

**Sustainable Development in Nigeria:  
Roles of Women and Strategies for Their Improvement**

**By**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study analyses and discusses the roles of women, the different factors affecting their roles and suitable strategies for promoting the roles of women in sustainable development. The main purpose of the study is to encourage better participation of women in their achievement of the goals of sustainable development which includes lasting improvement on the quality of life. A questionnaire was utilised to collect data from women in Nigeria with particular reference to Ughelli Local Government Area, Delta State. The results show that the roles of women in sustainable development were mainly domestic in nature while the factors affecting the role of women in sustainable development were mainly social and family in nature. The first three strategies ranked as most important for improving women's role in sustainable development are based on educating the girl child in order to liberate women from poverty and become more involved in politics, social and economy of the nation. Based on the findings some recommendations are made. This paper may be beneficial to policymakers and educators in their search of strategies for improving the roles of women in sustainable development.*

**Keywords:** Gender equity, sustainable development, strategies and roles, women, education, Policy makers, educators and agencies.

## INTRODUCTION

There are numerous definitions of the term sustainable development but the one adopted for this study is the World Commission on Environment and Development (The Brundtland Commission) which is defined as “meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generation” (Nosike, 1996:53). This definition, given by the Brundtland Commission, in its 1987 report published by the United Nations, as “Our Common Future, is the most commonly accepted definition (Paul, 2008). With this definition, the concept of sustainable development was born. The concept of sustainable development is intended to embrace the idea of ensuring that the future generations inherit the Earth which supports their livelihood in such a way that they are no worse off than generations today (Pearce; Atkinson 1998). In this paper, the concept of sustainable development is considered as an improvement of lifestyles and well being, preserving natural resources and eco system for the present and future generations.

In order to promote sustainable development there is the need for citizens (males and females) to participate in the economy, policy and social development of the society. Unfortunately, although Women constitute over 50 percent of the population of the World, they are relegated to the background in every facet of life (Igbuzor, 2008). In Nigeria, for instance, although the 2006 National population census, reveals that women make up 48.78 % (about half) of the total population, only a small number of exceptional women have achieved prominence on modern political and government spheres. Several reasons have been adduced for the present imbalance position of women in Nigerian society today. The reasons include colonisation, past in dependence, history dominated by military rule, patrilineal system through male, literacy on the part of women which relegates women to the background (Agee, 1996; Oganwu, 1999). This indicates that gender disparity is affecting women’s role in sustainable development since most of their roles are domestic in nature (Agbola, 1996; Ogbuigwe, 1996).

Global awareness of the role of women in sustainable development has made nations, individuals, and groups of persons to think of strategies that enhance women’s role in sustainable development. In agenda 21, chapter 24, governments are urged to consider developing and issuing by the year 2000 a strategy of changes necessary to crminate constitutional, legal, administrative, cultural, behaviour, social and economic obstacles to women’s full participation in

sustainable development and in public life (United Nations, 2004). To achieve this, the United Nations gave active steps to implement gender equity in sustainable development; some of which are mentioned in this study.

The overall goal, in terms of women and sustainable development, is gender-mainstreaming of all policies-incorporating a gender perspective in all planning and decision making processes. The main purpose of this study therefore is to encourage better participation of women in their achievement of the goal of sustainable development, which includes lasting improvement on the quality of life. Consequently, this study determined the roles of women in sustainable development, the factors affecting their roles in sustainable development and suitable strategies to improve women's full participation in sustainable development in Ughelli South Local Government Area. This local government is owned by the Urhobo people, one of the 7 major ethnic groups in Delta State, Nigeria. There is no evidence in literature that research on roles of women in sustainable development has been carried out in this area in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover most of the data available on this topic are theories and opinions of individuals, group of persons and agencies.

The questions asked and answered in this study include: What roles do women play in sustainable development in Nigeria with particular reference to Ughelli Local Government area? What factors challenge or restrict the role of women in sustainable development? What perceptions do women have on strategies given by individual agency for improving the role of women in sustainable development? This study will be beneficial to policy makers and educators in their search of strategies for improving the role of women in sustainable development.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Nigeria, like some other African countries, has made efforts to promote gender equity by acceding to several policy commitments at global, continental, sub-regional and national levels. For instance, the Federal government of Nigeria formed a national policy on women in the year 2000 and this was revised in 2006 as the problem of imbalance of the roles of men and women in sustainable development continued. The new policy adopted is National Gender Policy. According to Igbuzor (2008), this policy is aligned with relevant international and national

instruments such as Beijing Platform for Action, New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), All Solemn Declaration for Gender Equity, African Protocol on people's Right and Right of Women, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), amongst others. In spite of these efforts, it is observed that there are challenges in translating the policy into action in terms of concrete programmes of inequality in the development approach in the country (Igbuzor, 2008).

Studies show that the status of women is one factor that has effects on mainstreaming women in development (Oppong and Abu, 1987). Generally, women receive high regard because of their domestic role than their economic, political and social positions. Yet they are primary and invisible food producers. According to Idisi (1996:263), "among the Urhobo people of Delta State, for instance, an ongoing study shows that while men own all land, less than 20% of them are engaged in diverse non-rural economic and socio-political activities." Over 90% of the women are involved in direct food and agro-economic production and petty trading. "Literature also shows that, politically, women do not play much role. Although it is well known that despite the impressive contributions of women to the society, prior to independence, it is only from 1976 that Federal Government began to appoint women in policy-making functions (Agee, 1996). In the current democratic era, there is a slight overall in the percentage of female political office holders at both appointive and elective levels. This increase is, however, still very far from the 30% recommended by policy frame work such as the Platform for Action and the National Gender Policy (Akosile, 2008).

Very few women are economical empowered because of their occupation and lack of formal education. In parts of Delta and Edo States of Nigeria, over 70% of the farmers are rural women and girls. They engage in a variety of farming activities ranging from clearing to marketing and storage of food products (Ikeoji, 2000). The knowledge and skills used by the females are mainly their traditional indigenous skills as majority of them are uneducated. This yields little economic reward and keep the women poor. As observed by UNICEF (1994), gender disparity works to the benefit of men who have political control. At the domestic level male control over the household works to the detriment of mothers relative to fathers and the detriment of girls relative to boys. Hence, women despite their multiple roles of domestic work, food production, family occupation, childbearing, and care generally experience the worst severities of extreme poverty with prospect of escape from it. For instance,

records show that Nigeria, the most populated African Nation is one of the poorest nations in Africa. 75 million Nigerians live in poverty, 7 million children do not go to primary school, 1 million die each year before the age five and at least three million people are living with HIV/AIDS (DFID, 2006). These are evidence of reproductive health problems on the part of women and children. Record shows (WHO) that Nigeria's mortality rate is the second highest in the world, after India. About 1,100 maternal deaths occur per 100, 000 live births (Raphel, 2008). Women in poor health can not participate effectively in sustainable development. We believe that all these problems enumerated and others could be solved if women are educated. Literacy is another factor affecting the role of women in sustainable development.

It is believed that although in many countries including Nigeria school dropout rates are steadily falling; they continue to be higher among girls than among boys. According to Akosile (2008) "the most recent available national MDG progress report states that in Nigeria, the gross enrolment ratio for boys has remained consistently higher than that of girls by over 10% with a male: female ratio of 55.9%:44.1%. At the level of secondary enrolment, girls' have a much higher drop out rate such that by terminal class only 48.83% reach senior secondary school. Consequently, only 39.70% of female student graduate from universities and 37.54% from polytechnics". This is because parents do not see the benefits of girls' education as girls are given away in marriage to serve the husband's family; so sons are given priority (Fact Sheet No. 23).

As a result of factors, affecting the role of women in sustainable development discussed above, there is a call for women liberation as awareness is the key to sustainable development (Agee, 1996; Ogbuigwe, 1996).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study utilizes primary and secondary data in Nigeria with particular reference to Ughelli South Local Government Area, Delta State. A questionnaire (see Annex 5) was issued and answered by 180 women randomly selected from one town and two villages (covering both urban and rural areas and representative of women in the areas). The questionnaire was interpreted to the non literates in their language and responses recorded by the research assistance. The secondary data include recent literature

and research work on how various agencies are promoting gender equity in Nigeria. The women were asked to indicate their perceived roles of women in sustainable development and factors affecting their roles. They were also asked to rank strategies they considered suitable for improving the roles of women in sustainable development. Analysis, conclusion and recommendations are based on the United Nations active steps for implementing sustainable development and literature available for improving sustainable development in Nigeria.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

### ***Roles of Women in Sustainable Development***

All the women's responses to the 10 statements (see annex 2) on the role of women in sustainable development showed that most women were responsible for the education of their children than men, for feeding the family, for fetching water and wood for domestic use, for clothing use, for clothing the children in the family, for general maintenance of the home as well as childbearing and rearing. (Mean = 3.00 for items 9 to 11 and 14 to 16 respectively). Majority of them (Mean= 2.92) agreed that the production of food crops was basically the function of women in our society. Moreover, the respondents (mean = 2.67) agreed that women tend to inculcate discipline into the children. The least role they (2.48) agreed that women were being responsible is social training of children. Thus, the women's responses were satisfactory as all the mean scores were above 2.00. These results on role of women in sustainable development show that women are responsible for majority of the family needs, and suggest that to a great extent, the work load of women in the family has not reduced. Women are still involved in their primary roles, as found by Agbola (1990), Fact sheet (No. 23 p 7), and UNICEF (1994). For instance, Agbola (1990) observed that, in Nigeria, over 90% of women are involved in direct food and agro-economic and petty trading. The results suggest that the roles of women in sustainable development have not drastically change even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

These results also negate the fourth step to active implementation to gender equity as suggested by the United Nations, Agenda 21, Chapter 24. It asked government to provide Programmes to promote the reduction of heavy workload of women and girl children at home and outside through the establishment of more and affordable nurseries and kindergartens by Government, local authorities, employers and other relevant organisations and the sharing of household tasks by men and women on as equal basis, and to

promote the provision of environmentally sound technologies which have been designed, developed and improved in consultation with women, accessible and clean water, an efficient fuel supply and adequate sanitation facilities. There is need, therefore, for women to be aware that their principle roles are not just childbearing and rearing, fetching water and wood for domestic use, and the production of food crops. Education will assist women to even perform these roles better in their families. Education will help them plan their families, delay their marriage and have fewer children. As on Facts Sheet No. 23, education will give the female child the opportunity to be less dependent on men later. It increases her prospects of obtaining work outside the home. Moreover, if a good percentage of women is properly educated on the elements of sustainable development and their desirability, then such women will be properly equipped to transmit values that could enhance sustainability development to their children (Ogbuigwe, 1996).

### ***Factors Affecting Women's Roles in Development***

Responses to the 9 statements (see Annex 3) showed that the factors affecting women's roles in sustainable development could be grouped into two namely societal and family factors. The societal factors (items 15, 17, 18, 19, 20) had a mean range of 2.90 - 3.0. All the respondents agreed that women's status is of great concern in our society and there is the problem of poverty, government preferring to give more jobs to males than to females, gender bias keeping population growth rate high and denying women routes to economic security. Majority of them (Mean = 2.90) agreed that companies and industries prefer to give more jobs to males than to females. For family factors (items 16, 21, 22, and 23) the mean range was 2.83 to 3.0. Results show that all parents prefer to give more opportunity to boys than girls. The least factor they (2.83) agreed affects the role of women was parents preferring to have more boys than females. In all, all the responses were above 2.00 which is the acceptable mean for each response. The result for factors affecting the roles of women in sustainable development is consistent with the findings of Almaz (1992) and United Nations (2004) report on Agenda 21, chapter 24. The results of the societal factors show that government, companies and industries still prefer to give more jobs to males than females. An indication that there is still problem of gender disparities, which could affect the role of women in sustainable development. The family factors affecting women's role in sustainable development reveal that parents prefer to have more boys than girls and they give more opportunity to boys than girls. Almaz (1992) in his study concluded that despite the benefits of education for girls and

women, a mixture of social, cultural and economic barriers keeps a larger proportion of girls and women out of school. Many families cannot afford to send girls to school because their labour is needed in the home and in the fields.

### ***Strategies for Improving Women's Role in Sustainable Development***

The responses to the 8 strategies (see Annex 4) indicates that the women ranked as first the statement, “ministries of Education should liaise with Ministry of Women Affairs in planning the developing specialized programmes that enhance girls’ education”. This was followed by the statement, “The National Commission for Women should develop the education for women”. Moreover, the statement that “More non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should be founded to take care of girl-child problems” was ranked as last strategy (see Table 4).

The first three strategies ranked as most important for improving women’s role in sustainable development are based on educating the girl child. These results suggest that the women perceived education as a means of liberating women from poverty and become more involved in politics, social and economy of the nation. These results are in line with third active steps to implementation of sustainable development given by the United Nations (2004) in Agenda 24 Chapter 21. The steps request government to take measures to eliminate illiteracy among females and to expand the enrolment of women and girls in educational institutions, to promote the goal of universal access to primary and secondary education for girl children and for women, and to increase educational and training opportunities for women and girls in sciences and technology, particularly at the post- secondary level. Although there is evidence that the federal government has established the universal basic education for primary and junior secondary for both sexes, the policy has been fraught with problems. Hence the Federal Government has been enjoined to establish and strengthen gender units or gender focal points at all levels in all ministries to ensure that the gender concerns are mainstreamed into policy making and budgetary processes (Akosile, 2008). This recommendation and others recommended by a coalition of non-governmental organisation which focuses on gender issues in Nigeria reveal that the suggested activities for effective implementation of the roles of women in sustainable development to some great extent have not been fully implemented. There is need therefore

to encourage more women in the role of sustainable development at the grass root level.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It could be concluded from this study that women play a big role in contributing to development like their male counterparts. They are responsible for meeting majority of the family needs. Therefore, these efforts need to be recognized and not made invisible. Moreover, given the substantial contribution women make to agriculture and to other areas of economy, it is important that attention be given to their concern. It is necessary to look into the need and problems of women in order to tap their full potential and productivity.

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Government and all adults could play sustainable roles to remove the barriers militating against women's full participation in sustainable development by implementing the strategies considered in the paper.
- Existing women organizations in the rural and urban areas can easily be used as platforms to educate women to participate fully in sustainable development, especially through green consumerism.
- More females should be encouraged to read science and vocational subjects at all levels of education to prepare them for technological changes without which they cannot meet up with their roles in sustainable development.

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ANNEX 1  
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

ITEMS	STATEMENT	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGES
1	AGE		
	a) Below 20 years	30	17
	b) 20 - 29 years	40	22
	c) 30 - 39 yeas	55	30
	d) 40 - 49 yeas	45	25
	e) 50 years and above	10	6
2	MARITAL STATUS		
	a) Single	50	27
	b) Divorced	30	17
	c) Married	90	50
	d) Widowed	10	6
3	HIGHEST QUALIFICATION		
	a) Primary school	35	19
	b) Modern school	30	17
	c) Secondary school	25	14
	d) Teacher training college	50	28
	e) None of all	40	22
4	OCCUPATION		
	a) Farming	60	33
	b) Teaching	55	31
	c) Trading	40	22
	d) Civil servant	15	08
	e) Complete housewife	10	06

## ANNEX 2

## THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

ITEMS	STATEMENTS	MEAN(x) N=180	DECISION
5	Most women are responsible for education of children than men.	3	Agreed
6	Most women are responsible for feeding the family.	3	Agreed
7	Domestic shopping is mainly performed by women.	3	Agreed
8	The traditional woman is responsible for collection of water for domestic use.	3	Agreed
9	The product of food crops is basically a function for women in our society.	2.92	Agreed
10	Most women are responsible for clothing of the children in the family.	3	Agreed
11	Women are responsible for general maintenance of the home.	3	Agreed
12	Women are responsible for childbearing and rearing.	3	Agreed
13	Women tend to inculcate discipline into the children.	2.67	Agreed
14	Social training of the children is basically the function of women.	2.48	Agreed

ANNEX 3

FACTORS AFFECTING WOMEN'S ROLES IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

ITEMS	STATEMENTS	MEAN N=180	DECISION
15	The status of women is of great concern in our society.	3	Agreed
16	Family heads preferred to send only sons to school and cared less about the development of their daughters.	2.87	Agreed
17	If poverty is to be effectively addressed in Nigeria, the status of women has to be greatly elevated.	3	Agreed
18	Government prefers to give more jobs to males than females.	3	Agreed
19	Companies and industries prefer to give more jobs to males than females.	2.9	Agreed
20	Gender bias keeps population growth rate high because it denies women routes to economic security other than childbearing.	3	Agreed
21	The right to use credits or own land is enhanced if women read and understand contracts.	3	Agreed
22	Parents prefer to have more boys than girls.	2.83	Agreed
23	Parents prefer to give more opportunities to boys than girls.	3	Agreed

ANNEX 4

RANK ORDERS SHOWING THE STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING WOMEN'S ROLE IN  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

STATEMENTS	FREQUENCY	RANK ORDER
Ministries of Education should liaise with Ministry of Women Affairs in planning and developing specialized programmes to enhance girls' education.	50	1 <sup>st</sup>
The National Commission for Women should develop the education for women.	40	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Studies should be conducted by government to determine the factors that constrain women's education and develop plans to reduce the constraints.	30	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Basic education policy programme should be made to focus on increasing dropout on the part of girls.	23	4 <sup>th</sup>
Existing women organization in the rural and urban areas can easily be used as platforms to educate women on the concept of sustainable development.	12	5 <sup>th</sup>
Women should be properly equipped to transmit values that could enhance sustainable development to the children.	10	6 <sup>th</sup>
Women in academics should be involved in research to develop alternative production technologies that will enhance sustainable development.	10	6 <sup>th</sup>
More non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should be founded to take care of girl child problems.	5	8 <sup>th</sup>

## ANNEX 5

### QUESTIONNAIRE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND STRATEGIES FOR THEIR IMPROVEMENT

**Section A:**

**1. AGE**

- a) Below 20 years      b) 20 - 29 years      c) 30 - 39 years      d) 40 - 49 years  
e) 50 years and above

**2. MARITAL STATUS**

- a) Single    b) Divorced    c) Married    d) Widowed

**3. LAST SCHOOL ATTENDED**

- a) Primary school    b) Secondary school    c) Teacher training College    d) Post Secondary schools (College of Education, Polytechnic, University) e) None of the above

**4. OCCUPATION**

**Section B**

Items	Statements	Agreed	Undecided	Disagreed
5	Most women are responsible for education of children than men.			
6	Most women are responsible for feeding the family.			
7	Domestic shopping is mainly performed by women			
8	The traditional woman is responsible for collection of water for domestic use.			
9	The production of food crops is basically a function for women in our society			
10	Most women are responsible for clothing of the children in the family.			
11	Women are responsible for general maintenance of the home.			
12	Women are responsible for childbearing and rearing.			
13	Women tend to inculcate discipline into the children.			
14	Social training of the children is basically the function of women.			
15	The status of women is of great concern in our society			
16	Family heads preferred to send only sons to school and cared less about the development of their daughters.			
17	If poverty is to be effectively addressed in Nigeria, the status of women has to be greatly elevated.			
18	Government prefers to give more jobs to males than females.			
19	Companies and industries prefer to give more jobs to males than females.			
20	Gender bias keeps population growth rate high because it denies women routes to economic security other than childbearing.			
21	The right to use credits or own land is enhanced if women read and understand contracts			
22	Parents prefer to have more boys than girls.			
23	Parents prefer to give more opportunities to boys than girls.			

### Section C

Strategies	Rank Order
Basic education policy programme should be made to focus on increasing drop out on the part of girls.	
The National Commission for Women should develop the education for women.	
Existing women organization in the rural and urban areas can easily be used as platforms to educate women on the concept of sustainable development.	
More non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should be founded to take care of girl child problems.	
Women should be properly equipped to transmit values that could enhance sustainable development to the children.	
Studies should be conducted by government to determine the factors that constrain women's education and develop plans to reduce the constraints	
Ministries of Education should liaise with Ministry of Women Affairs in planning and developing specialized programmes to enhance girls' education.	
Women in academics should be involved in research to develop alternative production technologies that will enhance sustainable development.	