

Women Empowerment Programmes toward Sustainable Development in Nigeria: Challenges and Policy Options

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Abstract

Women play a significant role in sustainable development around the world, yet they often face unique challenges that limit their potential and impact. Globally, women make up almost half of the agricultural workforce, and their contributions are critical to food production and rural development. Developing countries are not left out. However, in Nigeria, women have less access to resources and services than men, and their participation in the sector is often limited by cultural and social norms. These challenges not only affect individual women, but also have broader economic, social, and environmental consequences. Invariably, to assess the correlation between women's empowerment and sustainable development, the study employed the qualitative research method. Hence, it relied on books, scholarly journals, articles, and seminar papers. Central to the finding of the study is that there have been numerous programmes that aimed at empowering women thereby promoting sustainable development among which include: The Women in Agriculture Program (WAEP), the Women Agripreneurship Development Program (WADP), the Women's Rights to Property initiative (WRPI), and the Agriculture and Gender Empowerment strategy (AGES) inter alia but their success was never encouraging due to poor programme implementation. The study also identified lack of continuity, illiteracy, and corruption, among other factors, as the main challenges confronting women empowerment programmes toward sustainable development in Nigeria. The paper recommended the development of multi-sectoral approaches that bring together different government agencies and departments to work together on issues related to women empowerment programmes.

Keywords: Women Empowerment; Sustainable Development; Challenges; Nigeria; Policy options.

Introduction

Women's empowerment is of importance to both the nation and the empowered. With women's empowerment, the future prosperity of the nation is secured because these are the people who are and will take care of many offices and functions in the country. They are also those who are going to manage top offices in the future following the popular statement "Women are the pillars of good society". Empowerment of the women who form a certain percentage of Nigeria's population who are also at their

productive age is crucial to economic performance. The main argument is that the durability of the new leaders will depend, not only on their ideology but to a large extent on their economic performance (Monday 2018 in Mela 2023).

As cited in Ihemeje (2015), growing concerns about the impacts of women's empowerment on sustainable development have generated lots of interest in enhancing the political and economic capacity of the local women in developing countries like Nigeria, where vulnerability to low political and economic capacity is high, because they are the marginalized group in the society. Thus, women's empowerment is a vehicle for ensuring effective sustainable development. Therefore, analyzing women's empowerment is germane to finding ways to help the poor rural women in both the rural and urban areas of Nigeria on a sustainable basis.

The important role of women in Nigerian development cannot be overemphasized. Women are source of labour inputs as well as human capital in production, which improves productivity in most developed and developing countries. In addition, employed women could be a reliable source of demand for the economy through their consumption activities and a new class of entrepreneurs in Nigeria

There is a direct relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development; that is why in the world we live in today, it is practically impossible to avoid the issue and discourse of women's empowerment in the development context. For instance, the issue is discussed among political scientists, civil society groups, politicians, economists, feminists, philosophers, teachers, environmentalists, journalists, scientists and technologists, among others. At different periods, there is a persistent reference to women's empowerment in the form of affirmative action, gender rights, gender equality and balance, women's political participation, the socio-economic construct of women, rural-urban women's lifestyle and the like (UN, 2015).

Many of the women who are productive and energetic remain unemployed, continue to suffer from poor health, and lack sufficient support. Some of them have special needs that require attention. These include those living on the streets, those living with HIV/AIDS, the girls and those with disabilities. The responsibility of ensuring that the aspirations and hopes of women are met lies with the formulation and implementation of good policy programmes.

The agricultural sector in many developing countries is underperforming, partly because women, who represent a crucial resource in agriculture and major contributors to the rural economy through their roles as farmers, labourers and entrepreneurs, face constraints in access to productive resources. Efforts by national governments and the international community to achieve their goals for agricultural development, economic growth and food security will be strengthened and accelerated if women empowerment projects produce the desired results.

The synergy between sustainable development and women's empowerment is undoubtedly threatened both in urban and rural areas in Nigeria by inequality, low sustainable livelihoods and unlimited time allocated to take care of children, the sick and the elderly. Despite these barriers, efforts have been made towards women's empowerment programmes in Nigeria. Some initiatives aimed at addressing these challenges include: increased women's access to education, land, improved seedlings, fertilizer and other resources. Others have focused on promoting women participation in decision-making processes and providing them with financial and technical assistance. These positive initiatives can improve the economic, social, psychological and political circumstances of women.

It is against this background that this paper discusses some of the empowerment initiatives and programmes that have been implemented to address these challenges and even enhance sustainable development, and assess certain factors which affect its impacts among women in Nigeria. Attempt at achieving this objective has led to the segmentation of the paper into five distinctive parts: The first section covers the introduction. The second section contains a conceptual review of the subject matter. The third section contains the research method; the fourth section contains the discussion on the body of the research paper and the fifth section covers the conclusion and recommendations respectively.

Conceptual Clarifications

Empowerment is a complex and multifaceted concept, with many different definitions and approaches. Nussbaum (2000) defines empowerment as "the capability to make effective choices." According to this view, empowerment involves not only the ability to make choices but also the capacity to act on those choices. Women's economic empowerment is the process of achieving women's equal access to and control over economic resources and ensuring they can use them to exert increased control over other areas of their lives (Taylor & Perezniето, 2014). Its achievement is now a global policy priority in light of its potential contribution to the sustainable development goals

Kabeer (1999) in Mela (2023) argues that empowerment must be understood in terms of the transformation of power relations, rather than simply the acquisition of new skills or resources. This perspective highlights the importance of social, political, and economic structures in shaping the ability of individuals to exercise power and make choices.

Urhibo et al., (2023) warned that in defining women's empowerment it will be wise to elude it to a supporting context or variable. Hence, in the context of rural development, women's empowerment is concerned with improving their access to resources such as land, credit, and education. Women empowerment is seen as an important component of rural development because it is linked to better health, education, economic outcomes and the general well-being of rural women and their families. According to Vaid & Kumar (2015) in Ihemeje (2015), women empowerment is simply the process by which the female population can achieve a greater share of control over material, human, and intellectual resources. Plus, having indiscriminate access to financial, decision-making positions at every strata of society.

To Matira (2015), women empowerment is holistic, hence empowering women in the true sense of the word - intra and inter. Intra means empowering women to feel worthy and control their lives at all levels of society. Inter means the ability to influence the direction of social change to create a just social and economic order at regional, national, and international levels. Central to this definition, is that women empowerment is a situation where women take ownership and control of their lives through the articulation of their aspirations and change strategies, as well as the expansion of choice as women are closely linked to their socially defined gender roles, responsibilities, and social structure.

Arising from these multiple definitions, empowerment has become a tool used to harness the potential of women as active partners in sustainable development, not only at the local government level but also at the state and national levels. As such, women empowerment describes the increasing and improving social, economic, political, environmental and legal strengths of women to ensure equal rights and make them confident enough to claim their rights and participate meaningfully in the decision-making process.

The term, sustainable development deals with any form of development programmes that can be sustained. In other words, any development effort that cannot be sustained is not a sustainable development. Hence, sustainable development is that kind of development which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN, 1987 cited in Ihemeje 2015).

Sustainable development is conceptualized as resting on interrelated pillars: economic development, social development, environmental protection, preservation of cultural diversity, political development and legal development (UNESCO, 2001). In Nigeria, women are treated in a tokenistic manner in project management committees; and they offer inadequate initiatives for community-based sustainable development (Harcourt, 2012). Dealing with these threats requires redistributive measures that address inequalities and realize human rights and capabilities; they need to be prioritized as central to sustainable development.

An Overview of Past Programmes aimed at Empowering Women in Nigeria

There have been several programmes enacted by the Nigerian government to address gender inequality and empower women since the country's independence in 1960. Due to certain constraints and limitations, only a few will be analyzed in this section

The Nigerian Women in Agriculture (WAE): The Nigerian Women in Agriculture Empowerment Programme (WAE) is a national programme that was launched in 2008 by the Nigerian government. The programme aimed to increase women's participation in agriculture and improve their access to resource, such as credit, training, and extension services. The WAE programme has several specific initiatives, such as the Women in Extension Services initiative, which trains women as extension agents. The programme has been implemented in all the 36 states in Nigeria (Oyelere et al., 2019).

Research has shown that the programme has had a positive impact on the agricultural productivity and income of women. For example, a study carried out by the International Food Policy Research Institute found that women who participated in the WAE programme increased their income by an average of 36% compared to those who did not participate (Ajabu et al., 2018). The programme has also led to an increase in the number of women-owned agribusinesses, and it has helped to improve women's access to extension services. The WAE policy has equally led to the passage of laws and other policies that promote gender equality, such as the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, which was passed in 2017 (Ajabu et al., 2018).

Women Agripreneurship Development Program (WADP): Another past policy is the Women Agripreneurship Development Program (WADP). The program was implemented in partnership with the United Nations Food Women Agripreneurship Development Programme. (WADP) was launched in 2016, as part of the Federal Government of Nigeria's National Agricultural Technology and Innovation Policy and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The WADP was designed as a five-year program, with the goal of reaching 500,000 women farmers across Nigeria (Omonoa 2018). The policy was aimed at empowering women in agriculture through skills development, access to finance, and linkages to markets. It is equally aimed at increasing the productivity and profitability of women farmers, as well as improving their access to information and technology. The WADP has been implemented in several states across Nigeria, including Kano, Kaduna, and Sokoto (Omonoa, 2018).

The WADP has also been credited with increasing women's participation in decision-making processes related to agriculture and rural development. Through the program, women farmers have been able to participate in policy dialogues and consultations, as well as contribute to the development of agricultural policies and programs. The WADP has also contributed to a change in the way that agriculture is viewed in Nigeria, moving away from a focus on subsistence farming to a more commercialized and market-oriented approach (Ajabu et al., (2018).

Women's Right to Property Initiative (WRPI): Another past policy development in Nigeria is the introduction of the Women's Right to Property Initiative (WRPI). The program was launched in September 2017, the programme was a five-year initiative (Morrisey, 2018). Unlike many developmental policies in Nigeria, the WRPI is a national program that aims to improve women's access to land and other property. The program seeks to do this by promoting legal reforms, improving the implementation of existing laws, and providing education and training to women. The program also aims to increase women participation in land administration and decision-making processes. There are also a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSO) that were working to promote gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria. The Women's Right to Property Initiative (WRPI) came as a result of the partnership between the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Agriculture and Gender Empowerment Strategy (AGES): The Agriculture and Gender Empowerment Strategy (AGES) of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development is one of the past policies of the government. The AGES was launched in October 2017, and aimed to increase women's participation and contribution to the agricultural sector in Nigeria (World Bank, 2018). The strategy focused on improving women's access to land, finance, inputs, markets, and technology, as well as promoting gender-sensitive extension services. It is worth noting that the AGES were closely linked to the NGP. The AGES policy was based on four main pillars: Access to land; Access to finance; Access to inputs and services; and Access to markets. The policy hoped to address the specific challenges faced by women farmers in each of these areas.

1. **Access to land:** The AGES focused on increasing women's access to land by promoting land rights for women, and improving the security of land tenure. The policy also aimed to improve women's access to agricultural extension services, inputs, and credit, (World Bank, 2018).
2. **Access to Finance:** Under the pillar of access to finance. The AGES aimed to improve access to finance for women farmers by creating gender-sensitive financial products, such as micro-finance services, and by promoting financial literacy. The policy also aimed to create gender-sensitive legal and regulatory frameworks for financial services and to increase women's participation in farmer organizations and cooperatives. This was important because it gave women access to greater resources and bargaining power (World Bank, 2018).
3. **Access to Inputs and Services:** It promoted gender-sensitivity extension services, and ensured that women farmers had access to appropriate technologies. The AGES also promoted the development of female-specific technologies and services, such as sanitary facilities for women farmers. This is important because it can improve the general well-being of the woman which has a direct impact on her productivity. They encouraged women's participation in market organizations, such as cooperative associations and farmer groups.
4. **Access to Markets:** The AGES engaged in the development of women-specific markets, such as women markets, and supported the promotion of women-specific products, such as organic produce and handicrafts. All of these strategies were aimed at increasing women's income and improving their livelihood. Lastly, the AGES promoted gender mainstreaming and capacity building. This pillar aimed to increase the capacity of stakeholders to implement gender-sensitive policies and programs and to ensure that all actors were aware of gender issues and could address them effectively. The AGES engaged in gender-sensitive budgeting, planning, and monitoring and evaluation of programs. AGES promoted gender training and capacity building for all levels of the agricultural sector, from policymakers to farmers (Ajayi & Adetula, 2019)
5. **YouWin Programme:** This was a youth development programme established by the federal government under the administration of Good Luck Jonathan starting in 2011 to empower Nigerian youth and Women. YouWin programme was a youth enterprise with innovation in Nigeria. Many women and youth benefited from the plan (Sanusi, 2012).
6. **Public Works and Women/Youth Empowerment Scheme:** The Federal Government of Nigeria also launched the Public Works and Women/Youth Empowerment Scheme (PW/WYE). The programme which was a component of the Subsidy Re-investment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P) was targeted at generating about 370,000 jobs across the country. The PW/WYE was intended to create employment opportunities for women and youth in labour-intensive public works and was expected to generate 50,000 skilled jobs and 320,000 unskilled job opportunities. The implementation was in partnership with the States, the Local Governments and the private sector. To enhance the scheme, the government set aside some portion of the partial subsidy on petroleum prices removal proceeds to support the employment generation intervention nationwide (Sanusi, 2012). Unfortunately, SURE-P was the first casualty of Buhari's Administration, and he scrapped it.
7. **N-Power Programme:** This is an ongoing federal government program that was established in 2016 under President Mohammed Buhari's administration. It is geared towards empowering and equipping young Nigeria women especially the youth in different sectors such as N-power Agro, N-power

Health, NPower Teach, N-power Build, N-power creative, N-power Tax, N-power Tech (hardware and software) to better and facilitate their productiveness in economic and social development. Since its inception, it has alleviated many women and youth with skills acquisition to better their lives especially those not fortunate enough to acquire formal education (Sanusi, 2012)

8. All these government efforts would have been laudable but for the bureaucratic bottlenecks encountered in the process of assessment of the benefit of these schemes; the most noticeable ones being the Nigerian factor of “who knows who”, god fatherism, bribery and corruption experienced in the disbursement of the funds.
9. Notably, there is a high rate of unemployment among productive women in Nigeria. Instead of this, employment generation becomes a resolution mechanism for most of the women empowerment programmes in Nigeria. The system of empowerment programme was structured for entrepreneurial skills development thereby facilitating the development of skills and initiatives to increase the employability of the graduates, especially among other categories of unemployed women. Women empowerment programmes have impacted and empowered most of the women fairly through the introduction of entrepreneurial skills and initiatives in Nigeria.

Empirical Review

Specifically, the rural areas offer the Nigerian women at that level, the environment and avenue to articulate, develop and achieve their potential; while their role and contributions to sustainable development constitute an integral part of the development process and should not be inaccessible to them. On the contrary, local government authorities that are supposed to cater for the well-being of their people, especially women in their area of jurisdiction do not seem to be making enough effort to encourage the participation of their constituents on the matter of felt needs (Ihemeje 2015), while it is equally argued that the local government have not used discretionary power to plan for development in their various jurisdiction due to inadequate autonomy; hence reducing women contribution within joint decision-making processes, and as a result, they (women) opt for independent economic control (Kabeer, 1998 cited in Ihemeje 2015).

Sustainable development in this sense is about the contribution of women to the development process at the local level, but the question is: how empowered are they? In a study carried out among Urhobo local people of Delta State for instance, results showed that men own the land, and less than 20% of them are engaged in diverse non-rural economic and socio-political activities (Idisi, 1996 cited in Ihemeje 2015). In other parts of Delta and Edo States of Nigeria, largely in local government areas, over 70% of the farmers are rural women and girls (Ukpere, 2009).

In another study conducted by the British Council on “improving the lives of girls and women in Nigeria,” with emphasis on the local female populace, results showed that 47% of Nigerian women are mothers before they reach 20; only about 4% of women are local government councillors, while only 7.2% of women own the land they farm (British Council, 2012). In addition, women are more likely than men to be affected by environmental problems because of their social roles and more impoverished status in local communities as they are more vulnerable to storms, floods and climate change impacts (Stevens, 2010). Besides that, most women in local communities are confronted with economic deficits as they lack financial muscles. This challenge is very pronounced and worse in developing countries, including Nigeria which adds up to seventy per cent of the world’s 1.3 billion people living on less than 1 dollar a day who are either women or girls (Stevens, 2010). In light of these responses that reveal the zeal, courage, strength and constraints of women toward sustainable development at the local level, it thus appears therefore that women contribute so much but achieve little due to their level of empowerment which is ridiculously low.

Stevens (2010) posits that women are essential to poverty reduction because of their role in increasing economic opportunities, thus, women are the cornerstone of development. Corroboratively, women are increasingly behind the organization of co-operatives producing artisan goods as well as

agricultural products from coffee to chocolate in the quest to enhance their livelihoods, their communities and local ecosystems (Stevens, 2010).

Results (1997) cited in (Ihemeje 2015) opines that ‘reaching and empowering women’ is its second key goal after poverty reduction; in fact, empowerment for women has recently recorded a major strategy in meeting not only Millennium Goal 3 on gender equality, poverty reduction, health, HIV/AIDS, Ebola virus restraint; rather maintained synergy with Goals 5 and 8 in the Sustainable Development Goals target (ICSU, ISSC, 2015).

A plethora of recommendations have been made in the past to ensure that women are empowered and contribute effectively to sustainable development at the local government levels by government, international organizations and community-based efforts but all to no avail (Ihemeje 2015).

Improving the Empowerment of Women toward Sustainable Development in Nigeria

There are suggested ways that will help to improve the empowerment of women toward sustainable development in Nigeria; they include, but are not limited to the following;

1. **Improvement in the provision of basic infrastructure:** When there are basic infrastructures like pipe-borne water and electricity, other economic activities will not be restricted; there will be the production of goods and services which brings about economic development and growth. Building and maintenance of good roads will help in the transportation of farm produce from rural to urban areas easily and economically.
2. **Improvement in the provision of quality and well-equipped health facilities:** The government should try as much as possible to bring home what most of the officials that have gone overseas have seen there to our own country. This will help all of us and will make our leaders access health care within Nigeria and not abroad. Also, the provision of healthcare delivery facilities is an important source of empowering women and youths. In 2008 World’s Safe Motherhood Day, Nigeria was rated with the notorious record as the second most fatal country worldwide for pregnant women and complications-related cases. By this ranking, Nigeria had the highest maternal mortality rate in Africa as of 2008. Other common health problems such as malaria, typhoid fever and HIV/AIDS are still ravaging the people. Increased public investment in healthcare delivery will be therefore a fundamental way of enhancing the wealth-creation capacity of women and youth in Nigeria
3. **Stability in government policies:** Policies adopted by the governments at the three tiers of Nigeria’s federal system have to do with the fiscal, monetary and trade policies with emphasis on pro-poor measures. The policy objective for empowering the poor and vulnerable members of the population, of which women form a majority of its composition, has always been to increase opportunities for livelihood for the poor through job creation, easing access to credits, provision of infrastructure, enhancement of business incentives, and increased participation in wealth-creation. For these purposes, budgetary allocations are made annually by federal, state and local governments, yet the policy outcomes usually fall short of expected policy targets. The government should try to make stable policies that can stand the test of time. The policies should be in favour of the Youth and women; not only politicians and lawmakers.
4. **Repositioning an effective, efficient and result-oriented economic team:** The creation of this economic team will help stabilise and improve our economy by bringing down the exchange rate of Naira to the dollar and British pound. This will also make prices of commodities come down and stabilise and improve our economy; thus, reducing inflation. Similarly, political reforms that engender populist enlistment into political power positions, and adjustment towards a belief system that is more adaptable to changes and equality also provide opportunities for empowerment of the disadvantaged and vulnerable segment of the population.
5. **Land law Reforms:** are a necessary way to empower all marginalised segments of the population; but social campaigns, advocacy and re-orientation that will change people’s traditional value system are essential to begin the process that will empower women through

participation in land ownership. After all, more women are engaging in farming than men in Nigeria.

6. **Starting up of new businesses:** Government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can channel their interventions towards advocacy and training for the creation of entrepreneurship skills among youths and women. So, talking about empowering women and youth in Nigeria through assisting them to set up, manage well and earn a living from micro and small-scale enterprises is a well-considered process of solving the problem of poverty among these groups. It is an employment avenue and a sustainable income-generating process. It is a sustainable job creation process. It is a potential source of revenue for the government.
7. **Formation of Cooperative Organisations/societies:** Cooperative organisations/societies emerged as self-help entities to combat economic and social inadequacies. Hence, cooperation is a form of collective action in which individuals join together to accomplish what would be more costly or possible for them.

Conclusion

Arising from this exploration, it is pertinent to conclude that women play a pivotal role in sustaining development at the local government level in Nigeria, despite their inadequacies. This paper establishes that it is a low rate of women's empowerment that poses an adverse effect on sustainable development at the local government level, hence the need for better women's empowerment programmes. It is believed that if women were in more productive and decision-making roles, we could be moving faster and more assuredly towards sustainability in the economic, political, social and environmental sense. Problem identification is crucial to enhancing the capacities of local women to contribute to development locally and nationally

It is evident that women play a vital role in agricultural production and rural development, and yet they continue to face significant challenges that limit their ability to fully participate in and benefit from the sector. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that integrates gender into agricultural policies, programs, and initiatives. This includes addressing issues of gender equality and equity, improving women's access to resources and services, and promoting women's entrepreneurship and agribusiness. Through such efforts, it is possible to empower women and ensure that they can contribute to and benefit from agricultural development in the long term.

Recommendations

In a bid to ensure women's empowerment programme with current Sustainable development goals this paper recommends the following:

1. Education and training should be given to women in the local government areas irrespective of their age. Through this medium, more women at the rural level would be sensitized about their rights, roles and responsibilities toward the development of their localities and thereby catalyze sustainable development process nationally;
2. women should be sensitized about climate change and the use of environmental resources like felling and planting of trees (deforestation and forestation);
3. The government should stop paying lip service to women's empowerment because women are a very important instrument to sustainable development, rather build skills and capacity in gender mainstreaming;
4. There must be attitudinal change among the women themselves at the local level not to rely on their husbands, governments and other interventions for political and economic independence. It will make them self-reliant and self-independent;
5. Women should be provided with investment opportunities at the local level through greater access to agricultural inputs such as land, labour, fertilizers, soft loans and high-yielding seeds; and

6. Enlightenment programmes for women on the need to be actively involved civic engagements and decision-making by attending town meetings involve in community development efforts and participate in the electoral process.

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