**A Case for Women Empowerment.**
The day a Nigerian Senator introduced the Gender Parity and Prohibition of Violence against Women bill, commonly called “The Equality bill,” on the floor of the Nigerian Senate, I smiled. But when this bill was thrown out for unbelievable reasons, I cried.

I smiled because I believed this bill, if passed into law, would bring Nigeria at the forefront of global relevance and strategic development. This bill would further strengthen our resolve in recognising the increasingly important roles women play in shaping and moving the world forward. I cried because the rejection of that bill took Nigeria twenty years backwards against civilisation.

If you followed the debate on whether, or not, to pass the proposed bill, you would realise that the bill was thrown out because it infringed on two fundamentally debilitating concepts that have kept Nigeria from reaching out to rapid developments. These two concepts are religion and culture. The Nigerian law makers believed that The Gender and Equal Opportunity bill was not compatible with Nigeria's cultural and religious beliefs.

A peep into the many problems facing Nigeria since inception will reveal, with increasing clarity that, religion and culture are the two foundations upon which other problems thrive. The Nigerian culture is evidently a domineering and patriarchal one. The Nigerian society is one that constantly violates the basic right of a woman, and will not hesitate to condemn her to the fringes of irrelevance at the slightest opportunity. It is a system that allows men to 'do as they want', but frown at a woman as she expresses her freedom of being and her sense of individuality.

The religious circles haven't helped Nigerians on this women discriminatory issues. Instead of preaching the gospel of liberation and love, they have tactfully promoted the part of subjugation. This is easily seen in the fiery sermons of many pastors that insist women submit to their husbands, without recourse to the biblical portion that says “husbands should love your wives.” They have failed to emphasise and promote the logic that submission breeds submission.

While Nigerians think discriminating against women is a cultural and religious rightness, they should quickly understand that no nation has ever grown by subjugating her women or by treating them as second class citizens. No nation has ever succeeded by treating the war against women - sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, verbal exploitation and gross injustice in the handling of issues of inheritance - with levity. Nations grow and climb into the sphere of immense development when they embrace their women, encourage and empower them to unleash their inherent potentials. Nations thrive when instead of fighting for liberation and acceptance, their women use their time to think creatively, work collaboratively and contribute immensely from their pool of talents.

Education breeds independence and empowerment. When women are properly educated and liberated, the nation thrives. Consider a woman that is properly educated, liberated and understands her immense powers to contribute to the society. She is equipped to make sound decisions on how many kids she can have, when and with whom to have them. She can also help increase the household income because she has great options in the labour force. This results in the better provision of basic family needs and better education and incentive for the children. These added benefits further increase the longevity of the family. And the nation.

Consider another women across the fence that isn't (properly) educated and whose rights are being infringed upon by her society. Because of these infringements, she automatically becomes a threat to the development of this same society. Lack of education makes her economic opportunities small. This also makes her lack the ability to make better options for a suitable partner and the number of kids she can have. She also lacks the basic skills of parenting. And because her contributory powers are small, the education of her children are relegated to the background.

I strongly believe the yawning gap between where Nigerians are and where they want to go is centred on the eradication of the cultural and religious barriers impeding the equality of women in the society. When Nigerian women are fully given a chance for individual liberation and economic emancipation, the society can then say they are ready to step onto the roads of unimaginable dimensions of economic growth and opportunities.

Until Nigerians are able to respect, embrace and celebrate Nigerian women, they will collectively remain where they are: running around in circles of under-development.

This article is written by Richard Chilee