

Gender Equality for Sustainable Development in Nigeria: Using Adekunle Ajasin University in Nigeria as a Case Study of Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract

Gender equality and empowering all women and girls is the fifth goal of the 17 Agenda which the United Nations (UN) have laid out for global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achievable between 2016 and 2030. The Agenda 2030 with 17 global goals was an improvement over the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which applied to both developing and developed nations whereas SDGs is specially designed and endorsed by all countries under the United Nations to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. Nigeria, like many African countries, has been described as a patriarchal nation due to the domination of men in many sectors of the economy. Being one of the signatories to the SDGs, Nigeria now has a task of creating a more gender-balanced society where women have equal opportunities, rights, and privileges like their male counterparts. Apart from the country-wide gender equality approach, universities and other institutions of higher learning in the country are also making efforts at ensuring a gender-friendly environment for Nigeria. This paper, therefore, through primary and secondary sources of methodology, examines the approach adopted by Adekunle Ajasin University in Nigeria towards promoting gender equality among the students and members of staff with a new orientation about gender equality in order to make it sustainable in the society through equal opportunities, rights and privileges in all spheres of the university life irrespective of sex without discrimination. This paper has implications for the Nigerian government as an eye-opener in prioritising gender-balanced policy in social, economics, and political areas for sustainable development.

Introduction

Globally, women have been facing discrimination, deprivation and degradation until after centuries of struggles, agitations, advocacy and lobby. Women's collective global action culminated in the first meeting held between July 19 & 20, 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York with about 100 people in attendance with two thirds of them being women under the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the organizer of the first Convention (History, Art and Archives: US House of Representative – The Women's Rights Movement, 1848-1917, <https://history.house.gov/No+Lady>). The outcome of the Convention was the Declaration of Independence which holds that "all men and women are created equal" (<https://history.house.gov/No+Lady>). This eventually led to achieving the "sacred right of Franchise" The success of the first meeting led to another meeting championed by Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, a Massachusetts teacher in 1850 who had forged a lifetime alliance as women rights activists (<https://history.house.gov/No+Lady>). They agitated against inequality between men and women, advocated for the abolition of slave trade and lobbied the congress to include women in the provisions of the 14th and 15th Amendments (Extending citizenship rights and granting voting rights to African-American men, respectively) without success (<https://history.house.gov/No+Lady>). However, women after several lobbies and advocacy, made Woodrow Wilson, the American president, to eventually support the 19th Amendment which was ratified by the states in 1920. By 1922, Rebecca Latimer of Georgia served in the U. S Senate to an unexpired term and it lasted a single term (<https://history.house.gov/No+Lady>). By 1890s, Volunteers from the middle class such as members of women clubs and professional societies, temperance advocates and local charity organizations joined the existing ones to fuel their agitations to legitimize the suffrage movement which enabled them to form political Party known as National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) (<https://history.house.gov/No+Lady>).

In 1908, Women's focus was on better pay, shorter hours and voting rights and these activities paved the way for the famous Women's Labour Movement (WLM) in United States of America. The second International Women Conference was held in Copenhagen in 1910 with participants from 17 countries where a woman called Clara Zetkin proposed the idea of a Women's Day that it should be an international celebration day to press for women's rights demands. (UNESCO: 2021). The suggestion was unanimously adopted and since then, other countries such as Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland started to honour 19th March as International Women's Day where more than women and men attended rallies to demand for women rights. Gradually, it moved to Russia where IWD was celebrated on the last Sunday of February between 1913 & 1914 when it changed to 8th March of every year to the present time (IWD: History of International Women's Day, <https://www.internationalwomensday.com>). By 1917, the working-class women embarked on 'bread and peace' strike and they gained the right to vote. (Olugbemi V. K. (2005:75) Women in Local Government and Re- Engineering in Grassroot Development: Lesson from Women Achievers in History and Contemporary World"). This event in Russia led to the adoption of 8th March as the celebration of

IWD across Europe. That notwithstanding, women continued to achieve their goals through lobby, persistence and dedication to their objectives.

Ultimately, the United Nations for the first time celebrated IWD and in 1977, the U N General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring a UN Day for Women's Right and International Peace. (<https://en.unesco.org/womenday>) followed by an annual theme from 1995 for every year such as #Balance for Better, #Press for Progress, #Be Bold for Change, #Pledge for Parity, #Make it Happen, #Choose to Challenge. The conference where the Convention of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which was signed by 189 Nations including Nigeria in 1995 opened a new vista for gender equality globally (<https://www.un.org/womens-day>). The signing of CEDAW became a global policy to build a bridge over gender inequality in all spheres of the society. However, after decades of the ratification of the Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which is an international treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 as a bill of rights for women. (Ibid.) It was established on 3rd September, 1981 and Nigeria signed the CEDAW on 23rd April, 1984 and ratified on 13th June 1985, yet in the 2019 election, the number of elected and appointed to the three-tiers of government in the Federal Republic of Nigeria are very insignificant when we consider the platform of action which marked the fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China between 4-15 September, 1995. Therefore, there is the need to create an enabling environment for our women to gain full and equal participation in national and global developments.

Towards promoting Gender Equality in Nigeria

For decades, scholars and researchers have devoted a considerable time and resources in explaining what gender equality means. The reason is not far-fetched, the promotion of gender equality is now globally seen as a tool for reducing poverty and achieving sustainable human and societal development (Ciroma, 2006). However, while gender equality is gaining attention globally due to the significant roles that women play in the development of a society, it has been discovered that many people have a misconception about this concept. It is important to clarify that gender equality does not mean women should be made more powerful than men or one gender is superior to the other. Rather, it means the creation of equal platform, equal playing field and equal opportunities for both genders to thrive (Ejumudo, 2013). In other words, gender equality is "the state in which access to rights or opportunities is unaffected by gender" (Laila, 2006:np). Gender equality also means that access to resources and opportunities is neither dependent on or constrained by sex (UNFPA, 2005). Chinwokwu and Arop (2018:46) also sees gender equality as a situation where there is 'no discrimination of any individual on the basis of sex with regard to the allocation of economic resources, political positions or access to social services'. The opposite word to gender equality is gender inequality and where this is the situation, we often see one gender being excluded or disadvantaged when it comes to access to resources and opportunities.

In many developing countries of the world, including Nigeria, a country in West Africa, it is generally the female gender, i.e. women, who are excluded,

marginalised and disadvantaged in relation to access to economic opportunities and decision making (Panday, 2008). The Nigerian government, in her bid to promote gender equality, came up with a National Gender Policy which serves as a significant roadmap for gender mainstreaming in both public and private sectors. The policy aspires to:

Build a just society devoid of discrimination, harness the full potentials of all social groups regardless of sex or circumstance, promote the enjoyment of fundamental human rights and protect the health, social, economic and political well-being of all citizens in order to achieve equitable rapid economic growth; evolve an evidence based planning and governance system where human, social, financial and technological resources are efficiently and effectively deployed for sustainable development (The Federal Republic of Nigeria, National Gender Policy, 2013).

Similarly, with the adoption of the Agenda 2030, also known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), by the United Nations in September 2015, more attention has been devoted to the issue of gender equality in Nigeria. More emphasis are also being made to the quest of gender sensitive policies at both global and national levels in the country. Specifically, the fifth goal of SDGs, which is targeted towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, is driving both policies and programmes of government with a view to aligning with the international communities towards achieving sustainable development. This is vital because the SDGs signals that if women and girl children are given equal rights and opportunities like their male counterparts, the development will be rapid and the quest to eradicating poverty, hunger, disease will be faster than imagined.

The Sustainable Development Goals and Gender Equality

According to Kaltura in SDG Library, the origin of SDGs started in Stockholm in 1972 at conference on the Human Environment where it was recognized that economy on one hand and on the other hand, were on kind of collision course due to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which is the first-ever sequence for tackling the most important problems in the world were midwifed at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 with the objective of producing a set of universal goals that meet the urgent environmental political and economic challenges facing the world. By 2015, the international community under the umbrella of United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030 (Reid et al., 2017). The SDGs which were introduced by the United Nations (UN) are to survive the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as Agenda 2030, is a global agenda for development containing 17 goals with 169 targets covering a broad range of sustainable development issues around the globe. Unlike MDGs with just eight (8) Goals, the SDGs contain

seventeen (17) goals and one hundred and sixty-nine (169) targets aimed at achieving better and sustainable future for all (Idowu, Olaniran & Perumal, 2020). The 17 SDGs, according to the UN (2017) are:

1. NO POVERTY (End poverty in all its forms everywhere)
2. ZERO HUNGER (End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture)
3. GOOD HEALTH AND WELLBEING (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages)
4. QUALITY EDUCATION (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all)
5. GENDER EQUALITY (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls)
6. CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION (Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all)
7. AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY (Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all)
8. DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH (Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all)
9. INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE (Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation)
10. REDUCED INEQUALITY (Reduce inequality within and among countries)
11. SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIEs (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable)
12. RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTIONS (Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns)
13. CLIMATE ACTION (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts)
14. LIFE BELOW WATER (Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development)
15. LIFE ON LAND (Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss)
16. PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels)
17. PARTNERSHIP FOR THE GOALS (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development).

Gender equality is a vital tool we cannot afford to ignore when we are talking about the sustainable development of any nation and society. It is, therefore, important to highlight clearly how promoting Gender Equality can help in the

actualization of these 17 goals by the year 2030 which is the deadline set by the UN to achieve the goals.

Gender issues are increasingly recognised as important in the development process. A free and just society is the one that gives equal chances to male and female in terms of access to employment, promotion and other social and economic opportunities. Equality is only possible when there is increased awareness, a transformation in attitudes, and a removal of unequal practices that are deeply rooted in the society. An increase in gender awareness means gender sensitization, and the recognition of a need to incorporate women into the development process as active participants. Gender awareness contributes to changes in the attitudes and behaviours of individuals, and of groups. The debate about GENDER EQUALITY is so important that we cannot afford not to talk about it unless we want to deceive ourselves. This is the reason why the United Nations devotes the whole of Goal 5 to the campaign and advocacy for GENDER EQUALITY so that each nation of the world can realise its importance and close every gap that leads to inequality in the society.

While the SDGs are a collection of 17 interlinked global goals designed to be a 'blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all, the four distinctive areas of SDGs, otherwise known as the pillars of sustainability, are human, economic, social and environmental which seeks to ensure health and well-being for all, which includes a bold commitment to end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and other communicable diseases by 2030. Moreover, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) engagement on the SDGs is aligned with five SDG pillars of people, prosperity, planet, peace and partnership as illustrated in the Figure 1.

Figure 1



Source: United Nations Information Centre, Lusaka (2021).

Since the 8th of March was proclaimed as the International Women's Day by the United Nations (UN) with the aim to amplify the role of women in achieving peace, equality and societal development (UNFPA, 2021), Nigeria has been celebrating the day as a mark of honour and celebration to the Nigerian women for their immense contributions to nation building. On the annual International Women's Day, nations of the world remind themselves about the need to apply gender-balanced approach in the allocation of opportunities and resources. While Gender Equality is a stand-alone goal among the SDGs, its efficacy cuts across the entire seventeen Goals of the SDGs (Modeer, 2019). Therefore, it is not out of place to submit that any nation that want to achieve the SDGs by the year 2030 must make a considerable efforts and investment in promoting gender equality in all sectors of the economy.

Method of Promoting Gender Equality Through Women Studies and Development Centre (WSDC), Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko (AAUA)

Adekunle Ajasin University is one of the few universities in Nigeria that gives credence to gender equality in its operations. This is evidenced in the establishment of an independent centre called Women Studies and Development Centre (WSDC) geared towards promoting gender equality and empowerment of women. Adekunle Ajasin University is located in Akungba-Akoko in Ondo State, Nigeria, hence, it is fondly called AAUA. It has consistently be ranked one of the best State Universities in Nigeria since 2010 to date. It was initially known as Ondo State University, Ado-Ekiti when Ondo and Ekiti were still together as one State. The university's relocation to Akungba-Akoko became imperative in 1999 following the creation of a new State of Ekiti out of the old Ondo State three years earlier in 1996. While the university, since its establishment, has been running several programmes to reach out to women within and outside the university, the creation of an independent centre dedicated to advancing women activities did not take place until the 19th of October, 2010 during the administration of Professor N.O. Mimiko, a former Vice Chancellor of the university between 2010 and 2015.

Women Studies and Development Centre (WSDC) was established on a vision to empower women and girl child through a progressive developmental strategy with a bid to building, strengthening and promoting their welfare in all ramifications. In a bid to achieve this, WSDC strives to pursue the following objectives:

- i. To play an important role in the academic community by incorporating gender perspective in the operations of all Faculties of the university.
- ii. To look into greater participation of female lecturers and administrators at all levels of the university system.
- iii. To initiate and monitor admission and related women issues, and to make ways for future equal representations of women in all spheres of the Nigerian society.
- iv. To encourage the construction of adequate hostel accommodation and facilities for female students within the university system.

- v. To establish sustainable network with the media for sensitisation and collaboration.
- vi. To foster mutual relationship between town and gown.

WSDC carries out these objectives by embarking on some cardinal projects and programmes such as:

- i. Networking, coordination and collaboration with different organizations within and outside the university for generation of ideas and programmes that could help achieve the set objectives.
- ii. Education and Technical Intervention which is geared towards strengthening the educational and technical capacity of women to study and implement schemes pertaining to their well-being.
- iii. Capacity building programmes which targets institutional networks with a view to identifying strategic training and creation of enabling environment to enhance and sustain women's entrepreneurial capacities.
- iv. Monitoring and review of programmes that are targeted towards developing the capacity of women and girl child within and outside the campus.
- v. Documentation, publication and dissemination of information that provides awareness on issues of inequality between men and women, special strengths of women, and women role models, among others.

These programmes as highlighted above are avenues for WSDC in AAUA to create enabling environment for women towards accessing relevant information and resources for their empowerment. The success story of the centre within the few years of establishment has made it to be one of the sought-after platforms for women both within and outside the campus to equip, collaborate or accessing resources for their well-being.

The WSDC has been running seminars and workshops every year to sensitize and sanitize the university community on gender issues such 'Violence Against Women, Rape, Health Issues such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, Sexua Transmission Diseases, Cancer, Family Values, etc.

Apart from the above, the WSDC also embarked on advocacy for gender equality in admission, recruitment of members of staff, and appointment of university management, offices, committees, directorates and units within the university. In addition, there have been social interaction and sustainability between the University and the host communities through workshops and seminars on the importance of gender participation in social, economic and political activities on equal basis without discrimination against women. Annually, IWD is always celebrated to create awareness and to celebrate women achievers within and outside the university especially in year's 2020 and 2021 to encourage women to aspire to the highest level of their career like men counterparts. For example, the first female Head of Service in Ondo State, the first Female Registrar of the University, the first Female Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the first Female Professor, the first Female Deputy

Registrars and all the female Professors and Deputy Registrars were also celebrated this year 2021 in line with this year's theme. The centre serves as a leadership training centre for both students and members of staff of the university community. For good health and economic sustainability of the university community, WSDC also established a Snacks Centre which produces Egg Rolls, Doughnuts, Fish Rolls, Chinchin etc.

The various activities of WSDC have resulted into female students pulling their weights with their male counterparts as course representatives on equal basis in every course department in the university, at Student Union Government (SUG) female students have secured the vice-president consistently for the past four years. At Academic level, the female students are also on the ratio 40-50 in first and second class divisions. The number of female students mobilized for NYSC from 2018 to 2020 viz:

Number of Students Mobilized Within Years 2018-2020

2018	Male	Female	Aggregate
BATCH A	293	207	500
BATCH B	614	659	1,273
BATCH C	506	435	941
TOTAL	1,413	1,301	2,714
2019			
BATCH A	129	91	220
BATCH B	1,076	1155	2,231
BATCH C STREAM (i)	122	127	249
STREAM (ii)	149	146	296
TOTAL	1,476	1,519	2,995
2020			
BATCH A STREAM (i)	235	223	458
STREAM (ii)	13	14	27
TOTAL	248	237	485

*There was no Batch B in 2020 because of COVID. 19

The above table shows that the enrolment of students admitted to the university increased on yearly basis which is a clear indication that more female candidates seek admission to AAUA. This has been bridging the gap between the female and male students mentored in leadership, gender sensitivity and equality.

Conclusion

The role of women in achieving sustainable development cannot be over-emphasized. While it is important for governments at the Federal, State and Local levels to double up their efforts towards promoting gender equality in all sectors of the economy, institutions of higher learning must also complement the efforts of government by promoting policies and programmes that empowers women. Establishment of units or centres, like the WSDC in AAUA, will go a long way in amplifying the voices of women as major stakeholders in development. This paper, therefore, recommends:

- i. That the Federal Government of Nigeria should join the leagues of nations such as Russia, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan by pronouncing March 8th of every year a public holiday as a way of recognizing the immense roles of women in nation building and sustainable development.
- ii. That the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) declare 2023 a year of Women in Politics by encouraging all Political Parties to present only female candidates for Presidential, and perhaps Governorship Elections in 18 states out of the 36 states of the federation.
- iii. It is believed that the campaign for gender equality will make more sense if we deliberately make these decisions in order to allow for more women representation in governance.
- iv. That institutions of higher learning in the country such as Universities, Polytechnics, and Colleges of Education sees to the establishment of platforms, like WSDC in AAUA, for the purpose of nurturing ideas and organizing programmes for women empowerment and development.
- v. That special education trust fund be introduced to cater for girl-child education, particularly for the girl children that are on-the-street, less-privileged and living with disabilities. Until equal numbers of girls and boys are registered in school at all levels of education, it will be difficult to build the framework and strategy necessary to eliminate hunger, poverty, ensure good health and well-being, achieve qualitative education and lifelong learning for all, and achieve gender equality as captured in the SDGs one to five.
- vi. That 50/50 representation of women and men be made compulsory in all spheres of the nation appointments and elections as a policy.

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