

# Women and Poverty in Nigeria: Agenda for Poverty Eradication

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## Abstract

Women constitute a vital social group in all known human societies. Apart from playing a very significant role in the continuity of society through reproduction and socialization, their economic, social and political roles cannot be overemphasized. Yet, this vital group has been mitigated with very harrowing challenges in their various respective societies. In Nigeria where the level and rate of poverty have skyrocketed over the years, women continue to face daunting and debilitating challenges. In fact, despite every efforts made by the Nigerian authorities and other non-formal organizations towards poverty reduction in the country, this problem has continued to mitigate women from living happily and contributing their own quota to national growth and development. This negative trend calls for urgent concern. This paper utilized secondary data to study women and poverty in Nigeria. The objective of the paper is to analyze the condition of women under persistent poverty with the view of suggesting how the problem can be effectively dealt with in Nigeria. The paper argued that, although women contribute greatly in societal growth and development, they have continued to suffer unjustly in precarious condition of poverty due to their underprivileged class position in the society. It was suggested in conclusion that until the structural imbalances in the existing social system was corrected by means of poverty eradication agenda; women will not only continue to suffer from poverty but the future effects may be catastrophic to social order in the country.

## Introduction:

The history of women has hitherto been one that is associated with abject poverty. In Nigeria as in other parts of the world, the culture has been the grim responsibility of women, like other members of the underprivileged and downtrodden class, to feed, serve, work, and fight and even die for the privilege class. Ogwumike (2012) reported that two-third of work in the world were done by women. Yet, women owned only ten percent of world's income and one tenth of the world's property. This has put them into unfortunate and sympathetic conditions characterized by untold hardships, general apathy for everything and intolerable struggle for survival.

In Nigeria today, where skyrocketing poverty have spread across the nation, it can only be more excruciating for women to access some common basic things such as good drinking water, food, toiletries, housing, employment, cooking utensils, drugs and medical attention, and other socio-psychological requirements that are needed for average quality living. Yet, some level of socioeconomic and psychological stability would be required by women for them to be able to effectively do their expected role to the society Amaka (2007). But given their present situation of both absolute and relative poverty in the country, women can only do little to nothing both to themselves and to the society.

When women lag behind in their expected positive role as it is the case of Nigeria today, the society suffers greatly in terms of achieving profound peace, order, stability, growth and sustainable development. No wonder, Nigeria is currently militated by perpetual crisis as characterized by chains of social milieu ranging from corruption, to ethno-religious conflicts and terrorism, all threatening the very foundation of the corporate existence of the country as a political entity.

However, a lot was done by both the Nigerian authorities and other non-governmental bodies towards poverty alleviation specifically among women and Nigerians in general. The creation of established poverty alleviation programmes such as the national poverty eradication programme (NAPEP), national directorate of employment (NDE), better life programme (BLP), national land development authority (NALDA) are among many other good examples (Ogwumike and Amolaran, 2000). Nevertheless, all these schemes never made great impact in effectively addressing the problem. In fact, women condition is becoming worse by the day and if drastic steps were not urgently taken towards effectively addressing poverty in Nigeria, especially among women, there is likely to be a wanton catastrophic impact on the country and perhaps the world. Thus, this calls for urgent concern. It is against this background that this paper arises to analyze the problem of women and poverty in Nigeria. The paper is divided into five sections, introduction, conceptual definition and theoretical framework, analysis, summary and conclusion, and recommendations.

## Definition of key concepts and theoretical framework

*WOMEN*: in this paper, refers to the plural of the English word 'WOMAN' which means the feminine gender or

the female folk. It is the opposite sex of man often refers to as girl, lady, woman, madam, wife, Miss, Mrs. Etc. Women constitute one of the social groups in all human societies. They play a vital role in the creation and perpetuation of human society. For example, as mothers, they reproduce children and by so doing, they provide the society with its members. As wives, they not only constitute sources of succor and psychological ease to other members of the family, but they also give moral and social instructions profound to the socialization of younger generation, that is besides doing other domestic and extracurricular functions. In the contemporary societies, women have also excelled beyond what was known to be their traditional functions. Today, women are medical doctors, engineers, pilots, industrialists, leaders, teachers, managers, etc (Umar, Amaka, 2007). In fact, the relevance of women in the society, historically and otherwise, cannot be over-emphasized.

*POVERTY*: It is always difficult to define the concept of poverty because drawing the line between the rich and the poor is not usually easy. However, this study refers to poverty simply as the inability of an individual to live an easy and comfortable livelihood due to difficulty in accessing basic means of daily survival. Such basics include things like food, shelter, dependable income, clothing, education, etc. Accordingly, Garba(2006) refers to poverty as a lack of command over basic consumption needs, which mean, in other words, that there is an inadequate level of consumption giving rise to insufficient food, clothing and/or shelter, and moreover the lack of certain capacities, such as being able to participate with dignity in society. The World Bank has also defined the concept in the same context as the inability to attain a minimum standard of living (World Bank Report, 2008).

This work is located within the orthodox feminist-Marxist theoretical perspective of society and social phenomena. The school is an analytical explanation of the position of women in society using the theoretical tenets of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. It is argued that the material arrangement of the existing social system determines human behaviors and social phenomena in the society (Ake, 2003). For example, the structure of a capitalist society consists of two classes – bourgeois class and proletariat or underprivileged class. Most women fall within the underprivileged class, that is, the poor and the downtrodden masses. This class suffers too much abuses and neglect by the bourgeois or Ruling class. The means of production and opportunity for survival and comfort is owned and controlled by the ruling class who utilizes it for their interest to the detriment of the masses. This singular act causes endemic deprivation among the masses that constitute the majority in terms of population as against the few elements of the ruling class. The end result here is poverty of the plenty in the mixed of opulence of the few (Onoge, 2003). In fact, the intention of the ruling class is to perpetuate ravaging poverty of the masses using all sorts of hypocritical and deceitful means so as to maintain and perpetuate its class interest.

In order to legitimize and further their interest, the state and its institutions have always served as a virile tool in the hands of the ruling class. It is in this context that Marxists scholars like Lenin, and Mills, argues that poverty, is common features of a capitalist society and are usually associated with the class of the downtrodden masses (Maduagwu, 2000). They also believe that the precarious condition under which the poor find themselves which does not give them any chance to contribute to the societal development posed a serious threat to its stability. This explains why unacceptable ways of life are commonly associated with the poor people. Thus, poverty and utter neglect of the condition of the poor are the main causes of social milieu in the capitalist society.

Most women in Nigeria, as in other developing economies, fall within the underprivileged class, that is, the poor and the downtrodden masses. As members of the same social class, women suffer the same fate with other masses in the capitalist system (Umar, 19980). That this can be seen in the conditions of life of women in Nigeria's rural areas where poverty is most prevalent and even at working places, as well as, in the domestic sphere. That, although the situation is being supported and perpetuated by the existing capitalist economy, the School also saw patriarchy as the system that was the genesis of the present unfortunate status of women in the society. Finally, the school is of the view that the condition of women in society may have to continue until the capitalist system in operation ceases to exist. Thus, it was suggested that women should join other progressive groups in agitation for better conditions of living free from poverty.

**Women and poverty in Nigeria:** over the years, abject and protracted poverty is a common feature of the Nigerian society. 65% of Nigerians live below the poverty line without any access to basic goods, services and commodities (NBS, 2012). Since women constitute almost half of the population going by the latest population census in the country, it is convenient to say that most women are the victims of poverty in Nigeria today. As a result of the deepening poverty profile of the country, most households in Nigeria are more concerned with the survival needs of their families' members (Ogwumike, 2012). Poverty is not only a reality in Nigeria, but most Nigerian women who should put a helping hand to their families are also poor. With their low educational status,

lack of basic skills and general unemployment condition, the poverty status of rural women in the country is even worse.

However, Nigeria as a nation is not poor as this unfortunate Poverty situation exist in the midst of abundant resources which is enough to cater for the general needs of the entire citizens. For example, Nigeria is the sixth richest oil producing country in the world. In terms of agriculture, the country has great potentials owing to its highly fertile soil and it has abundant land mass adequate enough for any socioeconomic and technological activity. With over 150 million people, there is enough potential for adequate manpower which may be required for any kind of developmental activity. Again, the country boast of over 50 universities and that is beside other higher institutions that should be involved in manpower development. Yet, poverty, especially among women, thrives in the country. Nevertheless, the reason for this paradox is not farfetched.

Sociologist like Onoge (2003) argued that structural forces within the class divided society shape the way in which socio-economic resources are distributed. The ruling class in Nigeria control instruments of distributions of resources and instead of ensuring equitable distribution; they only serve their own class and personal interest to the disadvantage of the masses that constitute the majority. Incidentally, most women in the country fall within this structurally disadvantage group and this explains why there is wide spread poverty among women in Nigeria. In this process women end up with little or no income. The system unjustly treat the women, especially in the rural areas and lower rank of their working places, without recourse to their basic survival needs and as such leaving them in helpless and hopeless conditions of poverty (Egware, 1997). In fact, while most the women wallow in perpetual impoverishment the ruling class members continue to enjoy their loot in their comfort zones.

Women like other Nigerian masses groups hoped for a better deal with the coming of democracy in the country in 1999. But this hope was dashed as the Obasanjo administration pursued and implemented anti-people economic and fiscal policies ( Adelokun, 2008). Although women were include in the top echelon of government, policies and programmes, however, resources supposedly meant for the provision of meaningful education, employment opportunities, and infrastructure that will better the living standards of the people, especially the women were diverted, siphoned, corruptly embezzled or mismanaged by the ruling class occupying powerful positions of influence in the society (Ribadu, 2006). Several billions of naira from the public treasury meant for overcoming poverty has been looted by political leaders. New York Times (2005) reported that Nigeria is the epitome of wasted potentials and squandered opportunity in Africa. This has negatively impacted on many generations of Nigeria women who with no good school to attend, no employment opportunities, and no sufficient basic infrastructures have to contend with poverty. The present administration of President Goodluck Jonathan has not done any better as incessant cases of corruption at all levels of governance is the order of the day (Opeyemi, 2012).

Although the issue of poverty in Nigeria is heartbreaking, official sources show that it is a northern phenomenon (Soludo, 2008). Further, the Nigerian economy, under the Obasanjo's democratic regime, was hurriedly pushed into the global neo-liberal capitalist economic system through programmes like privatization and commercialization of the public sector. Ake (2003), observed that the various liberalization programmes have succeeded in selling the Nigerian economy into the hands of a very few bourgeoisies to the disadvantage of the masses. It was to be followed by retrenchment of workers and sell of public properties. These actions of the government forced poverty on the people, especially women who will have to grapple with both personal and domestic challenges.

However, various governments made different responses to the problem of the poverty in Nigeria. For instance, some of the structures put in place include, the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), the Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), etc. These projects were expected to initiate and execute policies and programs towards poverty eradication through self –employment for self-reliance among the unemployed Nigerians. Several billions of naira was budgeted yearly to make the program very effective. Yet the problem of unemployment especially among women appears to be larger than life in Nigeria (Egware, 1997). This is because Nigeria is one country in the world where government agencies and parastatals constitute nothing more than a conduit pipe whereby public funds are grossly siphoned into the private pockets of the bourgeoisie (Adelokun, 2008). As a result of this unpatriotic and infamous act, women and other underprivileged groups have continued to live in the condition of ravaging poverty.

However, the consequence of the perpetuity of women in protracted poverty in any society is not only wanton but could be catastrophic. In fact, Nigerian women from their various communities and working places are already responding to their poverty situation in various sympathetic, infamous and very unfortunate ways. For

example, in many northern Nigerian communities where poverty is very high, especially in the rural areas most women have resorted to petty trading, hewing of woods and begging in order to support their families to make ends meet. This has no doubt exposed them to lots of risk (Soludo, 2008). This may be one of the reasons why HIV/AIDS cases are very common among women in the rural areas. Today, many young girls, including minors engaged in different kinds of dangerous and deviant practices such as prostitution, drug peddling, and political thuggery in their bid to support themselves and their families to conquer poverty (Amaka, 2007). The persistent occurrences of forced labor and child trafficking involving women and the girl child across Nigerian cities and other countries in the world can also be linked to the problem of poverty. Some men in various areas across the country have since cosigned their wives and the girl child to work in the farm and therefore denied them the opportunity of acquiring education because of poverty reasons. The various problems of delinquency and other criminal cases bedeviling the country today may be as result of the inability of women to play their role as mothers to bring up children properly owing to poverty. Perhaps, if women were not suffering from poverty, street begging, armed robbery and even terrorism may not have been rampant in the country today. The fact remains that no woman can play her expected role meaningfully and effectively towards the upliftment of the society while facing harrowing problems of poverty. Thus, women and poverty in Nigeria suggests that until drastic measures were taken towards poverty eradication in the country, the future is bleak.

### **Summary and conclusion**

Women in Nigeria, like in other societies of the world, constitute a very formidable social, economic and political group whose contributions towards peace, order, stability, growth and positive change is profoundly required. Yet, majority of them wallow in abject and protracted poverty due to their structurally disadvantaged position in the existing social system. It was concluded that unless some drastic steps were urgently taken to eradicate poverty in the country, its perpetuity may have future catastrophic consequences.

### **Recommendations**

An integrated programme should be created by the government specifically for the eradication of poverty among Nigerian women. This scheme must be sufficiently funded and managed by women of proven integrity in the country.

There should also be in place an empowerment fund for girl-child education at all levels of the society. This must be made accessible to children of the poor.

Government should put in place a law that will make it mandatory for financial institutions and corporate enterprises to engage in poverty eradication schemes for women as a corporate social responsibility to their host communities.

Law prohibiting early marriage, child labor and child trafficking should be seriously enforced to deter perpetuation.

Enabling environment should be created for non-governmental bodies to come in especially in the area of provision of women empowerment infrastructures such as skills acquisition centers.

There should be a deliberate effort towards improving the health of women in the country by providing free health and medical services to them.

Special loan and investment fund should be created for women in agriculture and should be directed mostly to women in the rural areas.

Distant and open non-formal education centers should be put in place to cater for adult non-literate women in the communities.

There should be a deliberate policy put in place to motivate women's participation in partisan politics to make it possible for more women to be in position of authority in the country.

Government should urgently embark on rehabilitation and reconstruction of infrastructures in the country so as to fast-track development and make life easy for the people especially women.

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