

# WOMEN, POVERTY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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## **Introduction**

Women are integral part of the society and their contributions in many spheres of lives have been recognized (Adepelumi, 2011; Garba, 2011). Notwithstanding their positive role and contributions in socio-economic development, many of them are still suffering from the scourge of poverty in most developing countries. Their inherent disposition in many African cultures put them at disadvantage position and lower status compared with their men counterpart. For instance, their access to education and participation in other economic activities are being curtailed and to some extent which denied them opportunities to participate and aspire for certain status in the society (Garba, 2011).

It is evident that the scourge of poverty in Nigeria is particularly severe among women especially in the rural areas, where up to 80 percent of them perpetually live below the poverty line. Their quality of lives has been very low due to limited access to social services and infrastructures (Babalola, 2008). The men-folk are said to be better off in many aspects such as access to intellectual and human capital development training and education. Men have better potential to earn higher income than women generally. They operate business as they wish and pursue unlimited opportunities. More men are moving up to urban areas in search of greener pastures leaving more women to look after their families in the rural areas. Majority of the women especially in rural areas depend on subsistence farming for food and income to move on with lives. There is indication of significant differences in poverty and social indicators in the country. When making comparison between regions, available statistics show that the southern part has more developed markets, greater demand for labor, and a more educated labor force than the North. The economy in the north is less developed because majority of the population lives in rural areas and depend on subsistence agriculture.

Nigeria is endowed with abundance of natural and human resources, but unfortunately it appears that the resources are not being efficiently and effectively harnessed to forestall the menace poverty. Nigeria is one of the poor and most unequal countries in the world with over 80 million or 64% of her population living below the poverty line (2016 UN report cited in Alubo 2016). Poverty and hunger have remained high in rural areas, especially among female headed households and these cut across the six geo political zones, with prevalence ranging from approximately 46.9% in the southwest to 74.3% in northwest and northeast (Alubo, 2016).

Generally, in Nigeria, poverty remains high and may continue to hit badly various group of citizens if the necessary measure are not taken. Based on the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) survey, the extreme poverty headcount rate in 2019 was estimated at 50.1 percent using the international poverty line of \$1.90 per person per day. The extreme poverty headcount rate was projected to increase in the subsequent years. This is indicating worsening situation on the incomes of the poorest half of the population over the past decade.

Women are estimated to be around 49% of the Nigeria population. This percentage is quite significant and by implication for Nigeria to meet the SDGs and requires a specific focus on women. Nigeria's population estimates are, however, limited by the absence of an official census since 2006. This has implications for many SDG indicators that are indexed to the population and makes development planning significantly more difficult. Poverty causes serious concern and conversations at various levels because of its monumental and far reaching implications on the survival human kinds. Hence, the eradication of poverty around the world remains a central issue in global political and socio-economic debates.

This write up is motivated by the desire to reflect on the challenges, what has been achieved and what needs to be done in actualization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria. This enables closer look at women as special group who are vulnerable to poverty. Therefore, the aims of this paper are to highlight women's poverty profile and efforts in SDGs to address their predicaments.

### **Theories of Poverty**

Brady (2019) proposed that most theories of poverty can be categorized into three i.e behavioral, structural, and political theories. Behavioral theories dwell on individual behaviors motivated by incentives and culture of that society. Structural theories emphasize the demographic and labor market context, which causes both behavior and poverty. Political theories explained that power and institutions determine policy, which causes poverty and moderates the relationship between behavior and poverty (Calnitsky, 2018).

Another important postulate that helps to explained poverty is the sociological theories. This theory explained the causes of poverty from five perspectives. It views culture and religious beliefs, social circumstances, access and entitlements, political and economic conditions, and unpredictable shocks as the fundamental causes of poverty (Cerio, 2019). A number of factors were identified and attributes poverty to some issues such as laziness, population growth, lack of planning for the future, poor sense of history, violence, early marriages, low commitment to the robust family system, bigger family size, overdependence on agriculture, seasonal employment and lack of education as the key determinants of poverty (Bayudan-Dacuyucy and Lim, 2013; Cerio, 2019; Lewis, 1961; Reyes et al., 2012; Schelzig, 2005; Tuason, 2002).

The dominant approach in research on poverty locates the origin of poverty in individual attributes and some of them may require structural explanation. The specific attributes considered are skills, talents, habits or even behavior. Individual explanation of poverty becomes more complex when we include individual attributes that have social causes.

Also, another relevant theory to this study is the theoretical works of Datt and Ravallion (1992) on poverty decomposition. The theory extends the

discussion of poverty to population and related demographic factors which were not considered by other theories. In their analysis, poverty was determined by growth and redistributive effects (Müller, 2008). However, in the later stage of the theory, population dynamics was introduced as a determinant of poverty. It is often useful to determine whether it is mean-income growth or changes in the relative income shares accruing to different parts of the population that are responsible for the evolution of poverty across time. Critique on this can assist to assess whether these two factors, mean-income changes and inequality changes, work in the same or opposite directions when it comes to the behavior of aggregate poverty. Similarly, it was interesting to determine if the differences in poverty across countries or regions are due to differences in inequality or differences in mean levels of income.

Theoretically, the poor of the society forms a sub-society or a sub-culture which is completely different in character from the other strata of human society (Lewis, 1961). This concept of sub-culture of poverty was initially derived from many studies of anthropology, sociology and eugenics. It was both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated and capitalistic society (Lewis, 1961). The sub-culture of poverty should not be misrepresented to mean the same as poverty.

The poor have serious resemblance in many ways such as in family structure, value systems, spending patterns, interpersonal relations and so on. The behaviors of the poorest are alike no matter where they are located either in Europe, Asia or even in African continent. They share some economic attributes such as unemployment, low wages, the absence of savings, shortage of cash, and the absence of food reserves in the home (Nwani, and Osuji, 2020). Of course, the intensity or severity of these factors may vary, depending on the aggregate economic profile of the nation where they belong. Furthermore, it is noticeable among the poor other social and psychological characteristics that described the manner they are surviving for instance living in a squalor and crowded houses, high rate of drug abuse and alcoholism, breeding ground for crime and violence, presence of gender violence, adultery and fornication, abandonment of mothers

and children etc. All these can be seen in a habitation where poor predominates.

As mentioned earlier, the sub-culture of poverty was both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in free market society. This perhaps was a result of the colonial conquest or detribalization among members of the particular society in question.

### **Feminization of Poverty**

The term 'feminization of poverty' is mostly used by scholars in recent studies to describe a situation where poverty is more prevalent among female head of households than their male counterparts (Boyi, 2019).

It is pertinent to ask if poverty can be gender sensitive. If that is so, the prevalence of poverty in a country depends on the proportion of male and female population. For instance, where the proportion of female population is high, the incidence of poverty will also be high. Bastos et al. (2009) affirmed that poverty is not a gender-neutral, because the incidence of poverty is greater among female than male. It is observed that women constitute half of the population in most countries. Therefore, all other factors remain constant the rate of poverty is expected to reflect the population distribution of those countries.

Some of the reasons for the existence of feminized poverty include discrimination against women in the labor market, lower education than men and therefore are low income (Anyawu, 2010). Thus, any development process or policy that ignores the life-chances of the women cannot address the problem of poverty and other pertinent issues of sustainable development. Many countries have fully incorporated women's empowerment as part of their development process. Women were put in the front burner in empowerment programmes and poverty reduction moves. Understanding of gendered poverty is a precondition for effective development of strategies for uplifting the poor. It is worthy also to understand that the determinants of gendered poverty are not only complex, but multidimensional which involve among other things, education, occupation, location etc. There is need to deeply study these dimensions, to be able to formulate policy options that address women predicaments (Anyawu, 2010)

The phenomena 'feminization of poverty' is mostly found in the rural areas of Nigeria where

women predicaments are much higher. It is now more prevalent and exacerbated by the poor governance, corruption, insecurity and other socio-economic challenges adversely bedeviling the development of Nigeria. Women especially in the rural areas are badly affected due to lack of education, food security, health etc. as earlier mentioned. In urban areas, the challenge is not somehow different, women are also subjected to harsh living conditions as many husbands abdicate responsibilities to them due to lack of employment.

Feminization of Poverty in Nigeria explains the difficulties of women and their challenges in many areas. The challenges are exacerbated by the presence of insecurity, economic woes and social upheavals in the country. More emphasis is placed on areas or zones that are adversely affected by the 'Boko Haram' insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, herder-farmer conflict and other communal crises that claimed the lives and destroyed valuable properties of many innocent people. These problems escalate the poor and devastating condition of women. Recently, a data from the International Monetary Fund World Economic Forum has shown how deteriorating poverty situation especially among women in African continent was brought to the front burner.

### **Women Tragedy and Poverty Reduction Challenges**

Poverty is continuing to be of significant socio-economic challenge to Nigeria. The number of people falling into poverty trap is increasing becoming alarming. There is a serious concern on the growing poverty by the government and international community. Targeting womenfolk to eradicate poverty is within the purview of policy makers and other Non-government organizations in the country. It is revealed that Nigeria now has more people living in extreme poverty than India which previously was worse off (Ifeanyi, Anthony & Prisca, 2019). This development has serious implications for poverty alleviation among women in Nigeria (Emmanuel, 2013). The government in particular set out a target to lift 100 million Nigerians out of poverty by 2030. It is in view of this that the National Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy was developed. The strategy seeks to stimulate rapid economic growth through policies aimed at specific job-creating sectors.

In most of the cultures found in Nigeria women are supposed to be subservient to their husbands.

Their major responsibility is to take of the family responsibilities such as cooking, attending to guests and looking after the children. Therefore, the ordain role of the husband is to provide the needs and wants of the family irrespective of his economic position. Unfortunately, where the husband income is low, many ingredients of life may not be available and thus the quality of life would severely become low. In such a situation, a woman without complimentary income will suffer as she will be waiting for the husband to provide. The devastating effect is more on women who were left as housewives not doing any income generating activity.

The family size should ideally be in tandem with the family income, but unfortunately it is not typically so especially in some families in the country. In Northern for example, husband with low income can engage in polygamous marriage. In some cases, a woman may give birth to ten children without recourse to the education, health care, feeding and accommodation. The overlooking of the family to plan for family structure was a direct recipe to poverty and exacerbates the difficulties of women in that society. Maternal and infant mortality were on the high side because of lack of proper medical attention. In the same manner, many out of school children and drop out within the family. It suffices to assume that family without health and education have no human capital development. Thus, the family has bleak future and without deliberate attempt to generate income through creative business activities, may continue wallow in abject poverty.

The recent unrest and insecurity in the country create other daunting challenges to women especially in areas where insurgency, banditry and kidnapping are rampant. For example in Northeastern Nigeria (specifically in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states) many women lost their husband due to “*Boko Haram*” attacks. Similarly, in Northwest region, banditry is pervasive and many women lost their breadwinners. Kidnapping and herder and farmer conflicts in Southern part resulted in many deaths of men and their spouses were left behind with orphans.

In some communities in Nigeria, socio-cultural and religious belief limits the extent to which women can participate in income generating activities especially in the Northern part. But on the contrary, some communities do allow their

active participation, but at the same time took onerous responsibility of the family. In this case, men abdicate their role of income generation to their spouse. In fact the women assume major responsibility of paying children school fees, feeding and settling of medical bills of their family members. This situation rather than being positive, it creates more difficulty and misery to them.

Women in the rural areas face different challenges because of the limited opportunities to explore compared to urban areas. Many poor households rely on agriculture and have no other economic and productive activities to generate income. There is very little number of men that are working in non-farm enterprises in the informal sector during the off farming season. In fact during the dry season, many flee to urban areas for greener pastures. In that case women would be left behind with the children without money to cater for needs of the family. The absence of men at home in search of jobs elsewhere creates unwholesome hardship to women.

Nigeria is entangled in insecurity and other socio-economic problems that promote poverty and thwart poverty reduction efforts. Some of the unresolved problems are behavioral which require unlearning such behavior by the members of that community. Education and health being important instruments of human capital development, have suffered neglect for some decades in the country. Many policies were evolved to cushion the effect of poverty and empower women economically, but to no avail, as the number of women falling into poverty traps is increasing by the day. Corruption has become endemic and has far-reaching implications on the livelihood of individuals in the country. In fact it is the bane of socio-economic development of Nigeria and contributes greatly to the furtherance of all sorts of social vices that particularly affect women at the receiving ends. Summarily, corruption makes the fight against poverty difficult and creates a chain of boomerang effects that mess up the entire society.

### **SDGs Efforts in Nigeria**

The concept of sustainable development is fundamentally important in this paper because it is something which many nations are aspiring and committing their resources to attain. The US and European countries that are industrially developed are mainly characterized by high level sustainable

development. Sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. However, it can also be defined as the process of improving the range of opportunities that will enable individual humans and communities to achieve their aspirations and full potentials, over a sustained period of time, while maintaining the resilience of economic, social and environmental systems (Munasinghe, 2004).

In a developing country like Nigeria, government accepts sustainable development as a key for its growth and wellbeing of its population. Many policies regarding attainment of the goal of the SDGs were developed and mechanisms to implement them are underway. However, to achieve the goal of eradicating poverty, the womenfolk should be empowered adequately by the government at all level especially in the poverty ridden part of the country. Specially, women empowerment should be on education, health, food security, provision capital and skills to participate in productive economic activities.

Before the era of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015-2030), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2000-2015) notably achieved 50 percent reduction in global poverty incidence from what it was in 1990 (Anyanwu, 2017). Despite this commendable global result, the proportion of Sub-Sahara Africans (SSA) affected positively is minuscule and insignificant (Hirst, 2016). Today, with international poverty line at \$1.90 per person per day, SSA accommodates the largest number of poor people in the world, having taken over from Asia in 2019. Poverty eradication in all its forms everywhere is the first bold statement mentioned in the United Nations SDGs. With 1/3 of the total coverage period gone, it has become appropriate to examine progress towards the SDG of poverty alleviation in SSA. The attainment of these lofty targets requires a multidimensional understanding in the light of specific social, historical, cultural, economic, and political contexts of the region (Phillips, 1958).

Nigeria has moved quickly to adopt the SDGs and incorporate the goals as part of its development planning purpose. This plan provides a coherent and overarching framework within which Nigeria plans to meet the SDGs during the decade of action.

The plan seeks to mobilize action through key initiatives to bridge the gaps in the current planning structure. First, the plan seeks to integrate the SDGs into national and sub-national development planning processes, while ensuring that the social, economic, and environmental dimensions are captured as well as the principle of "leave no one behind". The plan also seeks to realign the national statistical system with the requirements of the SDGs, ensuring the production of timely data to gauge progress and identify shortcomings. Finally, the plan seeks to implement flagship programmes that can serve as catalysts to states that demonstrate the potential for impact

On the global scale, the COVID-19 pandemic has put steady progress in poverty reduction over the past 25 years into reverse, with the number of people in extreme poverty increasing for the first time in a generation. Now, rising inflation and the impacts of the war in Ukraine may derail progress further. These crises could lead to an additional 75 million to 95 million people living in extreme poverty in 2022, compared with pre-pandemic projections. things stand, the world is not on track to end poverty by 2030, with poorer countries now needing unprecedented levels of pro-poor growth to achieve this goal (UN,2022).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The high poverty incidence in Nigeria is uncharitable giving the abundant resources available in the country. Many of Nigerians were denied the opportunity to have decent livelihood and continue to be antagonized through inequality and injustice. Poverty is a clog in the wheel of balanced development and progress, thus, serving as a debilitating obstacle that prevents the actualization of other economic, political, environmental, and social development goals among its other deleterious effects (Anyanwu, 2017, Anyanwu, 1998).

The conditions that brought about poverty in whatever form must be removed. The present state of insecurity and unrest must be counteracted to ensure that normalcy is return and people go about their economic activities. Women should be at the center stage of any government policy that is aimed at addressing poverty in the country. Addressing the challenges of women is a key to poverty reduction. Therefore, no poverty as the first goal in the SDGs could only be attained by drawing deliberate policies that would tackle

hitherto bedeviling predicaments of women in term of participation in active economic activities.

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