

# Impact of Women's Empowerment on National Development in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Various experts have opined that women's empowerment does not simply reduce poverty among women but also boosts the gross domestic product of the country and stimulates economic prosperity. The Nigerian population is evenly split between males and females. However, the workforce is male-dominated with the majority of females having to settle for crumbs. In addition, there are also social and religious norms that have limited the opportunities for women to effectively participate in economic activities. In Nigeria, many women are living in poverty as a result of early marriage, lack of formal education, and lack of any skills that can earn them adequate income. In most cases, women with skills and business ideas find it difficult to access the needed financial support to run sustainable enterprises. This is counterproductive for a country like Nigeria which is facing various economic and social challenges. The paper explores the strategies for women's empowerment and its potential contribution to national development. The paper is a literature review of measures that have been tried and found effective in other climes and the outcome of women empowerment in other developing countries with shared similarities with Nigeria. The paper will come up with useful strategies that can be applied to boost women's empowerment in Nigeria.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Poverty Alleviation, social protection, economic development, gender issues.

## Introduction

The difference between developed and developing countries lies not in the amount of resources at the disposal of each country but in the quality and quantity of human resources. Gross domestic product (GDP) or gross national income (GNI) per capita only measures a country's economic development in terms of income, but human development takes into account a wider range of factors, including the quality of its health care, education system, living conditions, and level of personal freedom. The world has thus moved on from which country has the highest number of millionaires and now rates countries based on the number of economically active, productive, and financially independent citizens. This has led to the development of the human development index (HDI) (Omodero, 2019).

The HDI was developed to stress that a nation's progress should be measured not just by its GDP but also by the quality of life its citizens enjoy. HDI is a useful indicator of a country's economic health and growth prospects, and its components should continue to be prioritised in national planning processes. In Nigeria, the human development efforts of governments have historically favoured males to the detriment of females.

In a country with about 102 females for every 100 males, the rate of unemployment and economic disenfranchisement of females is therefore a big dent on the human development level of the country. Indeed, female unemployment has been identified as a significant fact in the economic backwardness of Nigeria as a country (Kalu et al., 2020).

Nigeria has joined other African countries in demonstrating some measure of concern about human development problems by initiating specific developmental goals and strategies to boost human development and accepting the critical role of gender equality or parity in the developmental process. This is shown in the signing and adoption of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR); the

Women Right Protocol of 2003; the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) in 2001 (Kelly, 2013; Egwurube, 2022). However, all of these have failed to holistically address the huge gap between males and females in term of economic empowerment in Nigeria.

Studies have shown that Nigerian women, despite their numerical advantage, are still being overshadowed by the males in the term of access to education, political participation, career development and even in the opportunity to make basic decisions concerning their own lives (Adeosun & Owolabi, 2021; Iro-Idoro & Jinoh, 2020; Kalu et al., 2020). Apart from the fact that exclusion of women from economic activities is not compatible with the global norm in the 21<sup>st</sup>, century, it is a significant impediment to the quest of Nigeria to join the ranks of developed countries in the world. Hence, the call for women empowerment as a strategy to boost national development in Nigeria has been on the rise.

The importance of women empowerment can be seen in the exploits of various women of substance in Nigeria who has contributed so much to the society with many women such as Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Late Professor Dora Akunyili, Dr. Ndi Okereke Onyiuke and many others (Ovute et al., 2015). It can only be imagined how millions of women like the ones mentioned here in urban and rural Nigeria will contribute to the development of the country when properly empowered.

### **What is Women Empowerment?**

According to Okoi et al., (2021) the term “women’s empowerment” is often used in the narrow sense in Nigeria, especially among politicians who use it to mean poverty alleviation programmes. However, the term “empowerment” is a multi-dimensional concept which goes beyond poverty reduction. It describes a “social process that helps people acquire control of their own lives” in many contexts (UNECE, 2012). Furthermore, empowerment is the development of people’s power to take control of their own lives, communities, and societies through the pursuit of goals they themselves establish as important. In the words of Egwurube (2022), women empowerment is a set of activities, programmes, and policies that make “women have access to decision making roles and can mobilize available legal, economic, social and political capital to make and take decisions that affect their lives and others around them”.

As a result of these clarifications, the term “empowerment” has become a tool utilised by various levels of government to tap into women’s potential as active partners in national development. Thus, women’s empowerment describes the growth and development of women’s social, economic, political, environmental, and legal capacities with the goals of achieving gender parity, bolstering women’s self-assurance in asserting their rights, and allowing them to participate effectively in decision-making (Adeosun & Owolabi, 2021). Empowering women to participate in economic activities is therefore similar to tapping the dormant potential of the national human resources. It is a double advantage in that it lift a large number of women out of poverty and also provided the much needed human resources to drive economic growth.

### **Challenges of Women Empowerment in Nigeria**

Despite the expressed interest of government and other interested parties such as multilateral organisations and non-governmental agencies to empower women in Nigeria, the result has been below expectations due to certain factors. The first is the narrow definition or perception of what women empowerment mean. Many government officials and politicians often confuse women empowerment with poverty alleviation programmes. This has to do with the practice of given women token money or setting them up in petty trades in the name of empowerment.

Egwurube (2022) identified legal, economic, political and socio-cultural issues as challenges being faced by true women empowerment in Nigeria. The author cited the example of the Nigerian Police Regulations which stated that unmarried female police officers who become pregnant must be discharged from the Force and cannot re-enlist without the approval of the Inspector-General of Police, or that female police officers

who wish to marry must apply for permission to marry and be so permitted before they can get married. This is one of the areas Nigerian women are affected by gender discriminating laws.

Added to this is the socio-cultural issue where women are seen as subservient to men. In some states, women are even treated as part of their husbands' property and are prevented from accumulating wealth (Itua, 2021).

### **Strategies for Effective Women Empowerment**

Available evidence has suggested that women empowerment in Nigeria is affected by the structure of the society in which they live. Low education attainment, high poverty rate, early marriage and other negative factors are merely symptoms or outcome of the structure in which Nigerian women are being raised. As a result, the following strategies are considered appropriate for effective women empowerment in Nigeria.

A review of all discriminatory laws and policies. As shown by Egwube (2019), there are provisions in the Nigerian constitution which blatantly discriminate against women. These should be reviewed and repealed as necessary so that women can have the same chance at advancing their careers as their male counterparts. In addition, relevant policies such as the Nigerian Gender Policy and the Nigerian Youth Policy should be reviewed and implemented to the letter to ensure full emancipation for females.

Another strategy that can be adopted is to use gender mainstreaming in education, especially in areas such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) in which women are grossly represented. By doing this, many more women will be put on lucrative and empowering career paths as opposed to being encouraged to take on careers that can only make them live at the subsistence level.

In addition, more women should be encouraged and supported to take leadership roles in education, politics, business management and other sectors largely dominated by men. This will ensure that gender-friendly rules and policies are made to reverse the marginalization of women.

Access to capital. One of the major reasons for female poverty in Nigeria is lack of access to business capitals. The conditions for accessing business loans and facilities should be reviewed so that the aspects requiring females to seek male permissions or use males as the guarantor before being granted loans are removed.

Women should be introduced to mentoring opportunities so that they can be developed in self-awareness, confidence and learn to pursue their dreams instead of waiting for handouts from government and non-governmental agencies.

Welfare should be provided to the most vulnerable on need basis instead of a blanket provision of items which may not be what the recipients need at the moment. It is therefore necessary for those in government to have regular interaction with women in need to understand their actual needs.

### **Conclusion**

Getting women to participate in economic activities should be a priority for any government in Nigeria. This is because women have shown themselves as capable as men in advancing the economic development of this country. In addition, the large population of women means that they can either be assets or liabilities.

Women are assets to their communities, and the nation in general when they productively participate in economic activities. On the other hand, they can be liabilities when they depend on their husbands or government officials in order to feed themselves and their children. However, using the strategies of palliatives where women are given tools for a vocation they have not properly learnt or grant a token which cannot be useful as business capital. This paper therefore advocates that women should be taught how to

stand on their own feet instead of being helped to remain tied to the apron strings of various providers.

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