

## **GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA: PROGRESS, POLICIES AND CHALLENGES (1999–2024)**

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### **Abstract**

Women empowerment has remained a central concern in global development discourse, yet in Nigeria persistent socio-economic, political and cultural barriers continue to limit women's autonomy, visibility and access to opportunities. Despite national and international commitments including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), women in Nigeria still experience disproportionate levels of poverty, low political representation, discriminatory laws and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. This study reviews key women empowerment initiatives in Nigeria from 1999 to 2024, identifies the major barriers that undermine progress, and evaluates the extent to which state and non-state interventions have enhanced women participation in economic, political and social spheres. The study adopted a systematic review approach, synthesizing findings from peer-reviewed articles, government reports, policy documents, and credible media sources. The study reveals that while various administrations introduced programmes aimed at improving women's welfare such as Women Fund for Economic Empowerment, Business Development Fund for Women, Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme, National Social Investment Programme and the Nigeria for Women Programme, their impact has been uneven, short-lived or poorly implemented. The Jonathan administration (2010-2015) recorded the most significant improvement in women's political inclusion, surpassing previous governments in female appointments and leadership opportunities. However, pervasive structural barriers including restrictive cultural practices, discriminatory legislation, political exclusion, gender-based violence and limited access to economic resources continue to hinder sustainable empowerment outcomes. The paper concludes that although notable progress has been made, women's empowerment in Nigeria remains far below global and national expectations. It recommends among others implementing long-term and well-funded empowerment programmes, expanding girls' education and skills acquisition, and ensuring women's equitable participation in governance and economic decision-making.

**Key words:** Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Political Participation, Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

Over the last few decades, the issue of women empowerment has preoccupied public discourse globally. The awareness that women are critical stakeholders in the sustainable development of nations is growing because of the important roles they play in sustaining the family, economy and other important social institutions of the society. In other words, there is an increasing recognition of women empowerment as a solution to the biting socio-economic problems like poverty, illiteracy, gender inequality, skewed access to opportunities and resources in the society, as well as women's lack of control over decisions concerning their lives (Udegbullem. 2025).

Today, anniversaries such as International Women's Empowerment Day, International Women's Day, International Day of Rural Women, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women among others are celebrated to give women a sense of worth and to remind them of their essential position as change-makers in the society (Peace Corps, 2024). Accordingly, the issue of women empowerment in forms of affirmative action, gender rights, gender equality and balance, women's political participation, socio-economic construct of women, and rural-urban women life style attract the attention of sociologists,

political scientists, civil society groups, politicians, economists, feminists, philosophers, teachers, environmentalists, journalists, scientists, and technologists (Ihemeje, 2015).

Women are the most active economic agents in most societies. Dias (2020), and the African Development Bank (2015), affirmed that they perform the majority of agricultural activities, own a third of all firms, and make up some 70% of employees. Furthermore, they are central to the welfare of their families and play a vital leadership role in their communities and nations. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) however noted that in 114 countries, the power and freedom of women to make choices and seize opportunities remain largely restricted, and the levels of women empowerment and gender gaps are substantially low (UNDP, 2023).

Multiple barriers are faced by women in achieving their full potential. These barriers include but are not limited to restrictive cultural practices, discriminatory laws, and highly segmented labour markets. In African societies, the domination of women by men is promoted and women are often saddled with only domestic roles (Olonade et al., 2021). Similarly, cultural and religious affinity is attributed to the issue of women's disempowerment. Such situations could be responsible for the silencing and continued marginalization of women to the point where they are discredited or considered invalid (Adelakun, 2019). According to Adesokan (2018), women in Nigeria also encounter varying forms of marginalization, vilification, domination discrimination, exploitation and exclusion from major public policy formulation and development programmes. In the political arena, for instance, they are relegated to the background and are circumscribed by structures, procedures and ideologies that favour men over women, and the existence of an invisible 'glass ceiling' also prevents them from moving up the social ladder.

In spite of the challenges, their position has remained a very important one in the annals of the country's history. Agbalajobi (2010) affirmed that their place in Nigeria's socio-political set-up has always been a strong one. Historically, some Nigerian women positively influenced the histories of their societies. In Ife, for example, Moremi Ajasoro is widely remembered and revered today because of her impact in the liberation of her people. Also, the legendary Queen Amina of Zazzau was a powerful force in the administration of the Hausa kingdom in the 15th and 16th centuries. Queen Idia of Bini Kingdom also belongs to the same league as Moremi and Amina (Igwe, 2025). Today, the names that denote the power of women are the late Margaret Ekpo, late Gambo Sawaba, late Funmilayo Ransome Kuti and others who are still alive including the renowned novelist, Chimamanda Adichie, and former Minister of Finance in Nigeria and the current President of the World Trade Organization, Ngozi Okojo Iweala among others.

Nigeria's eventual return to democracy in 1999 after several years of military rule marked a watershed in the country's development strides. Since then, efforts have been made to ensure the inclusion of women in economic, political, social and health policies, in line with the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2000-2015) which transitioned into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015-2030). Goal 5 of the SDGs focuses on gender equality. It emphatically targets among others, "women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life." This paper therefore reviews the initiatives for women empowerment in Nigeria (1999-2024), the barriers to the effective empowerment of women in Nigeria, and the approaches to overcoming the challenges of women empowerment in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual clarification**

Empowerment is a term that refers to both the process of self-determination and professional support of people to enable them to overcome their sense of powerlessness and lack of influence, and to recognize and eventually use their resources and chances (Afsana, 2017). It refers to policies and measures designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in the lives of people and in communities in order to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way, acting on their own authority. According to Indiresan (1999), empowerment is a process which helps people to gain control of their lives through raising awareness, taking action and working in order to exercise greater control. It is the feeling that activates the psychological energy to accomplish one's goals. Empowerment refers to increasing

the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their capacities.

According to Adesokan (2018), women empowerment therefore connotes the development of the mental and physical capacity, power or skills in women, for them to operate meaningfully in their social milieu, thereby experiencing a more favourable level of social recognition and subsequently enhancing their economic status. It is the process through which women, who are currently most discriminated against, achieve gender equity. Afsana (2017), opined that in the context of women, empowerment essentially refers to a feeling of awareness of one's own situation backed up with the knowledge, skills and information which could enable women to gain higher self-esteem and facilitate their role as decision makers in the current patriarchal society where women have always been subordinate to men. Empowerment enables women or groups of women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life (Surekharao & Rajamanamma, 1999). It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives, or to have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free from shocks imposed on them by custom, belief and practice.

In Nigeria, most women are underprivileged, suppressed and underrepresented in positions of power and authority. They are accorded lower status than their male counterparts in most cultures. Women work longer hours than men but are usually paid less and are more likely to live in poverty. They spend a significant amount of their day performing tasks such as cooking, carrying water and collecting fuel wood (Adebola, 2021). For women to break these barriers they need access to power over economic, social, psychological and cultural situations to enable them to have knowledge to transform the world to their advantage. Women empowerment could boost their capacity to make choices and to transform the choices made into desired actions and outcomes.

### **Theoretical Framework: Empowerment theory**

The empowerment theory is traced to Paulo Freire (1973), when he suggested a plan for liberating the oppressed people of the world through education. The theory was later propounded in 1976 by Solomon, although scholars such as Miley, O'Melia and Dubois (2001) made significant contributions in popularizing and shaping the theory. The major assumption of the theory is that personal, interpersonal and environmental resources are needed to update the skills, knowledge and motivation of people in order to achieve their valid social roles. According to the theory, powerlessness and hopelessness come as a result of the inability to harness resources to support the attainment of set goals. Power blockages produce powerlessness which invariably usurps system energy (Miley, O'Melia & Dubois, 2001). Empowerment theory suggests an effective support system for individuals, groups and communities that have been blocked from achieving their collective goals.

Payne (2005), asserts that empowerment practice helps individuals and groups to overcome social barriers and attain self-fulfillment within existing social structures. By applying this theory to issue in discourse, the empowerment theory shows that when women are empowered on any platform or programme whether as individuals or groups, it will help them overcome social barriers, to attain self-fulfillment and further enable them to gain the ability to achieve their highest personal aspirations and goals. Critics of the theory, however, are of the view that it advocates for a radical change, which might become antagonistic or counterproductive among the groups and their administrative bodies. The theory is often focused on the "how to do it" issues and the analysis of the barriers rather than the analysis of the kind of changes that are expected to be achieved (Barry & Sidaway, 1999). Today there is broader, albeit tacit, agreement in political and educational arenas that women can no longer be ignored. Empowerment of women in Nigeria can facilitate their access to power, resources and have control over their own lives. It can enhance women's ability to achieve their highest personal and collective aspirations and goals.

## Methodology

The study adopted a systematic review approach to examine women empowerment initiatives in Nigeria between 1999 and 2024. Relevant literature was identified through electronic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR, focusing on peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy documents, and credible media sources. Keywords such as “women empowerment in Nigeria,” “gender equality policies,” “economic and political empowerment of women,” and “women programmes 1999-2024” were used. Selected studies were screened for relevance, credibility, and alignment with the study objectives. Data were synthesized thematically to provide a comprehensive overview of initiatives, barriers, and the way forward. Emphasis was placed on programmes with verifiable evidence, official statistics, and documented policy frameworks. The analysis combined both qualitative descriptions and quantitative indicators reported in the literature.

### Initiatives for Women Empowerment in Nigeria from 1999 to 2024

Since Nigeria’s return to democratic governance in 1999, women’s empowerment initiatives have evolved from largely symbolic advocacy efforts to more structured, evidence-based interventions, reflecting changing policy priorities and development paradigms. One of the earliest initiatives in this period was the Child Care Trust, established in 1999 by the First Lady, Stella Obasanjo, with the objective of addressing poverty, health, nutrition, education, and welfare challenges affecting children, while indirectly supporting women as primary caregivers. The initiative was significant in elevating gender and child welfare issues within national discourse and emphasizing the importance of women’s participation in governance (Arum, 2010). However, despite strong advocacy rhetoric, empirical evidence demonstrating its long-term impact on women’s economic or political empowerment remains limited. Studies on First Lady-driven programmes in Nigeria consistently show that such initiatives often lack institutional continuity, legal backing, and systematic monitoring frameworks, making it difficult to quantify outcomes such as employment creation, income improvement, or enhanced political participation for women (Arum, 2010). This limitation was reflected in women’s continued marginalization in governance during the early 2000s, as female representation in ministerial appointments and legislative offices remained below 10%, despite public calls for inclusion (Vanguard, 2004).

Building on this advocacy-oriented phase, the Obasanjo administration introduced more formalized empowerment mechanisms, notably the National Women’s Empowerment Programme (WEP) in 2002. The programme sought to enhance women’s economic and social status through skills acquisition, vocational training, and access to microcredit, aligning with global development approaches that link women’s human capital development to poverty reduction. Despite its promising design, WEP suffered from weak implementation and inadequate documentation. There is little publicly available data indicating the number of women trained, the scale of credit disbursed, or the sustainability of enterprises supported under the programme. As a result, its actual contribution to improving women’s income levels, employment opportunities, or entrepreneurial success cannot be empirically verified. This absence of verifiable performance indicators reflects a broader challenge of early post-1999 empowerment policies in Nigeria, where political commitment was not matched by robust monitoring and evaluation systems (Mordi, 2022).

In an attempt to address women’s financial exclusion more directly, the government introduced the Women’s Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE) in 2004. The fund was designed to provide financial support to women entrepreneurs to start or expand businesses, acknowledging access to capital as a critical barrier to women’s economic participation. However, evidence suggests that WOFEE’s reach and effectiveness were limited. Many potential beneficiaries, particularly rural and low-income women, were excluded due to collateral requirements, weak financial literacy, and limited integration with formal financial institutions (CEDAW, 2008). Furthermore, there is a lack of comprehensive national data on loan disbursement volumes, repayment rates, business survival, or income growth among beneficiaries. Consequently, while WOFEE represented an important policy shift toward economic empowerment, its

fragmented implementation and weak accountability mechanisms significantly constrained its transformative potential.

The administrations of Presidents Umaru Musa Yar'Adua and Goodluck Jonathan made deliberate attempts to incorporate women into Nigeria's economic, social, and decision-making processes, with particular emphasis on health, welfare, and empowerment initiatives. During the Yar'Adua administration (2007–2010), the role of the First Lady, Mrs. Turai Yar'Adua, became prominent in shaping women-focused interventions, especially in the areas of public health and support for vulnerable populations. Her approach reflected a continuation of the First Lady-led empowerment model, with a strong humanitarian orientation rather than a fully institutionalized policy framework. One notable intervention was the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, which aimed to support Nigerian women suffering from cancer through improved access to diagnosis, treatment, and specialist care (Arum, 2010). This initiative was significant in drawing national attention to non-communicable diseases affecting women, particularly cancer, which had previously received limited policy focus.

In addition to these health-focused efforts, the federal government during this period developed the Integrated Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (IMNCH) Strategy, designed to strengthen Nigeria's health system and accelerate progress toward achieving selected Millennium Development Goals related to maternal and child health. The strategy sought to reduce maternal and infant mortality through improved service delivery, coordination, and access to essential healthcare interventions. While the IMNCH framework represented an important policy commitment, evidence suggests that implementation outcomes were uneven across states, with persistent regional disparities in maternal health indicators, highlighting challenges related to funding, health infrastructure, and human resource capacity. Consequently, although the strategy aligned with global development priorities, its impact on women's health outcomes remained constrained by systemic weaknesses within the health sector.

Beyond health interventions, Mrs. Turai Yar'Adua also launched the Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF) as her flagship empowerment project, aimed at addressing poverty, enhancing women's education, and supporting the empowerment of rural women. As part of this initiative, the First Lady directed the wives of state governors to align their pet projects with issues of poverty alleviation, women's education, and rural women's empowerment, thereby creating a nationwide network of First Lady-driven interventions (Arum, 2010). While this approach helped to mainstream women's empowerment concerns across states and increased visibility for gender-related issues, it also mirrored the limitations of earlier First Lady-led programmes. Specifically, the absence of standardized monitoring mechanisms, verifiable beneficiary data, and long-term sustainability plans made it difficult to assess the actual scale and durability of empowerment outcomes. As a result, although the Yar'Adua administration contributed to expanding the scope of women-focused initiatives, particularly in health and welfare, these efforts largely remained personality-driven and lacked the institutional depth required for sustained and measurable empowerment gains.

Following the demise of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in 2010, Vice President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan took over and completed their term as President. Goodluck re-contested and became Nigeria's 7<sup>th</sup> democratically elected president. According to Ibekwe and Chidiobi (2022), the issue of women empowerment is one particular aspect of interest in which the Jonathan administration has been highly rated on. He gave the Nigerian women a sense of belonging as well as a fair opportunity to participate in governance. For instance, his appointments at the executive level historically increased the percentage of women in office from 10% to above 30% which was above the international average of only 20% for women in elected office. The Jonathan administration demonstrated a stronger political will toward gender inclusion than previous governments, signaling a shift from symbolic recognition of women's roles to more substantive participation in decision-making.

The administration of Goodluck Jonathan took off with the appointment of 16 Female Cabinet Ministers, 9 Female Special Advisers; 12 Female Ambassadors and High Commissioners; 16 Female Judges of Court Of Appeal; 12 Female Permanent Secretaries; 16 Female Judges of the Federal High Court; 3 Female Judges of the Supreme Court; 6 Female Judges of the National Industrial Court; 16 Female Heads of Federal Tertiary Institutions; 14 Female Representatives in International Multilateral Organizations; 26 Female Heads of Federal Parastatals, Agencies and Departments; First Female President of Court of Appeal, Justice Zainab Bulkachuwa and a First Female Chief Justice of the Federation in the person of Justice Marian Aloma Mukhtar (Ihenwa, 2013). Also, it was during Jonathan's regime that a woman became the first Chairman of the Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) for the first time since it was instituted. No Nigerian head of state had put that many women in the top executive positions in the past.

According to Caleb (2014), it was under Jonathan that the Nigerian women attained the highest level of participation in the nation's social, political and economic life. President Jonathan's Transformation Agenda contained a National Gender Policy which mainstreamed or incorporated all aspects of government planning and development and which a major component of the policy was women empowerment in politics. The government through the policy ensured that there was growing awareness among women of the opportunities that lay ahead of them in active participation in politics. The Jonathan's administration was also the first government in Nigeria to appoint a woman Petroleum Minister in the person of Mrs. Dieziani Alison Madueke, the first President to elevate a woman to the rank of Rear Admiral in the Navy, the first President to commission the first woman Air Force Pilot Officer in the person of Blessing Liman, the first to admit the first set of Combatant Cadets into the prestigious Nigerian Defense Academy (NDA) and so many other firsts attributed to Nigerian since the country's leadership history (Ajah, 2014).

Besides politics, there were other economic empowerment programmes that were established by the president at that time. Two micro-credit schemes were set up to assist women: (1) Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE) and (2) The Business Development Fund for Women (BUDFOW). The two schemes were revolving facilities with an interest rate of 10%. In addition to these efforts, 77 skills acquisition centers were constructed and equipped across the country to increase income generation, through job creation, for women especially at the grassroots level (Ajah, 2014). Moreso, part of the government Subsidy Re-investment Program (SURE-P) Fund was also channeled to economic empowerment of women particularly to those in the rural areas like the widows, petty traders, subsistence farmers, the unemployed, the semi-skilled like the fashion designers, seamstresses, hair makers and so on. The government of Jonathan also saw to the establishment of the National Commission for Women which later metamorphosed into Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, and the National Center for Women Development (Ibekwe & Chidiobi, 2022).

Under the Buhari administration, empowerment programmes were initiated to support women and to facilitate their involvement in politics. Women were also substantially represented in the cabinet and held important positions in MDAs. In 2015, the administration launched the National Social Investment Program (NSIP) as a social welfare initiative created by the federal government of Nigeria to promote a more equitable distribution of resources to vulnerable populations, including women. The program which was operated under National Social Investment Office was implemented under four programmes – the N-Power Program, Conditional Cash Transfer, Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP), and the Home-Grown School Feeding Program (HGSF) – which addressed the negative effects of poverty and promoted economic development. However, the programs were not specifically targeted at empowering women. Rather, they targeted young Nigerians, impoverished individuals, entrepreneurs, and students irrespective of their gender. The programs provided young Nigerians with job training, education, and a monthly stipend, also providing start-ups for small and medium-scale enterprises, and increasing school enrollment by providing meals to students.

At the twilight of Buhari's administration, particularly on May 19, 2023, the government launched the National Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) Policy and Action Plan, Nigeria Country Gender Equality Profile, and the Development Partners Group on Gender (DPGG) Equality Women's Coordination Strategic framework for 2023-2028. The WEE Policy was to build on existing gender policies to address disparities faced by women in accessing financial benefits and opportunities in various sectors. The initiatives sought to enhance gender equality, reduce poverty, and coordinate efforts among development partners to promote women's rights and empowerment in Nigeria. Scholars argue that the frameworks successfully unified Nigeria's gender agenda by providing a coherent national reference point for women's economic empowerment policies (Akinwale & Olofinbiyi, 2023). The WEE Policy, for instance, elevated women empowerment from a welfare concern to a macroeconomic strategy, consistent with global evidence linking gender inclusion to economic growth (Kabeer, 2016). The DPGG coordination mechanism strengthened alignment between government and development partners, addressing duplication and policy incoherence highlighted in earlier studies (Okeke & Onah, 2021). The Nigeria Country Gender Equality Profile improved the availability of sex-disaggregated data, which scholars identify as critical for effective gender-responsive policymaking (World Bank, 2023). Despite implementation constraints, the initiatives laid an institutional and analytical foundation upon which subsequent administrations can build more sustainable and scalable women's empowerment programmes (UN Women, 2022). However, there are doubts whether the Tinubu administration will follow through with the policies, considering that policies and programmes introduced by the Buhari administration are currently being reviewed, sidelined or remodeled citing issues of corruption, illegality among other reasons.

The administration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu officially commenced on May 29, 2023 after he emerged victorious at the general elections. One year into the administration, little has been observed regarding women empowerment initiatives. On March 8, the presidency unveiled the "Nigeria for Women Programme". According to the Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, the programme which encompasses the National Women e-Market Portal, National Helpline, Naija Save Nigeria and Nigeria Integrity Brigade Project is dedicated towards promoting women's economic empowerment as well as ensuring social inclusion (FMINO, 2024). Similarly, the First Lady, Remi Tinubu launched the Renewed Hope Initiative Programme for South West Women, targeting only women from one of the six geopolitical zones in the country. The focus of the programme is on women with disability and small business owners (Bello, 2024). However, not much has been achieved under the new initiatives and whether the Tinubu administration will introduce more women empowerment schemes is left to be seen.

There are many other professional women empowerment groups such as Nigeria Association of Women in Business, National Association of Women Journalists, Association of Women Lawyers, Association of University Women, Medical Women's Association of Nigeria that have empowered and exist to empower women through education. There are also religious groups such as Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), Federation of Muslim Women Association (FOMWON), and Muslim Sisters' Organization of Nigeria that have empowered women to understand about themselves, their roles as women, and how they can use their position to influence decisions especially in their families. There are also women political groups like Council of Women Politicians, Network of Justice, Women in Politics and Policy, Women Rights Collective which encourage women through seminars, publications and conferences (Arum, 2010). These organizations have expanded women's access to knowledge, skills, and networks, and have enhanced their socio-economic, political, and leadership capacities. Consequently, women are increasingly able to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes at household, community, and national levels.

### **Barriers to the effective empowerment of women in Nigeria**

Women in Nigeria face multiple challenges in achieving empowerment. According to Sebany, OlaOlorun and John (2020), women are relegated to the background with diminished agency and decision-making power in areas of economy, reproduction and social spheres. The household is a key site of

women's disempowerment. Rigid social structures dictate that men take on the role of the breadwinner and decision maker, while women take on domestic work and childcare responsibilities. Furthermore, these restrictive norms ensure women and girls have limited access to opportunities and resources that can foster their empowerment, leaving them vulnerable, and with limited agency and decision-making within their homes, ultimately creating inequitable relationships within the home. For example, only 44 percent of Nigerian women participate in decisions regarding their own healthcare in contrast to 82 percent of men (National Population Commission, 2019).

Gender norms also shape Nigerian women's mobility patterns, which in turn impact their access to education and ability to engage in work outside their communities. Additionally, gender-based discriminatory practices such as child marriage and teen pregnancy continue to be prevalent in Nigeria. Due to their association with school drop-out and early childbearing, these issues further compound the situation for girls, limiting their earning potential and life choice options beyond the domestic and reproductive sphere (NPC & ICF International, 2014). Egwurube (2016), further summarizes the barriers to women's empowerment into legal, economic, political and socio-cultural barriers.

*i). Legal constraints:* There are many legal constraints to women self-actualization in Nigeria and such gender-unfriendly legal provisions are contained in Federal, State and Local Government rules and regulations. For example, the Constitution stipulates that a person is of full age if he is 18 years and above. However, it goes on to say that this is not the case of a married woman. The implication of this is that even when a woman is 12 years old but is married, she is considered to be of full age. This provision is the reason why child marriages are prevalent in many parts of the country. Also, Section 55 of the Labour Act bars women from being employed in night work except as nurses. Section 56 bars women from working in mines (Nwogu & Okonkwo, 2023).

*ii). Political constraints:* According to Egwube (2016), the political constraint to women empowerment is evidenced by their invisibility on the political scene. The number of women who hold important elective and administrative positions is extremely low. This is due to several reasons such as the relative unpreparedness or unwillingness by women to take part in the wear and tear of electoral and partisan political activities, occasioned by many other systemic constraints, the most important of which is male dominance and monopoly of decision making. Cultural beliefs and attitudes regarding the traditional role of women which relegates them to passive followership rather than active or assertive leadership roles in society also serve as constraints. Additionally, there is the phenomenon of indigeneity which implies eliminating women from running for elections because they are not indigenous to the area. Moreso, one of the major challenges faced by women empowerment has to do with the issue of acceptability. The appointments of many women into political offices are rather considered as an affront by the majority of their male political counterparts. Women are seen by these men as competitors who had taken over the positions they had long enjoyed.

*iii). Socio-cultural constraints:* The relative disempowerment of Nigerian women is attributable to socio-cultural factors such as the patriarchal system and 'the age-long inferior status the society bestows on women' (Sani, 2010). The patriarchal system is accompanied by a motley of cultural and religious beliefs some of which are integrated into customary laws and infringe on the rights of women. In some Nigerian communities, women cannot own land except through male relatives.

Afsana (2017), noted that violence against women, gender discrimination, low education, exploitation and harassment at workplace, divorce and desertion, are some of the problems and issues facing women empowerment. Hossain (2020), opined that women are still perceived as secondary citizens. There are inadequate female entrepreneurs because women are still regarded as being inferior to their men counterparts and more associated with subordinate positions. Women are not taken seriously when they embark on entrepreneurship which is why most women-led businesses are stuck as small and medium enterprises (SMEs).



## **Overcoming the challenges of women Empowerment in Nigeria**

Purnamawati and Utama (2019), advanced strategies for women empowerment that appear relevant and applicable in every human society including Nigeria. These strategies take on economic, political, social and legal perspectives. According to the authors, empowering women will require efforts to increase their ownership and control of economic and noneconomic resources. Thus, empowering women economically may imply placing priority on rural women's groups, providing capital for them, and improving rural communication facilities and infrastructure that support the expansion of access to new information that is more accurate for women of small and medium entrepreneurs. Similarly, Dias (2020), cautions that women's economic empowerment is difficult to achieve without including them in decision-making and authoritative positions within political institutions. More often than not, Nigerian women's education is limited to learning skills which can be used in the household. While this is useful for women to earn basic living, it does very little to challenge the structures which perpetuate discrimination. Women need to be encouraged to enter fields which will grant them opportunity to access high-paying jobs. Entrepreneurship skills need to be encouraged by granting loans and funds for small-scale industries which are run by women.

According to Olomukoro (2015), the process of empowering Nigerian women and integrating them into the mainstream of the country's development must start from the grassroots. Government agencies and private organizations should organize training programmes with various skill acquisition units for rural women. This will ensure financial independence and better standard of living. Parents, guardians and the society as a whole must allow and encourage their female children to enroll in schools early enough so that they will be able to acquire a proper awareness of their potential, rights and higher responsibilities in society. Local governments should particularly assume a special role in ensuring that female children are henceforth properly enrolled in primary schools to enable them overcome the primary hurdle of illiteracy.

Okeke (1995), itemized four major strategies to be adopted for women's empowerment in Nigeria. These include education, participation in the cash economy, participation in politics, and a review of the laws on the status of women. The suggestion is corroborated by McDowell's (1985), who stated that "women must have a greater access to information, education, employment and political participation". Education of women will equip them with more valuable skills and competences which will enable them to perform their duties more effectively. This could prepare them for noble and rewarding roles in social, economic and political spheres. Educated women who are gainfully employed are sources of income to their homes, as they are able to augment financially what the man provides. Therefore, there is no doubt that a woman's access to education will go a long way to improve her poor economic status as well as that of the entire family and the nation as a whole.

Socially, women empowerment may include approaches such as the installation of modern cultural values, such as hard work, self-reliance, efficiency, openness, and responsible attitude. This is to strengthen the power of the community, especially the weak groups who have powerlessness, both because of internal conditions (such as their own perceptions), or because of external conditions (such as being oppressed by unfair social structures). Other approaches may be social guidance, skills guidance, facilities or social assistance, including the development of productive economic enterprises, which are aimed at increasing women's abilities and needs and increasing their income.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The most active economic agents in most societies including Nigeria are women. The period of 1999-2024 during which the country has enjoyed uninterrupted democracy, successive administrations have initiated empowerment schemes aimed promoting women's economic, social, and political growth and development. In some administrations such as the Yar' Adua/Jonathan administrations which spanned from 2007-2015, programmes were put in place with notable impact felt by women. The Buhari administration equally tried by introducing welfare programmes which focused not only on women but youths and other vulnerable populations. Under the Obasanjo administration women empowerment failed to live to the desired standard despite efforts by the then First Lady, Mrs. Stella Obasanjo. The present administration

under president Bola Ahmed Tinubu has not made concrete efforts in implementing the only women empowerment programme that was launched by the president. Notwithstanding, women empowerment programmes introduced by the various administrations demonstrate Nigeria government's commitment to achieving desired changes as it relates to women's economic, political, health, and social sustainability.

In order to enhance the effectiveness of women empowerment in Nigeria, specific actions should be taken. The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development should expand microcredit access, vocational training, and skills acquisition programmes for rural and low-income women to increase their income-generating capacity. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and political parties should implement and ensure strict adherence to quotas, mentorship programmes, and leadership training to increase women's representation and active participation in elective and appointive positions. Local governments and educational institutions across Nigeria should ensure early enrollment of girls in schools and provide community-based awareness programmes to promote gender equality, reduce cultural barriers, and empower women to make informed decisions.

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