

Women and Rural Development in Nigeria: Some Critical Issues for Policy Consideration

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Abstract: This paper examines the broad idea of gender and development with specific focus on some critical issues and challenges confronting the involvement of rural women in development activities in Nigeria. The paper addresses this issue through some theoretical and empirical review of literatures. Major impacts of women in rural development in Nigeria have been discussed and situated at historical perspectives through analysis of policies and programmes of government. Although women have served as critical agents of rural economic transformation, such role has been limited in scope, mostly shaped by the dictates of local patriarchy and religious beliefs. Their impacts have been felt indirectly in subsistent agriculture, and directly at the domestic domain. A number of challenges affecting their active involvement in rural development have been discussed to include the prevalence of cultural and institutional barriers as well as limited access to critical infrastructures in the rural areas. Policy recommendations focus on practical, legislative, legal and administrative actions that are particularly targeted at addressing those barriers.

Keywords: Gender Mainstreaming, Rural Infrastructures, Cultural and Institutional Barriers, Women, Rural Development

1. Introduction

Developing the rural areas has been at the core of national, regional and international governments and non-governmental interests the world over. Different countries have different approaches determined by some structural and cultural peculiarities. Most industrial and developed societies depend on the neoliberal approach in which rural development are attracted from the outside through the 'trickle down' processes brought about by increased production of capital in the rural areas (Blakely 1989, O Toole and Macgarvey 2003). Capital production, in this context, is attracted to the rural areas through tax concessions, development of critical infrastructures and other public spending activities. This market-based approach to rural development tends to focus more on the growth in the rural areas than real development (see Wolman and Spitzley 1996). Consequently, matters of human capital improvements, social justice and environmental concerns are hardly at the core of the neoliberal development agenda at the rural areas. Such development trajectory rarely promotes inclusivity and participation for the rural people (Piore 1995).

Rural development approach that fails to incorporate the

participation of the rural people remains exploitative. The question of participatory and inclusive development at the rural level is more important especially for developing countries with low human and infrastructural capital and high level of gender discrimination. In the literature, for instance, the rural economies in developing and underdeveloped countries are characterized by enormous informal activities dominated by the women. Women in the rural areas are involved in several productive activities yet their roles are never reflected in the mainstream public development agenda. A study by Gopinath and Kalra (1985) in India observed that women are typically involved in farming, domestic activities and other community-related engagements. For sub-Saharan Africa, several studies have reported that women form 60-90% of the agricultural labour, depending on the area, and that they produce about two-thirds of food crops (Pala 1976, Lamming 1983, Ogunlela and Mukhtar 2009).

Women constitute the central pillar of rural development in developing countries yet they are not visible in the mainstream rural development policies and programmes. According to Brandt (1995: 3), the many productive and development activities necessary for human well-being are made possible by women, yet they are not officially considered part of the conventional economy. Citing Waring (1999), O Toole and

Macgarvey (2003: 175) noted that the conventional economy includes paid work, the activities of businesses and the making of profit, whereas women's voluntary contributions towards the well-being of rural communities has not been considered part of the conventional economy.

In Nigeria, the role of women in rural development is mostly located in the informal agricultural sector. However, most government at the centre of policy and programmes hardly place women at the centre of policy and programmes development agenda. Statistics vary, but the general impression is that women involvements in public rural development programmes are at minimal level (Damisa and Yohanna 2007, Ogunlela and Mukhtar 2009). The importance of this study is to evaluate the level of participation of women in rural development by assessing some aspects of public rural development policies and programmes in Nigeria. The paper is expected to focus on the challenges and opportunities of engaging women in rural development programmes by highlighting some barriers and critical agenda for policy considerations. The paper is structured into sections. Immediately following the introductory aspect is a critical review of women in rural development within the contexts of development discourse and gender mainstreaming. The third section focuses on the historical perspective of Nigeria's rural development practice. The fourth section assesses the role of women in rural development. The fifth segment discusses the challenges of women participation in public rural development programmes. This is followed by recommendations and conclusions.

2. Development and Gender Mainstreaming: Some Theoretical Review

Gender and development and gender mainstreaming in development are popular discursive framework for understanding the relationship between women and rural development (see Tavira, 2008; Kandiyoti, 1990; Kaur and Sharma, 1991). Over the years, this trend from the gender and development literatures has served to inform and shape important agenda of international organizations in relation to policy guidelines and programme implementation. The third UN Millennium Development Goal, which emphasizes gender equality, is one of the most recent authoritative declarations seeking to create spaces for gender mainstreaming¹ in all political, social and economic spheres with the ultimate aim of guaranteeing the quality of men and women.

Gender mainstreaming in development issues emerged

following the wave of intellectual rethinking of the 'linear', 'modernizing'² and 'dependency' paradigm of the concept of development in the 1980s (see Tavira, 2008). Gardner and Lewis (2003, cited in Tavira, 2008: 208) noted thus: 'after the abandonment of the generalized and determinist theory there is a more frequent tendency to concentrate in specific groups and problems ('women', 'poor', etc), a more reflective attitude towards help and development, and a new emphasis towards 'bottom-up' and socially organized initiatives'. Taking off from there, Tavira (2008:208) argued as follows: 'in this framework, development language and discourses suffer a switch towards concepts that make reference to the plurality of the society. It is spoken about actors, agents, subjects and citizens, so that the practices and discourses of the governments and international agencies adapted quickly to the discursive wave and intellectual styles, incorporating in their public policies conceptual elements derived from a theoretical work framed by a series of social events.'

Within the framework of this paradigmatic shift is the consideration of the role and contribution of women to the development process. In the last three decades, there has been a growing body of research emphasizing the role of women in specific areas of social and economic activities (Sharma, 1981; Gopinata and Kalra, 1985; Mencher, 1982; Kaur and Sharma, 1991; Kandiyoti, 1990). The greater percentage of such studies document women contribution in agriculture and non-agricultural activities as captured by Kaur and Sharma (1991). For instance, Sharma (1981) in an analysis of women's work in northern India is reported to have recorded their immense agricultural expertise in animal farming. Gopinath and Kalra (1985) had documented the contribution of women in farming, domestic and community related activities in India. Mencher (1982) focused more on the contribution of women to household maintenance and poverty alleviation. In sub-Saharan Africa, Kandiyoti (1990) has noted the extensive contribution of women to rural development in agricultural and non-agricultural activities even with extremely primitive technology and with severely stretched time resources. The role of women in rural development has been broadly categorized as:

- a. Food producers and active participants in the agrarian sectors
- b. Daily household maintenance tasks
- c. Small scale income generating activities
- d. General contribution to the wellbeing of their rural community.

Within these categories, the role of women in rural development in Nigeria can be analyzed. In the agricultural sector, women have been useful in small scale farming activities that support the household food security, provide significant employment opportunities, and generate some

¹ Gender mainstreaming is the process of accessing the implication for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality (UN Economic and Social Council, 1997).

² Modernization is seen from the evolutionary perspective. Countries are conceptualized as organizations that go through different stages of a linear path that inevitably leads to an industrialized, urban and ordered society (Tavira, 2008:205). Gardner and Lewis (2003) noted that industrialization, the transition from sustenance agriculture to commercial plantations and urbanization are key phenomena in the process.

income for other livelihood pursuits. From the perspective of home management, women's roles have been significant at various levels. Household tasks involving water fetching, domestic sanitation, fuel wood collection, food processing and preparation, child care and upbringing, family welfare, are all within the realm of women activities. These are crucial to family stability, progress as well as the overall development of the community. Women's direct control over income and family resources have been known to translate to better economic, social and improved nutritional levels for the family as a whole. But how are these translated in Nigeria? The remaining section of this paper attempt some analyses of rural development practices in Nigeria in relation to their background, impact, challenges and opportunities for women.

3. Nigeria's Rural Development Practice and the Role of Women

By physical assessments and systematic studies, Nigeria's rural areas remain very highly underdeveloped. Several indicators to rural under-development include massive poverty, absence of physical, social and economic infrastructures, poor human capital development, including the worsening status of rural women. There exists a huge disparity between rural and urban areas even after several national and regional development efforts (see Onokerhoraye, 1978; Udeh, 1989; Olayiwola and Adeleye, 2005). Such disparity is mostly noticeable in terms of widening differences in quality of living, social opportunities, physical facilities, human development and standard of living.

Studies have attempted some explanations to this state of rural-urban disparities. Blench (2003) linked such differences to the British colonial policy of spatial segregation in relation to investments in major development infrastructures. According to the author 'in colonial times access was so problematic and information systems so underdeveloped that rural citizens were hardly able to articulate even major issues....' (p.7). British colonial interest in rural Nigeria was characterized by two-prong exploitation. In the first place, the rural areas were available only as primary resource areas for export of raw materials. The second level of exploitation saw the rural areas as food productive centres for the few urban centers which eventually were to serve the basic food needs of the colonial inhabitants.

This trend in development thinking and practice has evolved and form part of every government policy agenda which only recognize the rural areas as the source of food for the urban dwellers. The implication is that the rural areas depend on agricultural sector for income, employments and other livelihoods opportunities. But despite this recognition and its role in the national economy and GDP, rural areas in Nigeria remain very poor and deeply neglected (IFAD, 2011). Investments in physical, social and economic infrastructures have been focused largely on the cities. As a result, the rural population has extremely limited access to services such as schools and health centres, while the highest number of the

populace lacks access to safe drinking water. In the Nigerian context, the rural areas are associated with poverty and, as such, not attractive to live.

Poor access to physical and social infrastructures at the rural areas encourages high level of rural-urban migration of the young and able-bodied male adults. Migration tendencies have led to the gradual depopulation of the rural areas. The 1963 Census recorded 80.7% of the national population residing in the rural areas. This proportion dropped to 70.13% in 1985 and was estimated to further drop to 69% by 1990s (Muoghalu, 1992). In 2005, it was estimated that 53% of the Nigerian populace resided in the rural areas (World Development Reports, 2005) and in 2011, the World Bank reports recorded 51.6% of Nigeria's rural population.

Of greatest interest is the fact that today's rural population is mostly dominated by women, who are involved in daily existential and subsistent agricultural practices. The patriarchal nature of Nigeria's societal structures imply that women continuously remain subordinated to men, which tend to narrow their spaces of opportunities and limit their participation in development activities. Citing Amain (1998), Kamar et al (2014: 26) emphasize the importance of engaging women in rural development as follows: '...to reach all the people one has to reach the women. Once you have reached the women, you have reached the children, you have reached the family and you have reached the nation. You have reached the nation in home, in the school, in the University, in the city, in the village, on the farm, at local government level, at the rural community level...' Women are very important in rural development practices, but in what ways? What are the challenges and opportunities of engaging women in rural development activities? What critical areas should national and State policies be directed at enhancing the integration of women in rural development? These and related questions are addressed in the remaining part of this paper with particular reference to Nigeria.

4. Impact of Nigeria's Rural Development Plans on Women Participation

The development of Nigeria's rural areas has been guided by many public policies and development plans spanning from the pre-independence to current democratic period. But what are those policies and development plans, and what are their impacts on women and participation? Table 1 attempts a perspective on the pre-and post-independence rural development policies and programs with particular emphasis on their impact on the rural women.

Generally, most rural development programs were dominantly based on agricultural development and productivity. As can be seen in Table 1, program contents and implementation did not explicitly emphasize women involvements and participation. Programs mainly addressed general issues of rural development, while their implementation was determined by the dictates of local gender

relations. Rural women started to gain some attention beginning in the late 1980s with such initiatives as the Better Life for Rural Women (1987), and other family based

programs designed specifically to enhance the status of the rural women in development activities.

Table 1. Selected rural development program and women involvement from pre-independence to Date.

National Programs	Nature of Intervention	Impact on women
Colonial policies and programs (1946-1956)	Agricultural development and productivity	-Program aimed at rural resource exploitation -no explicit commitment to gender mainstreaming -program implementation was dictated by the dynamics of local patriarchy
First national development plan (1962-1968)	Educational services	-General program of rural development whose implementation was dictated by the dynamics of the local patriarchy -No explicit commitment to gender mainstreaming -Its primary focus was not about rural development. However, several of its contents touched on the rural areas.
Second national development plan (1970-1974)	-post-war rural development program; -comprehensive national program to foster unity and socio-economic development	-Although there was no explicit commitment to gender mainstreaming, its emphasis on egalitarian and participatory approach, in principle, was a framework for enhancing women participation; -Implementation eventually boiled down to the dynamics of local patriarchy
Third national development plan (1975-1980)	-Comprehensive plans which focused on several sectors of rural development besides agriculture. -first attempt at integrated development -it was more of a rural modernization attempt	-No explicit commitment to gender mainstreaming; -Implementation eventually boiled down to the dynamics of local patriarchy
Fourth national development plan (1980-1985)	-Comprehensive and highly decentralized form of rural development practice that involved local participation; -It covers several sectors of rural development needs. -this period did not articulate any specific rural development plan but several other programs were specifically put in place for the development of the rural areas, most important of which was the Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI)	-No explicit commitment to gender mainstreaming; -Implementation eventually boiled down to the dynamics of local patriarchy
1986-1998 period	-this happened during Nigeria's democratic experiment; -national and local economic empowerment and development strategies (NEEDS, SEEDS, LEEDS); -Better life for rural women (1987); -People's bank of Nigeria (PBN-1989)	-The program emphasis on social mobilization indirectly had some impact on women participation; -This also depended on the dynamics of local patriarchy
1999-to date	-Community banks (CB-1994) -Family support program (FSP-1994); -Family economic advancement program (FEAP-1998); -Poverty alleviation program (PAP-2000); -the national poverty reduction program (NAPEP-2001)	-Some program such as LEEDS had some impact on women by enhancing their participation in certain aspects of rural development
Several other programs		-Program specifically designed for women; -The scope includes family support, loans and credit facilities, poverty alleviation and economic empowerment, etc

But the period from 1999 to date, which coincides with Nigeria's democratic experiments opened up enormous scope for women participation in development activities. The framework of democratic participation encouraged women interest in electoral politics, which contribute in the area of enhancing their capacity to participate in national and local development programs. The emergence of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS: 2003-2007) was a very useful platform to streamline the rural women into development practices. NEEDS was quite comprehensive and ambitious, as it was not only duplicated at all levels of governments (State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy-SEEDS; and Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy-LEEDS), it incorporated the private sector, non-governmental organization and the general public in pursuits of its developmental goals. By attempting to empower the rural populace (including the women), NEEDS had a substantive vision of eliminating rural poverty and promoting the

development of the rural space through the agency of the women. As can be seen from the analysis, these modest achievements in encouraging women participation in rural development are relatively new. Several factors still militate against the full realization of women involvements in rural development practices. The next section discusses those factors.

5. The Challenges for Integrating Women in Rural Development Agenda

Given their position at the domestic and resource management levels, rural women constitute potential and critical agents for rural transformation. The rural women command a diversity of experiences in their daily management of resources ranging from participation in crop and animal farming and production, provision of food, water and fuel for the family, in addition to other livelihood activities. Despite these contributions, their voices are hardly

heard, while their efforts and contributions are never mainstreamed in national and local development policies and practices in Nigeria. Several challenges militate against their integration and mainstreaming at any level of development. These include unfavorable cultural tradition, inadequate policy and institutional structures for capacity building; absence of rural infrastructures, limited awareness and access to social network and opportunities, etc. These are discussed under three broad themes as below:

5.1. The Impact of Cultural Tradition on Women Participation in Rural Development

Rural women in Nigeria cannot be seen as a homogenous group. There are vital differences bordering on age, class, marital status, ethnicity, race and religion. Division of labour between men and women in relation to agricultural and other activities is deeply entrenched in the rural communities and households. This tends to discriminate against women (and girls) mostly in terms of opportunities to engage in income earning activities. Women do most of the household work, and are less likely to be involved in decision-making (especially outside the family). Rural women are left with so many activities at the domestic levels in terms of childcare, food preparation, animal care, domestic cleaning, and could extend to include daily struggles for domestic water supplies as well as participation in farm activities. Virtually all what the rural women do in Nigeria is unpaid. Rahman (1987) had also observed a similar situation among rural women in Pakistan. These traditional roles leave women with less time for other activities involving self-development and career pursuits. Cultural tradition has been documented as the most critical barrier confronting the rural women. According to Kaur and Sharma (1991: 13), 'all women in rural areas have a busy and unceasing day which starts in the early hours of morning, even before sunrise, and they are the last to retire to bed at night. In addition, household activities are usually performed single-handed with very little if any mechanical aid...'

The experiences of the rural women are relative to the contexts of operational spaces. In Nigeria, the intersection of religion and tradition complicate women's position vis-a vis development issues. In northern Nigeria, the Muslim women are the most disempowered because of the religious belief of keeping women in the 'Purdah'. Comparably, the Christian women are relatively freer, and can be involved in relatively limited development activities depending on the ethnic region.

According to Blench (2003: 8):

Women are assigned a subordinate role in all traditional ideological structures, and in Islamic societies have been increasingly repressed by the extension of purdah to rural areas. The spread of Shari'a law has reinforced the subjection of women in Muslim areas, rather counter to the national trend which has been to increase women's access to resources. In many societies of the south, women had considerably more social and economic freedom, as the phenomenon of large-scale women traders suggests. Even so, they were rarely permitted significant political power, a trend which continues today with the Nigerian state.

Differential gender-based power positions reflect the general patriarchal structure of the Nigerian society, which seems to concentrate enormous power, resources, privileges and prestige in men over women. The cultural perception and treatment of women manifest in their different positions in the society including 'homemaker' status, inferior partners in matrimony and limited positions in social, economic and political spaces. Some forms of social stereotypes and other forms of punishments enforce these restrictive positions and status when the boundaries are crossed. These keep women away from open and active participation in rural development initiatives. Their voices are never heard, but could be operating in the background. In most cases, women are hardly allowed access to their deceased husband's entitlements unless they have male children. Emphasis on male child is one of the subtle ways women employ to resist some barriers of domination in the matrimonial family.

5.2. Access to Critical Infrastructures

Rural women's position is further hampered due to the absence of basic physical, economic and social infrastructures. Absence of such basic infrastructures as water supplies and sanitation services, good road network, power supply services and telecommunications, places the rural women at a very disadvantageous position. Given the traditional role of women in the management of domestic resources and activities, poor access to water resources, for instance, exposes the woman to daily struggles to secure water for domestic usages. Several studies have demonstrated that women tend to spend a substantial amount of their time and resources for daily water supplies (Akpabio 2008). Rural women in Nigeria hardly have access to modern domestic facilities to enhance the efficiency of domestic activities and save a substantial amount of labor for other activities. Their domestic and farm works are mostly manual with primitive tools. Access to basic home economics management education is non-existent. Access to modern domestic technologies has the capacity to improve the average household productivity among the rural women. In a study of rural women in northern India, Mann (1979) noted a very high workload spanning from early morning until late at night, with spells of rest only when they visited their parental homes. The study noted that improved household technology had reached only a few women from the privileged section and most women from low socio-economic groups still toil all day long with age-old tools. The paper argued that the desired change in their life and productivity can be brought about by simple scientific technologies, like accessible water points, electricity, biogas and simple technological improvements in processing and preparation of food in the home (Kaur and Sharma 1991: 15).

In another perspective, poor road and communication network services in the rural areas are of great impediment to the growth of economic activities, which would be of practical benefits for the rural women. The challenges of having to commute from long and difficult peripheral areas into a nearby business or semi-urban areas are most costly and difficult for women. Experiences abound of rural women in southern

Nigeria who daily suffer enormous economic losses due to inability to convey some perishables into the urban markets. Rural Nigeria also suffers a lack of access to other social and economic infrastructures including good schools, health care centers and financial institutions, among several others. These disadvantages work against the improvement of the rural women in terms of income, health and intellectual capacity to lead a meaningful and quality life.

These challenges imply that Nigeria's rural women are placed in an unequal pedestal with their urban counterparts, making access to basic resources for livelihood and capacity improvements difficult. Even when these infrastructures may be minimally present in some contexts, their access and utilization may be further limited by prevailing cultural tradition. The relationship between infrastructure and development has long been theorized and empirically discussed. A discussion by Zhao and Kanamori (2007: 5), citing a number of authors, clarified such relationship as follows: 'Nicholas Stern (1991) emphasizes in particular the importance of infrastructure, management and resource allocation in economic growth. He states, 'the deficiencies of infrastructure, together with the weakness of management and economic organization, are likely to account for a substantial part of low factor productivity in developing countries.' 'it is very hard to run factories and businesses effectively when electricity and water supplies are unreliable, the telephone and mail services are weak, and transport is slow, costly and hazardous.'

In recognition of the critical role of infrastructures for improving the living condition and productivity of Nigeria's rural women, several targeted programmes were initiated, including the Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW), Family Support Programme (FSP), Family Economic and Advancement Programme (FEAP). These programmes could not survive successive political dispensation and governments due to factors ranging from corruption to the absence of institutionalized structures that could guarantee their continuity beyond any incidence of regime change.

5.3. Institutional Barriers

Most assessments and studies on gender relations and women inequality in the rural areas focus primarily on the role of women in the domestic sphere with much interest on the productive and reproductive issues. By concentrating in the domestic sphere, some opportunities for understanding the rural institutional aspects of gender relations seem lost. For instance, Little (1987: 340) has argued that the domestic role of women in the rural areas is also reinforced by the more formal local power structures by certain institutions such as the Church. Beyond the domestic front, the Church arena in Nigeria represent an important space for understanding local gender relations and inequality in decision making, in sitting arrangements, in critical activities including church sermons etc. This trend had been observed in other contexts. For instance, Little (1984) had observed that the structure of parish councils and parochial church councils in two Wiltshire villages in the UK revealed a heavy bias in favour of male

members, although, there was a tradition of women in the position of clerks. Nigeria's rural schools, village councils and other organizational activities are dominated by men, who reserve the right to take and enforce critical decisions affecting their domains of governance.

There are obviously weak or clear absence of institutional resources to cater for the interest of women by enhancing their relative position and contribution to the development of the rural areas. Institutional resources can be formal or informal practices including policies, legal provision, customary practices, administrative supports and working conventions. Despite claims by Attoe (undated) that pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Nigeria progressively evolved some customary and legal instruments to improve the status of Nigerian women, the point remains that such instruments were probably less active and relatively subordinated to informal cultural and religious norms and practices that perpetuated women subordination and inequality. Some institutional successes in enhancing the status of women may have been achieved for the urban women, which probably may have led to the emergence of few women in leadership position. These efforts were however subdued by inherent disadvantages in the rural areas as discussed earlier.

Although Nigeria's government has signed up to some international norms related to a commitment to gender mainstreaming and equality, progress is much noticeable among the urban women most especially in the areas of affirmative actions and commitments to women participation in politics and governance. Presently, there is no clear national legislative, legal and policy commitments to gender equality and mainstreaming in development activities saved for some ad hoc and piecemeal State policies on compulsory education for children including the girl child.

The prospects of institutionally driven enhancements for women status and development in the rural areas remain very limited given the generally poor capacity of the rural women to make realistic sense of their world. As have been discussed, every infrastructure for building the capacity of women (social, economic, physical, etc) remains absent in the rural areas. Where some are available, several barriers relating to cultural, religious and customary practices limit their fullest utilization. These leave women unable to take advantage of the available opportunities in the rural areas to develop themselves and their societies.

A lack or limited capacity at every domain of women's life bears negatively on their ability to be integrated in the social, economic and political network of development practices. Although some rural areas may have necessary infrastructural resources for utilization, the long term impact of traditional, religious and cultural perception of their relative position in the society equally constrain the utilization of such opportunities by the majority of women.

5.4. Some Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

The importance of women in development has been underscored through the provision of some international resolutions and agenda and their subsequent domestication at

national government levels, including Nigeria. The United Nations General Assembly's resolution on Women's Rights and International Peace (1977) sets aside March 8 of every year as International Women's Day. The Beijing Declaration and Action Platform was adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The platform and action re-affirm the fundamental principle that the rights of women and girls are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The platform strongly opposes inequality and all forms of violence against women. Consequently, all national governments were required to develop strategies or national plans of action to implement the platform locally. In June 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a political declaration reaffirming member States' commitment to the objectives set forth in the Beijing declaration and platform for action. The Beijing platform actually influenced some elements in the United Nations Development Goals which specifically addressed gender related issues such as achieving universal education (Goal No. 2); promoting gender equality (Goal No. 3), and improving maternal health (Goal No. 5).

International declarations and resolutions focusing on gender right and women empowerment have always guided the Nigerian government actions on gender and women related issues over the years. Policy commitments and some programmes specifically directed at women especially in the rural areas include:

1. Some policy commitments to achieving women participation in political activities. Women campaign groups on this issue have flourished helping to pressurize governments to concede some political positions for women. Although statistics related to gender mainstreaming in national politics and bureaucracies are hardly available, there have been progressive policy pronouncements, sometimes with political promises of 30% positions for women in national governments. Progress at streamlining women participation at States and local levels have been rather slow, and complicated by the absence of useful statistics.
2. Universal Basic Education. National interest in guaranteeing universal basic education has been spurred by the Millennium Development Goals. Ensuring the implementation of universal basic education has been a tool strategically directed at enforcing girl child education at the grass root level. Offshoots of some programmes have been developed specifically to reach out to girls. For instance, the Girl Education Project (GEP) of the federal government of Nigeria was designed to improve and increase girl enrollment and retention in schools, with target supports from the Governments Conditional Cash Transfer (GCCT) for the girl child. Various State governments have pursued similar or related projects and programmes over the years beginning from 1999 when Nigeria transited to a democratic government.
3. Subsidy Reinvestment Program (SURE-P) was launched

in 2012 as a social safety net, aimed to alleviate the impact of the oil subsidy removal on vulnerable populations. The programme was to engage 10,000 women and youths in public works across each State in Nigeria. The SURE-P, not only sought to mitigate the immediate impact of partial petroleum subsidy removal on the population, it was equally to serve as a tool for empowering the rural women by involving them in some occupational activities aimed to better their lives and improve on their livelihood activities.

4. There have also been some targeted financial services to rural women across Nigeria through Micro-Finance Banks (MFB) and the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). These financial services are run under the umbrella of Nigeria's Vision 20: 2020 specifically aimed to redress rural gender inequalities and subordination through some forms of financial empowerment programmes.

These programmes have been very useful in principle. In practice, there is a paucity or complete absence of relevant statistics to assess their utility and relevance in enhancing the empowerment of rural women. It is also important to note that the existence of these programmes hardly receive solid institutional back up in the forms of legislations, etc. They exist, more or less, as ad hoc and regime-based programmes whose utility and existence are tied to politics and the longevity of a specific regime. Hence the rural women still face critical challenges in relation to participation in development activities. To strengthen the contribution of the rural women in development activities, the following critical areas for policy and implementations are recommended:

- a. There is urgent need to focus on developing strong institutional supports for gender mainstreaming. Nigeria has not made significant progress in domesticating relevant international agenda through local legislations. This challenge also applies to virtually all aspects of gender and women development issues including property inheritance, violence and other forms of abuse against women, universal education and gender equality. Many of the programmes and actions at the moment exist as administrative pronouncements, which rarely outlive changes in regime. The critical policy priority at the moment remains the need to achieve foundational empowerment of the present generation through quality education for the girl child and economic empowerment for the women in general. There is an urgent need to streamline girl education within the legislative framework to make it a compulsory enrollment with appropriate penalties for defaulting parents/guardians.
- b. Nigeria's rural areas lack critical infrastructures of roads, functional schools, hospitals, functional markets and credit systems. Agriculture still forms the mainstay of the rural women, which are organized under subsistent basis. Absence of basic infrastructures for the rural women undermines whatever efforts put forward to build their capacity. Complicating the absence of critical infrastructures are traditional barriers including absence of the proprietary and inheritance rights, gender biases

in access to opportunities, etc. Policy priorities should be focused on developing the rural areas, while critical infrastructures that connect the rural women to urban markets and opportunities should be in place. These are certainly going to lead to some considerable empowerment and capacity building for the rural women as well as position them to contribute effectively to the development of the rural areas.

- c. Cultural and Religious Barriers: Nigeria's rural women still suffer enormous cultural barriers including inferiority status, discrimination in relation to opportunities, priority for the male child over the female, and restricted position as 'home makers' and domestic managers, as well as 'women in purdah' phenomenon common among Muslim women. These barriers impoverish women, disempower them and subject them to all forms of abuses. Eliminating these barriers require bold policies, legal, legislative and administrative actions and reforms. These should form an urgent agenda for policy consideration.

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