

## **Implementation of Nigeria's National Gender Policy: An Appraisal of Empowerment and Gender Equality Programmes and Projects in Rivers State, (2006 - 2015).**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Gender inequality in accessing socio-economic and political opportunities among others, has remained key policy problem in Nigeria. Efforts at addressing them, has prompted policies, which if fully implemented should perhaps, have had substantial impact on improving conditions of women and men. Nigeria's National Gender Policy aims at achieving the empowerment of women and gender equality. Researchers have continued to doubt any real progress, despite the numerous institutions, created to enhance achievement of these aspirations. The study examines the conceptualization of the empowerment of women and gender equality, and how it relates to the choice of programmes and projects adopted, for the achievement of the policy goals. Adopting the gender and development perspective, taking a critical look at the nature of implementation, it found out that projects undertaken by the gender machinery in Rivers State, did not succeed as envisaged. Focus on women over the years has not brought any significant change in their condition and position. The process of continuity and political will, can contribute to advancement towards empowering women and achieving gender equality.*

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**KEYWORDS:** *Empowerment; Gender Equality; Gender Policy; Women; Implementation.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The detrimental effect of poverty, disempowerment, gender inequality, marginalization, discrimination, violence, among others, on the socio-economic and political development of women, and to some extent men, in acountries across the South, culminated to the adoption of resolutions that acknowledges that a "gender dimension of development was imperative if the countries of the South desire to experience a transformational change" (The Report of the South Commission, 1993). This has attracted various national and local policies, programmes, projects and legislative reforms across the country. All aim at hitting set targets of ending feminized poverty, empowering women and achieving sustainable development. It is believed that the implementation of empowerment programmes and projects within the ambit of national and state policies will ensure that both men and women participate and benefits in the political decision making process, thereby accelerating the speed of achieving gender equality.

During the period under review, several macro and micro-economic programmes and policies were set up by the Federal and the State Governments, Non-governmental

Organizations(NGOs), and Donor Agencies, these includes; National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) 2004, Rivers State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (RIVSEEDS) 2005, The Adolescent Programme (TAP)2001, the Empowerment Support Initiative (ESI) 2008, the Young Women Economic Empowerment Programme (YWEEP) 2012, Growing Girls and Women in Nigeria Initiative (G-WIN) 2013, Micro-finance Scheme, Women's Health Intervention Scheme, among others. Women have benefited from these programmes and projects in Rivers State and many more will. There is no doubt that these programmes, projects and reforms are meeting the practical needs of women.

The World Bank, World Health Organization, United Nations Donor Agencies' projects are mostly welfare in nature. Adoption of micro-credit schemes for poor women/widows, free health scheme, population control/family planning, etc. These are designed to increase women's productivity within the framework of subordination and underdevelopment. Women under this category do not have the wherewithal to challenge the existing gender social relations of power, thus institutionalising gender biases and gender imbalances. One of the most important challenge facing women in the emerging nations has always been how to meet their daily needs which includes; food, shelter, health care, and of recent, protection from domestic violence. These are located in the domain of practical needs, and very basic to human daily existence.

We cannot deny the fact that these needs do exist, but even the better part of these basic needs, the state has not been able to provide. The implementation of this policy can go a long way, if programmes and projects, geared towards enhancing the capacities of women and men are considered and adopted. According to Hunt (2004), Practical gender needs are the immediate and practical needs women have for survival, which do not challenge existing culture, tradition, the gender division of labour, legal inequalities or any other aspects of women's lower status or power,,,,, strategic interest focus on bringing about equality between females and males, by transforming gender relations in some way, by challenging women's disadvantaged position or lower status, .... Strategic Gender Interests may express women's and men's long-term aspiratios for Equality". Working with men and women can help address women's strategic interest. Since these practical or basic needs that focuses on the well-being of women, works in Paripasu with the "existing gender order" within the neoliberal reformist policies.

While the strategic interests in terms of; empowering capacities, making choices and being able to actualize the choices made, as outlined by (Kabeer, 1999, Rai, 2004:164), addresses unequal gender power relations. Monsen (1996:102) explained that the strategic needs of women are those things that can empower women to challenge the existing gender division of labour and bring about greater equality. Challenging the gender relation in operation does not require open confrontation with the authorities, but challenging the status quo means that woman issues are not neglected or ignored.

Saulnier et al (1999:10), is of the view that, practical solutions see women as benefitting from improvements to their immediate conditions, strategic solutions improve women's position by empowering women as agents of change. She went on to argue that if the strategic interests are not addressed, women will not be empowered and transforming change will not occur. Several attempts at addressing the problem, especially as it has to do with reversing the

disempowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality has been ongoing. It is assumed that these policies, if properly and fully implemented should perhaps, have had substantial impacts on improving the socio-economic and political conditions of women and men, youths and the children, in the country. The intentions of the government are to institute transformative actions by providing for the strategic and sustainable needs of the citizens. Ensuring that the empowerment programmes and projects are transformatory to the extent of meeting the strategic interest of women and men. Unfortunately this has not been the case. Suggesting that, this may be a contributory factor to the lack of advancement in the march towards gender equality and sustainable development.

In a bid to minimizing the neglect to gender needs/interests, and finding solution to the misunderstanding of the type of programmes or projects that can properly empower and raise the consciousness of the beneficiaries of development projects to the point of making transforming choices. The Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs adopted an eight (8)-point strategy for the implementation of the policy. This includes:

- i. Campaign, Advocacy, Mobilization of Women for Programmes, Sensitization and Public Enlightenment,
- ii. Information, Communication and Value-Re-Oriented.
- iii. Skills Acquisition and Empowerment of Women and the Girl-Child.
- iv. Legislation, Policy Formulation and Implementation.
- v. Research Data and Evidence Based Planning.
- vi. Establishment, and Strengthening of Existing Institutions.
- vii. Capacity Building.
- viii. Partnership.

(Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs Annual Report, 2013.)

A decade after the implementation of the National Gender Policy, not much has been achieved in the area of attaining gender equality goals, and the options adopted to cushion the after-effects of long-term exclusion and neglect of women. Also, in the process of implementing the National Gender Policy, the focus has been on women, women's needs/interest, and women's projects/programmes, instead of gender and gender interest. To the neglect of the men, who presumably, are the "gatekeepers" to gender equality. Why has men's specific project not been given priority attention, as stipulated by the gender policy, Section 2.2.6, Objective 6:

Undertake women and men specific projects, as a means of developing the capabilities of both women and men to enable them take advantage of economic and political opportunities towards the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment.

These objectives aim at reversing a trend of diverse socio-economic, political and cultural situations that hinder the empowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality.

The study examines the state of implementation of the National Gender Policy in relation to whether the issues of inequality and disempowerment are being tackled. It seeks to explain the extent to which this is being achieved by assessing the implementation of the National Gender Policy (NGP) in Rivers State, to understand how it has gone in contributing to the empowerment of men and women. The main question which the study addressed, is the state of

implementation of the policy and its impact on the capacity of men and women to make sustainable choices that places women on the platform of becoming agents of change rather than remaining the targets. The literature considered socio-economic, and political factors that may likely enhance, or be a hindrance to the implementation of the National Gender Policy (NGP). The study tried to determine how the concept of empowerment and gender, are related to the choice of political and economic strategies, programmes and projects adopted by the gender machinery in Rivers State, so as to find solutions to the problems of inequality, poverty and underdevelopment.

It looked at the impact of the implementation of the policy, in relation to increase in empowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality. It considers the likely implications of continued neglect of gender related issues, and the focus on women related projects rather than gender and gender equality issues. The work explores the relationship between empowerment of women and gender equality. Is there any possibility for the empowerment of the disempowered to bring about equality between females and males?

### **EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN**

Empowerment from the point of view of the World Bank (2011), is a process of increasing the capacity of individuals and groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. For the South Commission (1993:23), empowerment enables the women to realize the full potential of their talents and creativity and to develop self-confidence, and to mobilize their contribution to the well-being and progress of their society. Empowerment of Women is a developmental goal, embarked upon by countries across the globe, backed up by international, regional and national instruments. It is also seen as a means to achieving such social justice as, gender equality, eradication of poverty and sustainable development. This increase can lead to the achievement of equity in those sectors and meaningful participation in governance.

Women empowerment was adopted by the world body, the UN in Beijing, China, as the third goal for ensuring that gender equality is attained in the year 2015. For the international organisations, empowerment of women is advertised as a development goal and governments are encouraged to embrace it. In the opinion of Olayode(2013: 73), the promotion of women's empowerment as a development goal is based on a dual argument; that social justice is an important aspect of human welfare and is intrinsically worth pursuing and that women's empowerment is a means to other ends. When women are empowered, every member of the family benefits, this boils down to the society at large. The family economy is boosted, the production capacity of the communities, the state, and the country is expanded and enlarged, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is improved. The need to encourage more people (men and women), to experience the true or real empowerment has become very imperative, if we want the strategic and sustainable interests of the people to be articulated and their needs met.

Empowerment is a process of creating advances in the socio-economic and political status of women and men. It confers authority on those whose capacity has been built to recognize opportunities and possess the knowledge to skillfully handle issues and challenges that may arise in the political system and their environment. In the words of Rowland (1997:14), empowerment is more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions, depending on

the level of development of the political system, and the society that they are operating from. Empowerment is also viewed as an outcome of development programmes and projects. Taking empowerment from the point of view of Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland, (2006:1), it is an outcome in which a person or groups enjoys a state of empowerment, and as a process, an action that moves a group or persons from a lower level to a higher level of appropriating the benefits of the state. Empowerment engenders increased, as well as raised level of consciousness and change of status for an individual or a group.

When empowerment is used as an intervention strategy, individual's asset endowments are strengthened, this places them in a position to change formal and informal rules that are impacting negatively in their lives and that of others. Also, an empowered person is expected to have acquired saleable and utilitarian skills that can open the beneficiary up to better paid jobs at both public and private sectors and at the political level. They become active change agents and viable assets to change their lives and that of others as well as transform their environment, instead of targets and objects that need to be changed. The new status is a function of ones position in the socio-economic or political ladder of the state. The status of men and women and the youths has become fundamental for determining whether a country has developed, is developing, or is underdeveloped, this also forms the critical mass of such country.

Any improvement in the living conditions of the citizens, can have positive effects on the economy, especially when it comes to the health and economic wellbeing of both men and women within the continent. The derived benefits can not be dismissed, that is why it has attracted various national policies, programmes, projects and legislative reforms, all aimed at meeting the targeted goals. This goal of empowering women is so crucial to the extent that it can possibly be handled within the ambit of national policies, its attainment can positively transform the socio-economic and political terrain of the Nigerian State. Giving the high population of women, put at 48.7% of the total national population,(National Population Commission :2007).

Writing on the benefits of empowering women and men within the development process, Rogers (1982), opines that not only women who would benefit from the expansion of opportunities, but the development process itself would better achieve its targets by virtue of their participation. While not doing so blocks the development process, and lives on its trail negative consequences of poverty and underdevelopment. There is reduction in annual per capita growth, when empowerment of the people is not encouraged. Had this growth taken place, Nigeria's economies would have doubled over the past twenty years. This would have increased the purchasing power and capacity of the citizens, thereby boosting the national economy. The higher the empowerment level, the lower the poverty level among women and the men. The higher the involvement of women in the economy, community life, and in politics, the higher will their capacity and level of creativity expand as well.

Every country that desires to develop its economy, needs trained and skillful, creative and competent manpower, to man the various sectors of the economy. This trained manpower includes men and women, empowered and enabled, to aspire and to achieve higher level of performance, above and beyond their present level. Higher leadership positions can only be attained by empowered and enabled men and women. This also determines the quality of their performance. Whether the economy will perform well or not, will be determined by the quality of available manpower.

The National Gender Policy (NGP) draft is expected to ensure that both females and males benefit from policy changes vital for Nigeria to reach its developmental goals. It is also expected to be an action-oriented transformation agenda to engineer women's empowerment in Nigeria, and to translate policies and programmes towards achieving gender equality (National Gender Policy: 2007). It is assumed that in the process of implementing policies especially the ones that has to do with poverty eradication, empowerment and gender equality, we can not overlook the roles of agencies, opportunity structure, and political culture in promoting or discouraging gender-sensitive and empowerment policies and programmes. In the course of this study, we looked at these among others.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF YOUNG WOMEN ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES**

The goals of National Policy on Women (2000), National Gender Policy (2006), and National Gender Policy Strategic Implementation Plan (2008), is to empower women and men, and achieve gender equality, which will ultimately bring about development and elimination of poverty. If this is the case, then what are the modalities put in place in order to achieve this goal? In the course of this study, the research took a critical look at the implementation of some of the empowerment initiatives mentioned above. The study undertook an assessment of the strategies adopted, programmes designed and projects undertaken by the gender machinery in Rivers State in order to empower women so as to achieve gender equality as envisaged, as well as achieving of the practical and strategic interest of the gender.

**The research examined the Young Women Economic Empowerment Programmes (YWEEP), the policy is aimed at** empowering young women in Rivers State to believe in themselves and their abilities, "the Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs decided to develop the home-small scale business ventures (these are business that can be run within the home with limited capital, and without interrupting their domestic activities" (Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs, 2011:32). Utilized as an avenue for training women and young girls, in bead craft making and knitting, catering and baking, and cellophane bag production, also in snail farming, fish farming, mushrooming and ginger farming, as well as paint making technology. Over 2000 young girls and women participated in, and benefitted from the training, and were assumed to have been empowered.

Under the eight-point implementation strategy, the programmes adopted for the achievement of Campaign, Advocacy, and Mobilization, includes; Community Education, Dialogue on HIV/Aids, conducted in six towns spread across six local government areas of the state, also an interactive meeting with Rumuwoji market women to resolve some misunderstanding among them. The ministry also observes the international days that draw attention to the plight of women, the child, and the marginalized.

The strategy adopted for the empowerment of women and the girl-child includes; the Rivers State Widows Micro-finance Scheme in order to address widow-hood disinheritance, where the beneficiaries were trained in Basic Financial Management for Small Scale Business Enterprise for effective fund utilization(RSMWA, 2013:27). Can the training of these widows, the total numbers notwithstanding, bring solution to the root cause of widowhood disinheritance? Due to the deeply in-grained nature of patriarchy, existing legislations are

poorly implemented. The training of women and young girls in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills, heightened by the low level of education among women, the Ministry established an ICT centre where over 200 young girls and women have been trained.

In the area of strengthening existing institutions and the "establishment of gender-specific programmes and projects that will address imbalance and increase the revenue base of the state"(RSMWA: 2013). The Cellophane Bag factory was established to train women in bag making. To introduce women into the business of paint making technology, the Rivlux Paint Factory & Allied Products was activated by the Ministry. Due to low patronage of their products, breakdown and lack of maintenance of equipment, the business came to an abrupt end. There is also the Mile1 Family Support Programmes (FSP) Hair Plaiters Centre, built to reduce the high cost of stores for the women.

The partnership with a Non-Governmental Organisation, Empowerment Support Initiative (ESI), supported the education of both girls and boys. In order to achieve Universal Basic Education, by the year 2015, the Ministry renovated the Family Support Programme(FSP), Nursery and Primary School located at Mile 3 market, to provide education for low income earners and for the children of those selling in the market. The one at Eneka was built by Empowerment Support Initiative to support the girl-child education. There is a Nursery and Primary School established within the premises of the Ministry of Women Affairs in Port Harcourt. A Creche and Daycare established within the State Secretariat Complex.

In the area of partnership, the Ministry partners with the Empowerment Support Initiative (ESI), an NGO, working to promote gender equity through the girl-child and early-child education, and to move women out of poverty, to improved and sustainable development economic status with the Lady Cabbies. The partnership with Guinness is to empower women to become distributors of Guinness products. That of Nestlé Plc. is to equip the women with basic domestic skills. As at 2013, about 30 women were selected to be trained in various skills by MTN Foundation Widow's Empowerment Scheme.

Table 1.1: The Young Women Economic Empowerment (YWEEP) Programmes in Rivers State.

Skills	No.Of Participants	Category of participants
Bead making & knitting	100	Full-time home makers, unemployed female graduates, secondary school leavers, and commercial sex workers.
Catering &	500	

baking		
Cat fish farming	500	
Cat fish farming	500	
Mushroom, ginger, and snail farming	600	
ICT	200	
Polythene Bag making	40	

Source: Compiled by the author from figures released by the Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs of the YWEEP, July 2011.

The YWEEP acted as an avenue for training women and young girls, to acquire beneficial skills. With no proper market outlet for their products, how can they make it in this world of competitiveness where only the strongest survive the muddy waters of globalization. So far what the gender machinery projected as intervention packages and empowerment schemes are welfares in nature, and been organised under the aegis of the Rivers State Young Women Economic Empowerment Programmes (YWEEP).

The partnership with a Non-Governmental Organisation, Empowerment Support Initiative (ESI), supported the education of both girls and boys. (ESI), a brain child of Judith Amaechi, the wife of the Rivers State Governor, Chibuike Amaechi, led to the training of some women as drivers (Lady Cabbies). How many companies, organisations or government establishments would want to employ a female as a driver? In the Nigerian context, what connection has a trained driver got with a legislative session or what qualifies him/her to get an appointment into the cabinet? In the area of partnership, the Women Affairs Ministry's partnership with Guinness Plc, was to "empower" women to become marketers and distributors of Guinness products. The Nestlé Foods Nig. Plc. trained and equipped the participants with basic domestic skills. Can these strategies close the imbalance between the gender?

While assessing the implementation of this policy in Rivers State, so as to understand how far this policy has gone in contributing to the empowerment or disempowerment of men and women in the political and economic spheres. It may not be far from the truth that, these programmes are meant to increase the identification of women with the domestic spheres. It not only diverts their agency away from the state political domain to the home front, but it also immobilize them to maintain their state of subjugation and underdevelopment.

Saulnier et al (1999:10), reiterated the fact that, It is crucial that interventions do not keep women in a subordinate position, but work towards transforming existing power relations. Moreover, if the strategic interests are not addressed, women will not be empowered and transformatory change will not occur, this means the institutionalization of feminized poverty, and the widening of the gender gap. Whereas empowered, talented, skillful, educated,

enlightened, liberated, men and women are supposed to be agents of change, but unfortunately, women's disadvantaged position has singled them out and pined them down as targets and objects of development. Sustainable development can only be achieved when the people are not just the targets or subjects, but also the agents of development.

The newly appointed Caretaker government in Obio /Akpor local government area, in August 2015, employed about 180 women to sweep the roads and streets along the Council area. This is one of its empowerment policy in order to reduce feminized poverty in the state. If these strategies and tactics are not changed, through addressing the strategic gender interest, the likely implications are that, the leadership abilities of women and the marginal group, will not be fostered, there will be reduced female presence in decision making foras, reduction in access and control of resources, continued inequality and inequity in high places, widespread poverty and underdevelopment, limited employment opportunities as a result of lack of saleable skills, low capacity as well as low capability that may compell them to remain at the receiving end of development policies instead of the giving end. From the research, we found out that these are the reality of empowerment and gender equality in the state.

**A national gender policy connotes or gives the impression that the focus is on both men and women, it addresses issues that concerns both. In the words of Connell (2005:365), gender issues have been widely regarded as girls and women's business and of little concern to men and boys. In all policy discussion, to adopt a gender perspective substantially means to address women's concerns.**

**The gender machinery in the country is referred to as the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, working towards redressing women's disadvantaged position, there is no ministry to harness the activities of men, who are in charge of and involved in gender equality reform. This trend of relegating the men to the background, and focusing on women only, portends diversion of stated objectives and loss of focus and at worst failure.**

**In the course of implementing the National Gender Policy, has anything been done to carry men along?. According to Connell (2005:816);**

**men are the 'gatekeepers' to equality between men and women in many ways - that is, they have access to resources, authority, and skills that may all be important in social change. The point is that men who believe in gender equality can do a great deal.... On the other hand, there are very large numbers of men engaged in preserving gender inequality.**

**As such these category of men and to some extent, women that may oppose or resist and undermine any form of change in the present form of unequal gender relation. A platform for their re-orientation towards accepting the inevitable change must be provided. Has there been any such platform in the state? If there is not, is this not an error in conceptualizing gender issues as only women issue? What is the reason for the anti-gender stand, and is there anything being done to correct the error? .**

The observations of the National Gender Policy(2006:24), that although the country has consistently affirmed its commitment to gender equality and women empowerment, the existing policy environment across sectors, intersectoral cooperation and programming priorities defy this commitment. In other words, despite all these policy interventions. Empirical evidence shows that much still need to be done at the political, economic and socio-cultural domain.

One of the pillars of the National Gender Policy is to empower women to be self reliant, politically and economically viable. It is in this premise that the ministry put in place projects and programmes for women empowerment and gender equality. A wrong perception of the concept of empowerment by the machinery responsible for the articulation and execution of empowerment strategies and policies has consistently hindered the achievement of gender equality goals.

The researcher observed some short comings at the point of conceptualization of, and implementation of this policy in Rivers State, and how this has contributed to increase in gender inequality at the sphere of decision making and governance. It noticed that scholars have paid less attention to how the conceptualisation of empowerment and gender equality is related to the choice of political and economic programmes, projects and actions adopted to cushion the after-effects of long-term exclusion and neglect, as well as the institutionalization of feminized poverty.

The need to prevent the issue of gender inequality degenerating into poverty, and underdevelopment, has prompted both regional and international summits, and communiques, which if fully implemented should perhaps have had substantial impacts on improving the conditions of men and women. According to Allen, (2012:117), The federal government has the greatest responsibility towards addressing the issues. Unfortunately, and inspite of various political, legal and administrative steps already orchestrated, the important issue of poverty (disempowerment, gender inequality) has not been sufficiently addressed by the federal government ". Neither has the state or local government done so.

The study took note of the fact that, for almost a decade of implementing the National Gender Policy, not much has been achieved in the area of gender equality goals. Why have the authorities not given priority attention to gender and men's specific projects, as stipulated by Objective 6 of the gender policy. These objectives aim at reversing a trend of diverse socio-economic, political and cultural situations that hinder the empowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality. At this level, can we suggest that, this may be a contributory factor to the lack of advancement in the match towards gender equality and sustainable development?

### **CHALLENGES CONFRONTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL GENDER POLICY IN RIVERS STATE**

The state has over the years instituted policies and programmes for the purpose of empowering women and achieving gender equality. These efforts have been somehow hampered, with the introduction of skill acquisition schemes, which is a more viable option for the empowerment of men and women. The projects addresses practical rather than strategic and sustainable interest and these interests are articulated within the states domain. This is confirmed by the NGP (2006:32) that most of the approaches have been welfarist using the

Women in Development (WID) approach, there was never a strategic and gendered approach to empowering the people, to achieve gender equality. Such strategy could have settled the issue of unequal power relations between men and women.

Most of the programmes and projects embarked upon by the gender machinery, the Ministry of Women Affairs proved that there are shortfalls in the area of matching the policies with the implementation strategy. Objective 6 of the National Gender Policy was never considered, both at the stage of formulation and implementation of the framework. Policy failure arises whenever there is distortion in the conceptualization of the mandate by the agencies concerned, this creates diversions in the implementation strategy

Gender equality in the state is preoccupied with women-focused welfare and skill acquisition programmes. Skill Acquisition programmes are substituted as well as referred to as empowerment and gender equality projects. These projects are executed once, after the first batch of Trainee, the programme goes into slumber. No continuity in project execution. In other words, there is the problem of policy sustainability, and continuity. As soon as a new government comes into power, former policies, programmes and projects are either neglected or they are abandoned and replaced with the brain child of the incumbent or that of the First Lady. This trend featured in TAP programmes, which was abandoned with the arrival of the Chibuike Amaechi's government. TAP was replaced by ESI in 2008. This has also been abandoned with the coming into power by the Nyesom Wike government.

Between 2000 and 2015, we have had four different Administrations at the State level, each with its own vision and pet project, there is no continuity in programme implementation, as each want to make a name for himself or herself. This has been the bane of our society. From NEEDS, to the Seven-Point Agenda, to the Transformation Agenda, Growing Girls and Women in Nigeria Initiative (G-WIN), among others, at the federal level. In Rivers State, there has been, the Rivers State Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (RIVSEEDS), The Adolescent Programme (TAP), Young Women Economic Empowerment programmes (YWEEP), Empowerment Support Initiatives (ESI), among others. None have been able to adequately empower women, to the point of achieving gender equality.

Another challenge confronting the National Gender Policy is the issue of the authorities sacrificing interests of women for political gain, shifting from gender equality programmes to focusing on the 'vote bank politics' which is the 'politics of expediency'. According to Jeffrey (2001) a consistently pro women orientation is unlikely, unless government had become convinced that enhancing women's interest is a vote winner. Patience Jonathan's 'Women for Change and Development Initiative' with the full weight of the Presidency was launched across the country towards expositing with assorted welfare packages to mobilize women to rise up and take their place. The G-WIN project was launched in 2013, programmed towards exposing young girls and women to life changing opportunities. Following the maxim, "empowering women is smart economics" Although, we have not seen any serious empowerment programmes that would provide for the strategic and sustainable needs of women in the state.

The study undertook an assessment of the strategies adopted, programmes designed and projects undertaken by the gender machinery in Rivers State in order to empower women so as to achieve gender equality, as envisaged. The implementers did not consider whether these programmes and projects can bring about raised level of consciousness or increase the level and number of women who would aspire and envision alternatives by making transforming

choices at the political and economic domain neither did they consider if these empowerment programmes will narrow the women's aspirations towards the development process?

The uphill task before the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, the machinery for advancing women's interests is the problem of translating the prescribed policy to goal actualization as they are constraints severally, from the analysis of the outcome of the In-depth Interview and Focus Group Discussion, both the national and the state's women's machinery may not have the capacity to take on the responsibility to effect gender equality in all sectors nor does it have the capability to carry out its mandate as stipulated by the United Nation's Experts Report for the National Machinery for Gender Equality. UN (1999:10-11).

The sector is experiencing poor budgetary allocation, and delay in the release of funds allocated. The issue of financial constraints hampers their capacity to meet set targets. In addition to this, is the issue of weak monitoring mechanism to measure if the empowerment programmes and projects are actually empowering the women or not. The political will and commitment for the implementation of gender equality programmes seems weak or it is absent in the state. For there is no structures or legislation put in place to separate between women empowerment and gender equality projects and programmes. The pursuit of one has overshadowed the other, leaving the gender question unanswered. In other words, no effort has been made towards answering the gender question, as it relates to unequal power relation between men and women.

Sustainable development is contingent on the extent to which opportunities are created for half of the human resource, made up of women and the marginal group, to enable them exercise choices that are transformational, strategic and sustainable, such as training and education that increases their consciousness and changes their orientation towards national development, gender interest and towards one another. This produces self confidence and unalloyed trust that, others are capable of handling issues as much as they are.

The level of governmental commitment will prove or determine how far they can go in implementing the policy goals. As it must not only be seen as an intent of government, but has to be translated into concrete actions and outcomes that would transform the lives of men and women in Nigeria and in the world at large. The challenge is how the political leaders who though, recognizes the existence of gender inequality, can go beyond mere rhetorics, to adopting and acting on a gender and development paradigm that embraces redistribution of political, social and economic resources between men and women and the marginal groups in the society. Transforming unequal gender power relations, and properly empowering the citizens especially women to adequately participate and contribute in developing their countries politically and economically.

From all indications, empowerment is not seen as development, but as skills acquisition. Effort at mainstreaming gender has been hampered with the increase in social welfare schemes which is a more viable option for the empowerment of men and women in Nigeria. The state machinery charged with the responsibility for implementing the projects is preoccupied with women focused welfare programmes and projects, the YWEEP is 90% skills acquisition. The problem is not just about the policy, but its effectiveness and impacts of its implementation is in doubt, although, the gender machinery claims that substantial progress has been recorded but the reality gives a different picture.

If this trend continues, we will have to say that the Rivers woman has a long way to go. The

strategies adopted for the empowerment of men and women so as to achieve gender equality will no doubt meet the basic needs of the beneficiaries of the projects and programmes by putting food on their table, should we term it "stomach infrastructure" while the strategic and long term needs are left unattended to. We are tempted to attest that, this is a ploy by the neo-liberal forces to divert the women's attention from the political spheres to the domestic spheres? This is in line with the ideology of patriarchy, which believes in the maintenance of status-quo of women playing the second fiddle rather than being agents of change. We are forced to agree with the argument put forward by Rai, (2004:196), that often strategies for 'empowerment of women' are a means for improving productivity within the status quo, rather than for challenging or transforming established structures and practices (Parpart, Rai, and Staudt, 2002).

In Rivers State, most of the programmes and projects embarked upon by the state gender machinery, the Ministry of Women Affairs shows some discrepancies in the area of matching the policies with the implementation strategy. The uphill task before the Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, the machinery for advancing women's interests is the problem of translating the prescribed policy to goal attainment, as they are constraints severally. From our observations, both the national and the state's women's machinery do not have the capacity to take on the responsibility to effect gender equality in all sectors, nor does it have the capability to carry out its mandate as the sector is experiencing inadequate budgetary provisions, coupled with delay in the release of funds for speedy execution of programmes and projects. The issue of financial constraints hampers their capacity to meet set targets.

In addition to this, is the issue of weak monitoring mechanism to measure if the empowerment programmes and projects are actually empowering the women or not. Although most of the beneficiaries of the YWEEP after the training, left their contact address and telephone numbers, so that there can be a follow up, how effective this has been is a matter of further inquiry. Another implementation problem is the nature of politics, and political interference in the activities of the gender machinery. They do not have a free hand in executing their mandates. Well thought out programmes are truncated and diverted by those who are only conscious and interested in their personal gain. As a result of all these, the YWEEP died untimely in Rivers State.

## CONCLUSION

The study analyzed the programmes and projects undertaken by the Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs to accelerate the empowerment of men and women, and the achievement of gender equality. Policy facilitators interpret the concept of empowerment, as an opportunity for skill acquisition, and as such, their conceptualisation is related to their choice of political and economic strategies and the entrenchment of inequality and poverty. From the findings, the conceptualization of empowerment, and the nature of implementing related projects and programmes in Rivers State may not bring about change in power relation, nor can it lead to the achievement of gender equality as targeted by the National Gender Policy. The study bases its assessment of the state of implementation of Nigeria's National Gender Policy on the premise that full implementation can have positive impact on the lives of the men, the women and the marginal groups, as well as the reduction of poverty, but may not be able to bring about the equality of gender.

There is need to adopt a gender perspective in the development process. The implementers adopted the liberal framework which favours reformation, and the maintenance of status quo, rather than transformation. While the GAD paradigm did not feature during implementation process. This would have adopted transformative agenda and the repositioning of women and men in the political and economic spectrum. It is believed that the higher the involvement of women in the political and economic domain, the lower the level of poverty and inequality in any society. Success or failure of any public policy depends on the proper conceptualization, strategies adopted, the process of implementation, and the character and nature of the State

### **THE WAY FORWARD**

Steps should be taken to facilitate the designing of gender sensitive development policies and the judicious implementation of strategic interest of women and men as well as future related projects. There is a need for proper conceptualization and execution of development projects and programmes, to align with the objectives of empowering women for the purpose of achieving gender equality.

How effective has the machinery and the institution responsible for designing empowerment programmes and projects, has been, also the political and socio-economic factors that impinge their operations is a matter for further investigation.

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