



Women's Economic Empowerment and Governance Challenges in Nigeria: An Analytical Perspective

The relationship between women's economic empowerment and governance in politically tenuous contexts is becoming increasingly apparent. In Nigeria, governance systems have been undermined by persistent instability, poverty, and civil conflict. Central to this fragility is the economic marginalization of women, which not only perpetuates poverty but also undermines national stability. This essay explores how economically empowering women can strengthen governance, reduce conflict, and contribute to overall national cohesion, building on Nigeria's historical context and contemporary developments. Rigorous analysis of these factors demonstrates that economic empowerment is not just a gender issue, but a critical governance strategy.

Women's Economic Exclusion and Its Impact on Governance

Nigeria's political landscape has been shaped by economic inequalities that cut across gender and ethnic lines. Historically, Nigerian women have been economically marginalized, limiting their participation in the formal economy and decision-making processes. This exclusion exacerbates the social grievances that drive instability in the country. Studies have shown that economic inequality is strongly linked to governance challenges, with countries experiencing high levels of gender-based economic exclusion being significantly more likely to face internal conflict and instability¹. This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where large segments of the female population remain trapped in the informal economy, with limited access to formal employment, education, and financial services².

Research indicates that countries with lower levels of female economic participation are more prone to social unrest and conflict. For example, nations where less than 10% of women participate in the workforce are 30 times more likely to experience internal conflict than countries with at least 40% female employment³. This finding is critical in the Nigerian context, where women's participation in the formal economy remains low. Furthermore, a 2021 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) underscores the importance of gender equality in economic participation as a key factor in stabilizing governance systems, particularly in post-conflict

¹ Goemans, C., Koester, D., & Loudon, S. (2021). Gender equality and fragility. OECD.

² Gates, S., Hegre, H., Nygård, H. M., & Strand, H. (2010). Consequences of civil conflict. ResearchGate.

³ Caprioli, M. (2010). Gendered indicators of conflict and peace. *International Studies Quarterly*, 54(4), 908-909.

environments⁴.

Historically, Nigerian women have resisted their economic and political exclusion. The 1929 Aba Women's Riot is one of the most notable examples of collective action by women in response to economic and political marginalization. This uprising was a direct challenge to the colonial administration's imposition of taxes on women, demonstrating how economic grievances can spark resistance movements⁵. The riot also highlighted the interconnectedness of economic empowerment and political agency, as the women involved sought to assert their rights both economically and politically. This historical precedent continues to be relevant today, as women's economic exclusion remains a significant factor in Nigeria's governance challenges.

Nigeria's contemporary governance challenges reflect the continued marginalization of women in the economy. While women make up a significant portion of the informal labor force, they are largely excluded from the formal economy, where they face barriers to employment, financial resources, and political participation⁶. The exclusion of women from economic opportunities not only deepens poverty but also undermines social cohesion, as economic inequality is a well-documented driver of social unrest⁷. Moreover, the lack of women in key decision-making positions further exacerbates governance issues, as their perspectives and contributions are often sidelined in policy discussions⁸.

Economic Empowerment as a Governance Strategy

In politically unstable environments, empowering women economically can be a transformative strategy for improving governance. Research consistently shows that countries that prioritize women's economic inclusion experience greater social stability and resilience against conflict⁹. The Nigerian context provides a clear example of how economic empowerment can serve as a tool for mitigating governance challenges. Empowering women in conflict-affected areas, in particular, has the potential to reduce the grievances that fuel violence and instability¹⁰.

A prime example of this can be seen in the ongoing conflict with Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. This insurgency has disproportionately affected women and girls, who have been targets of abduction, forced marriages, and violence. The

⁴ Goemans et al. (2021).

⁵ Egharevba, M. E., & Iruonagbe, C. T. (2015). Ethnic/religious insurgencies and nation-building in Nigeria. *International Affairs and Global Strategy*.

⁶ Ikpe, E. (2017). Counting the development costs of the conflict in North-Eastern Nigeria: The economic impact of the Boko Haram-led insurgency. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 17(4), 305-326.

⁷ Ikpe (2017).

⁸ Melander, E. (2015). Gender equality and intrastate armed conflict. *International Studies Quarterly*, 49(4), 695-715.

⁹ Goemans et al. (2021).

¹⁰ Caprioli (2010).

abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014 by Boko Haram drew international attention to the vulnerabilities of women in conflict zones and underscored the importance of education and economic empowerment in preventing such atrocities¹¹. The global #BringBackOurGirls movement, which emerged in response to this abduction, emphasized that empowering women and girls is essential not only for their protection but also for the broader stability of the region¹².

Economic empowerment of women can contribute to national stability by increasing household incomes, reducing poverty, and fostering greater social cohesion. Studies have demonstrated that women who are economically empowered are more likely to invest in their families and communities, leading to better educational and health outcomes¹³. In Nigeria, where poverty and economic inequality are significant drivers of conflict, empowering women could be a key strategy for addressing the root causes of governance instability¹⁴. Furthermore, women's participation in the economy has been shown to reduce the likelihood of political violence, as it increases their stake in maintaining social order¹⁵.

The OECD's 2021 report highlights the positive relationship between women's economic empowerment and national resilience in post-conflict societies. Countries that invest in women's economic participation tend to recover more quickly from conflict and are less likely to relapse into violence¹⁶. This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where governance remains fragile in many regions. By promoting women's participation in the economy, the Nigerian government can strengthen its political institutions and reduce the likelihood of future conflicts¹⁷.

In addition to economic benefits, empowering women also has significant political implications. Research has shown that countries with higher levels of female political participation tend to have more inclusive governance systems and are less likely to experience political instability¹⁸. This is because women, when economically empowered, are more likely to engage in political processes and advocate for policies that promote social welfare and stability¹⁹. In Nigeria,

¹¹ Atela, M., Ojebode, A., Makokha, R., & Otieno, M. (2021). Women organising in fragility and conflict: Lessons from the #BringBackOurGirls movement. *Gender & Development*, 29(1), 53-69.

¹² Atela et al. (2021).

¹³ Tripp, A. M. (2012). *Women's political empowerment in state-building and peace-building: A baseline study*. London: DFID.

¹⁴ Gates et al. (2010).

¹⁵ Caprioli (2010).

¹⁶ Goemans et al. (2021).

¹⁷ Lahai, J. I., & Koomson, I. (2020). *State fragility and resilience in sub-Saharan Africa: Indicators and interventions*.

¹⁸ Melander (2015).

¹⁹ Lahai & Koomson (2020).

where governance is often undermined by corruption and inequality, increasing women's participation in both the economy and politics could help to build more accountable and transparent institutions²⁰.

Addressing Barriers to Economic Inclusion

Despite the clear benefits of women's economic empowerment, significant barriers remain in Nigeria. In many parts of the country, cultural norms and legal frameworks continue to restrict women's access to education, employment, and financial resources²¹. These barriers are particularly pronounced in northern Nigeria, where Boko Haram's insurgency has severely limited girls' access to education. The systematic targeting of schools and the widespread displacement caused by the conflict have further entrenched gender inequality, preventing women and girls from accessing the resources they need to break the cycle of poverty²².

In addition to cultural and legal barriers, Nigeria's labor market remains deeply gender-segregated. Women are over represented in low-paying informal jobs and underrepresented in formal sectors such as finance, education, and government²³. This segregation is further compounded by limited access to financial services, land ownership, and social protections, which disproportionately affect women²⁴. For women in rural areas, these challenges are even more pronounced, as they often lack the infrastructure and resources necessary to participate in the formal economy²⁵.

Efforts to address these barriers have been made at both the national and international levels. For example, programs aimed at increasing women's access to credit, vocational training, and education have shown promise in helping women enter the formal workforce²⁶. However, these initiatives must be scaled up and integrated into broader governance reforms if they are to have a lasting impact²⁷. Legal reforms are also needed to ensure that women have equal rights to land, property, and financial resources, as well as protections against discrimination in the workplace²⁸.

²⁰ Melander (2015).

²¹ Nyadera, I. N., Kisaka, M. O., & Agwanda, B. (2020). Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria: A nexus of just war and fragile state. *The Round Table*, 109(4), 411-426.

²² Nyadera et al. (2020).

²³ Gates et al. (2010).

²⁴ Goemans et al. (2021).

²⁵ Lahai & Koomson (2020).

²⁶ Tripp (2012).

²⁷ Goemans et al. (2021).

²⁸ Melander (2015)

In conclusion, empowering women economically is not only a matter of achieving gender equality but also a critical governance strategy for Nigeria. By addressing the barriers that prevent women from fully participating in the economy, the Nigerian government can reduce poverty, mitigate conflict, and strengthen its political institutions. The evidence is clear: when women are empowered, countries are more stable, resilient, and prosperous.

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