

WOMEN RIGHTS CHALLENGES AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The roles women play in the socio-economic sphere have been of immense value and critical importance for national development in Nigeria. However, women capacity to engage and be optimally productive in the economic sector has been partly abysmal due to rising issues of violation and denial of rights that manifest in unequal opportunities and discrimination against them in the Nigerian patriarchal structured society and particularly male dominated industrial environment. This paper is an overview of the contemporary status of women rights and the implications on the drive towards sustainable economic development in Nigeria. It takes into cognizance the challenges of women rights development in the country and the effects on women economic empowerment in relation to efforts aimed at tackling Nigeria's dire need for improved productivity necessary to speed up economic growth for the attainment of sustainable development goals within the 2030 global deadline. The paper recommends that government prioritizes the enforcement and monitoring of comatose instruments of gender equality and upholds girls and women rights through effective legislations and smart judicial processes in Nigeria.

Keywords: Women, Rights, Sustainable, Economic, Development

Introduction

Human rights are alienable property of both men and women, youths and every child in the civilized and modern societies. It is not a privilege, gift or undue advantage and therefore should never be trivialized for any untoward reason or purpose. The rights of human beings to be free from certain man-made social, economic, political and psychological stress and obstacles in the course of life activities cannot be misplaced or ignored (Elendu, 2015). Human rights allow human beings to exercise their

legitimate statuses and roles in society for their own individual good and society's wellbeing. Whether the rights are for males or females, they constitute tools for normal, peaceful and orderly co-existence of all humans. Women rights, therefore, constitute the established rights women have as human beings that should enable them to co-exist peacefully and respectably with their men counterparts in society. Olakanmi (2007), states that, "women rights are human right and there should be full implementation of the human rights of women and of the girl-

child because they are inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms". Women rights are basically all about the empowerment and advancement of women freedoms and dignity in society. It includes the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief thus contributing to the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realizing their full potentials in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations (Olakanmi, 2007).

The status of women rights partly defines their degree of freedom to interact and deal freely with their structurally advantaged men counterparts in most societies, particularly in the patriarchal societies of which most of the world societies characterize. Women rights define their limits and boundaries with regards to what they can do, how and even when they do whatever they think, desire or pursue in life. This is why women rights have a lot to do with their ability to be free to exercise their full potentials, talents, ability and capacity in society. Their quality of human rights affect their capacity to grow and develop and therefore affects their productivity and economy. Women rights have interface and correlations with their economic opportunities, exploits and development in any economy including Nigeria (Anugwon, 2005). If women rights influence their level of participation and contributions in the economic sphere of a nation, it then implies by extension, that their level of productivity and economic growth can have profound effects on national development. Taken further, women rights can be instrumental to facilitating Nigeria's pursuit for sustainable economic development. Nigeria is in dire need of the engagement and exploitation of all its human and material resources in order to be in a better position to pursue and ensure that concrete efforts are made to achieve sustainable development goals within the deadline of 2030. As a country lagging

behind in global economic development indices and among the least developed societies (Egwuonu, 2015), there is need for concerted drive to explore the full potentials of the women through their empowerment, in combination with that of men for greater economic transformation.

This paper explicates the status of women rights in Nigeria, the challenges of women rights and the need for the continuous development of women rights in the country; it also discusses the interface and prospects between women rights, women economy and Nigeria's pursuit of enhanced national productivity aimed at sustainable economic growth and development. It argues that enhanced women rights increases women opportunities and empowerment and economic development with further positive implications on national productivity and goals. With the methodology of library research and augmentation, the paper focuses on the following items:

1. What is the status of women rights in the Nigerian society?
2. What are the challenges of women rights development in Nigeria?
3. Is there interface between women rights, women economy and national economic productivity/ growth in Nigeria?
4. What measures can improve women rights and engender sustainable economic development in Nigeria?

Status of Women Rights in the Nigerian Society

Human beings are by birth and for essence of good and healthy life supposed to live and enjoy at least considerable if not optimal freedom in order to be happy and purposeful in life. Human beings in civilized societies desire and quest for life of many freedoms

and this is the incontrovertible nature and value of human rights that make them to have no sensible alternatives or even equivalents in human society. Egbomuche (2006), opines that "every human being is naturally endowed with certain rights on account of his or her humanity. Human rights are such rights that are attached to one by the mere fact of being born scientifically, as a human being. They are those rights that accrue to man (both genders) in his capacity as a homo sapien - a wise and sensible animal or being".

According to International Law and numerous United Nations Conventions Declarations on human rights, human rights are inalienable and inherent by virtue of the human condition of existence and cannot be taken away from men and women by force; while laws under different jurisdictions may differ, the human rights to which each person is entitled are internationally acclaimed. Amaele (2013), stresses that the issue of women rights is probably another means for ascertaining the state of gender relations and gender inequality in Nigeria. The issue of violations and denial of some fundamental human rights of women globally, and Nigeria in particular, seems to gain momentum daily". Several institutions such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), mostly feminist biased, have come up laying such blames on male dominated culture, with very little blame on women side. Every human being is bestowed with some basic rights by nature and law and such rights as to live, move, express opinions, education and work in any part of the country among others are fundamental to both males and females. These rights are backed by law at both the national and global strata. The Nigerian Constitution and other statutes uphold the equal rights of man, notwithstanding the implementation processes which appear to be

selective and sometimes discriminatory (Amaele, 2010).

Suara (1998), notes that "the agitation of women in Nigeria and parts of the world on equal rights, especially on equal opportunity and participation in state employment, education, etc., is a laudable development, where it is not taken on selfish purpose or as a mere celebration of womanhood". The overall philosophy of Nigeria is clear on this issue of women rights since the addressed did not single the women out from the men. Hence, the "philosophy" states:

- a) live in a United and harmony, as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic sovereign nation founded on the principle of freedom, equity and justice.
- b) promote inter-African solidarity and world peace through understanding (National Population Commission, 2004).

In perspective, (a) above places both men and women on the same stream. There is no barrier placed against women from attaining any height they could. Hence, if philosophy is the sound foundation of the people's total life aspiration, the Nigerian women have the full support of the nation to aspire and attain their God-ordained positions within and outside the country. However, some authors and scholars consider this philosophy of Nigeria on women rights as mere paperwork that in reality is not observed nor effectively enforced or upheld. In support of this view are numerous issues and cases of women oppression and marginalization, wife battery, domestic/family violence against women, physical abuse and killings, etc. Also, there are some evidences of women rights violations in work organizations including the public service. Ugoh (2014), states that over half of the population of Nigeria are

females and this could imply that over half of the workforce are women; and therefore if these women capacity, creative intelligence and potentials are undermined by the effects of the violation or denial of their rights, it is to the detriment of the national economy. Women are veritable tools for achieving national development because of their industrious, energetic enterprising and patriotic nature (Nnamdi, 2014).

However, it has been observed that unfortunately most African countries, including Nigeria, have not had specific laws or policies to stem the tide of violation of women rights. Where there are reasonable state/federal laws against forms of women rights infringements, there are lack of enforcement and adequate prosecution of cases. Women rights has over time and space and within the historical conjectures of the Nigeria public service suffered untold setbacks. In an ideal setting, the state is supposed to guarantee the protection of women and accord them equal rights and opportunities with their men counterparts. Such an ideal condition, which rarely exists in human societies, is expected to enable the women folks play crucial and sustainable roles in societal development through active and direct participation in policy making strategic plan implementation (Isah, 2005). It is important to note that despite national and state laws enacted against violations /denial of women rights, cases of women rights violations continue to rise. More women are maltreated and abused on daily basis, and without limits at home, office and even in public spaces. Rape, physical assault and fatalities against women are on the increase and women remain at the dangerous receiving end of these atrocities and dehumanization. Although there have been some identifiable instances of positive

developments in terms of women empowerment and rights such as the recent declaration by the Supreme Court of Nigeria on women rights of inheritance and the Rivers state women rights to inherit family property. The Supreme Court in affirming the High Court and Court of Appeal judgments, held that the Customary law which barred a female child, irrespective of the circumstances of her birth, from inheriting or partaking in the sharing of the property and estate of her father, was a violation of her right to freedom from discrimination as in accordance with section 42 (1) (2) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Thisday live, 2022). This singular milestone in women rights in Nigeria if not just a paperwork, has the audacity and authority to instigate women to become more empowered and positioned to contribute their own quota to national economic growth and development.

Challenges of Women Rights Development in Nigeria: An Overview

Women rights face a number of challenges and constraints in many developing countries. It is argued that the stage of development of most third world states makes economic growth their most important pre-occupations that in order to satisfy this need, it is necessary to detract from civil and political rights and that a lesser standard should therefore be expected of them (Umozurike, 1997). This argument partly explains why human rights are undermined in the developing societies and women's rights tend to suffer more in these climes because it's already in second place position to the rights that men seem to have. Women rights can be said to be at nascent stage of development in the developing nations when compared with developed nations and some of the causes of

this women rights conditions in Nigeria and other third countries includes:

Firstly, illiteracy and ignorance - These two issues constitute major obstacle to the development of women rights in Nigeria. While it is believed that many Nigerian girls and women are acquiring good education and competencies to improve their viability and economy, a greater population are still largely unable to access formal education due to poverty, tradition, insecurity and some other socio-cultural issues (Amony, 2010). Illiteracy among women makes it difficult for them to know and appreciate their rights and to know when their rights have been violated and how to seek for redress through legitimate means. The inability to adequately explore the ingredients of their inalienable rights as human beings and also as women in society negatively affects the development of women rights in Nigeria.

Secondly, poverty remains a significant factor of underdevelopment of all human rights, especially women rights in developing societies including Nigeria. Poverty dehumanizes people to the extent of not taking advantage of their inalienable rights as expected or needed in the course of human interactions. Too many rural women and even the poor women in urban areas and the lack of money make it difficult for them to assert and defend their rights. They are at the mercy of their men counterparts and the judicial system that require certain funds for any litigation to be processed (Onyema, 2012).

Thirdly, closely related to poverty is the issue of the cost of fighting for rights in Nigerian society. Women are often not empowered enough to fight for their rights when violated or denied due to their inability to sponsor cases of violation through court action which

may as well be beyond their reach. Legal aid services, where available, may be limited to serious criminal cases and rarely dispensed for civil matters.

Fourthly, a great impediment to the attainment of better and improved women rights is the issue of the impact of the stage of national development. The level of development in the developing societies seems to be having negative influence on the enforcement and uphold of women rights. It makes economic growth the most important preoccupation which keeps them away from improving on fundamental human rights, let alone women's rights. In Nigeria, this is observable in the way bills on womens rights are handled in the National Assembly and also the poor implementation of the instruments of gender equality that are derived from the Beijing declarations, fourth world conference on women rights (Osigwe, 2014). In all these cases, women rights are trivialized and sidelined.

Moreover, at the structural context of the Nigerian society lies the system of patriarchy and social inequality that constructively constitute major impediments to the development of women rights in Nigeria. As a typical patriarchal society, Nigeria is a society where both traditionally and statutorily men are at the helm of social, cultural, economic and political affairs of the country with the women playing the second fiddle. This situation of affairs incapacitate women's efforts to improve their social and economic status and empowerment that can give them the necessary leverage to assert their rights and fight for the improvement and attainment of a greater quality of rights like their fellow women counterparts in the developed nations. The poor representation of women in the National and State

legislative bodies weaken efforts by the few women legislators to get bills related to women rights and gender equality to become laws. In the 8th National Assembly women were less 5% and hardly got noticed (The Leader Newspapers, 2022).

Again, the fact that the fight for gender equality and women rights is not a totally all women affairs weakens the development of women rights in Africa. The lack of unity of purpose and cohesion of action among women in the fight for their rights as well as their poor/smaller representation in the legislature put their efforts to attain equal rights with their men counterparts in difficult situations. Male dominated legislative systems are sluggish towards the enactment of laws that advance and protect women rights in society (Bachelot, 2012).

Women Rights/ Women Empowerment and Sustainable Economic Development in Nigeria

The Fourth World Conference on Women rights named the Beijing Declarations reaffirms commitment to the equal rights and inherent human dignity of women and men and other purposes and principles enshrined in the charter of the United Nations, to the universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments in particular the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women as well as the declaration of the elimination of violence against women and the declaration on the right to development (Olakanmi, 2007). These declarations are all encompassing and included the dignity of the men as well as the need for the right to development. Women rights do not conflict with human rights in anyway and includes the empowerment of

women that can enhance the efforts of everyone including men in society.

The rights of women entail the prevalence of equal rights, opportunities and access to resources, equal sharing of responsibilities for the family by men and women and a harmonious partnership between them are critical to their wellbeing and that of their families as well as the consolidation of democracy. From this perspective, women rights are in consonance with the concept and practice of gender equality and respect for equal rights and enthronement of egalitarian coexistence of all genders for fairness and development.

The pursuit of eradication of poverty based on sustained economic growth, social development, environmental protection and social justice are laudable targets that require the engagement of women in economic and social development. There is also the need for equal opportunities and the full and equal participation of women and men as agents and beneficiaries of people-centered sustainable development. All these are part and parcel of what the uphold of women rights aim to achieve in society that can transform human society in the 21st century.

From these principles of women rights, it is clear that the state or status of women rights in a society affects its economy and consequently its development. For instance, part of the Beijing Declarations on women rights states the explicit recognition and reaffirmation of the right of all women to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility and it is basic for the attainment of their empowerment. This particular declaration seeks to address the need for women to be free to determine their health decisions and choices for purposes of maintaining wellbeing for themselves as

individuals and also as mothers, family members and productive stakeholders in the national economic sphere. Having good health for women is a major source of empowerment and impetus for their economic growth. Women rights, further includes to design, implement and monitor with the full participation of women, effective, efficient and mutually reinforcing gender-sensitive policies and programmes, including development policies and programmes at all levels that foster the empowerment and advancement of women. In entirety, the contents of the Beijing Declarations on women rights dwell largely on the need and essence for women dignity and empowerment to be ensured and to take effective actions against violations of their rights and freedoms. This stance of women rights makes provisions for greater women access to opportunities, recognitions and fair treatments while protecting their human dignity and self-preservation for family, social and national interests and needs.

One major family and national need is stable income/economy. The stability and development of women rights in an economy opens the doors for women to freely and viably engage their human potentials and material resources in the economic sector, thereby developing their individual and collective economy and also that of Nigeria. As more Nigerian women participate and contribute to the nation's productivity and growth, the national economy expands and stabilizes; this will increase efforts and synergy towards the pursuit of sustainable economic transformation in the country. In real times, there is clear-cut interface between women rights, women economy and the national drive for sustainable development. As a concept and practice, sustainable economic growth a progressive

project that comes with enormous challenges in an economy or society. Sustainability as an idea can be traced back to the "Limits of growth" debates of 1970's and 1973 United Nation's Stockholm Conference (Egbue, 2015). Sustainable development is a goal for a world under growing stress and was first used by Barbara (1974), while International Organizations such as UNEP, WWF, and IUCN widely popularized its subsequent usage (Barrow, 1995). Sustainable economic development is the ability of the present generation to meet her economic needs without compromising the economic and all-round potentials of the future generations to meet theirs (Brundtland Commission cited by Buna and Badrudeen, 2010). Sustainable development connotes a pattern of resources use that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these can also be met by the future generation (Sally, 2016). In the course of the pursuit for sustainable economic development of an economy, the most critical aspect remains the aspect of positive management of human resources and this is one aspect that can be impacted on by the quality of human rights. Women rights affects women wellbeing and capacity and therefore an issue that affects human resources. Harnessing the potentials of human resources for sustainable economic development demands that the rights of girls and women are not violated nor denied; and no discriminations in gender relations so that the women can perform optimally in the home, and economic sector.

More specifically, the issue of human rights bother on human mental balance and emotional stability, positive sensibility, adherence to right values, physical health and prosperity of individuals (male or female, young or old), groups and societies at large. Therefore, women rights empower women

with the required psychological, social - cultural, political and economic relevance, opportunities, freedoms and access upon which they can build competence and capacity not only for survival and growth but also for higher productivity. The Nigerian economy requires the full and onward exploitation of all its vast resources, particularly the human resources, and more critical, the women who are more in population and should be encouraged, empowered and energized to participate and contribute their productivity for Nigeria to be on concrete path to sustainable economic transformation.

Conclusion

Women rights are inalienable rights like the wider human rights as contained in different United Nations Conventions Declarations and Beijing Declarations and should be observed and upheld for women and societal good, particularly in developing economies such as Nigeria. The status or quality of women rights affects their stability, wellbeing and productivity and therefore, a factor that influences their capacity to participate and contribute optimally to Nigeria's economic growth. As a country in pursuit of speedy development, Nigeria needs to exploit women full potentials and capacity together with that of their men counterparts in order to build the required concerted level of productivity that can help the nation achieve sustainable economic development within the global deadline of 2030.

Recommendations

The paper advances the following as some critical steps for the development of women rights, women empowerment, gender

equality and the pursuit of sustainable economic growth in Nigeria :

1. Collapse / dismantle of patriarchal structures, customs and traditions that infringe on the rights of women and deny them socio-cultural, political and economic relevance and empowerment. Obsolete and anti-development components of the social structure should be eradicated.
2. Existing formal instruments of gender equality that have been in comatose due to lack of effective monitoring and enforcement by different government agencies and statutory bodies should be made functional so as to achieve their aims and objectives.
3. Despite the increasing numbers of women acquiring good education, skills and competencies, it is imperative that government, institutions and families should continue to prioritize female education because when women are trained, majority of the nation are trained. There should be equal education opportunities for both males and females in Nigeria.
4. Skills acquisition and Entrepreneurship development for the girl-child and women should be prioritized by governments (federal and state) and females socialized to appreciate to be independent, resourceful and assertive yet respectful and modest for positive living, wellbeing and increased productivity.
5. Issues of women rights violations or outright denial such as wife battery, physical and emotional abuse and other forms of violence, oppression and denial of opportunities as well as discrimination, should be institutionally addressed and tackled formally through improved and

effective legislations, smart prosecutions and judicial processes where necessary.

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