

Gender Equality and Sustainable Economic Development Strategies in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article explored the linkages between gender equality and sustainable economic development strategies in Nigeria. The peculiarities and patriarchal construct remain the bane across virtually all spheres of life in the society. There is a greater level of gender sensitivity to the extent that boys are brought up to see themselves as superior sex to girls and such, boys feel stronger, more important and indispensable, while the female gender are trained to see themselves as weaker sex or even as appendages to the men folk. Efforts were also made to interrogate at those factors that drive economic development as they relate to gender and the place of gender equality in sustainable economic development was highlighted. It examined how traditional belief systems and cultural practices like widowhood and female genital mutilation rites in certain part of Igbo land in the South East and in Yoruba land in the West, the Ba Shiga in Hausa land in the North, just to mention but a few underpin cultural division of roles between male and female and increase, the vulnerability of women in accessing economic empowerment. The article thus argued that decision making process within the household is not only complex but it is also influenced by social and cultural norms. It also noted that inequalities in the allocation of resources matter because education, health and nutrition are strongly linked to human well-being, economic efficiency, and growth, and that low level of educational attainment and poor health and nutrition affect individuals capacity to work productively. Economic inefficiency represents a significant loss to society and hampers sustainable economic growth and development. This paper therefore argued that the restriction of the activities of women who constitute half of the population of the country to occupations such as small-scale businesses and low income earning jobs hinders sustainable economic development. The work relied extensively on secondary source materials and data were analyzed thematically. The study concluded that putting women and girls at the centre of economic activities will fundamentally achieve or result in more and better sustainable development outcomes. It is the view of the author that concerted efforts should be made towards changing gender and social norms to address inequalities in power and privileges between persons of different gender as one of the effective strategies for sustainable economic development in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Gender, Equality, Sensitivity, Sustainable Economic Development, Strategies*

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Background to the Study

Extant literature has shown that gender sensitivity has become a burning issue in recent years, basically because of persistent agitations by women activists. The female gender in Africa especially, in Nigeria seemed to be culturally suppressed resulting in upsurge in literature which is triggered by various feminist movements such as Women in Nigeria (WIN) Federation of Nigeria Women's Association, Non-governmental Women's Human Right Organization, Aba Market Women Organization, Abeokuta Women's Union etc. These organizations attend to different women's issues within the private sphere of the family and in the public arena, in such areas as sexual and reproductive health, poverty, economic empowerment, violence against women, property ownership, peace and security, leadership development and political participation among others Madunagu, (2010). It is common knowledge that in most parts of the country, there are deep rooted prejudices against the female gender as she encounters various forms of discrimination, physical and emotional torture that pervades all aspects of their life, and promoting gender equality has therefore become an important part of the development strategy that seeks to enable both women and men to diminish their poverty and improve their standards of living. As a matter of fact, there is now a global consensus on a comprehensive approach to sustainable development, and a critical aspect of the consensus according to Obasi (2006), is that there can be no sustained development without attainment of gender equity and economic justice.

Gender based violations of human rights and other forms of discrimination against women and girls can exacerbate their vulnerability, thus, the International Labour Organizations (ILO) declared that achieving gender equality in the world remains a major challenge for the labour movement in the world because, securing a sustainable and equitable recovery, and a fair globalization demands gender awareness responses Iloh,(2015). By ending gender-based violence and empowering women, the nations can alleviate poverty. It has also been said that ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, but it also has a multiplier effect across all other development areas.

Furthermore, the total development of society involves not only changes in economic activity but the achievement of economic, political, educational, social and cultural equity between men and women as it has currently become a core objective of the national development agenda. It is in the realization of this objective that the United Nations devoted a decade (1975-1985) to issues concerning women and development. A follow up to this was the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), Cario 1994. This Conference stressed the importance of effective promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women if the goals of sustainable development are to be attained. This was again reinforced at the World Summit on social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), and the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on women (FWCW) in 1995, and their respective five-year reviews United Nation,(2001).

In assessing sustainable economic development of a Nation, economics tends to focus primarily on economic changes and thus isolates economic development from 'total' development. The general consensus remains that 'it is conventional to begin with an increase

in per capita real income as the best available overall index of economic development, Meier, (1976). This is because both women and men continue to feel the impact of the economic crisis. Hence achieving gender equality remains a major strategy for the attainment of sustainable economic development.

Historically, gender inequalities in basic rights persist in all regions and limit the sets of choices available to women in many aspects of life. In much of Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria inclusive, women lack independent rights to own land, manage property, conduct business or even travel without the consent of their husbands. For Borlarinwa, (2009), they continue to systematically have low control over a range of productive resources, including education, land, information, financial resources and weaker ability to generate income. Although, female education levels have improved considerably thus reducing the large gender gap in schooling, the World Bank Policy Report say that if women labour is given a proper market value, women would emerge as the major breadwinners in most societies. In the home they perform the triple role of reproducers, child bearers and caretakers or managers of resources. They contribute significantly to the reduction of hunger and poverty, promotion of family welfare and to the overall growth of a nation's economy. Unequal rights and poor socio-economic status in relation to men further limit their ability to influence decisions at both community and national levels. Very few women have had the opportunity of being part of the decision-making processes of their societies while politics is regarded as an exclusive preserve of men. From the personal level to the highest reaches of decision-making power, women face discrimination, deprivation and violence World Bank, (2001).

Be it as it may, it is pertinent to note that many women liberation movements have made efforts to canvass the issue of women especially on the perceived injustice to the establishment gender equality in Nigeria. Some of their notable achievements include; the introduction of the 35% affirmative policy in terms of elective position in Nigeria, political appointments and formation of political parties. Fapohunda, (2012), observed that despite the socio-economic strides made in development and gender equality, women's representation in parliament still remains minimal. In 2015, all countries made a commitment to achieving gender equality through the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) These include the elimination of gender-based violence and discrimination against women and girls in all its forms. Member states reaffirmed that achieving gender equality, the empowerment of all women and girls and the full realization of their human rights are essential to achieving inclusive economic growth. It has been observed that despite the significant progress made in recent decades, labour markets across the world remain divided along gender lines. Female labour force participation has remained lower than male participation, gender wage gaps are high and women are overrepresented in the informal sector and among the poor.

Gender and development approach serves as a transitioning point in the way in which feminists have understood development. It serve as a comprehensive overview of the social, economic and political realities of development. It origin dates back to the Development Alternative with Women for New Era (DAWN) network in , when it was first initiated in India, Obasi (2006). The DAWN programme was officially recognized in 1986 during the Third UN

conference on Women in Nairobi. The conference brought together activists researchers and development practitioners across the globe. The conference discussed the achievements made from the previous decade's evaluation of promoting equality among the sexes, and a full scope of the obstacles limiting women's advancements, especially in the developing world. The forum also discussed the effectiveness of the continuous debt crisis and structural adjustment programme implemented by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and how the concept of neoliberalism tends to marginalize and discriminate against women more in developing countries. The goals were to prove that the unequal relationship between the sexes hinders sustainable development and female participation in the affairs of the state.

Additionally, it sorts to change the structure of power into a long-term goal whereby all decision-making and benefits of development are distributed on equal basis of gender equality. The gender and development approach is not just focused on biological inequalities among sexes: men and women, but also on how social reproductive and economic roles are linked to gender inequalities. There is therefore need to address this man-made issues as a strategy for achieving sustainable economic development.

Methodology

This article relied extensively on secondary sources which comprises review of books, journals, proceedings of seminars and other works on related topics both published and unpublished and data were analyzed thematically. Primary data that comprised interviews mostly unstructured interviews were used too and factors like age, educational attainment were considered.

Gender Inequality and Development

Gender is culture specific; it is used to refer to specific cultural patterns of behaviour that are attributed to human sexes. Nnachi, (2007), is of the opinion that the term refers to neither male nor female gender specifically but relates to cultural attributes of both male and female. Gender inequality therefore refers to the hidden disparities among individual based on gender. These disparities include discrimination in terms of wealth, opportunities, resources, services, benefites, decision-making, status, power and influence. Individuals are oriented towards the type of behaviour expected of them on the basis of being a male or female in a particular society. Most of the institutions in the society, such as political, economic, religious, marriage and educational institutions are developed and dominated by men around the world. The disparities that exist disadvantage women and girls and limit their capacity to participate in and benefit from development. The term gender is a social construct that establishes and differentiates statuses and roles between men and women particularly in the way they contribute to, participate in, and are rewarded by the economy and the prevailing social systems. It is therefore obvious to state that development or progress in people's welfare cannot be achieved where the needs and contributions of "half of the world's population, women" are continually downgraded, marginalized or completely ignored National Population Commisison, (2001).

Development that supports the security and regeneration of economic natural, human and social resources cannot be achieved if women are neglected. Thus women in Nigeria and in other parts of the globe must be systematically included in development efforts in order to change their subordinate status in the society. Their participation is crucial for the achievement of sustainable economic development. Gender concerns both men and women, therefore understanding gender means understanding opportunities and constraints as they affect both women and men. At the same time, issues such as men's reproductive health needs and sexual responsibilities, have until recently not received adequate attention, that is to say, that gender was not recognized as a variable relevant for promoting economic or human development. Many development agencies, having recognized that attaining gender equity and equality could lead to sound social and economic development are pursuing projects to achieve this goal. According to World Bank Report, (2001), the failure to include women in all aspects of life is responsible for the continued underdevelopment of countries in Sub-saharan Africa. Countries that reduce the gender gap in access to resources and opportunities achieve more rapid economic growth. The report also stated that agricultural productivity in Africa could in a short time, be increased by 20 percent if the access of women in the rural areas, is improved to education, land and fertilizer is improved considerably

As the World Bank's report "Enhancing women participation in Economic Development" captured it Social and economic losses are greatest when women are denied access to basic education and health care (and) investing in women will generate import and benefits for society in the form of lower child mortality, higher educational attainment, better nutrition and slower population growth. World Bank, (1994). Gender equality, therefore, should be seen within a dynamic system of relations embedded in a development process that seeks to empower its actors and gives equal opportunities for both women and men to participate and benefit.

Sustainable Economic Development in Nigeria

Sustainable development has been defined by Iloh, (2015), as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. It then implies that sustainable development cannot be achieved without a more equitable distribution of resources and the eradication of poverty. In other words, empowering women means giving them the opportunity to get out of abject poverty. Fapohunda, (2012), is of the view that women not only constitute the vast majority of the world's poor but they are at higher risk of poverty compared to men. It is pertinent to stress here that poverty does not only refer to material resources such as money, housing or food, but also to social resources like access to education, quality healthcare, good nutrition, and even meaningful relations with other people. Another scholar, Lee, (1985) sees sustainable economic development is therefore directly concerned with increasing the material standards of living of the poor at the 'grassroots' level, which can be quantitatively measured in terms of increased food, real income, educational services, health-care, sanitation and water supply, emergency stocks of food and cash, etc, and only indirectly concerned with economic growth at the aggregate, commonly national level In general terms, the primary objective of sustainable economic development is to ensure that the poor have access to sustainable and secure livelihoods, that is

reducing the absolute poverty of the world's poor through providing lasting and secure livelihoods that minimize resource depletion, environmental degradation, cultural disruption, and social instability. UNIDO, (1972).

In addition, for economic development to be truly 'sustainable' it requires 'tailoring the design and implementation of projects to the needs and capabilities of people who are supposed to benefit from them. Uphoff, (1987) For instance, in some rural communities institutional sustainability could mean reinforcing societal norms that inhibit women's economic independence and limit their social participation in government. This however may conflict with rural women organizing themselves to secure increased social justice, participation, and access to Land, Credit, Skills etc. Similarly, eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls is not only an essential component of sustainable development goal strategy but is also critical to ensuring healthy lives and well-being for people of all ages. The health consequences of violence against women and girls extend to their children, who may witness the abuse and suffer long term trauma that impacts their physical, emotional and social development. Understanding and addressing the disparate impact that economic development and globalization have on people based upon their location, gender, class, background and other socio-political identities is therefore an effective strategy for sustainable economic development.

Cultural Practices that hinders the Female Gender in Nigeria

The female gender in Nigeria is marginalized, stereotyped and humiliated in various ways resulting in negative impacts on them such as depression, physical disability and even inability to meaningfully contribute to sustainable economic development, Ojukwu & Ibekwe, (2020). Some of the cultural practices include, female genital mutilation, widowhood rites, the Purdah system, Early marriages, violence against women, Gender bias and Nutritional taboos. These harmful cultural practices however, have received global attention due to their severe negative impact on the health and well-being of the female, but efforts at eradicating these practices are often met with suspicion or hostility from those communities practicing them, particularly when efforts originate from outside the community. Herch, (1998).

Kinagu, (1996), observed that female genital mutilation ranges from a minor ritual cutting to racial surgery which causes major sexual and reproductive health problem and its complication includes; chronic infections, infertility problems during pregnancy and pains during sexual intercourse. The Purdah system prevents Hausa women and young girls of puberty age from going out unescorted and getting involve in public life and activities. Widowhood rites, especially in Igboland portray situations where women are subjected to certain cultural practices that strip them of their rights as human.

Due to gender biased sex-role orientation, the women's place in the traditional Nigerian culture was considered as primarily the home. The women was not expected to venture into areas that reduce her chances of being involved with home keeping and child rearing and caring. Her status and effectiveness were well appreciated within these stereotyped situation. It therefore means that anything outside these was frowned at and ascribed as not dignifying

for a woman and therefore discouraged. Consequently, women did not have to strive to excel or achieve, especially as it relates to effectiveness in higher positions that will enhance sustainable economic growth. Certain cultures in Nigeria forbid women, especially pregnant women from eating some kinds of animals. It is believed that when a woman eats those animals, that the child in her womb will take the form of that particular animal. It should be noted that this marginalization emerges from the structural nature of the unequal relationship between men and women, and its pervasive manifestation straddles every segment of the society.

The Way Forward

From the foregoing analysis, the strategies for sustainable economic development in Nigeria shall include but not limited to the following;

1. Increasing the 35% affirmative policy to 50%, this will help to accommodate more women in appointive and elective positions in Nigeria.
2. Active support for more female candidates during national, state and local government elections.
3. Policymakers should focus on those laws and traditions that deprive women of their rights as humans, such as access to inherit and own certain reproductive properties like land.
4. Empowering women through agriculture loans and other credit facilities at all levels.
5. Making laws that will not discriminate against the female gender but will rather encourage them to be fully part of the decision-making process.
6. Efforts should also be made towards changing gender and social norms to address inequalities in power and privileges between persons of different gender.
7. It is also necessary to emphasize that a proper understanding of the effects of economic development and globalization on people based on their gender, class backgrounds and other socio-political identities constitutes one of the effective strategies for sustainable economic development
8. Women labour should also be given adequate market value.
9. Some critical areas that concern women such as women's health, discrimination, deprivation, marginalization, violence against women, increased resources for women, qualitative and quantitative education for women and poverty eradication should be given paramount attention.

Conclusion

Conclusively, this paper raises a compelling case for the state to intervene in promoting gender equality. The challenge is for a better understanding of the link between gender and sustainable economic development. Policy makers also need to reflect this link in policy such that gender equality and economic efficiency is promoted. The paper thus concluded that sustainable economic development argues that real improvements cannot occur unless the strategies which are being formulated and implemented are ecologically sustainable over the long term and are consistent with social values and institutions, and encourage grassroots' (women) participation in the development process. In all societies women and men's roles are socially constructed, but all too frequently gender-based disparities exist that disadvantage women; and impede their development and hence that of humankind.

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