

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Empowerment of Indigenous Women in the Federal Capital Territory Abuja, Nigeria.

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### ABSTRACT

*Nigeria's development of the new Federal Capital Territory in the central part of the country named Abuja 8,000 km<sup>2</sup> in size greatly impacted on all spheres of lives of the host communities. However, the host communities of 845 settlements with over 316,000 people were exposed to urban violence and there was fear that they would be completely wiped out. The findings here are part of some surveys conducted between 1994 and 2000 on the impact of the FCT on the indigenous inhabitants. The research instruments were Focused Group Discussions and In Depth Interview Guides, Questionnaires, Observations and Content Analysis. The findings reveal that the first decade of the FCT Abuja posed challenges and the indigenous inhabitants found it difficult to adjust. With the FCDA and MFCT policies, women became empowered. The teeming urban population offered investment opportunities too, which women utilized that the former poor housewives gradually transformed into petty-business women, employees and so on, and was reflected in their improved living conditions.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Nigerians had been longing for a new Federal Capital since 1914. Nigerians wanted to shift the capital from Lagos to a more central part of the country for equal accessibility, and for the fact that Lagos being an Island has no space for continuous infrastructural development, and thus became densely congested and quit uncomfortable. It was not until in 1975 when the Military Government of General Yakubu Gowon initiated and carved Abuja area for the project. The *Abuja Master Plan* defined the location and size of the FCT - 8,000 km<sup>2</sup> in size at longitudes 6.7°E to 7.6°E and latitudes 8.3°N to 9.2°N – and was approved in 1979. On the eve of the construction in 1980 this place had over 845 settlements with over 316,000 (women constituting 50%) people in 11 different Districts of the then Plateau (now Nasarawa), Niger and Kwara (now Kogi) States there were by 1980. (Filaba, 2004:1). When the rapid physical development of the Federal Capital Territory Abuja (FCT) started in 1980 there were subsequent massive immigration of new comers and the demography, infrastructures, society and gender roles and other spheres of the lives of the indigenous inhabitants there started to change.

The construction of the Capital City was going on amidst the indigenous settlements that accommodated the new comers. The construction, the mass relocation of Federal Government workers from Lagos to the new Capital City, and the FCT policies towards the indigenous groups, all combined to greatly change the earlier predominantly rural farmers and the demography and the composition of the inhabitants. The changes started with the accommodation of secondary families who were mainly professionals in the houses of

primary families and the neighborhood became more nationalized. Statistics for the changing demography in the FCT since 1980 are presented in earlier works. (Filaba 2004).

The empowerment of the indigenous population in the FCT started with employment opportunities in the Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA) which recruited the indigenes into its various departments. The indigenes dominated the FCDA and Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC). The companies that constructed the new infrastructures also employed the indigenous women inclusive.

The rapid urbanization was also characterized by massive immigration of the urban poor – the job seekers in the construction companies, petty professionals and their apprentices and hawkers that brought about primary families living together with secondary families in the same compound and became congested. This later came to have direct empowerment implications as the indigenes were influenced to seize opportunities and learnt new ways of earning a living. In deed, more houses were built in the satellite towns to let.

There was gradual change in the family and gender roles as women started to become bread winners as politicians, employees, contractors, middle-dealers, professionals and so on, unlike before when almost all the women were full-time house wives. The first decade of the development of the FCT, though created empowerment opportunities, it also increased women's roles and posed new challenges some of which can be contended with if the suggestions hereon are taken seriously.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The survey was a Ph. D. proposal to assess the impact of the rapid urbanization process of the new capital city on the host/indigenous communities and on the physical environment as 1980 to 2002. The methods for data collation included the administration of structured questionnaires; conduction of Focused Group Discussions (FGDs); In Depth Interviews (IDIs); Observation; and Content Analysis. The Study Design of the survey spanned between 1995 to 2003. Research questions on the impacts of the developments on women were elaborately articulated in the FGD and IDI Guides and Questionnaires. Different types of sampling methods were employed for different issues under assessment. In order to elicit the desired data on impacts of the developments on women, there were systematic sampling, quota sampling, and purposive sampling. About 20 IDIs and 20 FGDs were conducted, and 200 questionnaires were administered. The data analysis and presentation involved comparative and quantitative tabulations, qualitative interpretations and inferences. There were maps and plates. The ethics of scholarly research were adhered to – objective and confidential treatment of information, respect of peoples' views and culture and commitment to the survey.

## **THE FINDINGS/DATA**

### **Living Conditions of Women between 1980-1990**

In the first decade of the construction of the FCT, women's domestic tasks gradually increased without corresponding increase in their incomes when their husbands migrated to the construction camps every dry season in search of paid labour (Filaba

2004). Most of the respondents complained that their husbands demurred to their demands. In the absence of their husbands, they did not only fend for themselves but they also liquidated hospital bills of the aged in-laws and children. The unconcerned attitudes of husbands most of the time resulted in frustration, maternal and child mortality, and so on, and thus forced out seek for jobs in the construction camps too. Women kept separate accounts and owned animals and farms, and were expected to assist their husbands in farm work. In some families, women provide the entire soup- ingredients (Filaba & T. Maiangwa, (2000).

Apart from the Abuja-pull factor, the status and living condition of women was also influenced by the prevailing socio-economic conditions in the communities. The poor incomes from agriculture worsen with growing economic adversity had negative health consequences especially for women. Poverty was precarious. Hence the people were exposed to the risks and vulnerability to child and maternal morbidity and mortality, while survivorship was difficult. Other independent studies on health, education, access to water, food security and sanitation in Nigeria reveal that they have been in decline since 1980. Roads, Hospitals. Schools and other infrastructures were collapsing and inaccessible to the rural poor. Illiteracy rate by 1995 was still high. 70% of the rural population did not have access to safe drinking water. Life expectancy was 50 years. Population per hospital bed was 1,277 people. Infant mortality was 191 per 1000 live births with the worst child survival rate in the world. Despite the fact that women constitute half of the Nigeria's population, their status remained poor with no access to health, education, credit, employment, and social equity. Thus, in attempt to survive, the women utilized the

natural resources - fuel wood – which they supplied to the teeming urban rich and poor in the FCT (Opogun W., 1996:19-12).

Between 1980 to 1990, women's family roles and poverty increased. Women started to own farms in order to curtail hunger and since food items were selling well. This influenced them to overwork themselves even when pregnant. The community health workers remarked that in addition to over-work, the lack of knowledge of balanced diet, the food of pregnant women and babies hardly changed, and resulted to the birth of underweight babies, maternal morbidity and mortality. The health workers backed up with obstetric records that 40% maternal morbidity and sometimes mortality were traced to lack of adequate feeding and overworking. The situation here can be likened to that of New Guinea, where abject poverty, the neglect of men and unconcerned government, resulted in poor health in women and subsequent high mortality. Abject poverty in New Guinea influenced some women to sell their babies, caused heart failure, anaemia and oedema of the limbs (Kuelik D., 1994:141). Only 20% of attendants from remote villages in the FCT had regular check-up, while the rest had irregular turn-up for lack of money, they attributed. Many of the rural women never came for maternity check-up on the ground that they had no money, or that their husbands did not approve of it. Some of them claimed that they were discouraged by the poor transport system to the far away towns where the clinics are sited, or that they were satisfied with traditional herbs most of which were efficacious. During the survey in 1999, those interviewed on the impact of the FCT on general health and personal hygiene of women, almost all the respondents claimed to have been solely responsible for buying their pads, panties, powders, brassieres, tooth pastes, toilet materials, creams, skirts,

and others. Men demur to their demands of these with the assumption that these were naturally women's affairs and that to succumb to the demands would imply being overburdened, particularly in polygamous families.

The poor living condition of women was still characterised by lack of the means to convey pots, chicken, fuel wood, water, and harvests home and to markets. Women carried the heavy goods to the City on shoulders. Fulani women too hawked milk, butter and eggs on head. Human being was still the dominant porter of items from the farms and bush to the teeming population in the FCT. They could not improve the porting system because of the low income level and lack of innovating a new technology. The government and rich individuals could not initiate any measure to empower women (Filaba, 2004).

In attempt to adjust, some women seasonally migrated from villages to the construction camps for paid jobs. The inherent consequence was children delinquency syndrome and wayward daughters who lefts into the City for fortunes but came back with unwanted children, which increased the burden of their mothers. The youth started to abandon farming for brisk businesses in Abuja.

### **Impact of the Urbanization of the FCT on the Rural Economy**

The urbanization of the Capital City directly impacted on the local economy – farming, animal rearing, crafts and marketing. Women have always been critical in the rural economy, particularly in porting back harvest and marketing them, potting, knitting and weaving industries. The desire for pots for flour beds encouraged pottery, which was the monopoly of women. Despite the opening

of new opportunities, farmers did not easily adjust by quickly embracing the new economy. In the first decade of the FCT, farming remained the main means of rural survival. Thus, the Federal Government's initial taking over of their farmland for the construction of the Capital City recorded a sharp decline in the agricultural production there (Filaba, 2004 chpt. 5).

The increased participation of women in farming was motivated by high demand rather than any policy. That may be why food from FCT was exported to the eastern, western and northern parts of the country. In fact, the satellite villages and the villages close to the FCT fed the whole teeming population, in the FCT and as well sold their products to far away towns and cities. Yams were exported in large quantities. The second most important food items, guinea corn, maize and rice, were produced in large quantity for food as before and for brewing local beer – *burukutu*, which both immigrants and indigenes consumed. Of course, the rapid urbanization and the offer of 'good' price motivated massive farming of other foods like cassava, rice, beans, pepper, sweet potatoes, sugar cane, maize, pepper, live stocks and garden crops of many sorts. Some people were tempted to sell out almost all of their harvests because of the 'good price'. This resulted in hunger in some households particularly in the months of March, April May and June when new crops had not ripened.

Apart from the high demand for food for the teeming immigrants, which directly stimulated farming more than before, Mango and Cashew nuts, earlier thrown as rubbish, came to be marketable. Many chemical and cosmetic industries appointed collectors of these nuts. Women were the main collectors and middle dealers in these nuts. Some of these middle women became rich. Thus, the coming of FCT Abuja,

directly encouraged tree farming. New crops, like vineyards, cucumber, foreign plants and flowers, and birds, were introduced. These new things were costlier than local products (Filaba 2004 chp. 5).

### **Embracing Urban Economy**

Those who lost their farms started to 'do one thing or the other in order to live. Some of them sold their labour in the construction camps. Some of them became guards or rendered social services. Many people started to invest in the new economy. Every household started raise structures as rooms to let.

Those people of Karu, Nyanya, Kurudu, Asokoro and Karshi that were given the first installment of the compensation (Ago et al, 1999, 21-28) used the money in building houses to let. Others bought motorbikes and buses for commercial purposes. Some people invested the money in running canteens and food hotels. In the first decade of the FCT in the satellite towns, apart from the new government quarters, almost all the restaurants, houses to let and accommodation hotels were owned by the indigenes. This was partly influenced by the demand for house to let. Since all the workers in the city became resident of satellite villages, every primary family head was influenced to build to let. The round thatched huts gave way for modern buildings and up stairs. There was also the evolution of food and drink hotels, shops and technical workshops, which influenced family heads to erect structures in the open spaces and backyards to let out at exorbitant prices. Tenants were asked to give not less than a year's advance before occupation. Women too started to own houses for renting.

Many indigenes started to become businessmen and contractors, as the first

Chairman of the FCDA, Hon Kyauta Yepwui, was from Karu and assisted them. When Mrs Esther Audu became Chairperson of the Abuja Municipal Area Council (1999-2005) few women won contracts and appointments at various cadres. Some of them became big land dealers and intermediaries. Some of them started to buy shares in the big companies, or established joint businesses and fuel filling stations. Other important new economic changes for the males included crafts and hand works like carpentry, mechanic, electronic, plumber, iron bender, welder, bricklayer, and other vocational training. Women, too, started to invest in the motorbike hiring business called "going" also known as "express" or "achaba" in Hausa. Women started to establish kiosks, shops, food hotels, and myriad of petty businesses (Filaba, 2004 chpt 5).

Another area that became source of income for women was the demand for their unskilled labour in the construction camps. Unskilled labour was valuable. Instead of the unpaid labour contracts of the olden days, labour was now purchased because of the demand for it at the construction camps. Labour and wages became very important issues. Labour became more valuable than before and highly priced that people went right into inside the City - Garki, Wuse, Ado, Maitama, Durumi, and other Central Districts - to work for money. Investment opportunities were unlimited. Vocational training became pervasive and the youth took to any job of their choices. Money accrued from rents, buses, motorbikes, wages from the companies and government, were used to buy labour for farming.

Very few women had the courage to start becoming big landladies. land speculators

and dealers as land was getting more valuable and costlier and thus much gains to the dealers. Women, too, increasingly became middle women and 'arrangees' for plots. Some plots in the FCT sold in millions of Dollars and Naira as partly influenced by the intense pressure on him from highly placed Nigerians for plots in the Capital City. The indigenes knew where plots were available and became middlemen who looked for plots to be sold. They derived large interests from agreed 'percentage' and 'kirk-back' of between 5% to 10%, which came from both the seller and the buyer. Before 2004 when the FG scuttled land deals in the FCT, many people embraced this as their secondary source of income, and a few took it to be their primary occupation.

Instead of remaining as immobile housewives who conveyed goods on shoulders from farms to houses and markets, they started to be conveying their goods by vehicles, and few of the workers and traders came to own personal or commercial vehicles. Further more, they similarly started to sell their labour to the construction companies and took up menial appointments. Of course, they were given preference because they might not disappear, and were accessible.

The indigenous women were preferred as cleaners, house-maids, stewards, bar/hotel attendants, and so on, because they might not disappear, and were accessible.

In addition to petty trading - having little table of drinks, canned and bagged foods, stationery and others, indigenous women started to sell cooked foods and competed with immigrants - the Ibo, Yoruba, Ebira, Tiv and Igalá - who run food hotels in the construction camps. It must be mentioned that the large and laborious population necessarily needed food. Hence, food

hotels sprang everywhere. Local breweries which had since ages been women's industry experienced a boom. Immigrants patronized local beer brewed from guinea corn. After all, most of the immigrants were from villages.

Their orchestra traditional dances by women were viewed by tourists, newcomer and entertainment industries. Traditional dance troupes were patronized, and that served to boost their cultures. They adored national and international festivals and parties with traditional dances and attires. It was famous for President Clinton to take the traditional title of Magnami [Hausa: Dan Masani] or adviser of Gbagyi in Abuja when he promised to empower the rural dwellers particularly women. Their traditional attires were used for adoring and crowning him so on the 27<sup>th</sup> August 2000.

Women became politically conscious too due to the generally increased political consciousness and participation. Mrs Esther Audu under the PDP flag became the Chairperson of the AMAC 1999-2003 and was proposed the second term in 2004. That was the period that two women became Senators and two more women Ministers. Every political party had Women's Wing. It must be mentioned of the fact that conscious attempt to empower women started during the Babangida regime when his wife established Better Life for Rural Women programmes ended up empowering the urban women in the FCT.

Some Churches in the FCT designed Women Fellowship and Cooperatives in order to empower them. They were given scholarships, and leadership training programmes were mounted for them. Women Traders' Associations also had credit and collection schemes, which

empowered them. It was in this area that new association of indigenes and newcomers evolved as foreigners established alliances with the indigenous communities for political, social, economic and other pursuits.

The educated women greatly benefited from the various employment opportunities offered by the Area Councils, AMAC, FCDA, Ministry of Federal Capital Territory, the Police, Traffic Warders, the Multi-national Corporations and individual businesses. Some women were influenced to start setting up private businesses and employed other too. The establishment of many primary, secondary and tertiary (higher educational) institutions by both the government and private groups greatly empowered all the inhabitants of the FCT. In deed, the satellite towns' schools were comparatively more equipped than their counterparts in the neighbouring frontline States. Many of the children of the indigenous groups attended schools unlike before, and they have automatic scholarship for post secondary school education. The government's primary and secondary education in the FCT was free unlike the States' schools. Most of the teachers in the primary and secondary schools here were the indigenes. Similarly, they dominated Welfare, Home Economic/Women Development and the Health Departments. Thus, the infrastructural development policies of the FCT purposely empowered the indigenous women, and there was an estimated ration of 1:2 women in the FCDA and AMAC employment.

Another cultural change with resultant effect on women empowerment was late betrothal that came to replace early and teenage marriage. Marriage was delayed particularly as influenced by the long period of schooling and available

employment for girls. Late marriage enabled them to have opportunities to undergo vocational training and schooling.

The rapid urbanization of Abuja was similarly characterised with establishment of markets most of which traders were women. Most of the inhabitants were workers and business people and they boosted trading in local products. Abuja workers and contractors followed producers right into their localities for their crafts, farm produce, fish and meats. This boosted and influenced the enlargement of roadside markets along Abuja-Keffi, Suleja Zuba and Abaji-Lokoja arteries. In addition to the food crops, the villages supplied cow milk and butter, fish, hides and skins, bush meat and honey. The villages along the roads like New Nyanya, Mararaba and Masaka had merged and were becoming primate cities of the Capital City. Since Abuja workers resided in these towns, their experiences and ways of life of FCT were extended on them (Filaba, 2004 chpt 5).

The FCT absorbed even the agricultural population, which went on seasonal basis for fortune because there was poverty in the rural areas. G. Breese observed the movement of the skilled labour and the most hard working from the rural areas to the Capital Cities to be a universal phenomenon, and warned that there may be a diseconomy or dysfunction involved in the tendency of high talent persons to leave villages where it is necessary to have as many as possible return to villages for administration of national programs. Capital Cities are observed to be magnets for rural population worldwide (Breese, 1969:42).

Abuja as locus of economic power became headquarter of industrial, commercial and other enterprises, where they attempt to establish contacts with countries outside.

Abuja's dominance over other states and economic functions made "all roads led to Abuja." Anybody who wished to make it within shortest time possible went to Abuja, women inclusive.

## CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, the coming of the FCT meant empowerment to the host communities. Although the agrarian communities were reluctant to change to the urban economy initially, they gradually picked up since 1990. Of course, there were job opportunities from which all benefited. Investment opportunities were open to all irrespective of tribe or religion. While the agrarian population adopted new professions and investment opportunities, the prospects for secondary schools, higher institutions and universities' graduates became unlimited too. Women immensely benefited as their marketing opportunities increased, and they also embarked on other brisk business or took up appointments in either government, corporate or self employments. New skills, ideas, techniques, investments and alliances evolved cutting across ethnic bounds, and women evolved new associations too.

The infrastructural development in satellite towns like the establishment of schools, health centers, communication links, etc, directly impacted on the living conditions of the people. Even women that were marginalized before started to come to lime light by embracing new ways of deriving income. The teeming population in the FCT stimulated investment of all sorts that impacted on the agriculture, marketing, local industries and so on. The empowerment of women was reflected in the increased number of women in jobs and business, and in their higher incomes and urbanized/globalized and improved living



conditions compared to earlier poor housewives (Filaba 2004 chpt 7).

Very significant too, our findings help us to assess some misrepresentations of the economic viability of the indigenes. Based on the opportunities the rapid urbanization offered to the indigenous population, the assumption of Aina and Salau (1992:54-56) that the indigenous communities would be wiped out in the FCT as they groaned under the yoke of foreign cultures and extermination is untenable. The pessimist scholars assumed that the indigenes were inept and could not change in the circumstances. They quoted the indigenes saying:

“We are finished as a culture. We cannot survive. We are likely to be forced to leave the territory entirely. I do not foresee us making good use of the infrastructures provided in this Territory because the people competing with us for these facilities are more aggressive. I am sure that the resettlement camps will, in the future, be inhabited by the more aggressive incoming population. We are conservative people, you know” (Aina and Salau 1992:56-57).

This pessimistic perception of Abuja FCT seems to me to be fallacious. The reasons are many. The indigenes were attempting to adjust by taking to other professions that evolved with the new change. It is not true that “The coming of the FCT: [is] a punishment from God or Blessing from the Devil” (Aina and Salau, p.50). Even if not completely, the economy of Abuja smeared the indigenous groups with its wealth in many ways. The urbanization of Abuja FCT offered numerous investment opportunities not only to the indigenes but

to the rest Nigerians and the wider world. Therefore, the assumption of some scholars (Aina and Salau pp. 54-60) that the indigenous communities would be wiped out in the FCT as they groaned under the yoke of foreign cultures and extermination is untenable.

Other positive changes included unlimited investment opportunities, increased cash flow as land became costly and rise in the living conditions of the indigenous communities. Some indigenes sold out their plots, which money was used to buy buses and cars and for employing large labour on the farms, and invested by building houses to let, bus commuting, motorbike riding and food and social services. The teeming population created good business environment and influenced family heads to erect structures to let out at exorbitant prices. Women were not left behind as they participated. This indicates that the future may be bright for them.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the recommendations for policy implication included the following:

- Government should implement the Master Plan as designed. The first phase of the Master Plan involve complete census, valuation of properties of the indigenes, compensation and adequate resettlement of the indigenous communities. Government should also set up mitigating measure to reduce the urban violence met on the indigenous population in the FCT. The government could purposely cushion the effects by embarking on restoration and reserving certain posts, scholarships, etc. for the indigenes only.
- Both the government and the indigenes should embark on poverty alleviation programmes and orientations that will enlighten the indigenes to embrace the

new urban economy. The indigenes should form NGOs and pressure groups to struggle for their rights.

- Need for individuals, NGOs and corporate institutions to embark on enlightenment programs and studies of the urban cum indigenous problematic in the FCT.

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