WOMEN EMPOWERMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

ASMAU ZARMA GOGARAM
Federal University of Education, Kano
asmauzarma@yahoo.com

Abstract

Women empowerment is a crucial key for sustainable development, especially in developing country like Nigeria, where gender disparities and marginalization significantly thwart the progress of the feminine race. The aim of this paper is to critically examine the significance of women empowerment for sustainable development. This paper explores the concept of women empowerment, sustainable development; roles of women empowerment in promoting sustainable development in Nigeria and challenges of women empowerment for sustainable development. This paper identified benefits of women empowerment to include economic growth and reduction in level of poverty, education and improved health, increase in political participation and governance as well as environmental sustainability. The paper also identified socio-cultural barriers and marginalization, educational disparities, economic barriers, political marginalization, legal and institutional barriers, health and reproductive rights and gender-based violence as factors that impedes women empowerment. The paper recommends intensification of the legal frameworks that protects the rights of women, economic empowerment programs targeting women, encourage political participation of women, cultural reforms, sensitization on the relevance of women empowerment and intervention in the healthcare service so as to improve healthcare infrastructure, enforcement of policy that will eliminate the gender based violence against women as ways of empowering women.

Keywords: Women, Women Empowerment, Development & Sustainable Development

Introduction

Recent studies have shown a direct significant relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development (Ihemeje, 2015). This is a growing concern in today's world. Literature had reviewed that is practically impossible to avoid the issue and discourse of women's empowerment in development context. For instance, the issue is discussed among political scientists, civil society groups, politicians, economists, feminists, philosophers, teachers, environmentalists, journalists, scientists and technologists, and among others. At different periods, there is a persistent reference to women's empowerment in form of affirmative action, gender rights, gender equality and balance, women's political participation, socio-economic construct of women, rural-urban women life style and the like (UN, 2015; UN, 2012; UNDP, 2006; UN, 2000).

Growing concerns about the impacts of women's empowerment on sustainable development have generated lots of interest as to 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 (Ihemeje, 2013; Agbalajobi, 2010). Thus, women's empowerment is a vehicle to ensuring effective sustainable development. Analyzing women's empowerment is therefore germane to finding ways to helping the poor rural women in the local government areas of Nigeria on a sustainable basis.

Sustainable development requires inclusive growth that integrates all sectors of society. Women, who make up almost half of Nigeria's population, have been systematically marginalized in various areas,

from education to economic participation, limiting the country's ability to achieve holistic development. According to the United Nations, women empowerment is both a precondition and a driver for achieving sustainable development goals (UNDP, 2023). Empowering women, particularly through economic inclusion, health equity, and political participation, is essential for driving Nigeria toward sustainable social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

The Concept of Women Empowerment

In the words of Cornwall and Rivas (2015), they define women empowerment as the process of challenging power relations that limit women's agency and voice, especially in the political and economic spheres. They stress that empowerment must be contextual and intersectional, addressing issues such as race, class, and geographical location.

In another development, Ibrahim and Alkire (2020) argue that women empowerment is closely linked to human development and must focus on increasing women's capabilities, freedom, and choices. They emphasize the need to incorporate the measurement of empowerment into policy frameworks to achieve gender equality in development outcomes.

Similarly, Gammage et al. (2016) added that women empowerment is a process by which women gain control over their lives through the expansion of choices, strengthening of their agency, and enhancement of their access to resources and decision-making power. They emphasize that empowerment is not only an individual process but also a collective one, where women mobilize together to address structural barriers.

Duflo (2017) highlights the connection between empowerment and economic development, stating that women empowerment is the process of improving women's ability to participate equally in markets, access financial services, and attain economic independence. She argues that economic empowerment is both a driver of and a result of sustainable development.

To Narayan et al. (2018), women empowerment is the enhancement of women's capabilities to make choices in areas that affects their lives. They argue that empowerment is not just about economic inclusion but also about overcoming social norms and legal barriers that limit women's autonomy.

The Concept of Sustainable Development

According Redclift (2005), sustainable development encompasses not just environmental sustainability but also social equity and economic growth. He argues that true sustainability requires a shift in how resources are distributed and how power dynamics influence development.

More so, Sachs (2015) describes sustainable development as a framework for achieving economic growth that is socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. He argues that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasizes the need to address poverty, inequality, and climate change in an integrated manner.

In the words of Leach et al. (2018), sustainable development is an approach that integrates the pursuit of economic prosperity, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. They emphasize the need to address inequality and power imbalances to ensure that sustainability efforts benefit marginalized communities.

González et al. (2022) opined that sustainable development involves a process of inclusive and equitable development that prioritizes both human well-being and planetary health. They argue that sustainability should integrate social justice with environmental governance to ensure long-term development outcomes.

Biermann et al. (2019) argue that sustainable development needs to evolve beyond its initial conceptualizations to include governance mechanisms that address climate change, biodiversity loss, and global inequalities. They emphasize that the global governance structures themselves must adapt to support sustainable development more effectively.

Women Empowerment and Sustainable Development

The section below identified ways in which empowering women can augment development:

Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction

Economically, empowering women is one of the most significant ways of enhancing sustainable development in Nigeria. World Bank (2022) stated that when women are given access to financial resources, employment, and entrepreneurial opportunities, they contribute to economic growth and poverty reduction. For example, women's participation in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria has been linked to higher household incomes and community.

For instance, most microfinance programs targeting Nigerian women have helped reduce poverty rates significantly. Empowered women reinvest their earnings into their families and communities, leading to better educational and health outcomes for children (Duflo, 2017). Additionally, when women control financial resources, they tend to prioritize expenditures that promote family well-being and long-term sustainability, such as healthcare, education, and food security (Narayan et al., 2018).

Education and Health Outcomes

Education is one of the most effective tools for women empowerment and a critical component of sustainable development. The World Health Organization (2023) notes that educated women are more likely to make informed health decisions, reducing maternal and infant mortality rates. In Nigeria, where maternal mortality remains alarmingly high, increasing women's access to education and healthcare services can significantly improve health outcomes, contributing to sustainable development goals.

Educated women also play a pivotal role in addressing reproductive health issues. Programs like family planning, which empower women to make decisions about their reproductive health, have shown to improve women's health and reduce population growth rates. Lower population growth contributes to sustainability by reducing strain on natural resources and allowing for more equitable distribution of resources (Ewerling et al., 2017).

Political Participation and Governance

The participation of women in governance and decision-making processes is crucial for sustainable development. Nigeria has historically had low female representation in political leadership, with women holding less than 10% of parliamentary seats (UN Women, 2020). Increasing women's participation in politics can lead to more inclusive governance, where policies reflect the needs of all citizens, not just men. Studies show that women leaders often prioritize issues related to social welfare, environmental sustainability, and community development, leading to more balanced and forward-looking policies (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

Environmental Sustainability

Women are often the primary managers of household resources such as water, fuel, and food in Nigeria, making them crucial agents in promoting environmental sustainability. Research indicates that women-led initiatives in natural resource management and sustainable agriculture have led to more effective conservation practices (Leach et al., 2018). In rural areas, empowering women with knowledge and resources to adopt sustainable agricultural practices can reduce environmental degradation and enhance food security.

Programs that integrate women into climate change adaptation strategies have also shown positive outcomes in regions prone to environmental hazards. In the Niger Delta, for instance, women-led cooperatives have been instrumental in advocating for the reduction of oil pollution and the restoration of natural ecosystems (Biermann et al., 2019). Empowered women can however move a motion toward sustainable environmental practices that benefit entire communities.

Challenges of Women Empowerment in Nigeria

Some of the major factors that impede women empowerment for sustainable development are discussed below:

Socio-Cultural Barriers and Marginalization

Traditionally, the culture of Nigeria in line with the norms is some of the most significant obstacles to women's empowerment. In many regions, particularly in the North, women are often relgated to domestic roles and denied access to education, economic opportunities, and leadership positions (Odeyemi, 2023). These norms in most cases perpetuate harmful practices such as early marriage, female genital mutilation, and widow inheritance, which undermine women's autonomy and economic independence.

A typical example of this socio-cultural marginalization is that of one Sanda Maryam, a woman who was sentenced to death by hanging for the alleged murder of her husband in 2017 (Oyeleye, 2020). While the legal system determined her guilt, the case exposed deep-seated societal attitudes towards women in abusive marriages. Reports indicated that Maryam who suffered domestic violence was pressured by family and community norms to remain in the abusive relationship. This is a typical example of how cultural expectations prevent women from escaping harmful situations, leaving them vulnerable to victimization.

In a similar case, Usman Zainab, a 14-year-old girl from Zamfara State, was forced into marriage and faced brutal physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her husband. Zainab's case drew public attention when she was hospitalized after sustaining severe injuries (Amadi, 2023). This case highlights the widespread issue of child marriage in Northern Nigeria, where girls are often deprived of education and subjected to early marriages, a practice rooted in cultural and religious norms. The consequences of such practices include poor health outcomes, low educational attainment, and limited economic opportunities for girls and women.

Educational Disparities

Education is a powerful tool for empowerment, yet in Nigeria, gender disparities in access to education persist. According to UNICEF (2023), over 10.5 million children are out of school in Nigeria, with girls accounting for a significant majority, especially in the northern regions. Factors such as cultural beliefs, early marriages, and poverty are primary factors preventing girls from attending school. Lack of education not only limits women's economic opportunities but also affects their ability to advocate for themselves and participate in governance (Adewole, 2022).

Economic Barriers

Economic marginalization is a major challenge to women's empowerment in Nigeria. Despite women making up a large portion of the informal workforce, they have limited access to formal employment, land ownership, and financial services (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Women-owned businesses are often underfunded, and women face significant barriers in accessing credit and loans.

A severe case of economic marginalization is the experience of John Blessing, a widow from Benue State who was denied her late husband's property under the practice of widow inheritance. After her husband's death, Blessing's in-laws claimed the family's farmland, leaving her and her children destitute (Ezeilo, 2022). In rural Nigeria, widow inheritance is a common practice where a widow is not only forced to marry her deceased husband's brother but is also often deprived of her husband's assets. This practice perpetuates poverty among women, limiting their ability to secure financial independence and sustain their families.

Political Marginalization

Nigerian women are grossly underrepresented in political and leadership positions. As of the 2019 elections, women held only 4.17% of seats in the National Assembly, far below the global average (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). This underrepresentation limits women's influence on policy decisions that

affect their rights and well-being.

The case of Olagbaju Funke, a local politician from Lagos, illustrates the challenges faced by women in politics. Funke ran for a local government seat in 2021 but was subjected to intimidation and harassment by male opponents, who sought to discredit her campaign by spreading false rumors about her personal life (Adewale, 2022). Despite her qualifications and community support, Funke ultimately withdrew from the race, citing fear for her safety and the lack of institutional support for women in politics. Her experience highlights the hostile environment women face in Nigerian politics, where gender-based violence and intimidation are used as tools to suppress their political participation.

Legal and Institutional Barriers

Despite legal protections for women, enforcement remains weak, and institutional barriers continue to hinder gender equality. The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) was enacted in 2015 to address gender-based violence, yet implementation is inconsistent across the country, particularly in rural areas (Chukwuma, 2023). Many women who are victims of violence face significant obstacles in accessing justice due to corruption, lack of legal awareness, and societal pressure to remain silent.

An example of this is Mohammed Amina, a victim of domestic violence in Kano State, who sought justice after being brutally beaten by her husband. Despite the enactment of the VAPP, local law enforcement failed to prosecute the case, and Amina faced social ostracization for reporting her husband (Oni & Adetola, 2023). Her case underscores the gap between legal frameworks and real-world enforcement, particularly in patriarchal communities where traditional justice systems often prevail over formal legal processes.

Health and Reproductive Rights

Access to healthcare, especially reproductive health services, is another significant challenge for Nigerian women. Maternal mortality rates in Nigeria remain among the highest in the world, with approximately 512 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (World Health Organization, 2023). Limited access to healthcare, particularly in rural areas, exacerbates these outcomes, while cultural taboos surrounding reproductive health hinder women's ability to make informed decisions about their bodies (Adewunmi, 2023).

Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive issue in Nigeria, with 30% of Nigerian women reporting experiencing physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (UN Women, 2022). GBV not only violates women's rights but also hinders their economic and social participation. The Nigerian government has enacted laws, such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP), to curb GBV, but enforcement remains weak (Chukwuma, 2023).

Conclusion

Women empowerment is not only crucial in the society but also a key driver of sustainable development in Nigeria. The severe cases of marginalization of women discussed in this paper and many others illustrate the urgent need to address the systemic barriers that women face in the society. There is need for government NGOs, stakeholders, policy makers and the society at large to stand up to the quest of eradicating the challenges that that continuously impedes the empowerment of women in Nigeria in particular and the world at large.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are therefore put in place for advancing women empowerment in Nigeria:

1. There is need to strengthening legal frameworks that protects the rights of women. The Nigerian

government must enhance the enforcement of existing laws that protect women's rights, including the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act and the Child Rights Act. Ensuring that these laws are implemented across all states, including rural and conflict-prone areas, is vital.

2. There is also need for economic empowerment programs targeting women. Expanding access to credit, financial literacy programs, and land ownership rights for women, particularly in rural areas, can help reduce economic marginalization. Programs like the National Financial Inclusion Strategy should be scaled up to target women in the informal economy.

3. There is also need to encourage political participation of women in the country. Positive action policies that promote women's participation in politics should be strengthened. Political parties should adopt gender quotas to increase the number of women in decision-making positions, and mechanisms to protect women from gender-based violence in politics should be implemented.

4. There is need for cultural reforms in Nigeria as culture is the basis of the existence of societal norms. Engaging traditional and religious leaders in promoting gender equality is essential. Grassroots advocacy campaigns should focus on dismantling harmful cultural practices, such as child marriage and widow inheritance, through community education and legal reforms.

5. There is need for effective sensitization on the relevance of women empowerment. Education and awareness remains the key to achieving these goals. Increasing investment in girls' education is fundamental for breaking the cycle of poverty and marginalization. Educational programs should focus not only on access but also on quality, ensuring that girls are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to participate fully in economic and political life.

6. There is need for urgent intervention in the healthcare service so as to improve healthcare infrastructure, expanding access to reproductive health services, and providing comprehensive education on sexual and reproductive rights. The Nigerian government's push towards universal health coverage is a positive step, but targeted interventions to reach vulnerable women are still needed.

7. There is need to enact policy that will eliminate the gender based violence against women. Invest in community-based initiatives that promote women's empowerment and address the root causes of gender inequality.

References

Adewale, S. (2022). Women in politics: Breaking the glass ceiling in Nigeria. *African Journal of Political Studies*, 15(2), 45-60.

Adewole, T. (2022). Education and empowerment of women in Nigeria: Bridging the gap. *African Journal of Social Studies*, 32(1), 45-58.

Adewunmi, O. (2023). Reproductive health and women's rights in Nigeria: A critical analysis. *Nigerian Medical Journal*, 58(4), 210-225.

Amadi, T. (2023). Child marriage and its impact on girls' education in Northern Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Sociology*, 30(1), 87-102.

Biermann, F., Kanie, N., & Kim, R. E. (2019). The global governance of sustainable development: Institutions and mechanisms. *Global Environmental Change*, 54, 24-31.

Cornwall, A., & Rivas, A. (2015). From 'gender equality and women's empowerment' to global justice: Reclaiming a transformative agenda for gender and development. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(2), 396-415.

Chukwuma, I. (2023). Enforcing the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act: Gaps and solutions. *Journal of Law and Society*, 14(2), 98-115.

Duflo, E. (2017). Women empowerment and economic development. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50(4), 1051-1079.

Ewerling, F., Raj, A., Victora, C. G., & Barros, A. J. (2017). Measuring women's empowerment: A need for context-tailored measures. *The Lancet Global Health*, 5(7), 685-686.

Ezeilo, J. (2022). Widow inheritance and economic marginalization of women in rural Nigeria. *Women's Rights Review*, 6(1), 23-39.

Gammage, S., Kabeer, N., & van der Meulen Rodgers, Y. (2016). Voice and agency: Where are we now? *Feminist Economics*, 22(1), 1-29.

González, P., Parra, C., & Plessis, C. D. (2022). Sustainable development as a concept of equity, well-being, and planetary health: A transdisciplinary approach. *Sustainability Science*, 17(1), 5-15.

Ibrahim, S., & Alkire, S. (2020). Agency and empowerment: A proposal for internationally comparable indicators. *Oxford Development Studies*, 48(1), 56-77.

Ihemeje, G. C. (2013). Strengthening the capacity of women for local governance: Nigerian experience. *The Quarterly Journal of Administration*, 33(2), 103-122.

Ihemeje, G. C. (2015). Women's empowerment, sustainable development, and sustainability in Nigeria's local governments. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 17(8).

Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2023). Women in national parliaments: Nigerian representation. Retrieved from https://ipu.org/statistics

Leach, M., Stirling, A., & Scoones, I. (2018). Sustainability and development: Beyond a 'knowledge fix.' *World Development*, 108, 11-22.

National Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Labour force statistics: Employment and earnings*. Abuja: NBS.

Narayan, D., Pritchett, L., & Kapoor, S. (2018). *Empowerment and poverty reduction: A sourcebook*. World Bank Publications.

Odeyemi, O. (2023). Cultural practices and gender inequality in Northern Nigeria: A sociological perspective. *Journal of African Culture*, 20(3), 123-136.

Ogunjimi, A., & Salami, T. (2023). Women's economic participation in Nigeria: Barriers and opportunities. *Journal of Economic Policy Review*, 35(1), 67-83.

Okenwa, B., & Adedayo, F. (2023). Women's political participation in Nigeria: A case for affirmative action. *Politics and Gender Review*, 27(2), 78-91.

Oni, S., & Adetola, A. (2022). Cultural barriers to women empowerment in Nigeria: The role of education and advocacy. *Journal of African Development*, 19(1), 33-47.

Oni, S., & Adetola, A. (2023). The role of law enforcement in protecting women's rights in Northern Nigeria. *African Journal of Law and Justice*, 12(1), 57-71.

Osagie, R. (2023). Economic empowerment of women in Nigeria: Policies and progress. *Nigerian Economic Journal*, 30(2), 51-64.

Oyeleye, B. (2020). The case of Maryam Sanda: Domestic violence and justice in Nigeria. *Journal of Legal Studies*, 9(3), 120-134.

Sachs, J. (2015). *The age of sustainable development*. Columbia University Press.

Redclift, M. (2005). Sustainable development (1987–2005): An oxymoron comes of age. *Sustainable Development*, 13(4), 212-227.

UN Women. (2022). *Gender-based violence in Nigeria: A comprehensive report*. UN Women.

United Nations Development Programme. (2023). *Gender equality and sustainable development in Nigeria*. UNDP. Retrieved from https://www.undp.org