

Poverty Reduction Strategies for Sustainable Economic Growth: Implications for Women's Empowerment in Nigeria

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Abstract— This paper examines the interplay between poverty reduction strategies, sustainable economic growth, and women's empowerment in Nigeria. Despite Nigeria's cultural diversity and economic potential, the nation grapples with entrenched poverty that disproportionately affects women. Research from the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER, 2020) underscores women's heightened vulnerability to poverty, stemming from factors like limited land ownership and constrained access to credit. The paper addresses the problem of gender disparities exacerbated by the absence of policies tailored to women's unique challenges. It underscores the need for gender equity, not only for social justice but as a practical necessity for fostering sustainable economic growth. The paper employs a multidimensional approach, drawing from existing research, policy frameworks, and theoretical perspectives including feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and empowerment theory. Key findings emphasize the potential advantages of gender-integrated poverty reduction strategies, including increased economic growth, reduced poverty, improved human capital development, and enhanced gender equality. The paper also highlights challenges such as entrenched gender norms and difficulties in targeting vulnerable populations. The paper concludes by underscoring the importance of integrating gender considerations into poverty reduction strategies, recommending gender mainstreaming in policies to promote women's economic participation and rights. The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform policy decisions and promote women's empowerment in Nigeria, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Poverty reduction; Women's empowerment; Sustainable economic growth; Gender equality.

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty remains deeply entrenched and grows increasingly severe in many societies around the world, with women bearing the brunt of this tragic hardship. Women stand out as a vulnerable and disproportionately affected population. Their struggle against poverty is further hindered by many structural and cultural impediments. Research conducted by the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER) in 2020 spotlighted women's intense susceptibility to deprivation caused by multiple factors including limited land ownership, constrained access to credit, and discrepancies in education and employment opportunities. Hence, this paper attempts to analyse the achievements of the Sustainable Development Goals concerning people and prosperity as they are reflected in Nigeria.

Gender disparities remain a reality in Nigeria due to the lack of policies that adequately attend to the needs and obstacles unique to women. Despite some progress in achieving gender equality, women still face many hurdles. For instance, discriminatory inheritance laws, the lack of proper financial assistance, and limited roles in decision-making processes all continue to impede women's realization of their full potential. This consequentially entraps them in low-wage positions requiring unsafe labour arrangements. A poll conducted in 2018 by the International Labour Organization highlighted the over-representation of women in Nigeria's informal economy, exacerbating their vulnerability to poverty and limiting their capacity to drive economic development.

Gender equity must be at the core of efforts to reduce poverty and secure sustainable economic expansion. It is not just a matter of social equity; it is a practical necessity for creating an egalitarian society. Strengthening women's rights and ensuring their equal participation in economic activities and decision-making processes are crucial steps to ending poverty and strengthening economic success. A 2019 comprehensive report from the World Bank, titled "Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict," highlights the significance of addressing gender disparity to minimize poverty and promote enduring peace.

This paper examines the correlations between poverty reduction efforts, sustainable economic growth, and women's empowerment within Nigeria. It analyses the implications and interactions stemming from each of these constructs. It also enumerates the key obstacles to poverty reduction such as gender norms and stereotypes, limited targeting, and sustainability challenges. There are suggested recommendations like acknowledging the prospective benefits of a gender-integrated approach, the need for policies that promote women's economic participation and rights, and the adoption of gender mainstreaming in poverty reduction strategies.

MEANING OF CONCEPTS

1. **Poverty:** Poverty is a multidimensional concept that encompasses various economic, social, cultural, and political aspects. It is not merely a lack of income but also a lack of access to resources, opportunities, and basic human capabilities necessary for a dignified life. The United Nations defines poverty as a lack of access to resources, opportunities, and capabilities necessary to enjoy a basic standard of living. The World Bank views poverty primarily through an economic lens, defining it as living on less than a certain income threshold, often measured as earning less than \$1.90 per day for extreme poverty.
2. **Sustainable Development:** Sustainable development is an approach to societal progress that seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It encompasses economic, social, and environmental dimensions.
3. **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** The SDGs are a set of 17 global objectives established by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They provide a comprehensive framework to guide international efforts towards achieving a more sustainable, equitable, and prosperous future for all.
4. **Women's Empowerment:** Women's empowerment refers to the process of enabling and equipping women with the knowledge, resources, opportunities, and agency to actively participate in and influence social, economic, political, and cultural spheres. It aims to challenge and overcome gender-based inequalities and biases, fostering women's autonomy, self-confidence, and decision-making abilities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to explore the links between poverty reduction strategies, sustainable economic expansion, and women's empowerment in Nigeria. The study seeks to offer critical understanding that can inform policy decisions and development plans. The fundamental ambition is to identify approaches that not only lessen poverty but also enable women to serve as essential facilitators of long-term economic success.

The importance of this exploration is reflected in its capacity to lead evidence-based policy formation that advances women's strengthening while promoting economic development. By identifying the barriers that impede women's equal participation and proposing practical strategies, this article contributes to the broader discussion on poverty eradication and gender equality.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodology based on an extensive literature review encompassing academic papers, reports from international organizations, governmental publications, and reputable databases focusing on poverty reduction, sustainable economic growth, and women's empowerment in Nigeria. Data generation was achieved through a systematic review and synthesis of existing literature from databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, World Bank repositories, and official publications from Nigerian governmental bodies.

The analysis centred on identifying correlations and interdependencies between poverty reduction efforts, sustainable economic growth, and women's empowerment within the Nigerian context. Through this review, key themes and patterns were extracted to understand the implications and interactions arising from these constructs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on poverty alleviation strategies, sustainable economic growth, and women's empowerment in Nigeria reveals a complex interplay of factors. Olowa (2012) identifies inadequate economic growth as a primary cause of poverty, while Ucha (2010) points to unemployment, corruption, income inequality, and a poor education system as contributing factors. Danaan (2018) underscores poverty's multidimensional nature, encompassing economic, social, cultural, and psychological indicators. In implementing poverty alleviation policies, challenges abound. Aminu (2014) notes policy ineffectiveness due to corruption and inconsistencies, while Ugoh (2009) highlights the government's failure to leverage poverty eradication structures, resulting in persistent poverty despite policy introductions. Nnamdi (2013) advocates for a more integrated approach to address the endemic poverty in Nigeria.

Gender disparities significantly contribute to poverty in Nigeria, as emphasized by Buba (2018), who highlights the socio-economic disadvantages faced by female-headed households. Anyanwu (2010) notes fluctuations in poverty incidences between male and female-headed households over time. Ajani (2009) underscores the dichotomy between women's role in food production and their overrepresentation among the world's poor, stressing the need for gender-focused interventions.

Proposed poverty reduction strategies range from marketing and local economic development approaches to multidimensional strategies advocating for employment generation and human capital investment. Oladeji (2000) emphasizes poverty alleviation strategies linked explicitly to employment generation and investments in human capital, while Aluko (2003) advocates for a comprehensive approach encompassing economic, political, social, agricultural, and ideological policy options.

Obstacles hindering poverty alleviation efforts include political instability, corruption, mismanagement of resources (Musa, 2016), and the need for inclusive growth involving productive employment and income redistribution (Inam, 2015). The literature emphasizes the need for comprehensive, multifaceted strategies integrating economic, social, and environmental aspects to address poverty in Nigeria.

Other empirical studies reveal that themes regarding poverty and gender dynamics in Nigeria converge on several critical points. Mahlangu's qualitative study (2021) employing a black feminist perspective uncovers the structural challenges impeding women from entering the development ladder, highlighting norms, laws, and financial institutions as exclusionary factors. Adeosun et al. (2021) analyse gender inequality using data from the Living Standard Measurement Survey and identify pronounced disparities in earnings across regions and sectors.

Ogbeide et al. (2020), utilizing Generalized Method of Moment estimation, highlight the negative impact of population growth on development while emphasizing the positive influence of female tertiary enrolment and employment ratios. They recommend strategies like fertility control and enhancing female education and employment for sustainable development.

The collective insights from these studies emphasize the criticality of women's empowerment in poverty reduction and sustainable economic growth. Idike (2020) underscores the neglect of crucial aspects of human capital development in state empowerment schemes. Okolie et al. (2021) examine Igbo women's basket weaving enterprises, underscoring the role of informal entrepreneurial learning in poverty alleviation efforts. Mogaji et al. (2021) study access to credit facilities by Nigerian banks and demonstrate how corporate social responsibility initiatives aim to empower women.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and empowerment theory as lenses to understand, interpret, and address complex issues of poverty, gender disparities, and empowerment in Nigeria.

1. **Feminist Theory:** Feminist theory, advocated by scholars like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, bell hooks, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, illuminates the pivotal role of gender in shaping social structures and power dynamics. In Nigeria, this lens accentuates the necessity of women's empowerment for sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction. It highlights how entrenched patriarchal norms and gender disparities contribute significantly to the disproportionate poverty experienced by women.

2. **Intersectionality Theory:** Intersectionality theory, championed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, emphasizes the multifaceted nature of individuals' identities shaped by intersecting factors like gender, race, and class. In Nigeria, this perspective underscores that women's experiences of poverty and empowerment are deeply influenced by various intersecting dimensions of identity. Addressing poverty requires strategies that recognize and cater to the diverse challenges faced by women from different backgrounds.
3. **Empowerment Theory:** Empowerment theory, as advocated by Julian Rappaport and Mark Zimmerman, focuses on the processes through which individuals gain control over their lives. In the Nigerian context, poverty reduction strategies centred on women's empowerment acknowledge its dual role in fostering sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction. These strategies aim to amplify women's autonomy, self-confidence, and active participation in decision-making processes.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AS A TOOL FOR FOSTERING GENDER EQUALITY

Women's empowerment is a key factor in fostering gender equality and aiding human development. It includes augmenting women's abilities, control, and access to resources, giving them the ability to shape their destiny and positively advance society. This concept contains multiple elements:

1. **Economic Empowerment:** Giving women the opportunity and resources to earn money, control finances, and participate in economic activity. This can take the form of work prospects, launching businesses, land ownership, and access to credit.
2. **Social Empowerment:** Achieving access to education, healthcare, and social services is essential for the enhancement of overall prosperity and to break the cycle of deprivation. Educating girls and women is a potent tactic for intensifying social authority and improving health outcomes.
3. **Political Empowerment:** This refers to women participating in public offices, political leadership positions, and community engagement. Greater involvement of women in decision-making results in more comprehensive policy and governing strategies.
4. Enabling women has far-reaching advantages that go beyond individual strengthening:

5. **Economic Growth:** Boosting gender parity and female economic involvement could add trillions to the global GDP. Women who are empowered contribute to economic expansion by augmenting labour force engagement and productivity.
6. **Health and Education:** Ensuring women have access to both education and healthcare can have a striking impact on maternal and child health and diminish child mortality rates.
7. **Gender Equality:** The elevation of women is closely tied to attaining gender equality, a crucial aim for sustainable growth.
8. **Political Stability and Governance:** Enfranchised women are key to enhanced governance and stable politics due to their capacity to provide diverse views and advocate for inclusive regulations.
9. **Sustainable Development:** Women's empowerment is inextricably linked to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically those associated with poverty eradication, education, health, and gender parity.

NIGERIA'S CONTEXT: COMPLEXITIES AND GENDER DISPARITIES

Gender differences in Nigeria are deep-rooted and persistent, especially when it comes to economic opportunities. The World Economic Forum's "Global Gender Gap Report 2021" ranked Nigeria 136th out of 156 countries in terms of gender equality. Women's presence in the formal labour market is visibly lower than that of men, with minimal access to decent work, entrepreneurial opportunities, and management roles. Women's experiences of gender imbalance and financial hardships differ significantly across regions in Nigeria:

1. **Northern Region:** The northern territory faces issues such as high levels of early and forced marriage, restricted access to education, and constraints on female mobility. Girls in this zone are more likely to be married before reaching adulthood, depriving them of educational and financial possibilities.
2. **Southern Region:** While the southern region shows slightly improved access to education and healthcare, women still face obstacles in economic involvement. They commonly confront biased employment practices and restricted access to credit for business ventures.
3. **Conflict-Affected Localities:** Conflict-affected areas, like the northeastern region dealing with the Boko Haram insurgency, magnify gender inequities. Women in

these territories face displacement, loss of income sources, and increased gender-based violence.

4. **Rural versus Urban Disparities:** Inequalities between rural and urban regions have a considerable effect on women's economic prospects. Women living in rural areas often lack access to basic amenities such as healthcare and schooling, and are more likely to practise subsistence farming with minimal access to markets.

POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGIES AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT NEXUS

In an attempt to reduce poverty and create an environment of inclusive development, Nigeria has carried out various poverty alleviation measures. These actions aim to tackle the challenges experienced by vulnerable people, particularly women, and promote sustainable economic development. A study by the International Monetary Fund found that a one-point increase in women's empowerment leads to a 0.176 likelihood reduction in poverty. This highlights the significant impact that women's empowerment can have on poverty alleviation efforts. Notable government programmes include:

1. **National Social Investment Program (NSIP):** Launched in 2015, this programme encompasses several components including the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), N-Power, National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme, and the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP). These measures aim to eliminate poverty by providing women with cash stipends and the expertise they need to foster their businesses.
2. **Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Scheme:** This scheme focuses on assisting needy households, with a special concentration on women as primary recipients. The programme provides cash transfers to poor households with the condition that children attend school and women receive healthcare services. It has contributed to increased school enrolment and improved maternal health outcomes.
3. **Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP):** GEEP offers microloans to small and medium-sized enterprises owned by women, providing them with financial resources to expand their businesses. It aims to alleviate poverty and promote financial inclusion.
4. **National Women's Empowerment Fund (NaWEF):** NaWEF provides grants and training to women-owned businesses, particularly those in rural areas.

5. **YouWin! With Women:** This initiative provides business training and support to women entrepreneurs, enabling them to start and grow their businesses.
6. **National Gender and Social Inclusion Policy (NGSIP):** This policy aims to mainstream gender and social inclusion into all government policies, programmes, and budgets. It seeks to promote women's economic empowerment, political participation, and access to education and healthcare.

Assessing the success of these programmes reveals both successes and limitations. According to the World Bank, Nigeria's poverty rate decreased from 53% in 2010 to 40% in 2019. However, this progress has been uneven, with women and girls disproportionately affected by poverty. The CCT programme has reached over 4 million households, reducing poverty by an estimated 10% in targeted areas. The WEDF has provided grants to over 1,000 women-owned businesses, creating over 10,000 jobs. The YouWin! programme has trained and supported over 5,000 young women entrepreneurs. However, these numbers represent a small fraction of the overall population and the vast number of women living in poverty in Nigeria. Continued efforts are needed to expand the reach and effectiveness of these programmes and to address the underlying structural and economic barriers that perpetuate poverty among women.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

1. **Gender Norms and Stereotypes:** The capability of poverty reduction initiatives is restricted by entrenched gender norms and stereotypes. These preconceptions can stunt women's autonomy and engagement in programme activities.
2. **Limited Targeting:** Problems with identifying and reaching women in need due to lack of accurate information can compromise the impact of initiatives. Improved targeting mechanisms are needed to ensure the most disadvantaged women benefit.
3. **Sustainability and Scalability:** The capacity of these programmes to reach a wider population of women and maintain their impact remains a valid concern.
4. **Low Political Representation:** The low number of women in Nigerian politics limits their ability to influence policy until the socio-economic, cultural, and political factors that keep women from being powerful are addressed.

5. **Limited Access to Education:** Many women lack access to quality education and skills training, hindering their employment opportunities and economic empowerment.
6. **Gender-Based Discrimination:** Discrimination and harmful traditional practices continue to limit women's opportunities and perpetuate poverty.
7. **Limited Access to Finance:** Women often face difficulties accessing financial resources and credit, which are essential for starting and growing businesses.
8. **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Poor infrastructure and limited access to essential services disproportionately affect women and hinder their economic participation. Despite these challenges, there are promising signs of progress. The Nigerian government has shown commitment to women's empowerment and poverty reduction, and there is growing recognition of the importance of addressing gender inequality to achieve sustainable development.

TAILORED SOLUTIONS FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

Based on expert opinions, solutions for women's empowerment are multifaceted. To successfully promote women's empowerment in Nigeria, bespoke plans must be put in place to confront the distinct difficulties that women encounter:

1. **Gender-Responsive Farming Assistance:** In areas where women occupy a key role in agriculture, providing them with access to modern farming techniques, education, and microfinance can significantly boost their agricultural productivity.
2. **Skills Development for the Informal Sector:** In metropolitan spaces where many women participate in informal trades, providing vocational training in areas such as crafts, textiles, and small-scale processing can enhance their skills and entrepreneurial opportunities.
3. **Localized Approaches:** Localized approaches acknowledge the diverse socio-cultural dynamics across regions. In the Northern region, community initiatives backed by religious and traditional leaders can enhance understanding about the value of female education and the importance of delaying marriage. In the Southern region, encouraging women's inclusion in local cooperatives and value chain associations can improve their access to markets and funding.

4. **Collaboration:** Addressing gender inequality requires collaborative effort involving governments, civil society organizations, the private sector, and international partners. Fostering partnerships can amplify the impact of initiatives.
5. **Addressing Root Causes:** To effectively promote women's advancement, it is crucial to address the underlying structural and social barriers that perpetuate gender inequality. This includes dismantling discriminatory norms and practices and ensuring equal access to education and employment opportunities.
6. **Investing in Education:** Education is a powerful tool for empowering women. Investing in quality education for girls and women, particularly in STEM fields and financial literacy, can significantly enhance their earning potential.
7. **Expanding Access to Financial Services:** Expanding access to financial services, including microfinance and mobile banking, can empower women to start and grow businesses and manage their finances effectively.
8. **Promoting Women's Leadership:** Encouraging women to run for office, supporting women's leadership initiatives, and mentoring women in leadership positions can foster a more equitable society.
9. **Leveraging Technology:** Promoting digital literacy among women and developing gender-sensitive technology solutions can accelerate women's empowerment.
10. **Supportive Policy Environment:** Governments should implement policies that address gender disparities in pay, access to land and property, and representation in leadership positions.
11. **Gender-Disaggregated Data:** Investing in data collection and analysis can provide insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by women and inform evidence-based interventions.
12. **Empowering Women to Advocate:** Women themselves are powerful agents of change. Supporting women's organizations and empowering them to advocate for their rights can drive positive social and economic transformations.

CONCLUSION

The combined forces of poverty reduction, economic sustainability, and women's empowerment create a complicated yet critical foundation that justifies comprehensive assessment. This study examines how these aspects combine and necessitate a range of strategies for specific and collective growth. Efficient poverty reduction requires more than economic assistance; it requires individualized procedures that take into account gender distinctions and regional differences. Implementing gender perspectives into anti-poverty initiatives is essential in forming strategies that consider women's exclusive issues. Incorporation of gender inclusivity, regulations that bolster female economic participation, and a gender-sensitive approach are pivotal not just for combating poverty but also for long-term economic and social progress.

Studies of real-life scenarios illustrate the effectiveness of gender-inclusive courses of action, highlighting the importance of localized initiatives and collaborative work. In the case of Nigeria, tailored arrangements are vital in view of various challenges in different territories. By setting up collaborations and involving women in programme development, the effectiveness of implementation efforts can be notably augmented. Understanding the complex connection between poverty reduction, economic prosperity, and women's empowerment is vital for forming a fair and prosperous society. Personalized approaches, deliberate efforts, and collaboration can lead to positive change, lifting people out of poverty and driving enduring economic prosperity in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Holistic Strategy Development:** Develop a National Gender-Integrated Poverty Reduction Framework that amalgamates various interventions for poverty reduction with emphasis on gender equality.
2. **Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms:** Establish a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system to assess the impact of interventions regularly, including defining key performance indicators and conducting periodic assessments.
3. **Community-Centric Approach:** Prioritize community involvement by establishing local committees to design and implement gender-sensitive poverty reduction programmes tailored to specific community needs.
4. **Education and Awareness Campaigns:** Launch nationwide awareness campaigns highlighting the benefits of gender equality in poverty reduction.

Most women are not aware of the poverty reduction schemes and strategies available to them.

5. **Public-Private Partnerships:** Foster partnerships between government, private sector, and NGOs to create job opportunities, offer training, and support women's entrepreneurship initiatives.
6. **Resource Allocation:** Emphasize the economic benefits of investing in gender-sensitive poverty reduction by showcasing potential returns on investment in terms of economic growth, productivity, and social cohesion.
7. **Addressing Cultural Barriers:** Implement targeted awareness campaigns aimed at reshaping societal perceptions of gender roles, collaborating with community leaders and influencers to foster acceptance of gender equality initiatives.
8. **Policy Implementation:** Simplify bureaucratic processes and enhance capacity building at the grassroots level to facilitate effective implementation of policies.
9. **Long-Term Sustainability:** Establish sustainable funding mechanisms for poverty reduction programmes, ensuring continuity beyond short-term initiatives. Integrate gender-sensitive budgeting to allocate resources specifically for gender-focused interventions. By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can strive towards a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to reducing gender-based poverty, addressing gender inequalities, and capitalizing on feedback from existing strategies for more effective implementation of policies to enhance national and individual economic growth.

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