, the BLP operated parallel structures answerable to the First Lady, while bypassing the provision in the NCW structure. These contradictory structures and ambiguous relationship and the tussle for control of the BLP by the First Lady and NCW continued until there was a restructuring of the NCW.

BLP and Possibilities for the Advancement of Women

Background: Practical and Strategic Gender Needs

Moser (1993) has stressed the fact that because men and women play different roles in the society and have different levels of control over

resources, they often have different needs. Moser (1989, 1993), therefore, made a distinction between practical and strategic gender needs. Practical gender needs are based on responses to immediate perceived necessity, practical in nature and often concerned with inadequate conditions of living in a community such as water provision, electricity supply, health care and employment. Therefore, because practical gender needs are those needs identified within socially accepted roles for women they do not challenge the gender divisions of labour or women's subordinate position. Strategic gender needs, on the other hand, challenge women's subordinate position and also relate to measures to overcome structured discrimination against women and their domestic handicaps. They relate to gender divisions of labour, power and control over resources and may include such issues as legal rights, domestic violence, equal wages and women's control over their bodies. One of the ultimate goals of meeting strategic gender needs is to achieve equality. Thus strategic gender needs tend to be long-term while practical gender needs tend to be immediate solutions to problems and as such are relatively short-term.

No doubt for a programme to be described as a tool for reducing or eliminating women's subordination, and empowering women thereby maximising their contribution to the development of a nation, it must meet both strategic and practical gender needs. However, majority of the planning interventions intended for women in developing countries meet practical gender needs without seeking to change existing divisions of labour. Furthermore, attempts to meet strategic gender needs have been few and perceived generally as threatening, western and feminist. If one considers the fact that there are constraints in meeting strategic gender needs in African countries and as such planners may often use practical needs as an entry point for fundamental change, then a sustainable intervention which effectively meets practical gender needs may be viewed as a move towards a positive change. The key question to this paper is: Can BLP be seen as a programme for positive change for women? One way of addressing the question is to examine BLP in its present context and the extent to which it can achieve what it seeks to achieve.

Achievements

On the achievements of BLP, there existed little monitoring and documentation except those provided by the publicity unit of the BLP office. According to the Central Bank report (1992), the programme has promoted adult education, primary health care, food processing, cottage industries, etc. By 1991, BLP had established 997 village industries, 1,751 new farms and gardens, 7,635 co-operatives, 419 women's shops and 103 welfare schemes. As a result Mrs Babangida won an African Prize for Leadership for Sustainable End of Hunger in 1991 (*Echo* 1992).

One of the most obvious effects of BLP is that it has raised the consciousness of men and women and the Nigerian populace in general to the existence of a 'national' framework intended to 'better the lives' of rural women. With governmental mass media at its disposal, BLP's publicity has penetrated both gender and class boundaries. Indeed, several villages whether involved in BLP or not were aware of the existence of the programme (Udegbe and Bamgbose 1994). An indication of its popularity is the fact that the relatively new naira bill which is also the highest naira denomination is unofficially referred to as 'better life'.

Despite its high level of publicity, the programme is fraught with many weaknesses and thus has been subjected to criticism. It must be noted, however, that the programme has attracted little academic discourse or evaluations. This is one of the gaps that this paper seeks to address. The discussion of the weaknesses of the programme will be examined from four perspectives: administrative, human resources, experiences of participants and content.

BLP's Administration

From the perspective of its administration, BLP is an undemocratic organ whose affairs are primarily run by the First Lady. Following the military line of control, orders are issued out to the state governors' wives who in turn transmit instructions to the local level. As Mama (1992) noted 'the real authority and direction of BLP rested on the First Lady'. This trend has evolved a female power structure revolving around the offices of the First Ladies at the three levels of government. One of the implications of this parallel 'government of women by women' is an emphasised class based gender oppression in which the women in power impose their ideas, plan and objectives on the women 'under their control'. Irrespective of the qualifications, expertise, experience or interest of other members, the chairperson at each level is the wife of the administrator at the highest level of authority. This top-down administrative structure is characterised by little or no avenues for feedback, discussion or criticism and minimal involvement of actual rural women in decision making. It is not surprising, therefore, that some participants have accused elite women of having 'hijacked' the programme (Udegbe 1994). As the president of the Community Women and Development (COWAD) put it 'the programme would be more meaningful if it is centred more on rural women and not the elites' (Nigerian Tribune, June 17, 1993).

The establishment of the NCW further made ambiguous and conflicting the control of BLP, because of the existence of BLP offices under NCW on one hand, and directly control by the office of the First Lady on the other hand. Indeed as the roles and span of control of the First Lady changed over time, it impinged directly on the organisational framework for the

implementation of the programme. This resulted in a tussle for control of BLP until Decree 42 was promulgated to make the First Lady the head of NCW. This has serious implications for the viability of BLP, because the sustainability and improvement of BLP is very much tied to the interest of the First Lady. One of the chairpersons stated that:

> Many people believe that the precision with which various projects were executed was a result of the influence willed by our militarised housewives via military husbands since the inception of the programme. The civilian wives may not have the will to see through the projects" (*Sunday Champion*, March 8, 1992).

At the moment the future of the programme is uncertain as the present First Lady Mariam Abacha is interested in 'Family Support Programme' which is what she inaugurated.

The question of funding sources for BLP was controversial. Even though the First Lady had no budgetary allocation, there were indications that the programme which originally had been described as self-financing by the First Lady was indeed at public expense. Furthermore, the programme lacked accountability and was perceived as highly wasteful. BLP has been associated with jamborees and fun-fair and seen as an elite women's affair because the initiation of projects, BLP trade fairs, anniversaries and other activities involved a lot of expenses. Many critics believe that more funds have been expended on seminars, trade fairs and conferences than on the actual projects for rural women. A critic put it aptly thus:

> The programme has been for some a veritable avenue for self-aggrandisement. Seminars and conferences organised in the opulence of five-star hotels and adorned with the splendour of her excellencies, the first ladies have become more synonymous with the operations of the programme than the task of rural development (*The Guardian*, August 28 1992:5).

The elaborate publicity given to BLP with the contradictory pictures of expensively dressed elite women rather than the poor, modestly dressed illiterate women that one is familiar with have aroused criticisms and reactions from the general populace especially among the males.

BLP's Personnel and the Experiences of the Rural Women

Related to the constraints of administration are those of the BLP personnel. As noted earlier, the whole programme revolved primarily around the First Lady, the state governor's wives and a group of eminent women. This group of women has been accused of exploiting the international attention and emphasis on greater gender equality. Most of the personnel were selected not on the basis of competence, understanding of, or sensitivity to gender issues but on the basis of a combination of their husbands' status, social status, social relationships and sex. The selections were based on the

assumption that being women they will inherently understand, be concerned with and have solutions to problems of women. This is not only erroneous but has resulted in widespread ignorance (as earlier stated) and the lack of innovation in running BLP affairs. In addition many were gender-blind, gender-insensitive, had undefined gender perceptions and are unlikely to see any inconsistencies between gender inequality, gender power relations and women's oppression and status.

The personnel have also been described as partial and exhibiting a 'know all' attitude. In a qualitative study of the perception of BLP in three villages with differential levels of responsiveness to community development programmes, Udegbe (1994) noted that the perception of the rural women concerning the BLP personnel included the following:

- women felt that only communities which had wealthy influential relatives as organisers benefited from the programme;
- they perceived unclear and inconsistent expectations of responsibilities of government and participants, they were not sure of what the government would actually do;
- the hopes of women which were raised in some villages by visits from BLP officials were later dashed when the women found that they had contributed money several times (for their membership) to no avail;
- there were administrative bottle necks and the women did not have a direct and easy link to BLP officials.

Three levels of BLP participation may be identified among recipients, these are non-participation, peripheral and active. Non-participating villages are those who out of ignorance, lack of information or lack of interest have not been linked up with BLP. Participation may be regarded as peripheral where the women were aware of the activities or objectives of the programme, had organised themselves into village/or community groups, had made attempts to liase with BLP but had not benefited from the programme. It has been found that in many cases, BLP representatives visited some communities once or twice to organise women into co-operatives without follow-up visits or improvement on the contact (Olawoye *et al.* 1994). Among the active participants three groups may also be observed. The first is the instrumental group whose membership was based on the initiation and invitation of BLP usually because the women in the village had some existing industry or group. The second group were those who were members through the prescribed or 'official route'. The third group are the privileged group who became members and fully benefited from the programme because they had 'connections' with BLP personnel.

While one may argue that irrespective of the process of initiation into the programme the end justifies the means; it is important to note that the end cannot be said to have been achieved and there are psychological

implications of participation and non-participation. Concerning the broad objective of improving the lot of the rural women, BLP has been described as a programme which has had little impact on the everyday lives of rural women (Mama 1992, Olawoye *et al.* 1994). Indeed, a study carried out among some BLP beneficiaries in Oyo State revealed that the women did not perceive any improvement in their standard of living (Adewumi 1991). Affective and behavioural reactions such as dissatisfaction, frustration and negative attitudes may result. Also negative feelings towards government, if already existing among the affected community will be heightened. Subsequently these feelings may lead to apathy and disregard for future women's programmes. Apart from these psychological consequences, social relationships have also been greatly affected. In many cases, existing co-operatives and lineage groups used for implementing the activities were destroyed by the imposition of several requirements of participation. Therefore, despite the fact that a serious focus on women's issues is very much needed in African countries, the prolonged exposure of the populace to women's programmes which pay only lip service to this important issue and which establish faulty institutional frameworks will only succeed in systematically desensitising them to women's needs. Thus a greater motivation will be needed to mobilise people and arouse feelings of trust and belief in future women's programmes.

Ideology

With its emphasis on making women better mothers, wives, homemakers, improving their health and those of their family members and also providing income-generating opportunities, BLP seemed to have adopted elements of welfare and some WID (antipoverty and efficiency) approaches. Therefore many of the problems inherent in those approaches are common to BLP. First, BLP is conservative and only emphasises the traditional roles of women. It did not challenge the subordinate roles of women and did not advocate gender equality. As BLP stands, it may be viewed as a programme which defined 'better lives' for the generality of the Nigerian rural populace through the rural women, rather than 'better lives' for women in terms of their specific needs as women. In terms of service provision, because of its resource constraints and the politically motivated need to cover wide geographical areas, BLP villages only benefited from a few programmes at a time and as such only a few practical needs are met in the final analysis. The benefit derived from the few services provided are usually short-lived because there is little or no capacity building for recipients and maintenance or follow-ups on services are minimal or totally lacking. As Olawoye *et al.* (1994) noted, many of the machines were inappropriate or improperly managed. For example, the report of a monitoring team in Benue State indicated that only 2 of the 28 surveyed BLP machines were functioning (Benue State 1991). Generally, the mechanism for deriving long-term

benefit from the services were underdeveloped. Furthermore, while some of the activities initiated in the programme were aimed at improving and protecting basic health and nutrition of the women and their families, they were achieved through reliance on women's unpaid time, involved longer working hours and increased their triple burden.

By encouraging income generating activities and small scale businesses involving activities such as garri processing, soap manufacturing, vegetable gardening, etc., BLP emphasised productive roles in activities traditionally occupied by women. In addition BLP did not successfully focus attention on 'the woman' in a holistic manner as a teenager, a young woman, a mother, a wife, an old woman. Rather, there has been an overemphasis on the woman as a mother and a wife.

To what extent has BLP met practical and strategic gender needs? In theory, the programme sought to meet practical gender needs. However, despite the large figures reflecting the number of projects initiated or services provided, several dimensions of the limitations of the programme in reality limited its ability to meet practical gender needs. For instance, a garri processing village group without a functional grinder or presser, or a maternity centre without adequate medical personnel or drugs may contribute to statistics but cannot meet the practical gender needs of the villagers. When the needs were met to some extent it was short-lived and at the cost of increasing the triple burden of beneficiaries.

While meeting practical gender needs does not automatically translate into meeting strategic gender needs in the longer-term, the former case may provide an entry point for the satisfaction of the latter. However, in addition to the fact that BLP has not successfully met practical gender needs, it has failed to meet strategic gender needs. This is because it was an undemocratic top-down structure in which the needs of women — perceived through engendered lenses — were defined within the traditional gender roles and their social, economic and political status defined primarily by their reproductive roles. BLP did not confront or question existing gender roles, women's subordinate positions and gender inequality.

Conclusion

BLP represents an attempt at forging a way for the advancement of women in Nigeria. While the specific policy objective of the programme concerns meeting the practical gender needs of rural women, the programme in its present context has not met these needs for the women. In addition, it has probably set the women back in terms of developing along their natural paths and coping after the BLP 'storm'. One of the important fall-outs of the BLP is the negative attitudes and cynicism it has aroused concerning women's issues. Therefore, future and genuine programmes focusing on the advancement of women may need to deal with an uphill task of gaining the

confidence of the intended beneficiaries and the general public. Because BLP has attracted both national and international attention, it is an important albeit expensive lesson in formulating programmes for rural women. Indeed, the programme may be said to be undemocratic and politically motivated, nevertheless, if the programme is to be continued or adopted by other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, it will be necessary to address the several limitations discussed and reworking of this programme may increase its potential for meeting the practical gender needs of rural women. However, it must be noted that the provision of services and increased opportunities for income-generating activities may meet practical gender needs, but unless these issues lead to greater autonomy and empowerment, it will not effectively meet strategic gender needs and an ultimate equitable development process.

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