

Non-actualization of Governmental and Non-governmental Empowerment Policies and Initiatives for Nigerian Women since 1985

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Abstract

Many governmental policies and non-governmental initiatives have been designed to improve the lives of Nigerian women. These initiatives can be traced to 1985, the closing year of the United Nations' Decade for Women (1975–1985). In addition, 1985 was the year when the Babangida administration came to power, remembered today in Nigeria for executing the Better Life Program for the African Rural Woman. Since the Better Life Program, many other women initiatives have been mooted, including the Widow Support Initiative and the MarketMoni Scheme. However, these initiatives have not achieved their goals. For instance, the Federal Government partnered with the United Nations and World Bank in 2022 on the issues of women's inclusion in cabinet and economic empowerment. The government also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Germany in 2023 on improving women's reproductive health and eliminating maternal deaths. Some issues militate against these initiatives, including a lack of continuity in government's women-welfare policies and, in particular, the negative effect on women of the struggling Nigerian economy. A variety of other issues also add to women's problems, including the failure to implement penal instruments to punish those guilty of offences against women and the existence of multiple cultural and religious dictates that gag women. The social conditions of many Nigerian women are deplorable and squalid: many young Nigerian women are exposed to exploitation in the Middle East, women in rural Nigeria still experience high childbirth mortality rates, incidents of rape are on the rise, and women are being murdered in money-making rituals. The Federal Government needs to fix the economy, depoliticize the issue of women's welfare through the use of statutory instruments, and partner with non-governmental organizations for the relevant financing and regulations required to achieve these aims.

Key words

Women-oriented initiatives, patriarchy, girl child abuse, MarketMoni, the Better Life Program for the African Rural Woman

Introduction

Women are an integral part of every society because of the important roles they play, including in economic productivity and the provision of services. These roles make them invaluable to society. However, despite this importance, women across the world are clearly not receiving the attention and benefits they deserve as important members of society. This is especially the case in Nigeria as a developing nation. Evidence for this observation is provided by the non-actualization of the goals of many women-specific government policies and programs as well as non-governmental initiatives purportedly mooted to improve the lot of Nigerian women.

Women-oriented government policies and non-governmental initiatives in Nigeria can be traced to the year 1985, a crucial year for this study as it was when the Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida military administration came to power through a military coup on May 27, 1985. Successive administrations at all levels have since replicated the concept and ideals of the Better Life Program for the African Rural Woman embarked upon by Maryam Babangida, the wife of the then president. This was followed in later years by other similar projects and government initiatives.

It is generally considered that these policies and initiatives have not achieved the purpose for which they were put in place. The non-functionality or outright failure of initiatives can be clearly seen in some manifestations within the Nigerian social system. The first is the fact that as recently as the period from October 2022 to January 2023, the Federal Government of Nigeria liaised with international bodies to improve the lives of women in Nigeria. For example, in October 2022, the Federal Government of Nigeria established a partnership with the United Nations and World Bank for the economic empowerment of women, the elimination of poverty among Nigerian women, and women's political inclusion, especially at cabinet level (Baba-Yesufu, 2022). In the same vein, the government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Germany in 2023 to improve women's reproductive health and eliminate maternal deaths, an agreement which has been cited as illustrating the Federal Government of Nigeria's determination to improve reproductive health (Egbo, 2023). This is to be achieved through an effective plan to contribute to the reduction of maternal deaths and improve the health status of Nigerian women and female children. Also, Nigerian women still die of cancer in large numbers. Former Nigerian health minister Prof Isaac Adewole stated that cancer is the most lethal disease among Nigerian women (Akinkuotu, 2018), while

a study by Uchendu (2020) showed that cancer is a major disease, constituting a particular burden as it increases in incidence as a population ages and, according to the results of his study, affects many more women than men in Nigeria. These alarming conditions for Nigerian women are further worsened by reports that women in rural areas of Nigeria suffer from general deprivations and endure a quality of life far below the norm (Zaid & Popoola, 2010).

This study was undertaken to assess the impediments to the actualization of the initiatives described above with a view to suggesting workable solutions, all for the betterment of Nigerian women. Given that the birth of the idea of women-oriented programs in Nigeria occurred nearly four decades ago, an assessment of the performance and success rate of the initiatives is appropriate and, for this study, the most appropriate way of ascertaining that success is to review the current living conditions of Nigerian woman, with emphasis on economy, politics, health, social status, domestic relevance, and religious perceptions as these concern women in Nigeria.

The Significance of the Period 1985 to the Third Millennial Decade in Nigeria

The paper covers the period 1985 to 2024, chosen because of its significance for women's welfare in Nigeria. The year 1985 was the last year of the United Nations initiative, Decade for Women (1975–1985), and was also the year the Ibrahim Babangida military government came to power in Nigeria. The administration was known for the popular program, the Better Life Program for the African Rural Woman, as undertaken by the administration's First Lady, Maryam Babangida, and financed by the government. The United Nations' Decade for Women (1975–1985) initiative influenced the "commitment" of the Babangida administration to the welfare of women for two reasons. The first was that the United Nations, through the Convention, expected member-nations to implement the resolutions and the legacies of that Convention in their respective countries. As a signatory to the UN Charter, Nigeria was required to implement the Convention's measures at a national level. In addition to this, the Babangida administration was, as a military government, seen as illegitimate. The administration used the implementation of the UN instrument to attain legitimacy among the people: as a cause centered on women, the administration saw this as a viable means of attaining civil relevance and portraying itself to the populace as humane.

Today, in Nigeria, discussions on programs and policies for women are incomplete without reference to the Better Life program. Indeed, it was a trailblazer

in this regard, such that successive governments at federal, state, and local government levels have been obliged, as a matter of course, to initiate women-oriented programs such as the National Women Empowerment Fund (NAWEF), whose aim is to improve the economic standard of women through financial inclusion and access (Alli, 2017). What is also significant is that Ibrahim Babangida seized power from the sitting president Muhammadu Buhari (1983–1985) on the grounds of human rights abuses and gross incompetence (Ekott, 2012). Given that President Buhari came back to power in 2015, it is considered relevant to ascertain whether in the context of gender orientation and attitude, the present administration is doing it right (or wrong). The context of gender is crucial because the two reference years (1985 and 2023) are known, in Nigeria, for crucial women-oriented actions and comments. The former witnessed an administration that financed an initiative, the Better Life Program for the African Rural Woman, while the latter was headed by a president, President Muhammadu Buhari, who has been quoted as saying his wife “belongs to the kitchen and the other room.” These two landmark phenomena are critical because the Better Life Program for the African Rural Woman has constituted an antecedent and a reference, while the President’s comment is seen as the standard for a patriarchal attitude to and conception of Nigerian women.

Methodology

A number of technical strategies and applicable instruments were used in writing this paper and achieve its objectives as efficiently as possible. Both diachronic and synchronic evaluations were strategically employed to draw fair inferences and arrive at a reliable conclusion. A diachronic survey was considered necessary to ascertain the success of government and non-governmental efforts to alleviate the deplorable conditions of Nigerian woman over time. The synchronic approach is to reflect the present situation, the cumulative effects of the policies and programs of government and non-governmental organizations for women as of 2024. The study’s approach is also significantly qualitative as the pursuit of its ideational goal is based on rationalism *a priori*.

The trajectory of advancing the objectives and concerns of the paper is guided by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie’s (2007) Stiwanist theoretical framework. This is an African variation of feminist advocacy which holds that African patriarchal hegemony should liberalize and loosen its gender grip on women by including them in the social scheme of things. In addition to the diachronic-synchronic surveys,

qualitative rationalism, and Stiwanist theoretical gender-equity principle pontification, the philosophies of the paper are constructed within the ideals of certain ages and ideologies such as militocracy, globalization, millennial civilization in Africa, and the prevalent capitalist economic situation in Nigeria.

A Survey of Notable Women-oriented Governmental and Non-governmental Organizations' Policies and Programs in Nigeria since 1985

As has been stated, 1985 is taken as the initial reference year in considering government programs for women in Nigeria as the year that produced the iconic Better Life Program, whose main aim was to better the deplorable condition of Nigeria's poorest women, seen as essentially marginalized despite their roles as producers of goods and services (Udegbe, 1994). No other program since has come close to matching this Nigerian-rural-women-specific program.

Another women-oriented program in Nigeria is the Widow Support Initiative, conceived by the renowned Professor Pat Utomi in 1992. The motivation for this project arose from a number of preceding events. (Pat Utomi Widow Support Centre at <https://wsc.org.ng/who-we-are/>) The first, according to the Foundation, occurred in 1983, when Professor Utomi published a paper centered on the plight of widows in Nigeria. The second motivating factor was Bishop Kukah's project in Kaduna where financial assistance was rendered to widows in the parish concerned as a form of economic empowerment. The third and most significant was the 1991 car crash in which Professor Utomi almost died and which claimed the life of his driver. He realized that a family he was friends with had lost their breadwinner, and that instead of living in a big house they were now homeless. He decided that this should not be the fate of any widow. This sequence of events gave rise to the founding of the Widow Support Initiative whose primary goal is the alleviation of the suffering of Nigerian widows as a result of the deaths of their husbands, and helping to empower them to fight culture-induced injustices in the law courts (Arum, 2010).

This is similar to the goals and objectives of Women for Women International which seeks to improve the situations of women in conflicts zones in eight countries (Wikipedia, 2023). It has been carrying out this humanitarian service in Nigeria since the year 2000 and in that time has improved the lives of about 80,000 women through their program known as Stronger Women, Stronger Nations. Their Nigerian team led an engagement program for men to bring them into dia-

logues of cooperation with their wives on the issue of gender parity, engaging with over 12,000 Nigerian men in the process. It has also hosted a Change Agents program in Nigeria and this continues to be productive.

Another relevant organization is WIMBIZ (Women in Management, Business & Public Service) which campaigns for the active representation of women in public life and all other sectors of society (Sotade, 2018). WIMBIZ's advocacy has been motivated by the obvious egregious underrepresentation of women in Nigerian public life, as evident in the non-inclusion of women in the governing councils of Nigeria's foremost tertiary institutions and the Nigerian Sovereign Investment Authority Board (Sessou, 2021). This non-profit, non-governmental organization has been concerned with the issue of women in influential positions in Nigeria since 2002. Also concerned with the attainment of women's potential in Nigeria is the Girls' Power Initiative, a girl-child-centered program conceived and founded by Bene Madunagu and Osakue Grace in 1993. Their goal is to train the Nigerian girl child with access to information, education, and career skills. This can be likened to the goals of the Moremi Initiative, founded in 2004, which aspires to motivate women to undertake a one-year course in mentorship, and provides professional internship and resource assistance. A major feature of this program is that it is Nigerian in origin, international in operation, and inclusive (Africa-wide) in impact.

In the same vein, the Stand to End Rape Initiative is concerned with improving the conditions of Nigerian woman by putting an end to sexual harassment and assaults on women by men. The initiative carries out its mandate by campaigning against violent sexual assault, and supporting survivors by providing the necessities needed to rebuild their lives, including financial support. It was founded by Oluwaseun Ayodeji Osowobi, herself a survivor of gender violence. She is dedicated to fostering systematic change by providing capacity building and support on the prevention of sexual violence, and campaigning for gender-centered laws in Nigeria (Akindare, 2020).

The Federal Government of Nigeria has shown concern for improving the status of Nigerian women through the establishment of a ministry for women's welfare. Its mandate is to ensure that Nigerian women have access to social, political, civic, and economic resources in the country. It supports some non-governmental organizations, including the National Council of Women Affairs, with financial resources and aims to build a society that ensures equal access to opportunities.

The Federal Government has also launched entrepreneurial programs in the

past six years specifically targeted at women, according to the Vice President, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo (Jannamike, 2021), and has instituted the National Women Empowerment Fund (NAWEF) whose mandate is to disburse interest-free loans through the Bank of Industry (BoI) to Nigerian market women and artisans, including women farmers (Adekoya, 2017; Alli, 2017). There is also the MarketMoni Scheme targeted at motivating women to engage in economic productivity. The MarketMoni scheme is one arm of the umbrella program entitled the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), initiated to cover other schemes such as TraderMoni and FarmerMoni, all based on the principle of collateral-free access (Odiase, 2020). The MarketMoni Scheme provides women engaged in petty trading with access to soft loans from ₦10,000 upward.

The schemes, policies, and advocacies cited above are only a few of the total but are representative of the majority of such initiatives. However, has the condition of Nigerian women improved as a result? Answering this question requires that some indices be appraised.

Nigeria's Current Economic Situation

The “present,” for the purpose of this section of the paper, refers to the period between 2015 and 2024. Certain economic indices and determiners of economic viability are evaluated in the process of determining the economic situation in Nigeria as it affects Nigerian woman. The first is the non-availability of energy (meaning electricity in this context) to power machines and appliances used in goods production and service provision. Electricity is in short supply in Nigeria: “Nigeria’s electrification rate is less than 50% of the population; this leaves approximately 76 million people without any access to electricity” (Sadik, 2015, p. 6).

If the number of people in Nigeria without access to electricity—vital in today’s world—is as staggeringly high as 76 million, abysmally low productivity rates would be expected. To avoid this, Sadik suggests the adaptation of nanotechnology as a viable alternative. Further on this, The Cable (2017), reports Ernest Ebi’s (Chairman, Fidelity Bank, PLC).perspective on the unfavorable economic situation in Nigeria as follows:

Ernest Ebi, chairman of Fidelity Bank, says many industries have crumbled under the weight of huge energy cost as a result of the epileptic power supply in the country. He said this while delivering a lecture at the convocation

ceremony of Redeemer's University in Ogun state. Ebi said until the power problem in the country improves, the manufacturing sector would only record a little growth (1)

In addition to the power problem as bane of Nigerian economy emphasized in this excerpt, The Cable further reports Ebi's view that the deplorable Nigeria's economic situation was the result of the global financial crises and the high national unemployment rate because of the mono-product nature of the Nigerian economy, as the country depends solely on oil as the mainstay of its income. Additionally, Nigeria has inadequate access roads, and the condition of the few there are is deplorable, a significant element in accounting for Nigeria's under-developed condition (Adeleke, 2018).

Although the country went into recession, it recovered during the period under consideration (The Cable, 2017). However, in spite of the recovery, inflation remains high, to the extent that hyperinflation could be a real issue in Nigeria. One current factor is the high exchange rate between the naira, Nigeria's local currency, and the US dollar, which is officially ₦1,136 to one dollar according to Aina (2024). The cost of food items in Nigeria is consequently high. Food shortages occur, such as in January 2023, and this has been attributed by the government to several factors including terrorism, the debilitating impact of the shrinking of Lake Chad, the coronavirus pandemic, and inter-state border closures. However, it is widely believed that the actual cause of such food crises in Nigeria is the government's ban on the importation of food items into the country. According to reliefweb.int (2020):

Nigeria has about 50 percent of West Africa's food insecure population in 2019... before the pandemic, as a protectionist move, the Nigerian state banned the importation of staple food items such as rice to protect local industries and boost local production. A combustible mix of embargoes on food items, the reluctance of manufacturing countries to export and the reduction of economic activities due to the pandemic has led to food price hike [sic] as high as 120 percent across markets nationwide.

The reliefweb.int observations and disclosures regarding the food scarcity situations in Nigeria as above in terms of the whopping 50 percent of the population living without adequate food was linked to the research conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The appalling economic situation in Nigeria since 2015 has created untold hardships for Nigerian woman .

Shifting the Burden of Domestic Finances onto Women as an Emerging Cultural Practice in Nigeria

An emerging trend in Nigeria and one being perpetrated by the patriarchy is men's avoidance of domestic financial responsibilities. This trend is manifesting itself in differing degrees among the different tribes in Nigeria; while it has been known in some, it is now becoming the norm among others, and Nigeria's current harsh economic realities have worsened the practice. Some men in Nigeria claim to be unable to meet their financial commitments as a result of rising inflation. However, as tenable as this alibi could be, it is understood to be a secondary or lesser cause of the emerging trend. The primary cause is in fact the newfound culture of profligacy that many Nigerian men are practicing.

This is worsened by the restrictions that holy books impose on women, including cultural and social constraints constructed against women by the patriarchal oligarchy. The constraints have made many Nigerian men to objectify women. For example, the "Baby Mama" phenomenon is on the rise. A Baby Mama is a woman who has had a child (or children) with a man while the man refuses to marry her. In most cases, such men refuse to honor their financial responsibilities toward the children. In her article about the phenomenon among Nigerian male celebrities, Owolawi (2021) asserts "The baby mama industry in Nigeria seems to be thriving going by the amount of unmarried stars that have kids. A great number of Nigerian celebrities have kids with numerous women and it has almost become a norm." Owolawi identifies leading Nigerian celebrities such as Davido, Wizkid, Timaya, 2baba, 9ice, Ubi Franklin, King Sunny Ade, Pasuma, and Shina Peters, among others, as having at least three Baby Mamas. As is the case with these award-winning artistes, the phenomenon also permeates the extended Nigerian patriarchal circle.

In addition to the Baby Mama Syndrome which creates significant financial pressure for women, many women are now substantive breadwinners in their families even though their husbands are fully employed. Though this has been attributed to the employability of women in the modern age (Akanle & Nwaobiala, 2019), an additional factor is the debauched lifestyle of most Nigerian men. They indulge in excessive alcohol consumption, take drugs, and practice adultery. The pressures caused for women by these habits and the stress of becoming breadwinners are added to by traditional religious teachings. Biblical injunctions direct women to be of service to men, as is noted in Titus 2:4-5: "And so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at

home, kind, and submissive to their own husband.” Corinthians 14: 34 repeats the instruction to submit to men. The Qur’an also enjoins women to be submissive to their husbands, because “Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth” (Quran 4:34).

All of these factors have made many Nigerian women pressured in meeting their forced financial obligations. This situation warrants an assessment of the conditions of Nigerian women to determine the efficiency or success of governmental and non-governmental programs for women and the unfavorable social situations surrounding their performances.

The Condition of Rural Nigerian Women

Many women live in rural settlements in Nigeria. The term “rural settlements” has a different connotation in Nigeria, and in most African countries, compared to more advanced countries. In the West, they are swaths of land populated by relatively few people but with social amenities. In Nigeria, a rural settlement characteristically lacks amenities and adequate government attention, with dire consequences for those living there. These consequences may include high maternal mortality, low economic productivity and, in the context of marital life, gender servitude. The gender servitude perspective is especially relevant because women are used by their husbands on the farm as a source of physical labor but do not benefit adequately from that labor (Adeyemo, 1984). This was the situation when the Better Life Program for the African Rural Woman was launched in 1987 and it remains the same today. This is because Nigeria’s rural areas remain devoid of adequate facilities and the services that make life worthwhile. They do not have access roads and bridges, hospitals and health-care facilities, schools and educational resources, or a modern market system, nor access to low interest or interest-free loans. In fact Nigeria’s rural areas are typically synonymous with illiteracy, abject poverty, and reduced life expectancy. The situation was so critical that the government authorized the disbursement of cash grants of ₦20,000 to rural women in Nigeria under the government’s Social Inclusion Program introduced in 2020 (Ogunyemi, 2021). This amount is, at the official rate, 18 USD, an amount that could be described as meager but still a palliative to ameliorate the difficult economic conditions of women in Nigeria’s rural areas. Yet these same rural women do not have access to social amenities because of the Nigerian government’s focus on urban areas in relation to the provision of amenities and investment (Egbe,

2014).

The Migration of Young Nigerian Women to the Middle East

Another current trend is the migration of Nigerian women, despairing of their economic situation, to the Middle East. They choose this option to seek economic opportunities in countries like Oman, Libya, Lebanon, and Dubai, as well as Saudi Arabia. This is a direct result of Nigeria's difficult economic situation, making remaining in the country appear a less palatable option. However, migration, and especially to the Middle East, has made the women vulnerable to male maltreatment, even abuse, in those countries. Alagbe (2020, p. 2) gives one victim's first-hand account of such an experience:

“As I kept on struggling with him, he lifted my skirt and underwear and raped me.” Asked if she reported the case to the Dubai police, Omoniyi said no, saying women's rights records were poor in the Gulf country. She stated that from her findings, rather than arrest rapists, most women who reported rape were the ones often arrested for either premarital sex or extramarital affairs.

The majority of victims of such abuse find it hard to make ends meet when they return to Nigeria as they find themselves even worse off—physically, mentally, and economically—than when they left.

Ritual Murder of Women in Nigeria

Cases of women being murdered for ritual purposes in Nigeria are now increasing, a crime perpetrated by men who want to get rich without hard work. They believe that appeasing demons with female body parts under the instructions of a traditional medicine man, would make them receive mysterious money from the demons. This often ends in disaster for those involved. This anti-social orientation and practice by avaricious Nigerian men is a manifestation of these men's desire to live the modern life, a life of conspicuous consumption in which they possess the means to acquire the latest versions of phones and tablets, cars, clothes, houses, and hotel accommodation. This is as a result or consequence of the wrong interpretation of the digital revolution in modern times, and the glamour of social media by many people in Nigeria. However, Nigeria's poor economic situation has made it difficult, or even impossible, for many in this category of men to acquire

even a taste of the life they long for. Their last resort is the use of women—girl-friends, wives, mothers, or *Olosho* (prostitutes)—in money-making rituals.

This type of violence against women is an everyday occurrence. Nwakanma and Abu (2020) have noted that the rate of the killing of women in Nigeria for ritual purposes is alarming, while Peterside (2021) points out that women who are virgins are especially vulnerable because their purity makes the sacrifice more potent. It is especially poignant to note that women's attempts to cope with or overcome economic challenges by seeking a job or taking a lover has made them easy prey to such predatory men. Some women are invited for job interviews, some are asked to deliver the commodities they sell to potential buyers, while many others are invited to come visit as lovers. Through these means, women are trapped and murdered in the most gruesome ways and the female organs critical to the rituals removed.

The Prevalence of Rape against Women in Nigeria

Another factor adding to the suffering and difficulties of Nigerian woman today is the prevalence of rape. Though rape is a global phenomenon, what marks the difference between how it occurs elsewhere and in Nigeria is the purpose or motivation behind the crime. Some Nigerian rapists attack children and extremely old women. Abah gives an alarming account of the increasing rate of rape cases in Nigeria as they affect vulnerable groups: "It is a daily occurrence in Nigeria – the pages of newspapers littered with graphic details of rape, especially of minors..." (Abah, 2019, p. 1). This gruesome practice would be disheartening in itself, but it becomes even worse when we realize that minors and old women are being raped for spiritual or ritual purposes. In Nigeria, occurrences that are elsewhere ordinarily practical or empirical often assume spiritual significance. In the specific instance of one six-month old baby, Abah states that the baby was raped as a cure for a couple's childlessness. Minors are especially susceptible to rape because they are often put in the care of neighbors while mothers pursue economic activities, the consequence of the patriarchal abandonment of domestic financial responsibilities.

Impediments to Governmental and Non-governmental Policies and Programs

The conditions for Nigerian woman as described above are, to say the least, gloomy. This is despite the efforts being made since 1985 by government agencies and philanthropic non-profit organizations with policies and initiatives aimed at

improving the lot of Nigerian women. These initiatives have not attained their targets because of a number of factors. These include the lack of a common administrative ideology in government, economic hardship, objectification of women, lack of willpower by the government to activate punitive instruments against rapists, and religious stipulations that favor the patriarchal dominion of women. Despite the criticisms leveled against the Better Life Program for the African Rural Woman as far back as 1985 (conception, ideation, and launch are considered together) it had the merit of paying attention to a deprived category of Nigerian women. However, this laudable program was jettisoned the moment there was a change in government in 1994 and it was never re-implemented. It should be acknowledged that Lucas (2000) believes the program failed and is currently not optimally functional because the women involved in the program were politically connected to the existing government and that rural women were sidelined. This perception would only be tenable to the extent of the efficacy of the program as perceived by the financing administration. If successive governments had believed in the program, they would have revived and continued to run it. But the Better Life program was discontinued by the government because the next administration, the Sani Abacha government, did not believe in it.¹

Another reason the Abacha government discontinued the Better Life for Rural Dwellers program was because it could result in the president being seen as in the shadow of his predecessor. This orientation characterizes political administration in Nigeria; no matter how credible an initiative by a former government, it is discontinued because the new administration wants to take credit for new things. This tells us that government-initiated women's development programs and policies need to be sustained as statutory instruments. In the same vein, initiatives for women by the Mohammadu Buhari administration, such as TraderMoni and MarketMoni, have not been efficient at granting women economic empowerment and thereby taking them out of poverty because (it is generally believed) they were intended merely as bait to attract votes from women. They were more active during the preparations and campaigns for the 2019 general elections than they are now.

Economic hardship is another factor that threatens the efforts of government and non-governmental women-oriented initiatives in Nigeria. Today's critical eco-

¹ The Ernest Shonekan government is excluded because, though it came immediately after the Babangida administration, it was an interim government in place for just three months.

conomic indices are unfavorable—hyperinflation threatens, food is scarce, the unemployment rate is high, industrialization is low, foreign reserves are dwindling, and the local currency (the naira), exchanges at ₦1136 per USD. This has made the prices of daily commodities skyrocket as most of the items Nigerians consume are imported. This harsh economic situation has made the government's women-oriented programs unrealistic. For example when ₦10,000 is lent to a woman under the MarketMoni initiative, such an individual may not be able to put the amount to gainfully productive use because it is now only worth around 9 USD. Even, if a woman is able to access the maximum ₦100,000 loan, she has only accessed about 88 USD which is still meager. Many Nigerian women are therefore finding it very difficult to escape through their trades.

The question of the objectification of women in Nigeria is relevant at this juncture. The cultural practice of seeing and treating women as men's property still operates in today's Nigeria and many Nigerian men still see their wives and female servants as pieces of property they own. This applies equally in Nigerian society in general, where most men see women not as independent and a separate but equal gender but as individuals to be utilized for the purpose of patriarchal gratification. This is in spite of the footprint that women have left on the course of Nigeria's modern history:

Nigerian women have always played a significant role in their communities – as wives, mothers or heads of households. Their role and contribution to the nation's economy is undisputed, they form the bedrock of our economy through their petty trading and farming (Irukwu, 1994: ix)

This observation may be true, but it is of little significance to a sizeable number of Nigerian men nowadays. This is why they feel free to make use of women to fulfill their worldly desires. An example is the rape and murder of 22-year-old fashion designer Oluwabamise Ayanwale in Lagos on a Lagos Bus Rapid Transit bus in 2022 (Soyele, 2022).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Nigerian government has implemented many programs and policies, accompanied by numerous non-governmental humanitarian initiatives, all aimed at making life better for Nigerian women. However, despite how many of these women-oriented programs and policies there have been and how much money has been expended on executing them, the present condition of Nigerian woman re-

mains parlous. The intensity of their difficulties is at least partly due to the fact that they are, as we have seen, being deliberately economically disempowered by Nigerian men. Rural Nigerian women still live in squalor almost four decades after the landmark program, Better Life Program for the African Rural Woman, was initiated. Nigerian women are forced to seek opportunities abroad, especially in the Middle East, which makes them vulnerable to sexual humiliation and abuse. Nigerian women are murdered and their organs used by Nigerian men in money-making rituals, a clear example of the patriarchal objectification of Nigerian women. In the same vein, rape cases against women in Nigeria are on the rise.

All this shows that the condition of Nigerian women has not improved. The various initiatives have not been successful, and this is due to a number of social and political factors. Examples include the practice of politicians using women-oriented initiatives as bait to obtain votes from women, and the traditional habit of discontinuity in political policies practiced by successive administrations. Another major factor, of course, is the ongoing difficult economic circumstances. All these issues have to be addressed in order to safeguard the interests and wellbeing of Nigerian women. The government should first of all fix the failing economy through diversification from oil and advancement of women-oriented economic policies and programs with enabling statutory instruments. This will stop politicians from presenting what they are doing for women as a favor. Additionally, the government needs to summon up the willpower to activate penal instruments against violators of women's rights, especially rapists. It is also very important that the government should partner with non-governmental providers of women-oriented humanitarian services.

Governmental policies and programs as well as non-governmental initiatives must actualize the purposes for which they have been put in place. The paper therefore recommends that the Federal Government of Nigeria should first of all fix the economy through diversification and the promotion of women-oriented economic policies in order to ease the palpable tension in the country. Government policies and programs for women should not be used as bait intended to win political favor by eliciting bloc votes from women. An example of this was the MarketMoni Scheme which once prompted the Vice President to visit market places across the country.

Government should partner with the initiators and sponsors of private or non-governmental women's welfare programs. Such partnerships necessarily need to involve financial compensation or assistance for the non-governmental individuals and groups. Financial assistance is critical in this context because advocacy for women's well-being is capital-intensive, especially in a vast country like

Nigeria. For example, according to Chukwu (2022), Kemi Levi, founder of the Total Woman Initiative (TWI), started catering for 300 vulnerable women nearly a decade ago. To support this large number of women with grants and loans, among other incentives, is significantly expensive over time. To avoid opportunists taking advantage of the situation, the government should put certain integrity conditions in place, such as a minimum number of women to be catered for and the number of years a program has been in existence.

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