

## Women Empowerment and the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development: A Study of Nigeria

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### Abstract

The contribution of women to national development is usually too significant to be ignored in any economy. This study examined the role of the average Nigerian woman to the nation's economy. It is a qualitative research in which data was sourced from secondary materials including books, journals, periodicals, newspapers, and the internet. The Neo-classical theory of environmental sustainability (Turner, et al, 2005) was adopted as the theoretical framework while the methodology followed the technique of content analysis. Results showed that the average Nigerian woman made immense contributions towards the provision of food security, employment and poverty reduction in the economy. In its conclusion, the paper observed that such contributions depended largely on the level of empowerment of the average Nigerian woman. Hence, it was suggested that government should beef up measures and policies geared towards the greater empowerment of the average Nigerian woman. This is one sure way towards the attainment of the 2030 sustainable development agenda for the country.

**Keywords:** *Women empowerment, Sustainable development, Poverty reduction, Employment generation, Food security*

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## **Background to the Study**

In the traditional African society, it is believed that the development of a woman is synonymous with the development of a nation as women constitute the hub of the family and the entire society. Hence, the notion of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (1996) that, “as long as there is the underutilization of the skills and resources of women in agrarian societies, there can be no development” The point to underscore in this assertion is that the population of most agrarian economies are essentially rural and women constitute the greater proportion of such populations. Thus, against the background of the statistics which places the population of women at 49.7% of the total Nigerian population by the Federal Office of Statistics(1992) Provisional population census report, it is obvious Adeyemo (1984) that “ the rural sector constitutes the social and economic environment of the total population and unless it can be set moving, many developmental objectives will be frustrated”. Flowing from the above therefore, it follows, that, “empowering the women will not only help to improve their social and family welfare, but go a long way to arrest hunger and poverty, eradicate disease and stimulate them into sustainable economic development for the entire nation” (Theduru, 2021). Little wonder why as early as 1928, Baumann, in his classic titled “the division of work according to sex in Africa culture”, recognized the importance of women in farming in Africa. The above is not to imply that such importance is limited to farming and the agricultural sector. Hence, it makes sense to recall at this point, the submission by Rhode (2003) and Adesokan (2016), that,

*Participation of women is vital to the success of sustainable development programmes because, they are powerful decision-making forces, well acquainted with the pros and cons of their communities and are always in a good position to analyse how best to improve their immediate society.*

## **The Problem**

The notion of sustainable development has as its major policy thrust, the welfare and wellbeing of both the present and future generations. This goal can only be realistic if more of the global population is engaged in productive and gainful economic activities since women obviously constitute the majority of the population which are usually domiciled in the rural communities, it stands to reason that the empowerment of such women will ensure a maximal contribution towards the realization of the basic objectives of the sustainable development initiative. These initiatives include among others – food security, poverty reduction, education and good health, to mention but a few. In this vein therefore, the onus revolves around this study, to interrogate the extent to which the empowerment of women can go in attaining the goals of sustainable development.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The broad objective of the study is to assess the extent to which the empowerment of women in Nigeria can go in attaining the nation's quest for sustainable development. The specific objectives include to:

- a) Examine how much the empowerment of women can enhance the realization of food security in Nigeria, and

- b) Ascertain the extent to which the empowered woman can help address the issue of malnutrition in Nigeria.

### **Research Questions**

This study will address two questions. These include:-

- a) Can the empowerment of women enhance the realization of the objective of food security in Nigeria?
- b) To what extent can the empowered Nigerian women facilitate the curtailment of malnutrition in the country?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Conceptual literature**

**Empowerment:** Empowerment is a multidimensional social process which helps people gain control over their own lives. It may be viewed as a process that fosters power in people for use in their lives, their communities and in their society, by acting on issues they believe is important. According to Sabay (1998), “empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life”. The term implies decentralization of power and authority in the deprived, oppressed and powerless people who have not been able to participate in decision making and implementation of policies and programs of both government organizations as well as in social matters. Chattopadhyaya (2005) holds that, “empowerment is multi-dimensional and refers to the expansion of freedom of choice and action in all spheres (social, economic, and political) to shape one's life. It also implies control over resources and decisions”. The term is further defined as “the process of gaining control over one's own life while supporting and facilitating others' control over their lives” (Aspy and Sandhu 1999).

**Food Security:** In any index of food security, four pillars are recognized and included as dimensions for analysis. These include: - availability, access, utilization and stability. According to FAD (1983),

*The ultimate objective of world food security should be to ensure that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food they need; food security should have three specific aims, namely ensuring production of adequate food supplies; maximizing stability in the flow of supplies; and security access to available supplies on the part of those who need them.*

The United Nations (1975), defines food security as “availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices”.

**Malnutrition:** Generally, the term malnutrition refers both to under-nutrition and over nutrition. In this study however, the term is used to refer to a deficiency of nutrition. Malnutrition refers to “all deviations from adequate and optimal nutritional status” (IFAD, WFP, FAO, 2013) resulting from specific nutrient deficiencies or diets based on inappropriate combinations or proportions of foods. Over nutrition can lead to obesity. It is the hyper-

consumption of calories and nutrients beyond levels necessary for growth, development, and metabolic functioning. Malnutrition literally means 'bad nutrition' and refers to the imbalance between the body's supply and demands for nutrition. The term may therefore, be defined as 'an impairment of health resulting from a deficiency, excess, or imbalance of nutrients'.

**Poverty alleviation:** A world Bank Report (1999) views 'poverty as, “comprising of hunger, lack of shelter, sickness, illiteracy, joblessness, uncertainty, high mortality rate, disease, polluted environment, powerlessness and lack of freedom”. According to Marshal (1998);

*poverty is a condition in which an individual or group of individuals are unable to meet their basic material needs such as foods, portable drinking water, clothing, shelter, basic healthcare, education, lack of participation in the prevailing social standard of living, dignity and having limited chance of advancing their welfare just to the limit of their capabilities.*

Ajaakaiye and Olmola (1999) perceive “poverty alleviation” as the process which seeks to reduce the level of poverty in a community or state”.

**Sustainable development:** The concept of sustainable development is based on the concept of development (socioeconomic development in line with ecological constraints), the concept of needs (redistribution of resources to ensure the quality of life for all) and the concept of future generations (the possibility of long-term usage of resources to ensure the necessary quality of life for future generations). The essence of the concept of sustainable development derives from the Triple bottom line concept, which implies the balance between three pillars of sustainability – environmental sustainability, social sustainability and economic sustainability.

Sustainable development is a concept that is revolutionary, yet unfortunately difficult to pragmatically define. The concept is one that is arguably multi-disciplinary, complex and systematic, yet defining it is without doubt a great task. This notwithstanding, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987 – the “Bundtland Report”), and the landmark World Bank paper “Environment, Growth and Development” (World Bank 1987), have defined sustainable Development as, 'development that meets the needs of future generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

### **Empirical Literature**

This section reviews related studies on the subject matter in a tubular format as follows:

**Table 1:** Past and Current Works on Women Empowerment and Sustainable Development In Nigeria

Name of researcher(s)/ year and title of study	Geographical and content scope covered	Data source and analytical tools	Findings/recommendation/ conclusion
Adesokan (2018) Women Empowerment as a catalyst for sustainable development in Nigeria: Adult education as a tool.	Nigeria: women empowerment, sustainable development and Adult education	Primary data were used for the study. Analysis was carried out using frequency tables percentages and correlational table	The results showed that women empowerment has effect on sustainable development. Again, positive relationship exists between women empowerment and sustainable development. It was recommended that education should be adopted as a vital tool for empowering women
Aregbesola (2016) Nigerian women empowerment status and its influence on access to reproductive health services	Nigeria: women empowerment status, reproductive health services.	Primary data obtained via interviews with a Nigerian women in Washington DC. The women were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. The ecological systems theory was employed for analysis.	Findings revealed that among the 9 women, traditional beliefs did not have an over whelming direct effect to access to services or information. Empowering women is vital for social growth, no matter the place of origin.
Bayeh (2016). The role of empowering women and achieving gender equality to the sustainable development of Ethiopia.	Ethiopia: role of empowering women, gender equality and sustained development.	Secondary sources of data. Qualitative methodology was adopted for the study.	Findings show that the role of women across various dimensions of sustainable development is not very manifest.

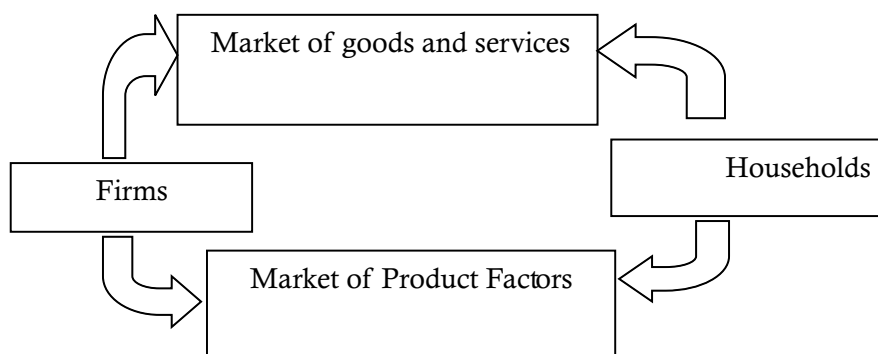
### Theoretical framework

#### The Neo-classical sustainability of the Growth Theory (Turner, et. al, 2005)

The neo-classical theory of growth (or development) considers the increase of production and therefore, of disposable income in higher levels of consumption as a solution to poverty for progress and development. The approach is based on the assumption that the capacity for self-regulation (Tetenberg, 2006 p.8) of free markets and not bound, and technological advances are able to ensure capacity of substitutions endless between the various forms of capital, mitigating so, the constraints arising from the possible scarcity of resources, allow sustainable growth, a level of consumption does not decrease over time.

The neo-classical approach – an economic system considered as closed and linear, offers a model of continuous growth. The removal of the assumptions of decreasing productivity of capital and exogeneity of technical progress, leads to deny that in the future, there is the process of convergence between the growth rates of the various countries. It also leads to predict the tendency to continue expanding as there are no implicit mechanisms to stop. The economic system: a closed system and linear.

**Fig. 1**



**Source:** elaboration on Turner, Pearce & Bateman (2005)

As illustrated in the figure above, the traditional neoclassical economists – Turner, Pearce and Bateman (2003), unlike the classical economists, did not take into account, the hypothesis of a binding connection between the economic system and the environment. For the neoclassical, the unlimited exploitation of natural resources is commonly accepted as the price to pay for fuelling economic growth and provide employment.

### **Methodology**

Data for the study was obtained from secondary sources which include – books, journals, periodicals, newspapers, and the internet. Leveraging on the theoretical framework – the neoclassical sustainability of the Growth theory (Turner, et. al). Data is analyzed using the method of content analysis. The analysis is sequenced as follows;

**Research Question one:** Can the empowerment of women enhance the realization of the objective of food security in Nigeria?

A study titled, “women empowerment for household food security: The place of education” by Olumakaiye and Ajayi (2006), investigated the association between educational status of women and provision of food for food security. The results showed that women with higher education are likely to provide varieties of food thereby increasing the household food security. Sitto, et al.. (1994) posits that, “improving women's education is probably the single most important policy instrument to increase agricultural productivity and reduce poverty”. Increased women's education is a key ingredient for women's empowerment. Many studies worldwide have documented the importance of women's education for its impact on child schooling and nutrition. According to Quisumbing (1996), “in Kenya where the amount of education women receive is extremely low, a year of primary education provided to all women farmers would boost their farm yield by 24%”. To lend credence to this fact, the FAO (1995) revealed that women account for more than half of the labour required to produce the food consumed in the developing world. Some previous studies also conducted by FAO (1995) established that, “in sub-Saharan Africa, where women and men farm separate plots, women farmers have traditionally been responsible for food production”.



In a related development, a study Adepoju, Ogunniyi and Agbedeyi (2015) which investigated the role of women in household food security in Osun state Nigeria, it was revealed that women contributed to food security at the household level in descending order of ranking by participating in food processing, buying of varieties of food items for consumptions, engaging in food purchasing and distribution process, buying food for storage keeping, among others. The result further reveals that education, household size, and household expenditure have significant effect on household food security in the study area.

**Research Question two:** To what extent can women's empowerment facilitate the reduction of malnutrition in Nigeria?

In a study titled, “Women empowerment and intra-household dietary diversity in Nigeria by Tanakem, Efobi and Atata (2017), it was found that, “ overall, households that are female biased in terms of share of female within the household, and those that favour leadership tend to have higher significant improvement in their dietary intake with empowerment”. FAO, (2011) and World Bank (2011) observed that “women empowerment in the agricultural sector is seen as essential to achieving food security and reducing hunger, as well as improving the efficiency of policy interventions”. In Nigeria and many other developing countries, one important role of women in households is their ability to ensure and enhance an efficient dietary intake among household members. Most women in Nigeria are largely involved in food production, distribution and consumption. This implies that within households, women are primary decision makers in relation to food (Diego and Quentin, 2010; Efobi, 2016).

To tackle the unacceptable situation there is a renewed interest in furthering women's empowerment status through interventions and programs. In a related development, a working paper by Salawu, Rufai, Kabir, and Adebayo (2020) on “the influence of women empowerment on child nutrition in rural Nigeria, credence was further given to the fact that, “women empowerment remains a pathway out of cycle of weak dietary diversity and consistent child malnutrition in rural Nigeria”. Interestingly, several other studies across Africa share the same results; of particular note is the study titled, “what does women's empowerment have to do with malnutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa? Evidence from demographic and health Surveys from 30 countries. The study opened up with the observation that the reduction of childhood malnutrition has been identified as a priority for health and development in Sub-Sahara African countries. Employing secondary data sets in which the analyses were performed at bivariate level with the use of chi-square, the results exposed the fact that, women's empowerment was related to childhood nutritional status. Thus, the paper recommended that policies and programmes which aim at reducing childhood malnutrition should include interventions designed to empower women in Sub-Saharan Africa.

## **Findings**

This study revealed the following:

1. Women with higher education are likely to provide varieties of food thereby increasing household food security.
2. Improving women's education is probably the single most important policy instrument to increase agricultural productivity and reduce poverty.

3. Increasing women's education is a key ingredient for women's empowerment
4. Women account for more than half of the labour required to produce the food consumed in the developing countries.
5. In Sub-Saharan Africa where women and men farm separate plots, women farmers have traditionally been responsible for food production.
6. Generally, households that are female biased in terms of share of female within the household, and those that favour leadership tend to have higher significant improvement in their dietary intake with empowerment.
7. In Nigeria and many other developing countries, an important role of women in households is their ability to ensure and enhance an efficient dietary intake among household members.
8. In Nigeria, women empowerment remains a pathway out of circle of weak dietary diversity and consistent child malnutrition.
9. Women's empowerment is related to childhood nutritional status

### **Conclusion**

The United Nations Development programme (UNDP) (1996) holds the view that, as long as there is the underutilization of the skills and resources of women in agrarian societies, there can be no development. This assertion not only underscores, but also highlights the significance of women's empowerment in the developmental process of any society. Again, this view has always constituted the mainstay of several investigations by contemporary researchers.

In the study, the role of women empowerment in the attainment of food security, the overall quest for the Nigerian sustainable development initiative was interrogated. The study employed secondary data which were analyzed by the technique of content analysis. Results which were in conformity with several previous studies reveal that empowering the women fold in an agrarian society like Nigeria and a host of other Sub-Saharan African nations would enhance food security as well as ensure improved nutrition especially for children. It was also gathered that a key approach to such women empowerment is the education process

### **Suggestions**

Against the background of the findings outlined above, the following suggestions have been made:

1. Education policies by government in Nigeria should adopt women as the centre piece of such policies.
2. Government policies to boost dietary intake must embrace women's empowerment as an important channel of delivery
3. Government should embark on policies to boost women's empowerment in the area of allowing them some leadership positions and roles
4. Effort must also be made by government to assist women farmers financially to enable them increase their productivity in agriculture



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