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[Combating Rural Feminine Youth Poverty in Nigeria's Democratic Governance](#)

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Introduction

Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation and has such a great ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. The Nigerian paradox has continued to baffle the world because the poverty level in the country contradicts the country's immense wealth as over 70 per cent of the population wallow in absolute poverty with no food, clothing or shelter (Obayelu and Ogunlade, 2006). The general picture, however, is of a country struck by poverty, maladministration and increasing internal conflicts. Poverty is painful. The poor suffers physical, emotional and moral pains (Deepa *et al*, 2000). The poor lives without fundamental freedoms of action and choice that the better-off takes for granted (Sen, 1999). Poor people often lack adequate food and shelter, education and suffer health deprivations that keep them from leading the kind of life that everyone values. They also face extreme vulnerability of ill-health economic dislocation and natural disasters and they are often exposed to ill-treatment by institutions of the State and Society and are powerless to influence key decisions affecting their lives. According to This Day (2007), above one million eight hundred thousand Nigerians stood up against poverty as part of a global call. A record 38 million people world-wide observed the anti-poverty call, eclipsing the 23.5 million figures for 2006.

Social analysts insist that women remain the worst victims of poverty. This is more significant when in September 2000, 189 world leaders, under the United Nations Millennium Summit, signed to commit themselves to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015. The eight goals include: halving extreme poverty and hunger; eliminating gender inequality; environmental degradation, and HIV/AIDS; improving access to education, health care, clean water and sanitation; and call for global partnership on development.

At a joint conference organized by Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) in collaboration with Oxfam in Abuja as part of activities towards the global Stand-Up against poverty campaign by the civil society, an intriguing picture emerged. The widespread belief is that despite Nigerian government efforts under the much-publicized 7-point agenda and the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), the eight Millennium goals are far from being met. The study therefore aimed at:

-Investigating the depth of girl-youths marginality and gender violence in rural Nigeria within a local government case study

-Assessing the distributive impact of the varied youth empowerment initiatives of the democratic

administrations since 1999 on the female rural youths' development and empowerment

-Interrogating the prospects of achieving a possibility intervention framework that can engender gender equality, inter-sex equality and sustainable economic empowerment for the marginalized and alienated rural female youth.

The study was carried out in Gboyin Local Government Area of Ekiti State. A total of 200 female youths were selected through a multi-stage random sampling technique from five towns/villages within the Gboyin Local Government territory. These villages were: Ode, Agbado, Imesi, Iluomoba and Ijan. Forty respondents were randomly selected from each village. A structured interview schedule was used in gathering information from them. Information gathered was subjected to descriptive statistics. Results were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages.

Problematizing Female Youth Poverty

Analysts insist that poverty affects women in a multifaceted way more than men; and that government has largely failed in poverty reduction efforts. According to Chambers (1983), several biases have impeded outsiders' contact with rural poverty. In rural development, the centre-periphery biases of outsiders' knowledge are reflected in the concentration of research, publication, training, and extension on what is exotic rather than indigenous, mechanical rather than human, chemical rather than organic and marketed rather than human, chemical rather than organic and marketed rather than consumed. It is reinforced by other biases towards what concerns men rather than women, adults rather than children, clean rather than the dirty, and perversely, the rich rather than the poor. For instance, in crop research, priority, prestige, and promotion have gone with works on crops for export, grown usually in plantations by big farmers, the better-off small farmers and the men of the household rather than women. These crops include: rubber, tea, sisal, jute, palm oil, cotton, coffee and cocoa. While less attention is paid on poor people's and women's crops for subsistence such as millet, sorghum, cowpeas, cassava and sweet potatoes. Most of these poor men and women crops are overlooked. Sometimes they do not appear in agricultural production statistics. Livestock research and extension follow similar patterns with high concentration on exotic breeds of cattle suitable for temperate region to the neglect of small ruminants such as goat which have many advantages for the poor people.

Experience has shown that women and children undertake the most tedious, back-breaking work in agricultural production. Yet there is pervasive bias against the technology and needs of rural women. Until recently, little attention was paid on home gardens and backyard farming, often sources of small but vital incomes for women. Domestic technology for processing food, cooking, cleaning, sewing, fetching firewood, carrying water, all traditional responsibilities of rural women are regarded as uninteresting and of low priority. When the human-hours devoted to these activities are considered, and the drudgery they entail, it is a grave reflection on those in power how miniscule has been the attempt to improve the technology of such activities. Besides, rural women have little or no access to the earnings they contribute to the household. Even the little that women earn goes towards the essential needs in the home like food, clothing, shelter, school and health. Women suffer more from problems of accessing agricultural support services and inputs such as fertilizer, improved seeds and extension services. Female farmers, according to Chambers (1983), are neglected by male-extension workers. Women and girls also have limited access to credit due to formal banking and credit institutions which insist on collateral often not available to women for cultural and legal reasons, as well as the very high interest rates. The stand-up campaign was to compel government to tackle poverty and accelerate

economic growth and human development for all, as encapsulated in the Millennium Development Goals. Poverty is a major obstacle to the realization of women's human rights and one of the most surreptitious forms of violation of such rights. The increasing feminization of poverty is linked to women's unequal situation in the labour market, their treatment under social welfare systems and their status and power in the family.

The National Bureau of statistics (2007) estimates that 75% of the 54% of Nigeria's 140 million populations, who live below poverty level, are women. The figure translates to about 57 million women that wallow in poverty. Several researchers have opined that poverty may be a motivation for young women to engage in early sexual activity and to have multiple partners. This assertion is linked to the practice in parts of Africa for men to give women money and gifts in return for sex, which might lead poorer females to engage in early sex for reasons relating to survival.

Rural Female Youth Poverty and Gender Violence

Violence against women has neither historical nor geographical boundaries. Violence against women is endemic in the Nigerian society. It can be argued that we are in a violent society. Any day's reading of the newspaper or watching what has been selected as newsworthy on television confirms the pervasiveness of violence in our culture. Regardless of how more generalized societal violence can be explained, violence against women, according to Helga and Naida (1992), constitutes a particular set of violent events and abusive acts against women because of their gender. Rape, incest, sexual assault, sexual harassment and spouse battering are significant problems among Nigerian women.

In Nigeria, the source of violence directed at women by men, according to Adedokun (2000), lies not in men's superior physical strength, but in women's lack of social, economic, political and legal power. Lack of economic power, the influence of culture and religion, lack of legal protections for abused women and girls and refusal to define domestic abuse as a serious form of gender violence have collectively ensured the continued dependence on men. The consequences of these for women and the society according to Adedokun are many and terrible. These include widespread damage to women's psychological well-being, self-esteem, bodily integrity and sexual pleasure. It also includes pain, fear and injuries which affect women's potential to develop freely and participate fully in the development of the society. This can also affect the well being of their children and families and impose additional health costs on the family and the nation. Sexual assault may result to unwanted pregnancies, which may lead to unsafe abortion, ill health and even death. Lack of sexual and reproductive rights may expose women to sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS and can damage their self esteem (ibid).

Many customary practices, according to USDA (2007), do not recognize women's right to inherit their husbands' property. Female genital mutilation is practiced extensively in all parts of the country among all ethnic and religious groups. According to the Nigerian NGO's Coalition's (NNC) study, an estimated 33% of all households practice the procedure.

The government only occasionally criticized child abuse and neglect, and it made little effort to stop customary practices harmful to children, such as the sale of young girls into marriage. There are credible reports that poor families sell their daughters into marriage as a means of supplementing their income. Young girls are often forced into marriage as soon as they reach puberty, regardless of age, in order to prevent the 'indecent' associated with premarital sex.

Women according to USDA (2007), experience considerable discrimination as well as physical abuse. There are no laws barring women from particular fields of employment, but women often experience discrimination because government tolerates customary and religious practices that adversely affect them. The NNC (ibid) expresses concern about continued discrimination against women in the private sector, particularly in access to employment, promotion to higher professional positions and in salary inequality. There are also reports that several businesses particularly the banks, operate with a 'get pregnant, get fired' policy. Women remain under-represented in the formal sector but play an active and vital role in the country's important informal economy. While the number of women employed in the business sector increases every year, women do not receive equal pay for equal work and often find it extremely difficult to acquire commercial credit facilities or obtain tax deductions or rebates as heads of households. Unmarried women in particular endure many forms of discrimination.

While some women have made considerable individual progress, both in the academic and business world, women remain largely underprivileged. Although women are not barred legally from owning land, under some customary land tenure systems, only men can own land, and women can gain access to land only through marriage or family. In addition, many customary practices do not recognize a women's right to inherit her husband's property, and many widows are rendered destitute when their in-laws take virtually all of the deceased husband's property. Widows are subjected to unfavorable conditions as a result of discriminatory traditional customs and economic deprivation. 'Confinement' is the most common type of discrimination to which widows are subjected, and for instance, it occurs predominantly in Eastern Nigeria. Widows are under restriction for as long as one year and usually are required to shave their heads and dress in black garments (USDA, 2007). In other areas, a widow is considered a part of her husband's property, to be 'inherited' by his family. Polygamy continues to be practiced widely among all ethnic groups and among Christians as well as Muslims and practitioners of traditional religions. Women are required by law to obtain permission from a male family member to get an international passport. The testimony of women is not equal to that of men in Shari' a court.

There is also evidence of trafficking of children to the United States and Europe, mostly for the 'reunification of Children' with their undocumented parents abroad. According to a press report from the Niger Delta region, there is an active trade in child-laborers, some of whom are exported to Cameroon, Gabon, Benin, and Equatorial Guinea to work in agricultural enterprises, others are coerced into prostitution. In January, Cote D'Ivoire's authorities repatriated eleven 10- and 11-year-old girls from Abidjan to Lagos. Authorities also have identified a trade route for traffickers of children for labour through Katsina and Sokoto to the Middle East and East Africa. The Eastern parts of the country and some Southern States such as Cross River and Akwa Ibom have been the centre of trafficking of children for labour and, in some cases, human sacrifice (USDA 2007).

It is pertinent to note that women and children are the most vulnerable to being trafficked, thus putting a gender dimension to the issue. Most victims are deceived, coerced or through deceit, cajoled to leaving with the hope of better opportunities for their educational or economic empowerment. These victims are trafficked for domestic work, farm labour and commercial sexual exploitation to mention a few. At their destination, they are treated as slaves with their movements curtailed and placed under some form of bondage. The situation is far worse for trafficked children who are usually not part of the decision relating to the transaction to traffic them. The victims are forced into exploitative labor with the onerous terms usually determined by the traffickers with heavy repayment bondage. For example, the

victims forced into prostitution in Europe and the middle East often enter into repayment bonds of amounts raging between \$20000-\$50000 U.S Dollars.(Olagbegi,2004).

According to Human Rights Victims Protection (2002) report,

‘The International sex industry is a multi-billion dollars industry but trafficked women are not the real beneficiaries. African women lured into the sex trade in Europe and the Middle East see very little of the money they earn. Many of them have to spend much of the little they get on drugs. Some reportedly die before reaching their destinations. Usually when they arrive in the country of destination their travel documents are confiscated so that they cannot escape. They have to pay up to US \$50,000 redemption fee to liberate themselves”.

In case of children in domestic servitude, their parents hardly benefit from the proceeds of their labour thereby recycling the poverty they initially set out to alleviate. The children victims are also denied education, physical well-being and good standard of living in negation of their human rights. Apart from the bondage, the women and children victims are exposed to physical and sexual abuse thereby exposing them to risk of contacting HIV/AIDS.

Gender Poverty, Education and Health Status.

Rural women are even more disadvantaged than their urban counterparts in terms of education and health. For instance, the educational sector, according to Ebigbola (2000), has been grossly under-funded since the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), resulting in the introduction of tuition fees and other levies under the auspices of Parent-Teachers Association (PTA). Limited resources have led to poor educational facilities. According to USDA (2007), only 42 percent of rural girls are enrolled in school compared with 72 percent of urban girls. In the north, Muslim communities favour boys over girls in deciding which children to enrol in secondary and elementary schools. In the south, economic hardship also restricts many families to send girls to school and, instead, they are directed into commercial activities such as trading and street merchandizing. In the area of health, the women-folk have been grossly affected due to the fact that the major burden of bearing and rearing of progeny is borne by them. The introduction of fees in health institutions has raised the cost of health delivery services above the means of the majority of rural deliveries. This has led many Nigerian rural dwellers to result in self-medication, or health care outside the clinics and hospitals such as patronizing religious centres and herbalists.

Efforts made by government to Alleviate Rural Feminine Youth poverty.

Successive Governments in Nigeria have introduced several programmes in order to improve the standards of living of rural people. Such programmes include the establishment of the People’s Bank, National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Recovery (MAMSER).The Directorate of Food Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) and the Better Life Program (BLP) for rural women.

It is pertinent to note that most of these programmes change arising from also change of government. For instance, MAMSER was renamed during Abacha regime to National Orientation Agency (NOA) with the same function while Better life program was replaced by the Family Support Program (FSP) under the same regime. Most of the programs were designed following the top-down approach

whereby the services provided by the planners were often not those required by the targeted group, and thereby resulting in waste of the nation's resources without deriving any significant benefits by the target group.

A person that is alleviated from poverty must be empowered and helped to permanently overcome poverty rather than just achieving a temporary relief. This could be done by helping him or her to: secure a sustainable job, acquire skills that would be enough to provide regular source of earnings and actively contribute towards the national productivity level.

Surveyed Data Analysis.

Socio-economic Characteristics of the Respondents.

Table 1 shows that the age of the respondents ranged from 15-30 years and 7.5% of the respondents were within 15-20 years, 56% were within 21-25 years, 36.5% were within 26-30 years of age. Majorities (60.0%) of the respondents were married, 32.5% were single while 16% were divorced, and 7.5% were widowed. A large percentage (38.0%) of those married was living with their parents or husbands parents. Educational status reveals that 25.0% had secondary school education, 29.5% junior secondary education, 27.5% primary education and 12.5% tertiary education. It is pertinent to note that despite the fact that Ekiti State is considered as a fountain of knowledge, about 5.5% of the female in the rural areas of Gboyin Local Government Area has no formal education. Above forty percent (40.0%) were farmers (helping their in-laws in their farms), 22.0% were civil servants, 25.0% were traders(engaged in petty trades such as selling credit cards, engine oil and provisions) while 10.5% were not working at all (unemployed). Of the 22.0% that were civil servants, majority were junior staff working as cleaners, helpers, ward maids' messengers and clerks. This is expected because of their low educational status. The respondents had large family sizes which contained 5-7, 8-10 and above 10 members in 48.5, 16.5 and 14.0% respectively. It could be inferred that rural female youths in Gboyin Local Government of Ekiti State are of low educational status with large family sizes but unskilled.

Facilities available in the environment

The respondents agreed that there were electricity, hospitals/health centers, pipe borne water and good roads in their environment, but most of them were not functioning (see table 1).

Pipe borne water: The Federal Government initiated and sponsored water projects in an attempt to address one of the Millennium Development Goals of access to clean water by 2015. The project was commissioned early in the year 2007 but up till the time this research work is carried out, none of them is fully completed.

Health delivery system: There are health centers, maternity centers and hospitals in some of the villages but most of them were ill-equipped and most of the

Table 1: Socio-economic Characteristics of the Respondents.

Variable	Frequency(N=200)	Percentages
Age		
15-20 years	15	7.5
21-25 years	112	56.0
26-30 years	73	36.5
Marital status		
Single	65	32.5
Married	88	44.0
Divorced	32	16.0
Widowed	15	7.5
Family size		
2-4	60	30.0
5-7	97	48.5
8-10	33	16.5
>10	10	14.0
Highest level of education		
No formal education	11	5.5
Primary education	45	27.5
Junior secondary education	59	29.5
Senior secondary education	50	25.0
Tertiary education	25	12.5
Facilities in the localities		
Good road network	190	95.0
Hospitals/health centre	165	82.5
Electricity	164	82.0
Pipe borne water	190	95.0
Primary occupation		
Civil servants	44	22.0
Trading	35	17.5
Farming	85	42.5
Unemployed	36	18.0
Number of medical doctors in hospitals/maternity		

time without expatriates.

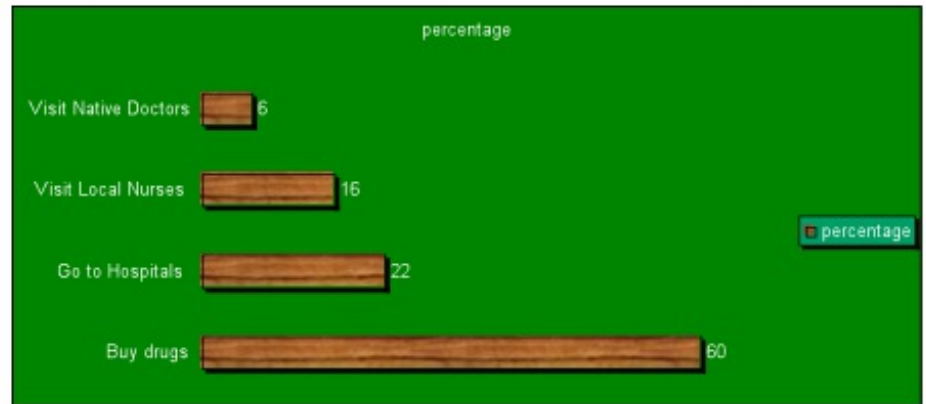
Majority of the villages (67.5%) had between 2-4 medical doctors in their hospitals/ health centers, 20.0% had less than two medical doctors while 12.5% had none. Of the 67.5% with 2-4 medical doctors, only 45.0% were resident doctors while the remaining lived in the State capital and visit the hospitals during working hours. This practice is seen as dangerous as there might be emergency cases any time of the day and night. Eighty percent (80.0%) stated that drugs were not available in the hospitals/maternity homes. Only 22% of the respondents visit the hospitals when sick, 60.0% buy drugs, 16.0% visit local nurses while 6.0% patronized local/native doctors (figure 1). Majority of the respondents (89.0%) indicated that they always travel to the State capital (Ado-Ekiti) during emergencies. The implication of this is that the health care delivery service in the study area is inadequate.

None	25	12.5
<2	40	20.0
2-4	135	67.5
5-6	0	0.00
Are there adequate drugs in the hospitals?		
Yes	24	12.0
No	176	88.0
Types of school present in the locality		
Public primary school	200	100.0
Private primary school	120	60.0
Public secondary school	200	100.0
Private secondary school	60	30.0
College of education	0	0.00
Polytechnics	0	0.00
University	0	0.00
Things provided in the schools by the government from 1999 till date		
Text books	0	0.00
Note books	124	62.0
Laboratory equipments	0	0.00
Classrooms	188	94.0
Sports equipments	0	0.00
Students scholarships	0	0.00

Source: Field survey, 2007

Figure1: Health Care Behavior/Patronage

Educational sectors: The study found that there were both primary and secondary schools in the locality. However, none of the towns/villages has a College of Education, Polytechnic or University (Table 1). This necessitated the rural-urban migration of those seeking admission to higher institutions.



Source: Field Survey, 2007

Considering the facilities available in the schools, provisions were made for libraries, laboratories and arts studios in terms of buildings but 83.0% of the science laboratories, libraries and art studios were ill-equipped.

Efforts were made to find out what the respondents benefited from the free education program since 1999. The study revealed that majority of the respondents (62.0%) was given exercise books. None was given text books or scholarship. Efforts were made to ask about the things provided to the schools in their locality since 1999 by government. Majority of the primary schools benefited from the provision of three-classroom block of the Universal Basic Education to replace the dilapidated ones. This is in line with the assertion of Ebigbola (2000) that the educational sector in Nigeria has been grossly underfunded since the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). It could be inferred from the above that the recent democratic government has not made any significant effect on the educational sector in the rural areas in general, as well as on the education of the girl-child.

Electricity: The presence of electric poles and cables in all the villages were pronounced in the five

villages surveyed. However, majority of the respondents (82.0%) stated that electricity was not always available while 18.0% believed that the poles and cables were mere decorations. This is expected due to the nation-wide power shortage in spite of the huge amount of money pumped to the power sector by the Obasanjo administration. For instance, at the eve of his departure, he awarded a 16 billion power contract. Official corruption is a major problem to the development of the power sector; it is for this reason that the on-going House of Representatives panel probing the fraud in the power sector is justified. Efforts were made to find out the respondents storage coping strategies as well as the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT). Majority of the respondents indicated that they preserved their farm products using the traditional method of salting and drying while mobile phones, radio and television the major ICT tool available in the environment. Thus it could be said that the rural people in Ekiti State are still lagging behind in the use of ICT tools. It is paramount to note that few elites in the areas used generator to generate electricity. This is quite expensive and can affect the provision of other essential things at home and the fact that the fume generated is dangerous to human health.

Good Road Network: It is paramount to note that almost all the villages in Ekiti State enjoy good road network. Both the successive and present civilian governments make road construction a priority as they believed this will encourage local and foreign investors operation in the State.

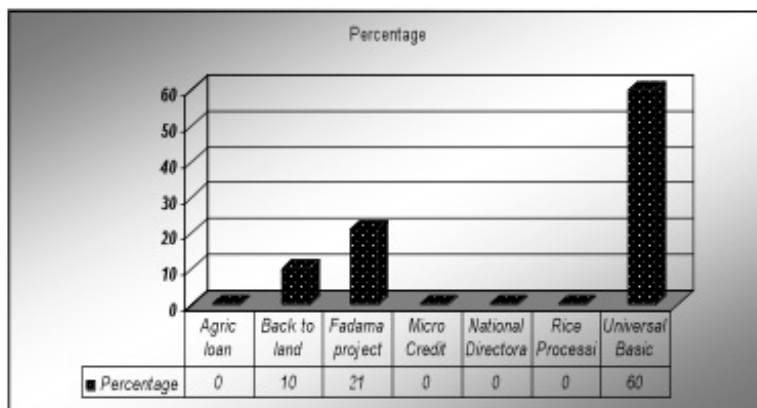
Youth Empowerment Programmes: A number of programmes were initiated for youth's empowerment in Ekiti State since the democratic government. These include: The Fadama project, Universal Basic Education, Agricultural Loan schemes, National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Back-to-Land programme, Micro-credit scheme, Rice processing industries and cottage industries.

Of all the programmes, 60% of the female youths from Gboyin Local Government Area benefited from the Universal Basic Education programme, 21.0% benefited from the Fadama project while 10.0% benefited from the Back to land programme. None of the female rural youth benefited from the Agricultural Credit Scheme, Micro credit and the National Directorate of Employment schemes as well as the rice processing schemes (see figure 2) as most of the government's youth employment schemes were concentrated in the urban areas of the State.

Figure 2: Government Youths Empowerment Programmes-% of Beneficiaries

Girl-Youth Marginality and Gender Violence in Rural Areas

Efforts were made to find out whether the female youth were aware of gender discrimination and their view about it. Eighty per cent (80%) indicated that they were aware of gender discrimination. However, 62.5% of them indicated that they subscribed to equality between men and women while 32.5% did not subscribe to it. Reasons given for not subscribing was that men were created to be head hence felt no desire for gender equality. While finding out whether female genders were marginalized or not, majority (68.0%) answered yes while 22.0% were indifference and 10.0% answered no.



Source: Field Survey, 2007

Efforts were made to find out the various types of violence /abuse they suffered. Figure 3 shows that the female youth in the study area have experienced all the abuse/discrimination listed, with lack of access to land being the highest (70%) followed by unemployment (67.5%), female genital mutilation (60%), battering by opposite sex/spouse(44%), sexual harassments (30%), and rape (12%). It was gathered during the interview survey that majority of the female respondents that engaged in farming and trading preferred wage paid jobs.

Figure 3: Gender violence/abuse/discrimination against female youths

Combating Rural Feminine Youth Poverty and concluding remarks.

The study found through a field survey that rural female youths in Gboyin Local Government of Ekiti State are of low educational status, low wage earners with large family size, unskilled and some unemployed. They have access to good roads but lacked electricity and pipe borne



Source: Field Survey, 2007

water. There were no tertiary institutions in the locality while the primary and secondary schools present were ill-equipped. The female youths in the area suffered various forms of abuses/discriminations ranging from rape to sexual harassments, unemployment, and genital mutilation, beating by opposite sex and lack of access to agricultural lands. They benefited from very few youth empowerment programmes hence could be said that they are grossly marginalized and still living in abject poverty. In an attempt to reduce gender discrimination as well as poverty at the local level, the following recommendations are made:

- There is the need to formulate the right policies to cater for both the rural and urban dwellers and for all genders in general, but for the rural feminine youths in particular to witness substantial progress in our society as a whole.
- Youth empowerment programmes as well as income generating opportunities should not be concentrated in the urban areas, rather they should be equally be extended to the rural areas so as to encourage rural youth participation and reduce urban drift.
- Special attention should be paid on the girl-child education in the rural areas to reduce the problematic issue of drop-outs, early pregnancy and pre-mature marriage.
- Teacher training colleges, technical schools and vocational institutions should be vigorously pursued at the grassroots level to improve economic resources available at the rural areas as well as their quality of life.
- Family planning units should be established in rural areas, while the use of condom and the need to delay sex should be promoted among the youths.

- Efforts should be made by State and Federal Governments to complete the projects embarked upon in the rural areas.
- There is need to review the Land Use Decree of 1978 in order to ensure its workability in the rural areas.
- Social amenities should be provided to encourage workers to live in rural areas as well as citing of small-scale industries (SMES).
- Efforts to empower women are not likely to succeed without the support of men.

This is because in virtually all parts of the world, men dominate positions of power and decision making and resource allocation. Men have better access to education and employment and greatly influence social thinking and policies affecting women, hence there is need for men's cooperation to engender all sexes, gender empowerment, reduce discrimination and rural feminine youth poverty.

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