

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATION STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper explores women empowerment and participation strategies for sustainable community development in Nigeria. Throughout Nigeria's history, women have played a significant role in societal development, with their contributions closely linked to the social, economic, and political progress of communities. Traditionally, women have been central to community life, yet their efforts are often overlooked or undervalued. Recognizing and harnessing the immense potential of women is essential to driving sustainable community development.

Keywords: *Community Development, Empowerment, Participation, Strategies, Sustenance Women*

Introduction

Women have always played important roles in Nigerian society thus, contributing to the development of the society. In recent years, there has been an increasing recognition of the important roles women play in community development initiatives across the country. Community development is essential to creating sustainable and inclusive societies and women's active participation can lead to transformative change. Nigeria, as the most populous country in Africa is experiencing rapid urbanization and development which creates opportunities and attendant challenges for communities across the country. Traditionally, women have been at the centre of community life but their contributions are often ignored or undervalued. It is important, not to only consider the roles of women in the development of societies, but also to

harness the enormous potential they possess to bring about positive changes.

According to Olubela (2023), women have played an important role in the development of societies throughout Nigeria's history. Their participation and contributions are linked to the social, economic and political progress of communities across the country. Historically, Nigerian women have actively participated in local development initiatives in their communities. Traditional roles such as running a household, raising children and maintaining social cohesion provide women with an important basis for community participation. Women use their social networks, personal relationships and collective decision-making skills to meet the diverse needs of their communities and create positive changes (Amodu & Gbervbie 2021).

In pre-colonial Nigeria, women held influential positions in their communities. They were often involved in the decision-making process and play an important role in resolving conflicts. Women contribute to agricultural, commercial and craft activities which contributed to the economic prosperity of their communities. In addition, they participate in community rituals, religious activities and cultural practices that reinforce community values and traditions. With the advent of colonial rule, Nigerian women faced many difficulties due to the disruption of their traditional roles (Ibrahim & Usman 2017). However, this period also saw the emergence of organized women's associations aimed at addressing social problems and protecting women's rights. It is noteworthy that the establishment of the Nigerian Women's Union (NWU) in 1947 by women like Funmilayo Ransom-Kuti marked an important milestone in the women's movement in Nigeria. NWU provided a platform for women to express their concerns, fight for social justice and contribute to community development (Ibrahim & Usman 2017).

In post-independence Nigeria, women continue to contribute to the development of society through various avenues (Agbalajobi, 2010). They have been actively involved in political movements, education, healthcare and economic empowerment initiatives. Women's participation in politics has increased over the years, with more women holding leadership positions at the local, state and national levels. This has led to policies and programmes that prioritize gender equality and women's empowerment in community development efforts. Furthermore, women-focused organizations and NGOs have played important roles in promoting community development

initiatives across Nigeria (Dibie & Okere 2015). These organizations provide platforms for women to acquire skills, access financial resources and participate in sustainable development projects. They play a vital role in protecting women's rights, combating gender-based violence, improving health care, promoting education and promoting economic opportunities for women from diverse communities. Recently, Nigerian women have continued to advocate and participate in community development activities. They actively participate in local initiatives, establish partnerships with government agencies and organizations and use technological advances to enhance their impact (Dibie & Okere 2015). In sum, Nigerian women have a long history of active participation in community development. From traditional roles to organized movements and modern initiatives, women have always contributed to the progress and well-being of their societies. Their participation is vital to achieving sustainable development and social progress in Nigeria.

Theoretical framework

This paper is hinged on the Gender and Development (GAD) theory. GAD theory was proposed in the late 1980s by feminist researchers and activists. It is the result of **collaborative, intersectional feminist thinking**, with scholars like **Caroline Moser, Diane Elson, Naila Kabeer, and Eva Rathgeber** as key contributors. Gender and Development (GAD) theory is a comprehensive and critical approach that seeks to **reshape development strategies** by addressing the **root causes of gender inequality**, encouraging **equal participation**, and fostering **structural transformation** for inclusive and

sustainable development. It emerged as a critique of the earlier **Women in Development (WID)** approach, which primarily aimed to integrate women into existing development processes without challenging the underlying structures that perpetuate gender inequality. It reflects a shift from focusing solely on women to examining **gender relations**, power structures, and the **systemic nature of inequality** in development.

The theory was then advocated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1985 with the aim to address the limitations and biases of current development models that have largely excluded or pushed women to the margins of the society. GAD theory emphasizes the importance of analyzing gender power dynamics, social norms and cultural practices to understand women's experiences and roles in development. It recognizes that women's empowerment and participation are essential to achieving sustainable and equitable development outcomes. This theory posits that development initiatives must view gender as a cross-cutting issue, address gender inequality and promote women's rights to create comprehensive and effective development strategies.

In the Nigerian context, GAD theory provides a framework for examining the challenges and opportunities facing women in community development initiatives. It highlights the need to address discriminatory practices, social stereotypes and unequal power dynamics that limit women's participation and opportunities to contribute to the development of various communities. By incorporating a gender perspective into community development efforts, GAD theory aims to promote women's empowerment, enhance their self-

determination and recognize their unique contributions to community development in Nigeria. Overall, gender and development theory has greatly influenced community development discourse and practice in Nigeria and beyond with its emphasis on women's interest in achieving equitable and sustainable development outcomes.

Community Development

Community development is a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems. Community development processes and practices entails the inclusion and participation of different interest groups, stakeholders and actors including the people whose livelihood projects are geared at improving, government and non-governmental bodies, funding organizations, project experts and executors (Akande, 2010).

Alemayehu (2019) regards community development as a process concerned with the improvement as well as the transformation of the social, mental, economic, institutional and environmental conditions of the rural dwellers through the mobilization and rational utilization of their human, material and institution resources so as to enhance their capacities to cope with the daily tasks and demands of modern time. It is about the quality of life of people, their capacity to improve the conditions of their existence to reach, control and utilize their resources for greater productivity and enjoyment. It is about the autonomy and self-respect of the individuals as a free member of his community. Community development objectives include; to increase employment, to uplift the general health of the rural dwellers, to provide technical works and knowledge to the rural dwellers as well as to

maximize the productivity of the average person on his family (Hiruni, 2018). It also requires citizen's participation, increase in their productive capacity and attitudinal change, leading to their desire to show their sense of dependence on their environment.

In various parts of the world, the concept of community development can be traced back approximately two centuries. Since then, numerous organizations and movements have emerged with the goal of improving rural life, particularly following the post-Civil War era (Phifer, 1990). Key historical events such as the democratic revolutions in France and Britain, as well as the aftermath of the Second World War, significantly influenced the evolution of community development (Farooq, 2012). These events, marked by widespread destruction and social upheaval, highlighted the urgent need for rehabilitation and reconstruction. In response, professionals such as sociologists, anthropologists, social workers, and technocrats initiated what became known as the community development programme—designed to foster cooperation and support among community members. Genuine community development requires active participation from the people themselves. Recognizing its importance for both national and global progress, many countries launched community development programmes targeting multiple sectors in underdeveloped regions (Farooq, 2012). Over time, the concept became increasingly linked with what is now referred to as social action (Smith, 2012).

Sustainable Community Development

Sustainable community development is the process of enhancing the well-being of a community by addressing current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Bridger

& Luloff, 1999). While sustainable development advocates that the present use of natural resources should not result in a diminished standard of living for future generations, sustainable community development focuses this principle at the local level, highlighting a more geographically specific and community-oriented approach. It further emphasizes dimensions such as:

- **Environmental Sustainability:** Ensuring the responsible use of natural resources, reducing pollution, and protecting ecosystems. Decision-making focuses on reducing the impacts of population growth and development on natural resources and the environment.
- **Economic Sustainability:** Promoting local economic growth that provides stable employment and income opportunities without over-exploiting resources. Community members make local capital investments that will sustain local human and natural resources and yield adequate financial returns to those investments.
- **Social Sustainability:** Fostering social inclusion, equity, community participation, and empowerment. Equitable access to resources and decision-making processes foster the distribution of foods and benefits across all sectors to the community (Swisher, Rezola & Sterns 2003)

Participation of Women in Community Development in Nigeria

Women have had a significant impact on the development of societies in Nigeria throughout history. Their active participation has played a vital role in shaping various aspects of Nigerian society, including social,

economic and political development. One of the major impacts that women have on community development is the promotion of education. Historically, women have been at the forefront of advocating for educational opportunities for children and adults. They established and ran schools, encouraged girls' education and provided vocational training to equip women with skills for self-reliance (Imhabekhai & Omege, 2013). By giving priority to education, women contribute to the intellectual development and empowerment of individuals as well as the overall development of societies.

In addition, women play an important role in promoting healthcare initiatives in their communities. They actively participate in health campaigns, health education programmes and establishment of medical facilities. Women's participation in public health has greatly improved access to quality health care resulting in better health outcomes, lower mortality and improved overall well-being for community members.

Women also play a central role in initiating and promoting economic development in Nigeria. They are actively involved in various income generating activities such as agriculture, trade and business. Her contribution to agricultural productivity and food security is particularly noteworthy. Women have established cooperatives, developed value chains and implemented microcredit programmes all of which have helped improved economic opportunities and reduce poverty levels in communities. In addition, they are at the forefront of advocates for social justice and gender equality. Through popular movements, women have fought against discriminatory practices, traditional norms and gender-based violence. Their activism paved the

way for legal reforms, policy changes and increased recognition of women's rights.

According to Odozi and Isah (2019), women's involvement in community development initiatives in Nigeria has led to improved access to education and healthcare services resulting in better overall well-being. While, Amodu & Gberevbie (2021), opines that women's participation in community development efforts has contributed to economic empowerment through the establishment of income-generating activities and entrepreneurial ventures. In a research conducted by Obi & Ogbuabor (2020), they obliged that women's involvement in community development has played a pivotal role in promoting gender equality and social justice by addressing discriminatory practices and advocating for women's rights. While in their article on women and community development, Ibrahim & Usman (2017), explained that women's engagement in community development has positively influenced their political empowerment by increasing their participation in decision-making processes and political representation.

Also, in the research conducted by Umar & Mohammad (2018), they emphasized that women's active involvement in community development initiatives has been crucial in promoting sustainable development in Nigeria, including environmental conservation and community resilience.

Strategies for Women Participation in Community Development in Nigeria

The Way Forward Various strategies have been opined to facilitate the development of communities in Nigeria by women. Some of them would be examined here. They include but are not limited to:

- Promoting Women's Education and Skills Development

By encouraging women to pursue education and acquire skills related to community development, such as project management, leadership and management skills, and communication. This will enhance their ability to contribute effectively to community development initiatives. According to World Bank (2019), implementing educational programmes and vocational training that empower women to acquire new skills and knowledge would help them contribute to community development efforts.

- Empowerment through Entrepreneurship

Encouraging women to start their own businesses or engage in income-generating activities does not only empower them economically, but also contributes to the overall development of the society (Omage, 2021). According to Women's World Banking (2020), supporting women-owned businesses and providing them access to microfinance and business development services empowers their efforts towards community development.

- Networking and Collaboration

Encouraging women to form networks and collaborate with community development organizations and other individuals. This can help them exchange ideas, share resources and work together to achieve common goals (Dibie & Okere, 2015).

- Advocacy and Awareness

By promoting women's rights through advocacy campaigns and awareness programmes, this can help address challenges related to gender issues and promote more inclusive and equitable societal development. Also, by developing programmes to raise awareness about

gender-based violence and providing support services for survivors (International Center for Research on Women [ICRW], 2021).

- Leadership Skills Development

According to Olawale & Olawale (2017), this can be done by encouraging women's participation in community decision-making processes, including local councils and development committees. By encouraging women to assume leadership roles in community development organizations and participating in decision-making processes and involving themselves in leadership development programmes and mentoring opportunities, this can help them build confidence and increase their effectiveness as community leaders.

- Ensuring Equal Access to Resources and Opportunities

This can be done by supporting policies that ensure equal access to resources such as land, credit and employment opportunities for women (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018). This has been a contentious issue for women advocates in Nigeria as lack of finance has stunted various developmental initiatives by women in the country.

- Engagement with Local Authorities

Encourage women to actively engage with local authorities and government organizations to voice their concerns and support community development initiatives. This can help ensure that women's views are taken into account in decision-making processes (Olawale & Olawale, 2017).

- Capacity Building and Training

By providing training and capacity building programmes to enhance women's knowledge and skills in community development strategies, proposal writing, project management and resource mobilization. This

will enable them to implement effective community development projects.

- Cooperation with International Organizations

Seeking cooperation with international organizations or non-governmental organizations that focus on women's empowerment and community development. These partnerships can provide access to resources, funding and expertise of different kinds that will promote their effort towards community development in Nigeria (Olawale & Olawale, 2017).

Challenges towards Women Participation in Community Development

Various challenges have been observed to act as a clog in the wheel of the progress towards women's path to contribute to community development in Nigeria. Some of them are;

Gender Inequality and Discrimination: According to Oladepo (2017), women that are involved in community development initiatives are prone to various forms of discriminations including sexual harassment based on gender. This can discourage them from active participation and thus limit their contributions towards the development of their various communities.

Limited Access to Education and Skills Training: Limited access to education and skills training deters women's effort to actively participate and contribute immensely to community development initiatives (Ogunsanwo & Davies, 2019). This has created a very big hindrance towards women empowerment initiatives.

Cultural and Traditional Practices: According to Okoro & Okafor (2023), various cultural and traditional practices deter women from participating in community development. It has been observed that women are in most times not

allowed to take part in some important decision making process simply because they are females and are barred because of cultural or traditional reasons.

Inadequate Finance: Women in African settings are made to believe that their place is in the home and this invariably affects their access to finance which limits their ability to contribute to community development. In most cases, they are seen as not credit worthy for those that intend to get access to credit. According to Ofoegbu & Nwajiuba (2017), women are faced with the troubles of lack of finance and resources which hampers their effort towards community development in Nigeria.

Political Marginalization: According to Onyishi (2018), women are politically marginalized in the country and this serves as a hindrance to their bid to assist in community development. Politics have been seen as a source to power and resources. With the near absence of women in politics, this cripples their access to power and resources which is essential in community development agendas.

Suggestions

- The government should actively recognize and promote awareness of women's contributions to community development, thereby motivating greater participation and involvement.
- Women should be encouraged to pursue education and develop relevant skills that enhance their capacity to contribute meaningfully to community development initiatives.
- Strategic partnerships should be established with international bodies and non-governmental organizations dedicated to women's empowerment

and sustainable community development.

- There should be strong advocacy for the formulation and implementation of inclusive policies that ensure equal opportunities for women while safeguarding them from gender-based discrimination in community engagement processes.

Conclusion

Nigerian women have made significant contributions to community development in various fields. Their participation in education, health care, economic rights and social justice movements led to deep positive changes in Nigerian society. Awareness and support for women's participation in community development remains very important for sustainable and comprehensive development in Nigeria.

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