

## ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: THE CHALLENGE FOR THE RURAL WOMEN IN NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Given our settlement pattern as evident in Nigeria, it is expedient to note that the country's population spread has shown considerably that we have older women and children dwelling within the rural areas of the country and doing subsistence job on their respective farms so as to keep them going. Given this trend, their quest for survival at the face of the eminent economic pressures has sent many into pursuing vigorously the best option in survival strategy with utmost aim of making life bearable for them within the changing society of ours by their subsisting on nature. The consequences of such effort demonstrated the government's total neglect of women's need. Therefore, this study looked at these issues from the feminist perspective as they relate to women's need. Also, the plight of the rural dwelling women, their survival strategy, the poverty syndrome and the planned action of the government in the effect to salvage the impending problems which women's quest for survival in the rural areas will cause the Nation as a whole have been studied. Our submission is arrived at as a result of our observations in villages such as Eye-Korin, Gambari, Lasoju, Gbede and Ote among others in Asa Local Government area of Kwara State in Nigeria. Consequently, this study proposes a premise for the re-awakening of all parties to the needs of not just women alone, but the environment that all must collectively preserve lest the consequential effects which such neglect will cause will be enormous.*

**Keywords:** *Environment, women, Nigeria, farmers*

### INTRODUCTION

Majority of the Nigerian women dwell in the rural areas within the country where social and the needed supportive services are not in existence. The rural dwelling women in Ote, Gambari, Lasoju and Afon villages in the Asa Local Government area of Kwara State have severally adopted varied survival strategies with the intent of coping with their predicament and their long neglect by the concerned interests. They have in the process been working on a regimented structure in such a hard manner on the available piece of land within their reach in such localities. Such pieces of land are their closet neighbour and on whom they can successfully depend. If this trend is not carefully watched and controlled, a number of unexpected hazards will rear their heads in view of the women's excessive activities on the available farmland in the area. It is therefore pertinent to ask these important questions, what are the major issues of the next century likely to be, and how best can we build on our past experiences and thus be able to cope with them in the light of our present situation in

the area under consideration? From the feminist perspective, the problem ahead is on how the rural women in Nigeria can be assisted and how they can assist at the local level in sustaining our environment given the nature of their occupational scope and the survival strategy which is available to them.

### ***Women and Survival Pattern***

If life must be lived to the best of human desire, it is necessary that one must be constructively engaged in a rewarding, highly sustainable and suitable kind of job at least for a living. In the Nigerian experience, a large percentage of the rural dwelling women are not skilled professionally. Hence, all they need do to get them going occupationally is resulting to doing the subsistence work such as cutting down trees as fuel woods which they sell in the existing markets for survival. They maintained their age long farm plot on which they have been working for generations thus resulting to excessive use of the same plot which will no longer yield much more produce from the tedious human efforts. It is obvious that the chosen way to survive will invariably be assisting the gradual deforestation of our farmland. Norman (1993) echoes the magnanimity of the problem which the society will run into if we fail to make peace with our environment. This she states in the following words:

*We face a time of breakdown or breakthrough; we can allow our global environment to be devastated until it's scarcely functions and longer as a habitat for humankind or we can accept that we can make peace with one another only by making peace with earth.*

The challenges of having to take care of our environment must be taken seriously as we do not have another place we can conveniently relocate to. In consonance with the call upon women to assist in sustaining the environment, the Government on her part must equally make available the resources that will enable the Nigerian women dwelling in the rural areas integrate and thus become highly functional and efficient in their human endeavour by helping to translate women from the poverty ridden level to efficient and capable producers within the Nation's economy. When this is ensured, women will definitely not result into damaging the natural endowment all because they want to survive.

Survival is a right and neither should it be construed as an opportunity that women must resort to in a highly endowed country like Nigeria. Women must therefore rise to the occasion to assert their rights to equal job opportunities that are rewarding. The obvious in the Nigerian situation is that, we have a larger percentage of our women folk in the rural areas doing a sustaining service for humanity. Services are good when rendered; yet they must equally be remunerated appropriately. It is in the light of this fact that we must submit like Joanns (1993) said;

*Unless women can take their fate into their own hands all attempt will ultimately be controlled by political powers which already use both culture and religion as weapons.*

The battle for women's dignity and right to survival must be brought to the lime light

in our contemporary situation in clear terms. What women suffered in the past should be reckoned as belonging to the past. The present must and ought to be given the required impetus which will help to lay effective foundation for the future wherein hope for equal opportunity must become realizable. This noble vision can effectively be achieved when women are sure that they have the means of controlling everything within and around them like Miranda (1994) reiterated, having control over lives and bodies is essential to ensure a sense of dignity and autonomy for every woman and that should not be sacrificed.

It is necessary that this vision must be pursued with the aim of having to remove all forms of inequality and oppression which geographical and occupational demands have plagued women dwelling in rural areas with. Essentially, the battle for due recognition and reward must first be won if women meant any good for themselves in the order of event that has always approached and addressed women's need as secondary. Without women's efficient involvement in production processes, it is not likely if the total population can survive effectively, therefore, if we are prompt in highlighting the dangers which women's effort which aimed at survival can cause the Nation, we must look inward and thus re-evaluate the pains which the complete neglect for years have caused the women dwelling in rural areas. Opportunities must not be allowed to pattern women's survival as much as those who are milking the resources are not super human. They at least need women's supportive services for their immediate upkeep.

In the Instraw News Special Edition (1996) there was a categorical statement which the Nigerian women must accept as a challenge in the effort to save our environment. In its submission, it says: women have a vital role in environmental management development. Their full participation is therefore essential for achieving sustainable development. For the environment to be sustained, the required participation of women must not only be pursued, it must at least be ensured in view of the fact that women have direct contact much with the environment than men. The modius operandi that calls for their integration at its fullest level must provide the required impetus that will relatively bring about their desired participation and not mere insertion of a few women into the scheme of things in the changing world order. The need for improved educational facilities coupled with a review of the academic curriculum in respect of women's need must be taken into consideration and must be provided for so that women can catch the pace of development in the society. It is when these are ensured that women's efficient and resourceful potentials can be developed and enlisted as we collectively struggle to sustain our environment without jeopardizing women's quest to survival as human beings.

The bane of the environmental hazards cannot be limited to women's supposed active engagement in their search for a living, the obvious in men's crave for economic prosperity has equally lend a hand in the destructive effort on our environment. Women are however receiving prominence in this research because our focus is on women's destructive exercise on our natural environment.

The inevitable must surely happen if no policy statement is made to check the human assault and excesses in our drive for survival. The special issue of Instraw News (1996) was apt in stating the obvious regarding the problems which women are facing within our society. Like it said:

*We are also aware that women are the main collector of water, fuel wood, the main prerequisite for survival. Deforestation and desertification affect access to water, fuel and toddler thereby forcing women to walk further and further each day to obtain these essential items for survival.*

The fact that women have had to struggle to survive is as a result of the fact that there has not been an organized effort to cater for their basic needs in the society. The neglected posture of the rural dwelling women have brought the inevitable task to light that women must as a result explore the possibilities at their disposal. Women as a result have had to resort to the followings;

- a Cutting down trees, dry them and later sell as fuel woods.
- b They remove leaves of big trees which they will sell in the markets for packaging of local herbs among other things.
- c They wash locust beans seeds in the rivers and brooks that would have provided other uses for the community, thereby polluting them through their activities.
- d More so, those who are peasant farmer have had to soak their harvested cassavas in nearby streams so as to prepare it for other uses.
- e Some in the bid to treat ailments have resulted into removing back covers of trees in which they use locally in treating ailments. These have in process resulted in killing indirectly trees that are meant to help in protecting the environment.

These varied survival strategies have their effects on the environment and unless something is done to alleviate the poor situation in the rural areas, the cycle will inadvertently continue because of the women's daily task in the cares for their respective families. Women in developing countries have affected and are closely affected by their environment. An enabling environment must be provided for if we want to address the issue of sustainability of our environment.

The obvious in the scope of the effects which women's gainful economic enterprise is having on the environment is though enormous. We must ask a fundamental question, must such neglected poor people not look out for a means of sustenance when the Government is not making any effort to alleviate their sufferings in the society? Ignorant as they are to the dangers which their activities will immediately bring on them, the people in government should ensure a mass literacy effort so as to help those women and thus help save the wellbeing of all Nigerians. Constructive effort has to be put in place if we desire a stop being put to the said destruction that is being perpetuated against our environment. The Instraw News (1995) was apt in bringing out this in the following words:

*In developing countries, few women are able to afford retirement at all much less post-retirement in public service. The challenge is to create incentives for older women to 'recycle' their skills continue their participation in economic activities and thus achieve the same objective set for their young counterparts participation in their countries developments.*

If women's desire for effective integration will help by alleviating their suffering posture, women must work harder and together as a team thereby recognizing the fact about their expulsion and so fight against it with all within their reach. It is only then that women will in the process be able to effect a change and thus help to preserve our environment. The problem that is facing the environment in view of the excessive human activities through women's strives can better be addressed as the In straw News Letter (1995) rightly affirmed:

*In years to come as women become better educated, and economic opportunities are less by the physical differences between men and women. Women will be able to contribute far more and for much longer. Their potential should be factored into policy planning at all levels. At the same time, the number of the very old and rail increases, local and natural officials must have the statistical tools with which to design policies to meet the physical, cultural and social needs of the aging population.*

If the aging women are taken care of, their survival will invariably change thus helping to save the environment from the obvious onslaught in the attempt to survive in desperation. If women have perpetuated havoc against the environment, they must not be made to bear the brunt of the ensuing problems since other land users have equally contributed their quota for which they too must be held accountable.

### ***The Challenges for women in the Nigerian situation***

The ordering of our society in view of the occupational distribution has shown significantly that a larger percentage of our youths have through rural/urban migration moved away from the rural areas into the urban centers in search of good paying jobs and more also. Because the availability of social infrastructures in such places have helped to ameliorate problems that they would have encountered if they had remained in the rural areas. The end result of the drift has manifested itself in the total or absolute neglect of women who are dwelling in such places. For them to attain a living, their closest neighbour will have to bear the brunt of human search for survival in a depressed situation.

The precipitated crisis in the economic sphere which the urban drift has caused will not only take its toll on the urban centers alone, the rural populace will equally have a share in the ravaging economy as witnessed in the Nigerian situation. What should be the collective resolve of women at the face of these eminent problems have been expressed by Diane (1992) who says:

*Economic crisis should be seen by women as a turning point for a whole range of social institutions and practices. Restructuring opens up new opportunities as well as closing old opportunities. Oppressed and disadvantage groups find that change creates conditions for new forms of struggle. Trying to resist the tide of change and to preserve pre-crisis social relations rarely works. A more creative approach that tries to influence the terms of restructuring, to restructure not just production but social relations and to create new institutions and organizations of and for oppressed and disadvantaged groups may have more chance of success.*

The task for rural women through the organized efforts of the successful women in the society is to ensure that their social relations are improved upon. The domineering posture of men based on age long tradition must change considerably. The male perception of labour, which only aims at having women at the lowest ebb, must progressively change. The events of the past must not be allowed to trail our movement with its negative or imposing capabilities again. Its abiding presence will be a pointer to women's oppression and thus help us to fashion out a more rewarding ways of combating the ills of the past with a better hope for the present, thus projecting and laying a foundation for equitable allocation of 'scarce resources' where women like men will have unrestricted access to rewarding venture within our National Economy.

Women's cry for justice may have been loud in the past as we yearn for a change. It is evident that a louder noise must be made now otherwise; women may still be trailing in the shadow of what that past symbolizes. Every progressive mind has an idea of the reality on ground therefore, as one of the progressives, women cannot afford to wait without aiming higher to surprise the world in the new age. Women must be the revelation that the world expects. Every passing century has always evoked a change. As we expect technological discovery in our contemporary age, women's crave for a change must not become an illusion. And like Joanns (1993) pointed out:

*Women's issues are marginalized into under-funded and ineffective machinery. As a result, women around the world are demanding an extensive transformation of the existing deficient human rights framework. Women's resolve has further sent them into asking that their rights move beyond promises into guarantees.*

Promises have been evasive given the Nigerian context in respect of women's demand. Therefore, women must do everything possible to get their demands put in place as freeborn citizens who have legitimate rights and capability to exist without any inhibitions. When this is realized, women shall be able to function effectively within the structure that is guiding and directing our society.

Apparently, that will help to reduce the supposed dependence of women on their immediate neighbour which is what the environment could offer for their survival. Sequel to women's resolve, the agonizing effects of marginalization should further

spur women into action not only at the grassroots level but at the national level also. In the words of Marilee (1995) she says:

*It is this experience of continuously being marginalized in mainstream politics that lead us to believe that there is a continuous need for participating in feminine activity and politics.*

The sure route to freedom is the women's resolve to effectively participate at all level in the society. For the rural women, we must get them integrated into the scheme of the moment. That will ensure their participation in decision making which will eventually help to translate them into an effective force in our communities. The efforts which aimed at improving women's worth in the society must not remain at the level of communication or paper work. Sincere effort must be made to get a written commitment from those who have 'enslaved' women's capabilities all in the name of tradition. It is high time that women rose to challenge the integrity of culture, which has become a cog on the wheel of progress for ages. Komenchak (1982) expresses that we must challenge the tenacity of tradition and the wisdom of accepting its dictates without question. The reserved questions have reached the bottleneck stage that women must constructively pursue their vision with all within their reach. Their resolve as a dynamic force must no longer be repressed; they have enormous revolutionary power which must not be laid to rest in the face of the obvious hostility against their dignity in the society any more. Women must assure themselves of the fact that they have a purpose to living. Marilee (1995) reiterates that:

*We have a purpose in our lives to be part of history of a new dawn to be an over flowing river that waters the world which belong to all equally.*

Wherever women may have been placed, the rural women should be recognized and they must also be provided for. Women must seek to channel a path to progress by saying no to oppression, segregation and neglect that has been their lot for a long time as history has shown. The United Nations Conference of 1986 in Nairobi reaffirmed this accordingly that:

*The quest for change cannot be attained unless women effectively organize themselves. In its submission, collective organization is the vital ingredient that may move female participation in paid labour from survival strategy to a transformation strategy.*

If the plight of rural women in Nigeria will change for good thus ceasing from being the drawers of water and hewers of fuel wood, women must come together and take another look at their status in the society. This will considerably help to re-shape women's focus and thus help them see more glaringly the effects of neglect and oppression through the uncaring acts of government in failing to develop appropriately the rural areas where women are the predominant settlers. The Nairobi Declaration of 1995 further states as follows:

*To enhance the self-reliance of women in a viable and sustained fashion... Grass root participation processes, and planning*

*approaches using local enterprise and resources are vital and should be supported.*

The government must not spare effort in developing the rural women coupled with their areas because, it will ensure their self-reliance. The improvised local technology should be made available so as to constructively engage the rural women in productive processes rather than subsisting on the natural habitat. If this is not given consideration, women's approach in the rural areas will ever remain survival. In desperation, they will do just anything to survive thereby exposing the environment to more serious dangers, which a large sum of money will never be able to repair.

### ***The challenges of Poverty in the Nigerian Experience***

Poverty is a wild disease that is ravaging so rapidly the economy of the under developed countries including Nigeria. For the poverty level to be reduced considerably, efficient productive processes must be put in place. More importantly, it is time for women to have a say in decision making and planning procedures of our nation. Nigeria is such a rich country but our resurgent problems have been in the areas of planning, execution and management. Unless women are involved, the cycle of poverty which has established its hold on the rural women may remain. However, the problem with women is that they do not have effective representative that can spear head their demands. The few inserted women in government are products of lobby or connection, such individuals can never represent women's collective interest. The submission made in Instraw news letter of 1995 must be seen as relevant in the Nigerian situation if women sincerely desire a change. In the submission, it says;

*Women and men have equal essential roles to play, but as long as macro political and economic concepts remain insensitive to gender relations, and the framework for decision making does not encourage equal participation by women and men, the development process will remain biased and is bound to fail in achieving sustainable and equitable level of development.*

What is most expedient for women's resolve is that, women must struggle to get themselves involved and engaged in the decision making at all levels. Sequel to this, women must be willing to represent not self (individual) but women's collective interest for a better tomorrow. What have women gained in the time past with few cases of insertion? Has a vast majority of women still being kept far below poverty level? The alarming revelation must spur women into taking action with the intent of helping to revert and as well alleviate the burden which has been placed on their shoulders in the society.

The claim that old women cannot learn the basic skill again must not be allowed a theory that will dissuade women's agitation for developing rural women in Nigeria. Instraw News of 1996, buttressed this need in the light of the following words that;

*Aging as a stage at development is a challenge for women. In this period of life they (women) should be enabled to cope in a creative way with new opportunities.*

It is necessary to add that rather than conceiving age as a detrimental factor to the rural women's aspiration on the ground that they may not be able to learn new things, we ought to be creative enough to constructively engage them in productive activities. Otherwise, our environment will continue to suffer if such helpless individuals must survive. More so, the cost of kerosene is so high in market, the alternative is the fuel wood which those old women are capable of carrying to the market for sale.

The government cannot remain a passive observer; concrete efforts must be put in place so as to help avert the inevitable danger which the uncontrolled deforestation will cause. It is in this vein that we shall reinstate the submission of the Commission on the Status of Women in its Resolution 36/6 of the 36th session of 1996 which states that:

*Women and the environment urged the governments to adopt laws, policies and programme to promote women's participation in the preservation of the environment ...effective implementation of these mandates will depend on the active involvement of women in economic and political decision making.*

The said involvement of women must take due cognizance of those interest who appears feminine but who have masculine virtue of amassing wealth and suppressing other interests that are not going to be rewarding in their pursuit for gainful rewards at all cost.

## CONCLUSION

The perverse nature of the plight of the Nigerian women has turned most women into the survival strategy in spite of the obvious in our natural endowment. If women have been neglected, women must rise to the occasion by saving themselves and the enabling environment that God gave to us. To attain a more practical and lasting solution to the prevailing problems, critical gender issues, particularly the differing roles of women and men have to be addressed and properly integrated into the policy decision made by both government and the private sector. We must be honest in our resolve to help ourselves otherwise, the adverse effects of the continuous damage done to the environment would have been enormous that we shall not be able to do anything about it in future and we shall have to bear the consequences which such is gradually posing to our collective existence.

We must equally express that the poverty state into which women have been drawn particularly those within the rural areas is directly linked to the existing poverty syndrome that has been affecting the Nigerian economy. The question now is not to see causes of feminization of policy but move towards feminization of development. Through this process, those rural dwelling women will receive proper attention.

Without their care and provision, many of the urban dwellers would hardly have survived. Like Duenasloza (1996) has said:

*Why at the end of this century which has known such extraordinary scientific and technological discoveries and has known such an intensive development of material well-being. Women are still submerged in extreme poverty; are still victims of all kinds of abuse and exploitation, are still in obscured illiteracy, are still more than ever victims of incurable diseases.*

These obvious questions demand answers. However, pragmatic those problems may have been, the challenges they pose to our future existence must spur us into action with a view of paying greater attention to the looming danger to our collective existence. As much as the rural women have a duty to help preserve, we owe them the duty of caring for them as well. They are not abnormal beings and so they must be recognized and respected. If we have at heart our environment, and if the ecological problems that may eventually erupt is anything that will help us to think, we must think now and then help the rural women to help save and preserve them and our environment. If we love nature, we shall do our best to preserve it as nothing is too big to offer for viable and rewarding venture that our collective world would have benefitted from in the long run. The enabling environment is part of our heritage and must be preserved at all cost.

The authority must in the same vein ensure that land for farming are allocated based on need and such should not be sublet out as it is the practice in our case. The need to procure farming tools should be made easy and soft loan should be provided for those who are constructively engaged in farming in the local areas. They should also be given patronage by the government. This is necessary by discouraging the importation of what can be produced locally. They inconsonance with the above should be given improved seeds. Fertilizers should also be given at controlled price and not as exorbitant as they have been. The need to establish storage facilities to aid production and thus encourage rural dwellers will assist in keeping a sizable people within such areas. Above all, improved road net work and social infrastructures will help change the once bad state into a good one.

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