PLEDGE FOR PARITY:

SUPPORT WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE IN NIGERIA

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**Background**

Today March 8, marks the day for the celebration of the International Women’s Day in the world. The world has reasons to celebrate women, who constitute more than half of the world’s population everywhere including in the Niger Delta. We recall with nostalgia women such as Mrs. Seremavo Bandarekei, former prime minister of old Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, Indira Ghandi of India, recently Hilary Clinton, Aung San Suu Kyi of Thailand who have achieved Parity, and Angela Merkel of Germany to mention but a few. These women and many others have been and would continue to be instrumental to a better society in their various nations. This is the power of the woman where parity is achieved. Here in Nigeria, in the Niger Delta, we had several such women as Late Margaret Ekpo, lateQueen Idia and Emotan of the old Benin Kingdom. The current women achievers in Nigeria are Prof. Alele Williams, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Folorunsho Alakija. You all seated here are all women achievers.

The World Economic Forum in Davos recently predicted that gender parity, would not be achieved until the year 2133. Do you agree? In my view this is poor predictions indeed, because the skills and capabilities of women are becoming very competitive. It is the conviction of this paper that as we - and the world - take a further step today to pledge for parity, we shall go a long way to render this prediction mutable.

***Rationale of the theme***

*The focus of the International Women’s Day (IWD) Forum 2016 is ‘Pledge for Parity’, it is important at this stage to explain the rationality of this theme. Pledge for Parity simply means a conscious effort to ensure fairness and equality in accessing particularly the means of livelihood, political decision-making structures, social and economic infrastructure in homes, communities and in the society at large. It is important to know that both men and women jointly formed the political and economic society that we live in today hence they should equally have access to public and private good.*

*Gender parity, fairness, or equality would generate more productivity and it would mean more gender balanced leadership and better all-round performance.*

The goal of the International Women’s Day 2016 seeks to impact the lives of women in five (5) simple areas:

1. Help women and the girl-child achieve their ambitions
2. Challenge conscious and unconscious bias
3. Call for gender balanced leadership
4. Value women and men’s contributions equally
5. Create inclusive, flexible cultures

All of the above is what we can individually commence action without waiting for someone to push us within the various families, through organizations, the work place and the classrooms. This is because what we ‘Know, shape our Attitude and define the Practices (KAP) we embark upon. Let us examine some of the basis for the confident, that the achievement of parity is attainable. Let us analyse parity from socio-economic and political perspectives.

Parity in the formation of the Social Contract

The concept of ‘Social Contract’ as the basis for the formation of the society/state had prevailed from Hellenic (Greek) through the Roman civilization to the age of Renaissance. It upheld that men and women out of their weakness sought to live with one another (gregarious instinct), in order to achieve a fulfilled life. This is because men and women are dependent on each other mutually; hence, there was a social contract, an agreement between human beings to live orderly together. They then set among themselves a ‘Leviathan’ or the ‘government’, to do for all of them, what they could not individually do for themselves. This is why the state must guarantee equal rights between men and women because they gave up equal rights in its formation.

We need only here say, it is clear that both men and women entered into the social contract. Men and women gave up equal rights in the formation of the state.

Divine Parity ‘parity is a synonym for fairness or equality’ for both men and women who gave up equal part of their inert rights in the formation of human society. They should therefore share equally the pains and gains of the society they jointly created. An illustration of this is found in what is referred herein to as the ‘*Zelophehad paradigm*. This is contained in the Bible.  **Zelophehad** had five (5) daughters. In the course of the Exodus, their father died without a male son. When *Moshe* (Moses) started allotting land to different tribes for settlement he did not assign any portion to their late father (it was the custom of the Jews not to give inheritance to the women). The girls went to Moshe and Eleazer the priest to protest. Moshe brought the case before the Lord and the Lord said to Moshe, *‘the daughters of Zelophehad speak right; you should surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father’s brethren and cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them’*. From consultations made, it is clear that other religious beliefs encourage women’s access to economic opportunities and assets. Women need to speak out against disparity as Zelophad’s daughters did.

Framework of Analysis: Right Based Approach

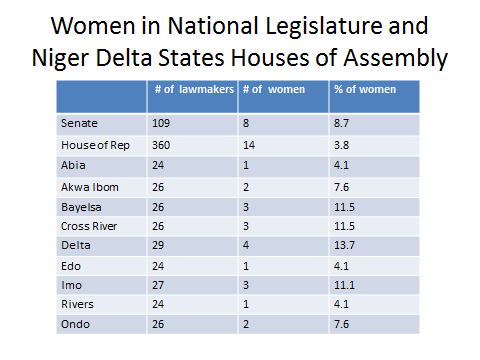
The Right Based Approach (RBA) avers that everyone came into the world with rights. It was part of this right, which was given up in the ‘social contract’, which resulted in the formation of human societies. In the creation of the state, no one gave up more rights than the other; hence, everyone should have equal access to the provisions of the state. It asserts that those who are often most marginalized, excluded and discriminated against do have rights as anyone else. It gives citizens a stake in the political system and a say over the decisions that affect their lives, this is the essence of human rights approach (Machel, 2001:153). The absence of parity in rights and access, engender inequality in social relations.

Nigeria and the Gender Inequality Index

The UNDP had developed a measurement paradigm for the assessment of Gender Inequality (GII) back in 2010. It captures the loss of achievement or gains, which would have accrued if there were gender ‘parity’. In the initial measure, Nigeria scored 118/134 ( 88% in gender inequality meaning that very few women 7.2% only, are allowed to have very little level of parity) indicating a wide gap between the sexes across Nigeria. Thus, Nigeria was losing enormously from the advantages, which would have accrued from the creative ingenuity of women, because the women are less empowered at all levels. They contribute less to labour market participation and high in reproductive health (Adolescent Fertility Rate –AFR) hence high Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR). The composite measures of Gender Inequality and Gender Empowerment (GII and GEM) indicated that Nigeria women have less access to the means of power in economics, politics and decision-making (Bardan and klasen, 1999). In spite of the shortcomings of this paradigm, it revealed that the situation of women empowerment in Nigeria is very low in all areas of human socio-economic activities. Nigeria then has high deficit in development because of the low empowerment level of women. It is not surprising that Nigeria belong to the class of Low Developed Countries (LDC).

**Gender and Politics**

*The ratio of women to men in the current legislative houses in the country specifically in the Niger Delta is not encouraging:*

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*The disparity is very pronounced. We need to make commitments to support women to become more visible in this sector of regional and national development.*

**Agriculture**

Agriculture is the oldest occupation known to man. The legendary Garden of Eden was a farm meant to be tended by the Patriarch and the Matriarch of mankind, Adam and Eve for their sustainability on *parity*. Since then every man and woman and every country had use Agriculture as the first source of the wealth of nations. Agriculture, the arts and science of growing plant, livestock and other crops for food and other human needs or economic gain is the primary source of wealth of nations. Agricultural practices consist of three major components which are: actual crop and animal production (farming), the production and distribution of farm inputs (supply of equipment) and the processing and distribution of farm produce (value addition), (Frank, 2016: 63) which involve several activities to bring the product to the final consumers (business activities).

Nigeria, like all other nations had depended on agriculture to generate the legendary groundnut pyramids in the North, Cocoa seedlings in the West and the massive drums of palm oil in the East until the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantity. Today, agriculture contributes very negligible per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with crude oil sale taking the largest chunk. Consequent upon this neglect of agriculture, Nigeria’s food import bill by 2015 stood at #1.6 trillion as stated by the current minister of Agriculture (Ogbe).

The lopsided development policies in Nigeria, which follow in the direction of the 1917 Township Ordinance by the colonial masters, have dictated the development pattern in favour of the urban areas. This has resulted in:

i) The poverty of public policies, which excludes the rural areas in the development dynamics.

ii) The imbalance in infrastructural distribution between the rural and the urban areas;

iii) The weakness of agricultural practices, which is still rudimentary; and

iv) The poor land tenure system, which excludes women and denies them access to the means of agricultural production compounds the situation of lack of food sufficiency and income disparity;

The cumulative effect of all these is the development of the ‘pull-theory’ which depletes the rural areas of young men with labour power to the urban centres, with the women and the elderly left to tend the farms. The net effect is a reduction in agricultural outputs.

In spite of this situation, the women have been able to produce enough food in the rural farmlands to feed the ‘white collar’ populations in the urban centres under very excruciating conditions. It is instructive to note that the bulk of the rural population engaging in agricultural practices are women, yet they do not own land of their own for agricultural practices and no collateral to empower them to have access to financial assistance from financial institutions.

Collateral is a security in the form of an asset or property offered against a loan/credit portfolio. Financial institutions require it for mortgages and other secured loans.

However, women in the Niger Delta and most of Nigeria, do not own assets or property, hence cannot secure loans/credit to finance agricultural practices. It is instructive to note that most institutions will not accept vacant land even where the women had this.

**Women in Agriculture**

The British Council Gender Report (2012) on Nigeria, indicated that about 60-79 per cent of Nigerian women live and work in the rural areas predominantly in Agriculture, 21 per cent of the women are engaged in non-agricultural practices, while only 7.2 per cent of women in the Niger Delta own the land they farm upon, this limits their access to credit, it limits their productivity and economic prospects. (NDDF, 2015) required to boost economic activities.

The women in the Niger Delta are involved in agriculture as full time business, however in the value chains, they are dominant in planting, seedlings, harvesting and processing (for cassava, peeling, grating and frying garri) in local methods for subsistence. In order to make a little income, they either sell the products crude or add minimal value to them. This downstream sector of agricultural sector fetches very little income hence they remain in the poverty cycle. An issue to address is how to upgrade women’s involvement beyond the downstream level.

The concept of value chain means that at every stage of the product, the product acquires value or usefulness. Cassava for instance, cultivating large acreage of cassava farmland to have larger output to obtain garri, to produce starch for custard, thickener for baby foods, sausages, bakery products, confectioneries, jam, bread production and animal feeds. Non-Food Industries for cassava will include natural adhesive, cassava alcohol, stalks for particleboard, dried yeast, glucose and laundry materials. The Pharmaceuticalsneed cassava formedicinal property, coatings, and biofuel.

In this cassava value chain for instance, is it possible to involve women beyond the first stage into mechanized /industrial farming? Can they become exporters of cassava products? The women are able to go beyond the initial level when they embark on industrial farming subject to their ability to farm in large expanse of farmland, access credits and other farm resources.

Let’s look at Aquaculture as a value chain.

**Aquaculture**, (i) Acquiring the pond/land, (ii) Hatcheries for the supply of fingerlings, (iii) supply of fish feeds, (iv) wholesaler /traders buying at farm gates, (v) klin producers for drying the fishes and (vi) selling to dry fish merchants, retailers selling to restaurants. Where are the women?

The women are mostly found at the level of selling the fishes either fresh or dry/smoke to the final consumers. This is because the other stages of the value chains require enormous cost in their operations and they cannot afford the huge cost because of lack of access to finance and capital, high lending rates, and stringent collateral requirements. Even when facilities are available, information on existence of facilities is poor. Cluster farming which merges several smallholders’ farms to create a bigger one, to take advantage of the economy of scale is helping to build women’s participation in this sector. The farmers’ clusters are organized either horizontally or vertically with cooperative spirit as the engine of growth. How do we strengthen women’s involvement in these clusters? This will be a question I believe we should discuss at this forum.

For Palm Oil, therearesmall holders plantations, harvesting of Palm bunches, processing and marketing. The food Industry is a traditional market for palm oil as the oil is used for cooking in many communities. (Nigeria has 700,000 metric tonnes deficit). Non-Diary **-** creamers, ice creams, use in product where animal fats are unacceptable for religious reason. Non-Food usesinclude soap manufacturing, production of grease, lubricants and candles. Pharmaceutical **-** cosmetics (kernel oil). Its bye-products are used for other purposes including animal feeds. There are huge business opportunities for women in this value chain.

The women of the Niger Delta hardly own palm oil plantations. Since they do not have title to land, it is clear why they hardly own palm oil plantations. They are not involved in the harvesting as they only buy the palm fruit bunches for processing. The women do marketing in small scale to subsistence consumers, while the men conduct industrial sale. Because they confine themselves within their environment, they do not benefit from markets and investment opportunities within and outside the Niger Delta. How do we make the women play more profitable roles?

Are women playing leadership roles in agricultural associations? Assuming roles that facilitates decisions that help women farmers to access agricultural assets and other resources that would help achieve income parity is important. How do we encourage women to take leadership roles in these associations and also strengthen or support the establishment of dedicated women farmers’ associations and networks focussed on empowering women in agriculture in the region?

**Addressing the constraints against Women**

A major problem identified is that of lack of title to land for agricultural business. It is herein proposed that the State or Government should commence a process of *leasing out state farms to women* farmers*. This would fill the gap created by their inability to hold titles to land, and access credit thereof. By this token, they would be able to cultivate agricultural product, make good income and contribute to food sufficiency in the Niger Delta of Nigeria.*

Specialised banks such, as the Bank of Industry (BOI) or Bank of Agriculture should institute special facility meant to acquire modern women-friendly agricultural infrastructure for women to boost their agricultural production. This would take care of the crude tools which are currently being utilized in agricultural production by women and the attendant low yield which they generate. For example, the 200 billion Naira commercial agriculture credit scheme by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), and Micro Finance Banks (MFBs) should be made to create facilities for women in agriculture. Leasing institutions should also be encouraged to take more interest in supporting women groups.

The financial sector should be mobilized to increase lending and refinancing through incentives and the development of intermediaries services that meet the need of women entrepreneurs in agriculture. There should be a review and amendment of laws governing the operations of financial institutions to cater for women. Because of the need to push women forward to achieve parity, some privileges in terms of accessing facilities should be set aside for women. Cooperatives should be strengthened to help meet needs of small farm holders.

Furthermore, efforts must be made to institute legal and constitutional reforms that would promote the principles of women parity, protection and promotion of women access to not only agricultural resources but all factors of social wellbeing. Attention should be given to providing economic infrastructure regarded as drivers of growth. A good example is provision of good roads to ease movements of inputs and farm produce.

The various state Ministries of Commerce should set information desk on external markets and investment opportunities in global markets - ECOWAS, Africa, the Europe, Asia, America etcetera and specified product standards. This would enable women farmers to know the standard required of them if their products are to be allowed into the various global markets. Government agencies such as SMEDAN, Export Promotion council, should be accessible to women. The Nigeria Export Promotion council for instance should constantly update the State’s Ministries so that farmers who will not be able to journey to Abuja will avail themselves of this information.

Women should also endeavour to network, interact with other women and men from other associations within and outside the region, to avail themselves of opportunities and information. The need to take advantage of new media, online-social platforms to seek investment information cannot be overemphasized, but this will require some level of literacy and exposure. Partnership with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) with focus on women’s rights and empowerment should be forged.

Some years ago, in Ikot-Akama and Itung communities in OrukAnam local government council of Akwa Ibom State, women were not allowed to join the village council where governance decisions were taken. Women did not have rights to land inheritance. Civil society organizations worked with ActionAid for five (5) years, sensitizing both men and women on their rights in the communities. Today, women have been given positions of leadership in the various social structures in the communities. Women have now joined the village councils where governance decisions are taken. Many women and girl-child have been given their shares of both their husbands’ and fathers’ property including farmland.

There should be a framework for gender responsiveness in all public, private sector policies and programmes. This should be followed by the review, domestication, and implementation of international and regional conventions that advance the rights of women and the girl child.

In order to sensitize the society pursuant to changing the stereotype, the mass media should become a partner in progress. Generating discussion in the television, radio, billboards, and other information, Education and Communication materials (IEC) would reach wider audience tangential to changing the stereotype held on women on issues such as ownership of land, leadership tasks, exploring investment opportunities outside domestic environment. *Parity would allow more women to be involved in careers in the communication sector to drive gender sensitive issues in the media.* Development organizations such as PIND should continually generate the discussions over the media throughout the Niger Delta for the desired changes to occur.

Sensitizing the men

The media and other channels should be deployed to educate the men over the opportunity cost of their women not being equipped to be part of the agricultural transformation. They should be made to realize that women have been known to spend more of their income on their households; therefore, when women are helped to increase their income, the welfare of the whole family is improved. Men can become strong allies when the overall benefits of such social change become evident.

I will challenge the organisers of this forum to assume the role of ***Amicus Curiae*** friends of the court in pushing through a case in favour of the women in order to establish the ***judicial precedents*** and create ***stare decisis*** for subsequent cases (a decision of the court used as a source for future decision-making. Stare decisis – to stand upon decisions by which precedents are authoritative and binding and must be followed). Traditional, Community and religious leaders should be sensitize to take the ‘Pledge for Parity’ as the custodians of customs, most of which infringe on women’s rights.

Policy –Makers and legislators at all levels of government, Federal, State and local government should be drawn into the ‘Pledge for Parity’ campaign to sign into it and perhaps legislate on it.

In pushing for parity we need to appreciate the importance of capacity building in all spheres. Capacity building is required for women to be able to increase agricultural yields, add significant value to farm produce, operates profitably in the local and global markets, access farmlands and finance, build networks and engage in advocacies, create enabling agricultural environments, .influence political and legal decisions

**Conclusion**

It is instructive to note that, all first world societies defined as ‘developed countries, have taken steps towards gender equality and that partly account for the higher development indicators we find in these countries today, conversely underdeveloped societies that have not accepted or taken steps towards gender parity are struggling with growth and development indictors.

The import of parity is reiterated by Ban Ki Moon, the UN Secretary General thus: ‘Until women and girl are liberated from poverty and injustice, all our goals peace, security and sustainable development stand in jeopardy’. It is important to note that while ‘sex refers to the biological differences between males and females, gender describes the socially construed roles, rights and responsibilities that communities and societies consider appropriate for men and women. In other words, the families and male roles we perform are courtesy of the socialisation we received from the families. This is what creates gender identities, which turn out to engender gender-based discriminations.

Finally, the means to gender parity does not require a police officer to guide over us; rather, individuals should make pledge to change the behavioural pattern in which we have been socialized to accommodate the women on the basis of equality. Once we have changed, we will be able to support others to deal with their situations.

Thank you.

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