**Women’s Education: A Catalyst**

**for Nigeria’s Sustainable Future**

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**Abstract**

*All over the world, education is an indispensable tool for sustainable national development. This is to affirm that no nation has ever achieved sustainable development without adequate investment in education industry and particularly in women’s education. Education is undoubtedly, a major instrument for appropriate innovations and enhancement of societal development and must be tailored properly to achieve the hope of Education For All (EFA). Therefore, this paper discusses the concept of education, women’s education, and its objectives as enshrined in the National Policy on Education (2004). It equally highlights those challenges militating against women education and the way forward. Conclusion were drawn and recommendations were made, such as women education must be given adequate attention it deserves by the government, stakeholders and Non- Governmental Organization (NGOs) among others.*

**Keywords:** Women Education, Catalyst, Sustainable Development

**Introduction**

Education is the most powerful weapon which can be used to change the world. It defines a comprehensive and multifaceted process that includes all intentional and unintentional efforts by a society to foster individual growth and development, while also addressing the needs and values of the surrounding community, thereby promoting a harmonious relationship between personal and societal objectives (UNESCO, 2015). Education is a vital process that empowers individuals to acquire knowledge about their environment, understand the causes of variations in individuals and groups, and promote sustainable development in a country (Hassan & Musa, 2018). According to Okafor (2016), education is a process of acculturation that helps individuals reach their full potential. Moreover, Hassan and Musa (2018) describe education as a means of transmitting cultural norms, values, and ethics to younger generations. As a lifelong process, education should be accessible at all times, in all circumstances, and in all places. The right to education has been universally recognized and reinforced by various international instruments. However, merely ratifying these instruments is not sufficient to ensure the education of the girl child, and more than just lip service is required.

Education empowers girls to make their own decisions, positively influence their families, take control of their lives, and acquire skills to contribute to sustainable development. By educating girls, we can save and improve their lives, and have a profound impact on their future and their communities. Educated women have already played or are still playing pivotal roles as presidents, prime ministers, chancellors or as competitive political leaders, ministers, community elders, consultants, researchers, managers, etc. in various countries. The number of influential women in international positions is also not deniable. As leaders and managers, they have attested their trustworthiness and continue to do many valuable activities in stepping up productions and have contributed their part in the sustainable development of their countries. Throughout history, women worldwide have been oppressed by men, perpetuating a global phenomenon of discrimination. This oppression has been fueled by persistent cultural stereotypes, abuse of religious and traditional practices, and patriarchal structures that dominate economic, political, and social power, notes Sharma (2016). Amaechi (2015) also agrees that women's historical role as

followers of male leaders has contributed to this widespread gender-based oppression. Although society has been unfriendly to women, their role remains crucial and vital.

According to Okafor (2016), women have always played a significant part in Nigeria's socio-political landscape. Throughout history, women have been depicted in myths and legends as agents of change, bringing positivity to society. Examples of their contributions include the legendary Moremi Ajasoro, who liberated her people, Queen Amina of Zazzau, who ruled with power in the 15th and 16th centuries, and Queen Idia of Bini Kingdom, who demonstrated remarkable leadership. In modern Nigeria, women like Margaret Ekpo, Gambo Sawaba, and Funmilayo Ransome Kuti have fought tirelessly against women's suppression and taxation. Adesokan (2016) emphasizes that women's participation is essential for sustainable development, as they are key decision-makers, familiar with their communities' needs, and well-positioned to drive positive change. Thus, women’s involvement is crucial for ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of any community development programme or project, and should therefore be integrated into the design and implementation of such initiatives.

The concept of sustainable development is by no means novel in contemporary Nigerian society, having been the subject of extensive discourse in literature. At its core, sustainable development aims to shape and secure a brighter future. While it has been defined as a qualitative and quantitative increase in a nation's output across all productive sectors, sustainable development encompasses more than mere economic growth. Saliu (2023) citing International Institute of Sustainable Development (IISD, 2013), define sustainable development as development that caters to the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In other words, development is deemed sustainable when the output from various sectors of the economy is sufficient to meet the needs of both present and future generations.

 Orlukwu (2019), informed that women's empowerment is achieved by increasing their authority and control over resources and decisions that impact their lives. As women gain the ability to make choices, they become empowered, enabling them to manage various aspects of their lives, including economic, political, social, spiritual, and other matters (Akanbi & Akintunde, 2019). Empowerment programs aim to contribute socio-economic development, leading to improved income, basic needs, security, quality of life, and political awareness and participation. Globally, the focus has shifted to educating women and girls, recognizing their vital roles in socio-political and economic development. The World Bank acknowledges women's significant economic contributions, noting that they produce half of the food in some developing countries (Orlukwu, 2019). In Nigeria, women's participation in adult and non-formal education is a crucial step towards achieving sustainable development. This approach empowers individuals to identify and address their needs, fostering a participatory and grassroots-driven development process.

**Concept of Education**

Education is a fundamental human right, essential for the full realization of all political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Akanbi and Akintunde (2019) citing United Nations (2015), highlights the value of education in promoting women's empowerment and gender parity. Choudhry, Mutalib, and Ismail (2019) emphasize that education is the primary driver of effective leadership development in individuals. Without investments in education and healthcare, women's exploitation may persist, undermining development initiatives aimed at supporting them. Research by Choudhry, Mutalib, and Ismail (2019) demonstrates the positive impact of education and training on women's participation in development projects. Ogunyinka and Okemakinde (2016) underscore education as a vital means of achieving other human rights. Education serves as a powerful tool for economically and socially marginalized individuals to break the cycle of poverty, acquire skills, and fully engage in their communities. According to Nwaigwe (2014), education transmits societal values and knowledge, expanding human culture through formal, informal, and non-formal means.

**Concept of Women Education**

The concept of women's education encompasses a multifaceted array of issues and debates surrounding the education of girls and women, including primary, secondary, tertiary, and health education. According to Mandal (2015), this includes addressing gender equality, access to education, and its link to poverty alleviation. Additionally, single-sex education and religious education are also pertinent considerations. The home serves as the initial school for a child, with the mother acting as their first teacher, laying the foundation for their socialization. Research in Nigeria by Amaechi (2015) reveals that women comprise approximately half of the country's population, yet they are the most vulnerable group, susceptible to diseases and economic hardship. The 2006 census indicates that 48.7% of the population are women, with a staggering 70% of this group being illiterate. This may be attributed to various factors, including high levels of illiteracy, cultural and religious beliefs, economic hardship, early marriage, and a general lack of support for women's education in the country.

The societal features in Nigeria perpetuate gender inequality, relegating women to a disadvantaged position compared to their male counterparts (Akanbi & Akintunde, 2019). To bridge this gap, women need empowerment through access to economic, social, psychological, and cultural resources, enabling them to compete on an equal footing with men (Okafor, 2016). Education and knowledge, when utilized effectively, become a powerful tool for women's liberation from poverty, hunger, and other obstacles that hinder their well-being. Providing girls with basic education is a crucial step in empowering them to make informed choices and shape their own destinies, ultimately leading to a more fulfilling life (Ogunyinka and Okemakinde, 2016).

Women's empowerment in Nigeria is a crucial economic strategy for poverty reduction, aiming to strengthen women's political, social, and economic capacities for national development. Empowerment encompasses enhancing women's education, political participation, health, and legal rights, thereby reducing their vulnerability and dependency in all aspects of life (Nwaigwe, 2014). Historically, Nigerian women have held subordinate roles compared to men, but empowerment can be measured through indicators such as education, literacy rates, leadership roles, and economic empowerment (Orlukwu, 2019). To achieve the Millennium Development Goals for women's development, the Nigerian government has initiated programs like the Women's Fund for Economic Empowerment and Business Development for Women Entrepreneurs, as well as the 'Second Chance' program, which aims to re-enroll female dropouts who discontinued their education due to pregnancy.

In addition, at 64th general assembly it was reported that "the number senior female civil servant was judge to be 22 percent, while judicial appointment across the 36 states of the Federation constituted about 30 percent. A national action plan on the promotion and protection of Human rights in Geneva in July 2009 (Featherstone, 2016), devoted a chapter to the rights of women and children. A National policy on sexual Harassment in Educational institutions had also been put in place. Free medical treatment was provided for victims of domestic and sexual violence at temporary shelter that were being established nationwide. Nigeria was also working to improve education of girls and women, proving textbooks at subsidized rates, among other measures.

Judges and Magistrates were continuously being trained on gender and women rights, health system facilities were being scaled up (Featherstone, 2016).

**Objectives of Women Education**

1. To enable women to improve their family's health and diet, and also to increase women's productive ability, thus raising their families' standard of living.
2. To give women access to appropriate technologies, management of cooperatives and the use of loan facilities
3. To improve women's social and culture structure and to enable women to discharge their responsibilities more effectively.
4. Educating women in all round development such as; mentally, socially, physically, psychologically, religiously and economically:
5. Helping women to fight their own fear and feelings of inadequacy or inferiority, and also to make women participate fully in all the affairs of their nation and to be at centre of sustainable development:
6. To make women able to acquire their own basic needs of the society such as food, shelter, fuel, clothes and nurturing, And to enhance nation building in terms of economic and human development.

**Sustainable National Development in Nigeria**

Sustainable development is an amalgam of two component words according to (Nwaigwe, 2014), “sustainable” and “development”. The concept of sustainable development, according to Emod (2015), was brought into common usage by the World Commission on Environment and Development in its 1987 report. The report conceptualized sustainable development as human progress that meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Ruqia, 2018). This means conservation, reservation, usage and management of resources so that what we do to improve life and living standard today does not compromise future use of such resources and improvement in the quality of life for all the people (Saliu, 2023) The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) conceived sustainable development to mean environment, economic and social well - being for today and tomorrow. Hassan and Musa (2018) submitted that sustainable development mantra enjoins current generations to take a systematic approach to growth and development and to manage natural, produced and social capital for the welfare of their own and future generations – a system that connects space; and a system that connect time. Contemporarily, sustainable development has become a password that resonates across all disciplines in today’s knowledge industry (Nwaigwe, 2014). It is associated with “omnipotent capabilities” of proffering solutions to all problems of man and the society. It suggests harmonious living and quality growth among individuals in the society in order to secure the well-being of future generations. In other words, the present generation should avoid practices and activities that can be harmful to future generations. The building of a literate society will lead to the development and empowerment of women to be able to understand their environment and institutions governing them (Amaechi, 2015). Education for women means that they will come to know the importance of understanding their rights and duties. Adult Education therefore gives a better chance for empowering people of all age most especially women because of its flexible in nature. Sustainable development involves the execution of programmes that offer economic benefits in the present without limiting social environmental choices that may be available to people in the future or in other places. Scheta (2014), unveiled that it is a development that provides real improvements in the quality of human life and at the same time conserves the vitality and diversity of the Earth's ecosystems. And the chances for successful, long-term development with minimal unintended consequences are improved with a coordinated focus upon economics, society and environment. Sustainable development calls for concerted efforts towards building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and planet. For sustainable development to be achieved, it is crucial to harmonies three core elements; economic, growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. These elements are interconnected and are all crucial for the well-being of individuals and societies. Emod (2015) states that sustainable development recognizes that growth must be both inclusive and environmentally sound to reduce poverty and build shared prosperity for today's population and to continue to meet the needs of future generations. It must be efficient with resources and carefully planned to deliver immediate and long-term benefits for people, planet, and prosperity.

**Contribution of Women Empowerment in National Development**

There is no doubt that enhancement of education and empowerment of women increases and expands the potentials of women towards development. The more educated nation's citizenry, the more likely developed the nation. In the same vein, the more women are educated and empowered, the more they have in themselves the ability to contribute effectively to national development. Some of the benefits that can be derived from women education towards a sustainable national development in Nigeria includes:

**Leadership:** Okafor (2016) avers that, there are sufficient evidences to prove that women are a veritable access in public offices. In the military sphere, women play prominent leadership roles, not only in the military exploit of the Amazons of Greek legend, but also in those of the Amazons of South America and Dahomey, in modern times. (Ogunyinka & Okemakinde, 2016) The leadership roles played by both Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Mrs. Margaret Ekpo in the Nigerian pre-independence political struggles of the 1950s are incontrovertible (Sklar, 1963). Mrs Kuti1 was a strong advocate and campaigner for women's rights across the country. Mrs. Margret Ekpo, on her part, was the only female member of the seven-man committee set up in 1951 to organize a national political organization geared toward achieving self-government within five years. She became the Vice-President of the Eastern House of Chiefs in 1959. Indeed, it may well be that the women who spearheaded the 1929 Aba Women's Riots in South-Eastern Nigeria were the precursors and role models of the two better known female political activists (Sharma, 2016).

Reduced Dependency Rate Educating women is a way to reduce dependency rates within a nation. Empowering women through education helps to alleviate pressure on economic resources. According to Shama (2016), women's empowerment begins with their participation in various spheres of life. Education is a crucial step in this process. Women must be educated about their rights and privileges in modern society to be empowered. Education can raise awareness about their social status, injustices, and societal inequalities. It can also provide them with a sense of belonging. Mandal (2015) identifies several benefits of empowering women through education, including:

1. self-esteem and self-confidence of women,
2. a positive image of women by recognizing their contribution to society, polity, and economy,
3. ability to think critically,
4. decision-making abilities and action through collective process,
5. choices in areas such as education, employment, and health,
6. equal participation in development process,
7. knowledge and skill for economic independence and
8. access to legal literary and information relating to their rights.

 This will help to sustain the economic resources in the country towards the path of development. Similarly, empowering women through education would also enable them to become self-sufficient individuals, they would be equipped to learn and develop various means of which they can meet up with personal and societal needs. This will help to reduce the pressure on national resources and also reduce dependency level on their sponsors.

**Resources Management:** Women all over the world are known to be better mangers than their male counterpart. The prudent management of resources helps to reduce wastage and increase economic benefit from available resources. When women are properly educated, it helps them to put their managerial skill into use and help manage national economic resources for the benefit of all. It is therefore advisable that women should be empowered through adult education on how they can harness their management abilities for the long term benefit of all citizens in the country.

Women education is very imperative to the development of a nation. In African societies, the role of women cannot be quantified because they are being relied upon to meet the core needs of their family members. In the pre-colonial era and even today, Women are deeply involved in agriculture, trade and commercial activities in large scale. With the proceeds from these activities, the women bread-win and pay fees of their children.

**Challenges Militating Against Women Education**

Gender roles and stereotypes along with societal expectations, can limit women’s access to education and opportunities. Poverty and economic constraints; Families may priotize boys education over girls due to financial constraints.

Cultural and religious beliefs; certain beliefs and practices can restrict women’s access to education Lack of access to schools and infrastructure; inadequate schools, transportation, and resources can hinder women; education. Early marriage and childbearing; Girls may be forced to drop out of school due to early marriage and childbearing. Gender-based violence and discrimination; women may face harassment, violence, and discrimination in educational settings.

**Conclusion**

Education remains an important tool in achieving sustainable national development most especially women education. However, the quality of development in any nation will be improved through the collaborative effort of both males and females in the society. It has been established in this paper that the educational gap between male and female is still wide due to certain obstacles. When the women in the society are deprived the opportunity of acquiring quality formal education, it will result to an immeasurable loss in the various sectors of the economy.

**Recommendations**

For women to contribute effectively to the sustainable national development of a nation, they must be involved in educational policy and development policy. The popular saying that ‘he who wear the shoe knows where it pinches' best describes what women feel about their discrimination and inequality amongst the men-folk this means that proper involvement and placement of women in educational policy formulation and other developmental policies will give the women ample opportunity to address major constraints hindering their involvement in developmental plans that are pertinent to them. Use of extensive enlightenment/awareness campaign; this can be achieved by employing all relevant avenues that will reach and appeal to the target group irrespective of where they stay in Nigeria. Government should establish more women centres and Early Child Care Development Education (ECCDE) in order to enhanced the education of women in Nigeria. Various educational stakeholders should also be encouraged to contribute meaningfully to support women education in the country. The private sector, parents and school management should provide enabling environment for women to acquire quality education for sustainable development. This could be introduced as part of their corporate social responsibility to the country. Gender studies can be introduced into the school curriculum to enhance women status. The curriculum planners should develop meaningful curriculum that suits the needs of women and the girl child. The government should enforce the universal basic education policy (UBE) more especially in the northern region, this will curb the multi-faced issues there.

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