

# Grassroots Women and Livelihood Opportunities for the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals

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**Abstract:** This analytical study, persuasive type, analyzed the linkages between grassroots women livelihood opportunities and the achievement of the sustainable development goals. The study explains how grassroots women have been playing major role in the production of goods and services particularly the cultivation of farmland. More importantly, the role of women in the production, processing and cultivation of food was emphasized. In spite of all the above, the study argues that, women particularly grassroots women, remain the hardest hit in poverty and hunger due to inadequate means of livelihoods, lack of opportunities for improved livelihood potentials as well as other challenges. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that rural and grassroots women produce most of the world food; they are most often denied land tenure and credits for their business while also contending with other discriminatory practices that negatively impinge on their livelihood opportunities. On the other hand, the new paradigm for development, the SDGs (the Sustainable Development Goals) believes in not leaving anybody behind for the achievement of all the lofty goals. It therefore becomes imperative, that all obstacles and constraints preventing grassroots women from developing their full livelihood potentials be removed or reduced to its barest minimum. And for the SDGs to be achieved, grassroots women must be given the opportunity they need to improve their livelihood potentials as well as enhance their participation in the labor market.

**Key Words:** Grassroots Women\* Livelihoods\* Opportunities\* Achievement\* Development

## I. INTRODUCTION

All over the world women, particularly rural and grassroots women have played significant roles in the development of their societies. Grassroots women are a term used to refer to women residing in agricultural areas where they are mostly farmers, producers, pastoralists etc. Wesley and Dublon, (2015) noted that in combining the term rural and grassroots women reflects the fact that women are rooted in every day duties and responsibilities while they are systematically excluded from decision –making. In virtually almost all areas of development women have remained a major contributor to development and improvement in the well –being of people and the society at large. More importantly, the role of women in the production, processing and cultivation of food cannot be over emphasized likewise their procreative function still remains interminable. In spite of all the above, they remain the hardest hit in poverty and hunger as a result of inadequate means of livelihoods as well as other challenges. A person’s livelihood on the other hand, refers to the person’s means of securing the basic necessities

of life. Livelihood is therefore defined as a set of activities essential to every- day life that are conducted over one’s life span (Wikipedia). Whereas, livelihood opportunities was defined by Kapur,( 2019) as the opportunities that the rural individuals get engaged in with the main purpose of sustaining their living condition as well as improving their standard of living. Every individual regardless of their class, sex, position or standing in the society are expected to be involved in one form of livelihood activities or the other. Kapur, (2019) disclosed that the educated and wealthy individuals are able to acquire reputed livelihood opportunities while the individuals belonging to deprived and under privileged sections of the societies are only able to acquire lesser paid livelihood opportunities.

The importance of rural grassroots women in the agriculture and commercial development of their nation is glaring and undeniable. In the rural communities where there are a large number of rural and grassroots women in Nigeria, agriculture is the main source of livelihood opportunities in addition to few others such as handicrafts, pottery making, weaving and livestock rearing etc, This is why rural and grassroots women are significantly involved in the production of most of the world food. Farming is the major occupation in Nigeria of which women have been actively involved. They are involved in the internal and long distanced distributive trade system of farm produce; they also actively take part in agricultural processing and processes as food farmers or as source of labor. They are also involved in the heavy task of bush clearing, planting, harvesting and food processing. In the Northern part of Nigeria, women also participate in the sedentary farming and pastoral food system. Hence Nigerian women, like their counterparts in other African counties have been playing very important and significant role in the development of agriculture especially with regard to food production, food processing, as well as active involvement in the major processes of agriculture including harvesting, processing transportation and marketing. Buttressing the above view, Fides, (2016) disclosed that food security is a broad term that covers availability, accessibility, utilization and stability of food system. Fides (2016) notes further those women farmers currently account for 45 to 80percent of all food production in developing countries. In the same vein, Wesley and Dublon (2015) stated that UN ‘S agricultural organization has projected that giving women the same access as men to resources such as fertilizer could increase their productivity by 20-30 percent and in turn boost

agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 percent. Grassroots women efforts in food production cannot be over emphasized, as earlier disclosed by former UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon “Rural Women are the backbone of sustainable livelihoods and they also provide food security for their families and communities”. Furthermore, it is estimated that rural women represent 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, and that approximately one quarter of the world population is comprised of rural women whose livelihoods are sustained by agriculture and natural resources. Shivutse, (2016) emphasized that rural women are knowledge –holding experts with visionary and practical development solutions to ensure food security, conserve natural resources, and encounter widespread inequality. These women must be recognized, supported and applauded because they are coming together as groups to improve their circumstances. They are hence agents of change working to build productive and vibrant rural communities world -wide, they must therefore be made essential actors in planning, implementation and monitoring of development commitments.

Bearing the above illustration, it is pertinent to ask whether in spite of the importance of grassroots women on the Nigerian agricultural sector and overall economy, have the grassroots women substantially improved on their livelihood opportunities over the years? In the same vein, how have the policy directives of the MDGs, AWD and UNO etc. as well as national efforts and policy directives targeted at improving women livelihood potentials fared? It is therefore the position of this paper that rural and grassroots women have not substantially improved in their livelihood opportunities despite their economic importance as well as both national and international policy directives towards improving the lot of grassroots women in order to boost their livelihood potentials. The approach is a critical analysis of current literatures and personal observations.

## II. STUDY OBJECTIVES

The general objective of the study is to critically analyse the role of grassroots women in the economy vis-à-vis their level of livelihood and potentials in the achievement of the SDGs in Nigeria. Specifically, the study

- (1) Identified and explained the roles of grassroots women in the economy of Nigeria
- (2) Clarified the challenges negatively affecting the achievement of an improved livelihood potentials for grassroots women
- (3) Explored the impacts of the UNO and AWD towards the improvement of livelihood opportunities for grassroots women that will spur the achievement of the SDGs
- (4) Recommended on how government can successfully key in grassroots women into the process of the SDGs for its achievement

## III. GRASSROOTS WOMEN, THEIR LIVELIHOODS AND CONSTRAINTS

Although, rural and grassroots women produce most of the world food, they are most often denied land tenure and credits for their business (Ibru, 2008, Aina, 2012, Adewumi, 2017). Hence women’s lack of access to credit affects their livelihood potentials as well as hurt their economy. Large numbers of grassroots women therefore continue to wallow in poverty and hunger as a result of lack of opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. In the same vein, the rights and dignity of women, particularly grassroots women are still under attack as they do not still have much say in decision about their lives. This is one of the reasons why they bear a disproportionate burden of the world's poverty ( Aina, 2012, Adewumi, 2017, Aina, 2020). Indeed statistics show that women are more likely than men to be poor and at risk of hunger. The poverty implications are widespread for women who are sometimes left without basic rights like access to potable water, education and medical care. It is estimated that women represent 70% of the world's poor as they are often less paid than their male counterparts (Global Citizen News, 2017). Hence Guterres, (2020) noted that the gender pay gap must come to a close to ensure equal economic rights and opportunity for all. Women are constantly discriminated against when they apply for credit for business or self-employment purposes. More often than not, they settle for insecure, unsafe and low-wage work. Poverty and inadequate means of livelihood have therefore remained major problems that women are confronted with in most rural communities including Nigeria. Voicu and Tufis (2012) noted that similar to Nigeria, in Romania, also a patriarchal society, tasks were divided by age and sex but it was collectivization of agriculture which transformed the gender relations inside the agrarian society and turned rural and grassroots women into agricultural workers. However, the state did nothing to promote equality inside the family or to encourage sharing domestic tasks which takes most of the time of women as well as undermine the time and rate at which they venture into economic activities which will yield them more economic reward.

Combining family obligations and working life mostly constitute a major challenge to grassroots women livelihoods drives. Similarly, young married women do not have money to spend to acquire necessary knowledge and skills to enable them have veritable livelihoods even when they are ready to sacrifice the time to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge (Kester, 2012). Similarly, lack of effective and desired developmental programmes for women and youths also constitute some of the reasons they cannot provide for themselves and constantly remain at the mercy of their husbands. Grassroots and rural women are also still constrained by other challenges which include limited access to credit, property, and lack of educational and technical skill as well as coping with domestic responsibilities.

Although some of the problems above are not created by women themselves they nonetheless negatively affect women opportunities and therefore constitute major challenges to their progression and means of livelihood. As a result of all the challenges, rural women are mostly confined to subsistence farming with little or no additional income or credit facilities to improve their yield and activities. In addition to all the above, older women are so faced with more challenges within the rural communities since they do not have the strength to partake much in subsistence farming any longer as they use to do. Hence they are usually left at the mercy of their children, who at most times also do not have adequate means of livelihoods themselves Ngoyi, (2016)

This was probably part of the reasons why leaders all over the world initially came together to address pressing problems of poverty, hunger etc in 2000. An agreement was reached in the year 2000 and a set of new dimension and agenda, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to eradicate and solve the problem of poverty and related policies. The MDGs introduced a powerful and digestible narrative of development appealing to public and parliaments for fundraising towards development assistance. The MDGs perceived poverty as multidimensional material deprivations described as lack of income, water, and education and health services. While this was laudable, the MDGs was too restricted by ignoring the broader understanding of poverty as a human, lived experience, and its causes as embedded in social, economic and political structures, hence why the MDGs was abysmally poor in its performance particularly in most part of Africa including Nigeria.

#### IV. GRASSROOTS WOMEN IN THE MDGS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The agreement reached by the world leaders in 2000 on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) brought a new dimension on the understanding of poverty and related policies. The MDGs narrative for development was quite powerful in its attempt towards appealing to publics and parliaments for fundraising towards development assistance for the eradication of poverty around the world which is connected to lack of income as a result of a lack of livelihood opportunities particularly for rural and grassroots women, lack of water/ sanitation, and education as well as inadequate health services. It is however, saddening to point out that women, particularly grassroots women's social/ economic status did not improve significantly during and even after the MDGs (Adewumi 2017). This is probably because the MDGs were quite restrictive and less inclusive. This might be parts of the reasons for the abysmally poor performance of the MDGs by the end of its target time of 2015. Although the eight goals of the MDGs set a broad agenda for tackling gaps in education, child mortality, maternal health, gender equality etc. unfortunately, by the end of 2015, 62 million girls still remain out of school while 830 women were dying each day from preventable causes related to child birth, 5.9 million children under age five had died in 2014 alone (Ngoyi, 2016).

There is no doubt that the MDGs left so many gaps unfilled and so many of its goals and targets still remain a major parts of world challenge today including new emerging challenges to the new narratives of the sustainable development agenda. Thus women's livelihood status remains largely unchanged.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was therefore adopted in 2015 as an agenda to address major challenges still affecting human society. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) therefore came to fill the identified gaps and global persistent problem of poverty, hunger, education, climate threats, problems of inequality etc. Most of the above highlighted challenges and problems largely confront women particularly grassroots women. Today, one in three women around the world is a victim of physical and sexual violence while discriminations against women still persist through laws and policies, gender based stereotypes, social norms and practices. Similarly, women around the world earn 24% less than men for the same work while they constitute 22% of the world parliament. Attesting to the under- value of women s unpaid work, Shearman (2020) notes that recently in March 2020, the Young Women Trust (YWT) launched an online calculator enabling women to work out and show online the value of their unpaid work from cooking and cleaning to caring for sick relations as well as providing emotional support. Using data on women's unpaid work, YWT estimated that that women aged 18-30 contribute about 140 billion pounds to Britain s economy annually. They reiterated that although women make up a little over half of the world population, their contribution to measured economic activity is far below its potential.

Hence, poverty and hunger still remain a major threat to women (Adewumi, 2017). However, there is the need to stress the fact that the process of setting up the Sustainable Development Goals was better than that of MDG. It was more inclusive and much more representative. Grassroots women were able to push decision makers to create goals that are community led and driven. Their voices were heard through civil society organizations that aired their views and opinions on issues and challenges confronting them (Ngoyi, 2016). Civil societies and other women groups stressed the need for strong commitment towards gender equality which is integral to positive health outcomes, education gaps, environmental needs etc. Hence the Sustainable Development Agenda which, was adopted by world leaders in September of 2015 is assessed to be impacting women in its transformative framework that will help usher in a new era of inclusive and equitable development for the whole world with 17 Goals and 169 targets. It is focusing, in action –oriented manner, on a wide array of development disparities, addressing and encompassing the economic, social and environmental dimensions of developments with the slogan that no one will be left behind in the process. However, for the 2030 Agenda of the SDGs to be truly transformative, organized rural women groups must also be central to the achievement of an inclusive and gender equitable results. In the same vein, Fides



(2016) disclosed that results from empirical and case studies revealed that grassroots women's holistic, integrated and inclusive responses are in line with the sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). She noted further that the recognition and supports for climate change adaptation initiatives and bottom up interventions led by rural grassroots women are essential foundation for sustainable development. Fides (2016) concludes that it is essential to recognise that women's vulnerabilities are embedded in social, economic and political processes, and that the current sustainable development processes, when properly implemented, will empower grassroots women to positively transform the living condition of their families and communities as well as enable them reverse their vulnerabilities. In the same vein, Fordham, (2011) had earlier reiterated that to achieve a just and sustainable future, the rights, values and capabilities of half of the world's population cannot be denied. Similarly, Jahan (2020) affirms that we cannot talk of human development without taking account of 50% of the population hence gender equality and women empowerment and improved livelihoods is absolutely critical to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

#### V. INTERNATIONAL POLICY DIRECTIVES FOR GRASSROOTS WOMEN

*The International Day for Rural/ Grassroots Women:* The International Day of rural women was established by the UNO General Assembly in its resolution 62/ 163 of 18 December, 2007 in recognition of the critical role and contribution of grassroots and rural women to the enhancement of agricultural and rural development as well as the improvement of food security which is central to the eradication of poverty. Hence, since 2008, October 15<sup>th</sup> has been set aside to appreciate and recognize the critical role of rural women every year. But this programme has yielded little or no success for grassroots women.

*African Women (AD) and African Women Development (AWD) :*With regard to Africa, the AU also launched the AWD (2010-2020) with the aim of advancing equality through the acceleration of the implementation of global and regional decisions and commitments on gender equality and women empowerment under the theme "Grassroots approach to gender equality and women 's empowerment". The AWD Agenda of the AU focuses on the need to ensure that grassroots women are fully represented and actively involved in all platforms of decision making in such a way that they are able to speak and contribute to planning and decisions concerning women and the larger society. The Agenda also focuses on an effort to bridge the divide between women in decision making and grassroots women living in poor rural communities. It also aims on enhancing the capacity of grassroots women networks to undertake community research and to manage and own active plans that feed into local government, state and national policies and programs.

Unfortunately, despite the establishment of the International Day for Rural /Grassroots Women as well as the African Women Development, grassroots women, particularly in Nigeria still fall short in terms of livelihood opportunities and the development of their potentials. The impacts of both the UNO and AWD attempts to improve the lot of women as well as improve their livelihood potentials especially with regard to increased opportunities for livelihood has yielded little of the anticipated results particularly for rural and grassroots women. This is probably due to the lingering problems of gender inequalities which is still inherent in major parts of the world and more particularly in Africa as well as other challenges as outlined in a recent report by Rodrigues (2020). It stressed that gender equality is crucial to uplifting communities and ensuring that they are able to escape and stay out of poverty. The report stated further that when countries prioritize closing gender gaps through policy formulation, income level is sure to rise across board and this will greatly contribute to poverty reduction. The dissatisfaction on the limited success made the current UNO Secretary General, Guterres (2020) issued a clarion call to African leaders to ensure that the needs and perspectives of the continent women and girls are fully integrated into policies and efforts to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies. He observed that it is a fact that we live in a male dominated world with a male dominated culture which is essentially a question of power for the above reasons he stressed that power is never given but taken. Hence Guterres (2020) emphasized the need for power sharing and parity in decision –making policy formulation. This to him represents a first step for full gender parity in 2028 at all levels of the UN, which remains the basic objective of the UN. He noted that this year' s anniversary of Beijing+25 and the UN' s resolution 1325 on women must push us further and faster towards progress and gender equality and women 's empowerment. He noted further that it is unfortunate that poverty in Africa as in other part of the world still had a woman's face. He therefore submits that some of the benefits of inclusion and gender equality are the achievement of peace and sustainable development. Guterres concludes by urging leaders particularly in Africa to facilitate women's contributions to the communities they live in by enhancing their social, economic and financial inclusion as well as making sure that women and girls are encouraged to develop scientific skills through access to innovation and technology. On the limited success, Johnson-Sirlerf (2020) also noted that it is time to move from speeches to action. She observed that financial inclusion was one of the best proposals that seek to address critical barriers limiting women s contributions to mainstream economic activities. From all the above, it can be concluded that there are inherent challenges impinging on the empowerment and livelihood potentials of women generally and grassroots women in particular. Some of the challenges are highlighted below:

## VI. THE CHALLENGES

1. Illiteracy and poor access to educational opportunities which is critical to livelihood assets and empowerment frameworks, hence why grassroots women lack livelihood opportunities
2. Inequitable access to resources particularly land and inequitable allocation of resources- due to marginalization, deprivation and discrimination on the bases of sex.
3. Unequal participation in decision making process as well peace process.
4. Gender based violence and other harmful practices.
5. Effects of poverty and vulnerability at the household level and the larger community
6. Faulty inheritance procedures as a result of repugnant cultural practices and norms.
7. Lack of appropriate vocational educational skills which can contribute to better opportunities for improved livelihood and income for grassroots and rural women.
8. Poor welfare and economic deprivation, unemployment, sexual exploitation etc. as a result of persistent inequalities.
9. Health, maternal mortality, deaths from preventable diseases and HIV/ AIDs
10. Climatic and environmental problems and challenges.

## VII. SOLUTIONS THROUGH THE SDGS LENS

Investment in rural women's education is central to increasing literacy rate among rural women. Education and training will help boost the potentials of rural women. Knowledge will also promote technological growth and innovation. There should be a proactive measures put in place by government to increase the enrolment of girls and women particularly in rural communities to vocational, technical, scientific, new technology and management training programmes in order to reduce illiteracy and gender imbalance.

Government need to incorporate SDGs 1 2 3 and 5 into their development plans, giving special focus to rural women farmers, seeking their inputs, developing entrepreneurship programs, and promoting the organization of producer cooperatives. Ajede, (2016) had earlier suggested solutions to poor access to safe water and sanitation as well as mitigating other environmental challenges. Such challenges are erosion, flooding and climate change challenges which undermine grassroots women capabilities and potentials. She further suggested that rural women must become actively engaged in land governance, ensuring their equal access to use and control over land and other resources

Investment in rural women's leadership need is equally central to increasing their visibility and capacity to make well informed decisions. Rural women should be given a formal role in decision making processes. The Huairou Commission stressed that the framework created by the Sustainable Development Goals is a means by which rural women can establish themselves as leading agents of transformative

change in their community and in their country. Moreover, implementation of all existing policies on violence against persons particularly women and girls is central to eradication of violence, discriminations and harmful practices against women that undermines their capabilities and livelihood potentials.

There is the need to create equal opportunities and rights to economic resources through microfinance facilities with a focus towards adequate investment in poverty reduction. To help improve the livelihood opportunities of rural women, government should resuscitate and institutionalize marketing board to buy over agricultural products to reduce glut from farmers. In the same vein, there should be the creation of food processing / cottage industry for export as well to increase value chain addition and investment opportunities. Government should also create feeder roads to bring agricultural products to the market to help improve rural women's profits, as well as the provision of agricultural inputs, and extension services to boost livelihood potentials and reduce poverty.

Grassroots women are often confronted with preventable diseases and other health challenges, government therefore need to upgrade and improve on the existing healthcare facilities particularly in rural areas in order to provide efficient, accessible and user friendly health services. There should also be training and retraining of all categories of health workers in order to improve their service delivery.

Government also need to provide rural incentives for primary health workers especially in rural areas to motivate them positively and increase administration and governance. More importantly, there should be adequate provision of basic drugs, rehabilitation, renovation and construction of hospitals to cater for the health needs of people as stressed by (Guterres, 2020). Health institutions should receive adequate funding, in order to improve accessibility of health facilities to all and sundry especially in rural areas.

There is the need for government to strengthen vocational and technical colleges particularly in the rural and grassroots in order to provide free skills training opportunities to empower rural women. Existing adult education agencies should be strengthen while more skill-development programmes and centres should be established for illiterate women to improve their livelihood potentials in rural areas and reduce their level of poverty.

The effects of poverty and vulnerability at the household level makes rural women struggle hard for survival as a result of poor access to critical livelihood assets and empowerment frameworks belaboured by persistent inequalities. Hence, government need to eradicate all arrays of discriminations against women.

More importantly, all forms of faulty inheritance procedures as a result of repugnant cultural practices and norms should be eradicated to improve rural women opportunities to resources

and ownership of properties. Government also need to institutionalize legal protection for rural women to safe guide their interests and rights.

It is also important that government partners with rural women in order to increase awareness of traditional knowledge and indigenous and local practices, as a complement to scientific knowledge on climate change and disaster risk management. This will strengthen their initiatives to adopt resilient practices such as drought prevention technique, adaptive innovations and other local actions of tackling natural disaster.

#### VIII. A FEW CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper highlighted the importance of the role of grassroots women in food production and commerce and noted a mismatch with livelihood opportunities available to them. The challenges to the achievement of grassroots women livelihood potentials, policy priorities in the context of SDGs implementation that will boost the achievement of livelihood opportunities for grassroots women were critically analysed. It is safe to postulate that the fate of grassroots women hinges on successful implementation Sustainable Development Goals which aimed at strengthening universal peace, gender quality and quality education, eradicate poverty, hunger, health challenges etc. In Nigeria the Goals and targets have in a no small measure stimulated positive actions for the benefit of women. The effort to achieve the SDGs –based targets although still relatively new, has improved the lives of people in Africa including Nigeria, in spite of all the series of food, energy, financial and economic shocks. With series of debates, advocacy and inclusive nature of not leaving anybody behind, a number of the goals have been incorporated into national development plans and strategies to achieve the ambitious goals. However, there are still identified gaps which with adequate intervention strategies and the involvement of all relevant stakeholders as well as adequate monitoring of success rate will go a long way towards achieving the sustainable development the world desires.

With regard to the plight of rural women, the incorporation of the SDGs 1 2 3 and 5 into government development plans, as well as giving special focus to rural women farmers will go a long way to improving the lot of rural and grassroots women. In the same vein, it is important to develop grassroots women entrepreneurship skills and abilities. Empowering rural women to convene public policy dialogues and engage them in decision making process is also crucial to catalysing SDG implementation in order to achieve the targets. The SDGs if well implemented will go along towards ensuring better lives and well- being for rural and grassroots women.

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