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# Gender Equality and Women Empowerment towards Sustainable National Development in Nigeria

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## **Abstract**

*This study examined the imperative for gender equality and women empowerment as basic to sustainable national development and growth in Nigeria. There is no gainsaying that women are the heartbeat of men's strength and success and therefore engine room for development in the society. The sustainability of socio-economic development in Nigeria will depend so much in the way men carry along the women in their stride for national development and growth especially if the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are workable and realizable in Nigeria. The highly descriptive nature of the study demanded for the adoption of extensive desk research in this study. The study seek not to advocate for new principles for gender equality, but brings to bare the rationale for women to be seen and treated as composite entity with men in the attempt to attain sustainable national development in Nigeria. The study argues that given the same opportunity with men, women have the capacity and competence to compete favourably with men and in most cases have performed creditably better than men under the same platform without prejudice. The study recommends among others: family policy legislation; the government as a matter of urgency to pass the bill on women empowerment, the will on the part of governance to enforce all policies and regulations that discriminate against gender equality and women empowerment without bias; the total elimination of all socio-cultural laws contrary to basic human rights as entrenched in the constitution; empowerment of the girl child through massive elimination of socio-cultural structures that inhibits their education and protection of the womanhood of all ages against obnoxious cultural practices and regulations.*

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**Key Words:** Gender Equality, Women empowerment, National Development, Nigeria

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## **Introduction**

The issue of gender equality and women empowerment has been in the front burner of contemporary discourse in recent times. This is due mainly to the fact that whenever gender equality is contemplated, women seem to be the focus of discussion. It is evident that women have borne the burden of gender inequality across the globe. Thus George, Adetunde, Ijagbemi, and Udume (2016, p.145) assert "Women all over the world are in one way or another discriminated against and/or marginalized. This is evident in their representation in all sectors of global economy". This is an indication that we really live in a man's world where men dominates and determines the pace in the society. We therefore assert that man by nature is aggressively dominant specie that likes to lord it over the environment and every other thing around him including women and that is why gender balancing is necessarily advocated for women empowerment and sustainable development in the society. It is this man's alter-ego that makes him assume that he is superior and stronger specie while women are inferior and weaker specie. This sexist's nature of man makes him look down on women as a 'thing', an object to be possessed and not even as a human being that resembles him in

all physiological characteristics. The implication is that man finds it very difficult to come to terms with the reality that women are equal and complementary partners in the developmental wheel of creation. However, the fact remains that without women; men can but do nothing in nature as far as socio-economic development is concerned. More so, man and the entire society remain void and incomplete without women. This sums the position of women in the developmental web in the society. Thus, Adeyokunu (1981) notes that “women in Nigeria are more involved than men in virtually all areas of agricultural activities ranging from farm clearing to processing” (cited in Anugwon, 2009 p. 127). In fact, “women constitute half the world population, perform nearly two thirds of the work hours, receive one tenth of the world’s income and owns less than one hundredth of the world’s property” (UN Report, 1980 cited in Agalamanyi, 2008 p.71). What is more, women suffer social disfigurement and disequilibrium in the distribution of status and allocation of values in the hands of chauvinistic and power stricken men.

We live in a world where the worldview is defined and prescribed by man. Man gives meaning and interpretation to social phenomenon and so defines social relations and interactions that exist in the society. It is on this premise that gender identity, roles and statuses emerged. Gender is thus, “the social construction and the allocation of roles and expectations to men and women in any given society” (Idyorough, 2005 p. 1). In spite of the hue and cry for gender equality globally, there is no known society where women are absolutely equal with men. Even in the so called developed nations of the world – Europe and the West; women are still struggling and craving for men to give them a chance to showcase themselves in the developmental imperative of the society. Perhaps, Mbah (2005) was right when he observed that the social relationship which exists between men and women in every society has for a very long period been marked by the subordination of women to the fancy and benefits of men. In other words, women position from time immemorial had been relegated to the background to the advantage and benefit of the men. But this was not the plan or arrangement in creation. In the beginning of time, women were in the womb of man and at the right and appointed moment God delivered her out of the womb of man. There is no reason any one should feel superior or inferior over the other. Women on the other hand should be very special because while man was created out of coarse matter known as earth woman was delivered out of man. However, we noticed that men envy the position of women and so create artificial and superficial imageries to keep women subjugated for their own selfish ego and benefits. Connell (2005) was assertive when he observed that in patriarchal societies “the majority of men gain...from the overall subordination of women” (cited in Woloshyn, Taber & Lane, 2013, p. 151). Women contribute so much to mankind and yet treated with disdain and of no consequential to the socio-economic development of the society. The plight of women is that of pity, sympathy and sorrow.

However, for society to have meaningful and sustainable national development men have to interact with women in the society on the basis that no group is subordinated to an insignificant position. The implication is that men must recognize and accord women their rightful position in the socio-economic structure in the society. We must accept the fact that men alone cannot bring a meaningful and sustainable national development talk-less of making the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to work beyond 2016 without interacting and reaching out meaningfully to women. Thus, Onu (1998) argues that “women are the heart of development” (cited in Mbah, 2005 p.257). We recognize the fact that women control most of the country’s non-monetary economic sector such as subsistence agriculture and domestic labour in addition to child bearing and home keeping. They also participate in the money economic sector like trading, wage employment in factories and cottage industries.

For instance, National Bureau of Statistics Report (2004) indicates that women represent 87% of those employed in the service sector, which involves predominantly informal and unregulated forms of employment.

In Nigeria, women play vital role in the economy of the country, yet they are devalued and discriminated against in all social institutions. In fact, women are decimated in the line of development in the society in order to make them eternally irrelevant while continually being subjugated by men. Thus, for women to bring out their best in them and stand side-by-side with men in the national stride for sustainable national development, they need to be empowered in all facets of the social institutions. The empowerment of women was critical in the transformation agenda of President Goodluck Jonathan's administration. Though the 35 percent Affirmative Action was adopted as a working instrument for the administration, it is yet to be entrenched in the laws of the land in order to give it a more legal status. This means that it is a mere paper works which has no constitutional relevance, with the implication that any other leader or party can jettison without legal context. In fact, we are not certain the 35% Affirmative Action is functional in President Muhammadu Buhari led government. It is in the onerous recognition of the role of women in sustainable development that encouraged Senator Abiodun Olujimi, representing Ekiti South in the National Assembly to re-introduce the bill on gender equality in Nigeria after it was rejected in October, 2015 on grounds of religious and cultural beliefs. The bill was to create equal opportunity for women and promote equality and development of all persons in Nigeria. It also sought to remove all forms of inhuman and degrading religious and socio-cultural discriminatory practices against women (Vanguard, 2016; Payton, 2016). It is rather saddening to note that the bill could not sail through in the National Assembly due mainly to religious beliefs. The bill was rejected at the floor of the Senate after it had passed through the second reading on March 15, 2016 (Oshi, 2016; Payton, 2016). The question is "why or what went wrong?" It is important for us to stress that unless women start to fight against certain religious and cultural practices that naturally discriminate against them on the basis of their sexuality, society will continue to find reasons to put them in solitary social and economic confinement. It is incumbent on the government and successive administrations to ensure the status of women is consolidated and sustained in the 35% Affirmative Action by enacting legislative law to seal the policy and also pass the bill on women empowerment as a genuine commitment towards the advancement of women and gender equality in Nigeria. The United Nations International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, Egypt in 1994 noted that "the empowerment of women and improvement of their status are important ends in themselves and are essential for the achievement of sustainable development" (United Nations, 1995). Derek and Chen (2004) assert that "Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment is an essential component of an effective economic and human (social) development strategy" (cited in Okomu & Asfaw, 2014, p. 103). This is because gender equality is central both as "a development goal on its own and as vital to accelerating sustainable development" (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), (2016b n.p). Aside from it "1 percent increase in gender inequality reduces a country's development index" (UNDP, 2016a n.p). This forms the basis for the call for all nations of the world to embrace gender policies that will change the status of women globally. This is premised on the notion that women have indeed contributed positively to the development of the human society and greater opportunity given to them will encourage them to do even better.

It is on this basis that this paper intends to inquire into the need for gender equality and women empowerment as imperative for sustainable national development and also try to deduce the obstacles against such empowerment. It would also seek ways of empowering

women by way of policy formulations and implementations. Extant literatures abound on gender equality and empowerment (Anugwom, 2009; Agalamanyi, 2008; Onyeneho, 2005; Boserup, 1970), but this paper tend to differ on theoretical approaches previously espoused by injecting some new ideas that may challenge established thought on gender equality. The paper infers that gender equality is a utopia. What is basic is for women to see themselves as capable of doing what men can do and de-hood themselves of the long time stereotype and sexism of women being weak while men are strong. It is rather being postulated that women are stronger sex while men are weaker in terms of biological and psychological make-up. It is in the struggle to suppress the strength in women than men have become impulsively aggressive. The oppressive and suppressive nature of men against women is a disguise used to hide the weakness of men and their fear against women superiority. The call here is for women to demystify men and prove that they are stronger, capable, and functionally ready to work at par with men in the developmental platform and deliver efficiently without being hounded by any setback resulting from sexism. The demand for 50/50 affirmative action is realizable if women prove they can really do it just like men or even better than men. In that case, women need not go cap in hand and knee on the floor begging for socio-economic and political space and allocation from men: they really need to take it by force by the demonstration of their will to lead without any complex inhibition. Women need to thrive side by side with men with a demonstrative capacity that what men can do women can do better.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objectives of the paper include:

1. To examine the effects of gender equality and how it enhances sustainable development in Nigeria.
2. To advocate for new principles for new equality: principles that will see women as complementary partners in progress with men towards the attainment of sustainable development.
3. To recommend to government on the urgent need to re-strategize for girl child education that will increase opportunity for gender empowerment and sustainable development.

### **Research Methodology**

The study basically relied on secondary data which depended on library materials – books, journals, newspapers, magazines, internet and other sources dealing on gender issues and women empowerment. These materials were critically analyzed to determine the qualitative content for this study.

### **Conceptualization of Terms**

Gender is often seen as the mere categorization of the human species into male and female. However, gender is far from just the binary identification of humans into these categories. Gender is thus, “a social construction of the relations between male and female in terms of roles in power sharing, decision making, division of labour and remuneration on labour both at home and in the work place” (Idyrorough, 2005 p. 1). Gupta (2000) succulently looked at gender “as the widely shared expectations and norms within a society about appropriate male and female behaviour, characteristics, and roles. It is a social and cultural construct that differentiates women from men and defines the ways in which women and men interact with each other” (cited in Idyrorough, 2005 p.1). In other words, gender is socially constructed and specific to cultural milieu within a geographical boundary. The implication being that what women are permitted to do in Nigeria (say in Igbo society) will

differ from what women will be allowed to do in Latin America (say Brazil) as a result of cultural variations. It shows that men allocates social roles to women and determines how women should act and behave in every society. Thus, the problem of women is that men find it very difficult to allocate equal roles to women for the fear of being controlled by women. Is it not possible for women to allocate roles to men in the society? What will society look like if women are in authority of allocating roles to men? Is there any functional role that is performed by men which women cannot competently perform in our contemporary society? The Statistical Abstract of the United States (1999) shows that “women now fill more than half (54 percent) of all professional jobs” (cited in Kottak, 2004 p. 566).

Gender equality therefore implies that there should be no discrimination of any individual on the basis of sex with regard to the allocation of economic resources, political positions or access to social services. We must recognize that gender equality is a fundamental issue of human rights and unless women are given an unrestricted access to fully develop their natural endowments there can be no sustainable development in the society. The society will develop at the pace in which women are empowered to showcase their talents side by side with men. The United Nations Development Programme identified five basic levels of analyzing gender equality namely: welfare, access, conscientization, participation and control. These frameworks are avenues through which women can be empowered for meaningful and sustainable national development of the society.

The concept of development is basically viewed from the angle of economic growth and benefits accruing to a country. But development is far from the economic viewpoint only. It encompasses everything about man’s life and society. However, development has been shaped by various ideological concepts which have tended to pin it down on economy. In that sense, Ake (2001) argues that “the ideology of development itself became a problem for development because of the conflict between its manifest and latent functions” (cited in Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013 p. 287). Scholars were apt to look at various economic models and thus viewed development from the point of structural changes, savings and investment and enhanced gross domestic product (GDP) as basis for economic development and growth (Rostow, 1952; Harrod & Domar, 1957; Otto & Ukpere, 2012). Unfortunately, economic growth could not adequately explicate reasons for the unending issues of unemployment, criminality, poverty, hunger, diseases, illiteracy, conflict, wars and terrorism which abound in all nations rich or poor. This provided the fulcrum for a redefinition of development. According to Chandler (2007) “development has been redefined taking emphasis away from traditional economic indicators of GDP indicators and trade and broadening out the concept to take in psychological and material factors related to the measurement of human well-being” (cited in Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013 p. 285). Thus for Nnoli (1981), development is a dialectical phenomenon whereby the individual and society interact with their physical, biological and inter human environment by transforming them for their mutual benefits and humanity at large and in so doing transform themselves in the process. Development succinctly put is “the process of empowering people to maximize their potentials and ability to exploit nature to meet daily human needs” (Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013 p. 285). In this regard, development will entail freedom, liberty and equality and above all, the removal of all discriminative tendencies that inhibits sustainable development in the society. Sustainable development as such is viewed as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987 cited in Atapatta, 2006 p. 279). The implication is that if gender equality and women empowerment is continually compromised with political levity, sustainable national development will be in dire jeopardy and MDGs in Nigeria will

be a mirage.

### **Theoretical Exposition**

Extant literature on gender theory abounds (Mills, 1956; Marx, 1967; Engel, 1942; Hooks, 1984; Blumer, 1969; Ritzer, 2007). These notable scholars have viewed theory of gender from the biological, economical, psychological and sociological perspectives. They have argued that women are oppressed by men because of their biological characteristics in which the women are considered as weaker sex; that in this unequal relationship between men and women, it is the men that benefits; that society does not necessarily need restructuring to achieve empowerment for women rather what is required is for women to be incorporated into meaningful and equitable role in the society. Some have also called for change from traditional values that are male dominated with its negative consequences on women to modern values that are feminine friendly and favourable to women development while others especially the radical feminists have called for a complete matriarchy in which men are subservient to women.

This study adopted the functionalist and empowerment theories as frameworks for explicating the intricate nature of gender equality and women empowerment for sustainable development in Nigeria. The traditional functionalist or structural functionalist theorists in Sociology and Anthropology (Emile Durkheim, 1964, 1965; Talcott Parsons, 1975; Robert Merton, 1968; Radcliff-Brown (1965); Brownislaw-Malinowski, 1994) have theorized that society is made up of interdependent parts, each of which contributes to the working of the whole society. It therefore implies that if women in the society fail or refuse to cooperate with men for the propagation and multiplication of the human race, society will cease to exist. Invariably also, if men refuse to perform their social and reproductive functions of impregnating the women; society will go into extinct. Men and women are mutually living a symbiotic life. This implies that man and woman depend basically on each other for their survival and thus should see themselves as equal and complementary. In the natural design one gender cannot thrive without the other. It thus, means that the functional role of any member of the society should not be disregarded for everything in society including lesser animals has functions to perform for the survival of the human race. Nature did not create any one – man or woman to be of any less importance. It is rather human greed, yearning for position of supremacy that places some people lesser than others. The significant implication is that sustainable development in any society cannot be achieved without the empowerment of women. Emile Durkheim (1964) recognized this inevitable fact while espousing the principles of the division of labour in society. Therefore, the main focus of functionalism in any society was to find out how any given element of the social structure contributes to the overall functioning of society which culminates to social stability, balance and equilibrium. In other words, sustainable development is enhanced when discrimination against women is eliminated and women are meaningfully integrated into the mainstream of socio-economic and political development of the society which ensures social stability and equilibrium cum growth and sustainable national development.

On the other hand, the empowerment theory which was propounded by Rappaport (1981), is one of these new theories that is gaining currency in contemporary times. The theory attempts to draw a link between the personal and the social, the micro and macro. For the individual (micro level) the empowerment process is a process of increasing control and transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of ownership and power whereas community empowerment (macro level) is a collective social process of creating a community and achieving better control over the environment, and decision making in which

group's organization or communities participate. Thus, from a sociological standpoint, the empowerment theory captures people or groups that have suffered exclusion in various ways such as in terms of decision making process and economic acquisition or in terms of social discrimination resulting from skin colour or race, ethnicity, physical disability, religion, sex and other social phenomenon. Women are known to have been completely or partially excluded from socio-political and economic decisions even when their contributions have been overwhelmingly acknowledged by the society. Therefore, for meaningful sustainable national development the inclusion (empowerment) of women in all strata of socio-economic and political decisions is imperative and overdue. Men have for long deliberately played the hide and seek game in this sphere and thereby scheming out the women from the mainstream socio-economic and political discourse at the detriment of sustainable national development.

Here is the panacea to gender equality and women empowerment. Since women subjugation is a result of their position in the men socio-economic arrangement of the society, it means society must eliminate all the socio-cultural norms and values which inhibit women empowerment. When women gain economic strength by also being wage earners, their power and influence inside the home and society is strengthened and this can lead to more equal arrangements in the society. Women will now be seen to exercise some authority in the society as they too contribute to the socio-economic development of the society. This will guarantee sustainable development of the society. This will invariably fulfill the aim of the National Gender Policy which is to:

Build a just society devoid of discrimination, harness the full potentials of all social groups regardless of sex or circumstance, promote the enjoyment of fundamental human rights and protect the health, social, economic and political well being of all citizens in order to achieve equitable rapid economic growth; evolve an evidence based planning and governance system where human, social, financial and technological resources are efficiently and effectively deployed for sustainable development (The Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013).

### **Women Empowerment as Imperative for sustainable development**

This is the crux of the matter in the issue of gender equality in every society. The question of women empowerment raises fundamental objections which necessitate a cross examination of the structure of the society in which men is over lord. The implication is that if women are demanding for empowerment and equality with men, it means they had been under the subjugation of men; and in another sense they seek for freedom and liberty from the crutches of men's oppression and men's dominated worldview. The moment an oppressed, exploited and suppressed group recognize their servitude position and began to do something about their liberation from their chains, it means they will stop at nothing until their demands are met. It is a natural truth and incontestable fact that women are integral part of the social order of creation. It means that in the absence of their contribution, society will be void and incomplete. In other words, there will be disequilibrium and lack of development. It becomes socially and naturally acceptable that the empowerment of women is a task that must be done if sustainable development must be achieved.

It is a non-negotiable truce that women must be made full partners with men in the developmental strides of society. This partnership which must be a workable one will enhance women capacity to participate fully with men to design, implement and evaluate policies and programme which are aimed at sustainable development of society. This was the

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idea of the Beijing Declaration Platform for Action (1995) when it emphasized: women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society which include participation in the decision making process and access to power as being fundamental to the achievement of equality, development and peace. According to Doan (1994),

Empowerment is a process with series of steps by which individuals gain access to critical economic and educational resources, such as information, assets, cash and skills. The individuals use these to bring about changes in their environment and to influence other persons and institutions with competing or conflict interest (cited in Onyeneho, 2005, p. 421).

Thus, empowering women ensures the completeness of nature and society in all their ramifications. It is a way of settling women and making them to be more productive and useful in the development goals of the family and society at large. From a religious perspective, man is completely naked, weak, void and empty without his missing rib which implies that he cannot achieve anything meaningfully without the woman. It is in the realization of this basic fact of nature that God decided to create a help mate fitting for the man to bring out the best in man and in creation. Check it out with every successful man who is behind the scene, initiating, stabilizing and re-focusing the man for giant strides and breakthrough in the development efforts in the society. The cycle of sustainable development is like an umbilical code which is intricately connected to women empowerment. However, just like the child whose umbilical code is severed from its mother can survive society and in fact man, if severed from the contributions of women cannot survive.

The empowering of women will ensure family stability, peace and growth which translate to economic growth and sustainable national development. Women empowerment transcends women development and gender equality; it brings about peace, unity and sustainable development in the society. It involves meeting the social needs of women translating to family progress to improved quality of life of members of the society. It ensures women take charge and control of their affairs and positively contribute to family decisions and development which in turn spiral to societal sustainable development. When there is peace in the family the society is bound to develop progressively and exponentially.

Empowerment of women will enlighten women to their basic fundamental rights. Gender and domestic violence which cut across all women age group is on the increase in the society. There are cases of rape, sexual harassment in working places, sexual abuse, and restriction of movement, physical harm, wife battery and deprivation of various rights against women in all societies. A woman that is empowered will be able to check these abuses and ensure the maintenance of balance in the society. Women that are empowered will be able to resist obnoxious cultural practices that dehumanize womanhood and ensure there is a redress to injustice done on the basis of sex. For example; the issue of female genital mutilation (otherwise known as women circumcision); early marriage, widowhood practice and purdization of women in the name of religion must be eliminated from the society. The Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality (2005) provided five components for women's empowerment. These include: Women's sense of self worth; the right to have and to determine choices; the rights to have access to opportunities and resources; the rights to have the power to control their own lives both within and outside the home and the ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order. These are basic ingredients to women's empowerment and gender parity and must not be denied them. It is also a smooth but rough road for sustainable development



in the society. It is rough in the sense that men are bound to oppose it.

### **Strategies for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality**

We affirm the fact that no society can successfully grow without providing equitable opportunities, socio-economic resources, and life prospects for men and women so that they can contribute meaningfully in shaping the fortunes of their families and countries. In providing the fulcrum for women's empowerment and gender equality (USAID Policy, 2012) highlighted three basic strategies which include: reduction in gender disparities, reduction of gender based violence and increased opportunity for women to participate in political governance.

#### **Reduction in Gender Disparities**

This could be achieved through the removal of obstacles which hinders women's access to resources and wealth control and equal opportunities to socio-economic and political benefits. The Nigerian society is bedeviled with various socio-cultural practices which portends danger to women empowerment. In some societies like the Igbo society of Nigeria, women are deprived of all land inheritance at the death of her husband especially where a male child is absent. Women are denied access to bank facilities and made to pay tax even when her male counterpart is given some waiver based on his dependence. Women are frowned at when they seek for legal redress against their husbands for battery and other domestic violence. Women are discriminated at the work place on the basis of her sex even when she is well and over qualified and more competent than her male counterpart. Women are prevented from free movement and association and sometimes fair hearing and expression. These prevent women from contributing meaningfully to the development of the family and society or even having control over their own resources and wealth.

#### **Reduction of Gender based Violence**

Gender based violence is a serious setback for women's empowerment and gender equality in the society. According to Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1992) Article 1, gender based violence inhibits women's capacity to enjoy their rights and freedom on the basis of equality with men and it also impairs their ability to enjoy their basic fundamental human rights as enshrined in the international law and conventions. CEDAW (1992) Article 1 went on to define gender based violence as "any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life". Women have been on the receiving side of all kinds of gender based violence especially in the home and have remained dominantly the silent partner in covering this act. Society has not been fair to women especially when issues of sexual violence are being discussed. For example, in some parts of Northern Nigeria, women are easily put to death in cases of adultery and fornication without fair hearing whereas the men are allowed to go scot-free. This is an aberration of justice, freedom and equality which every human person is supposed to enjoy irrespective of sex. Most times, women are afraid and reluctant to dare to complain even when their basic fundamental human rights are denied them.

#### **Increased opportunity for Women in Socio-Political Activities**

According to King (1988, p. 163), "the goals of development are largely defined through political process". Therefore, women empowerment entails that women are given increased capacity to participate in the socio-political activities of the society. In this regard, they should have the right to realize their rights in determining their participation in political

decision making in the society. They should have the right to vote and be voted for into political offices and ability to influence decision affecting their families and societies at large. Thus, women empowerment is considered realized when women “acquire the power to act freely, exercise their rights, and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society” (USAID Policy, 2012, p.3). The socio-cultural practices in the society determines to a great extent to which women are given opportunity to participate in the political decisions. In most societies culture is used to exclude women form active decision making and political participation.

It is vital to understand that women should be allowed to enjoy their political and civil rights through participation in political decisions especially in matters that affect their life and the society. Economic sustainability and women’s empowerment depend so much on the integration and participation of women in the political decision making process in the country. Panday (2008) notes that the purpose of gender equality, development and peace cannot be proficiently and successfully accomplished without the vigorous involvement of women and the integration of their views at all stages of decision-making organs in the political democratic processes of the states and governments. Similarly, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2008) argues that “without greater representation of women in parliamentary and executive positions as well as in the judiciary, it is difficult to achieve participatory, accountable, and transparent governance which can ensure political, cultural, social and economic priority goals of the wider society” (Okumo & Asfaw, 2014 p. 101). It is thus imperative to not only allow women to participate in politics but also given them key positions that will give them the opportunity to take part in policy decision making. It is in so doing that gender parity and women’s empowerment for sustainable development could be realized. While women make efforts to empower themselves, the socio-cultural practices that inhibit such emancipation and empowerment must be eliminated. The laws entrenched to eliminate all social inhibitions for women’s empowerment must not only be seen to have been made, it must in reality be seen to be working and being enforced in line with the laws of the land and global aspiration.

### **Increased Opportunity of Women in Education**

Education is a vital tool in the empowerment of women in every society especially in Nigeria. It is important to know that educated women are most likely to participate in the socio-economic development and governance of a country than uneducated women. Thus, educational gap between the girl child and boy child must be closed in order to give women equal opportunity to contribute positively to the socio-economic development of any country. The simple reason is that the empowerment of the girl child through education is the empowerment of tomorrow women who will be key movers and builders of nation’s economic growth and sustainable development. The Global Gender Index Analysis report presented by World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2013 named “economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival and political empowerment” as areas where gender gap is very prevalent in the world (cited in Lalthapersad-Pillay, 2014, p.146; UNDP, 2016). Nigeria has shown gross adamant to eradicating socio-cultural practices that impedes girl child education cum elevating the value and status of women towards sustainable national development.

The gender gap in educational attainment in Nigeria is very shocking. Riley (1997, p.5) noted that “almost all the developed countries of the world, female are more likely to be illiterate and have spent few years in school than the male counterpart”. Relying on the United Nations (1995), figures, he maintained that “since 1990 illiteracy is higher for women

than men especially among young adult in many countries". Inadequate access to education has been one of the avenues men have been applying to short change women and discriminate against them in the allocation of juicy positions and status in the political arena. Stakeholders and scholars have come to terms with the fact that the socio-economic development and growth of society towards sustainable national development depends so much on women education and empowerment (Stephen, 1992; Palmer and Almaz, 1991; Caldwell, 1979). Government must strive to ensure that women are given equal educational opportunity with men and further be encouraged by giving women scholarships in all aspects of education, as the national development depends so much on this action. It must be recognized that education is an investment in the human capital, thus empowerment of women through education is like empowerment of the nation's human capital for meaningful national development and sustenance. Nigeria must key into the global groundswell of women empowerment in this direction if the dream of realizing our millennium development goals are ever achievable.

### **Equal Access to Economic Opportunities**

Although, women have contributed immensely to the total well-being of the family and society, they are still left to occupy the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder of the society. Hence, Leach (1998) notes that minority of women have acquired education and skill for paid jobs, this has not basically altered their subordinate position which is deeply rooted in their primary role as unpaid wives and mothers and entrenched in the patriarchal nature of the society. While women's paid jobs have massively expanded globally, there are found to be highly concentrated at the lowest level of the market economy. As if that is not enough, women are faced with various challenges: job insecurity, sexual harassment, low pay, restricted mobility, low status, work overload, discrimination, as well as poor working conditions and environment. These challenges inhibit the full integration of women in the mainstream market economy. It also negates the worth of women's contribution in the national development plan. Economic empowerment of women is a major global issue because a large proportion of the world's female population are trapped in patriarchal societies. In fact, the extent to which different nations move toward greater women's empowerment and gender parity especially in effective political decision policy making is an international measure of relative progress in dealing with patriarchy cum effective measure to sustainable national development. It is therefore very imperative for government to allow women have access to basic financial facilities, own land and property and participate in making decisions on issues that affect her human person and dignity. The nation stands to gain a lot from women's empowerment as this will boost our national development.

### **Conclusion**

Women empowerment is very imperative not only to national development but to long term sustainable national development and national security. We recognize that long term sustainable national development will only be realizable when men and women share and enjoy equal chance to rise to their natural potential. Women are the foundation for the sustenance of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Nigeria beyond 2015. Therefore any attempt in maintaining the dominant mainstream stereotypical gender view (patriarchal) will tantamount to subjecting human race to obscure development and penury. There is a great demand on men of all races to rally round women to ensure a sustainable national development that will provide the fulcrum for sustainable global development. Men must veil their ego and accept the reality that women are not just partners in progress but equal, competent and reliable partners in shaping the entire socio- economic and political affairs of the society. The sustainability of socio-economic development of any society

depends so much on the opportunities that are given to women to function with men without any inhibitions.

The paper strongly believes that the empowerment of women and their freedom depends so much on the women themselves. Women are the perpetrators of all the socio-cultural values which tend to demean womanhood in all societies. The enforcement of such socio-cultural values are done and sustained by the women and not the men. The discriminatory practices which sustain men dominance in the society are being enforced by women. Most cultural practices in the society would have been jettisoned and eliminated if women had refused its enforcement rather it is the issue of “I, passed through the same ordeal why wouldn’t others” that perpetuate and sustain women discrimination, cruel cultural practices and relegation to the background. Women must rise in unionism to resist all socio-cultural practices which impedes upon their humanity and humanness in all societies. The humanness which expresses the true identity of the womanhood must be displayed in all facets of the human society. It is dehumanizing for women to dance nude in public places in order to appeal to the pleasure of men. Women must stand and protect themselves against unnatural acts of inhumanity against them. Thus, achieving our long term sustainable national development will require speedy efforts to attain gender equality and women’s empowerment. Otherwise, peace, national security, prosperity and long term sustainable national development will be a mirage. Nigeria must key into the groundswell that is gaining currency for gender equality and women’s empowerment in order to enhance the MDGs for sustainable national development.

### **Recommendation**

1. Government must gear efforts to ensure the current 35% Affirmative Action on gender parity is enacted into law while mechanisms should be put in place for the full implementation of the 50/50 gender equality policy as canvassed by the United Nations across the globe. It must be emphasized that without proper legislative enactment regarding the 35% Affirmative Action, the talk of gender equality and women empowerment is a mirage in Nigeria. It is even becoming clearer every day, that the APC led government in Nigeria has not fully incorporated the 35% Affirmative Action in their policy and strategic planning. Feminist groups, gender equality advocates and all stakeholders in the mainstream gender equality and women empowerment must rally round to prevail on government to enact legislative laws in respect of the 35% Affirmative Action. This will be a ground breaking achievement and a fulcrum for higher stakes on gender equality and women empowerment.
2. One of the objectives of the National Gender Policy is to establish the structure for gender responsiveness in all public and private spheres and strengthen competence of all stakeholders to deliver their constituent mandate of the gender policy and national gender strategic framework (Chinwokwu, 2014). The National Gender Policy is in line with relevant regional and international protocols and gender instruments such as the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA); New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD); au Solemn Declaration for Gender Equality; African Protocol on People’s Rights and Rights of Women (APRRW0); The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other international conventions and protocols to which Nigeria is a signatory. What then is required is the will of governance to implement and enforce all policies and regulations that discriminate against gender equality and women’s empowerment without jittery.
3. In Nigeria, various socio-cultural laws and practices like widow inheritance,

widowhood practices, purdization, young girl early marriage, female circumcisions, land inheritance and freedom of movement which inhibits womanhood and infringes upon her fundamental rights must be totally eliminated from the society. Government must protect all genders in line with the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, if indeed we practice and believe that the Constitution is supreme and above all other laws of the land. We must not rob Peter to pay Paul in the exercise and interpretation of our laws for justice demands equity. Socio-cultural and religious practice which seem to demean womanhood and their humanness should be criminalized or eliminated out rightly.

4. Women across the globe must rise up in support of Nigerian women to appeal to President Muhammadu Buhari from assenting to the bill that allows for a girl child of 11 years old to be given in marriage. This act is inhuman and a mockery of the sensibility of the humanness and an instrument to show that women are just there to please the sexual pleasure of men irrespective of the socio-psychological and health implications of such laws on the girl child. Government must ensure that this kind of barbaric and animistic law must not stand in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We advocate rather that this kind of practice should be criminalized to protect future generations of womanhood. Imagine a situation where over 30% of girls under 12 years old are married out to men of 60 years old and above what will happen to the girls/women and society in the next twenty years.
5. Government must massively pursue vigorously the girl child education policy in Nigeria. We therefore canvass for intensive and comprehensive girl child education for better tomorrow and enhanced national and sustainable development. In this regard, government must outlaw child hawking and abuse with severe sanctions against defaulters. Therefore, all socio-cultural structures and practices that impede girl child education must be eliminated and efforts must be made to protect women of all ages against obnoxious cultural practices and regulations and violence. Families that abuse the girl while encouraging child hawking should be economically empowered by government through social security welfare assistance.
6. It is rather absurd to hear that the National Assembly on March, 2016 refused to pass the bill on women empowerment which was before them after it had scaled through the second reading at the instance of religious beliefs. Concerted effort should be geared towards re-presenting the bill in the future at the National Assembly with the aim of having it passed into law as the gains of women and their contribution to the sustainable development of the nation cannot be over emphasized.
7. We advocate for a family policy in Nigeria whereby the activities of the man and woman are clearly spelt out in the family. In this case, specific responsibilities and roles of husband and wife are constitutionally provided for better empowerment of women. Entrenched family policy in our constitution should require that religious organizations and marriage registry to educate or counsel couples on shared family responsibilities from the onset. This is expected to reduce tensions that married couples experience in their family relationship and enhance mutual understanding, peace and progress that is sine qua non to economic development and sustainable national development. We acknowledge the natural feminist role in the family, however, in recent times women have begun to assume the sole bread winner of many homes and yet men still treat them as mere rags and decorations of the home. But if the functions in the family are legally spelt out between men and women, it will give greater empowerment and autonomy to women and enhance their socio-economic and political status in the society. Women will earn their respect in the society by what they have achieved and not what society and nature have bestowed upon them.

8. Women should be elected and not appointed into political offices. This requires that women must struggle side by side with men for political positions and not relax and wait to be appointed to hold political office. It is when women are elected into political positions that they can express their political powers and add value to sustainable development. Therefore, women aspiring for political positions should work assiduously for their candidature.

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