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# POPULATION GROWTH, GENDER AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs) IN NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT**

The global population has more than tripled since the middle of the twentieth century, rising from roughly 2.5 billion in 1950 to nearly 7.9 billion in 2021. According to United Nations (UN) projections, the global population will reach about 11 billion people by the end of the twenty-first century, when it is predicted to stabilise. The population of Nigeria follows the same patterns as the rest of the world. Her population continues to rise at a rapid rate. To achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those linked to reproductive health, education, gender equality, climate change, and the environment, comprehensive law and policy frameworks are required to slow population increase and advance gender equality in decision-making at family and community levels. This paper examines the current law and governance frameworks on gender equality in Nigeria to evaluate gaps that continue to exacerbate the population explosion. We offer several drivers of women's marginalisation at family and community levels, such as an imbalance in power relations, limited education for girls and women, financial inequality, and marginalisation in decision making, that continue to worsen population increase in Nigeria, therefore, slowing down progress on the SDGs' successful implementation and population control. On a multidimensional approach, we examine SDGs 5, 6, 7, 11, and 13 as tools for population control, women empowerment, and gender equality. The SDGs dynamics provide a model for environmentally healthy and long-term population control. This article analyses this from a feminist perspective as integral to sustainable development policies and activities.

**Keywords:** population growth, SDGs, environment, Nigeria

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is the most populated country in Sub-Saharan Africa, among the world's highest growing countries and the 7th most populated country in the world.<sup>1</sup> The country has a population growth rate of 3.75% and is predicted to reach about 350 million by 2050 making it the third most populous country in the world.<sup>2</sup> However, to argue that the main cause of this population growth is high birth rates would be neglecting some other fundamental factors that exist, particularly, gender inequality. Nigeria has a gender gap which is rather high in comparison to other developing countries. According to the 2012 Gender in Nigeria report, Nigeria ranks 118 out of 134 countries in the gender inequality index.<sup>3</sup>

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5, 6, 7, 11 and 13 contain targets to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and create sustainable environments and communities, particularly regarding population growth and control.<sup>4</sup> In order to enhance the effectiveness of programs and policies geared towards achieving these goals, a crucial step is to understand the relationship that exists between them.<sup>5</sup> A symbiotic relationship of some sort exists between these targets in that, a step towards achieving one is also a step towards achieving the others. When women are empowered (SDG 5), they can contribute to building sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11) and make strategic decisions when it comes to the environment (SDG 6, 7 & 13).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Nwamaka Ogbiede-Osaretin and Bright Orhewere, 'Population Growth, Gender Inequality and Economic Development in Nigeria' [2020] [1] *Izvestiya*, Varna University of Economics <<https://ideas.repec.org/a/vrn/journal/y2020i1p47-64.html>> 47,64

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Admos Chimhowu, Sushila Zeitlyn, and Dada Omowumi Asubiaro, 'Gender in Nigeria Report 2012. Improving the Lives of Girls and Women in Nigeria, Issues, Policies, Action' [2012]

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, UN Sustainable Development Goals <<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

First, we identify the ways in which gender inequality is exhibited within Nigeria and how it contributes significantly to the population explosion within the country. Several legal frameworks and policies exist to tackle the problem of gender inequality and create enabling environments for citizens to thrive. To some extent, these policies have largely remained ineffective due to the heterogeneous nature of the country and the diversity of cultures and religious beliefs that exist therein. Evidently, gaps still exist regarding policy making and implementation where gender inequality, population growth and sustainable development are concerned. From a feminist approach, there are several measures that can be taken to abate this phenomenon. While taking into cognisance the barriers and challenges that exist and stand against the achievement of gender equality, qualitative solutions are provided.

## **2. GENDER INEQUALITY AS A DRIVER OF POPULATION EXPLOSION IN NIGERIA: CASE STUDIES AND LINKAGES**

Different cultures and beliefs influence gender inequality in Nigeria. In most parts of the country, women are considered subordinate to males and are best believed to be suited to home keeping.<sup>7</sup> Even with the recent rise in feminism and female agitation for inclusion in the social, economic and political sectors, these stereotypes still exist and continue to hinder the propagation of female inclusion and women's rights. While gender inequality can be said to have various effects in the country, one not-so-popular effect is how it contributes to the population explosion in the country. Population explosion can be said to be the rapid rise or increase in the total number of people living in an area without a simultaneous increase in the living resources made available or

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<sup>7</sup> Damilola Olawuyi, 'Gender, Indigeneity and the Search for Environmental Justice in Post-Colonial Africa', in Carmen Gonzalez, Sara Seck and Sumudu Attapattu (eds) *Cambridge Handbook of Environment Justice and Sustainable Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

produced within that area.<sup>8</sup> Nigeria is currently faced with a population explosion in all parts of the country. This explosion can be attributed to high birth rates, low death rates and immigration.<sup>9</sup> While death rates are significantly harder to control, initiating policies and empowering women and their families can mitigate immigration and high birth rates. The high birth rates in the country result from several factors, a majority of which share some sort of connection with gender inequality, the consequences, and how it manifests. According to Nwachukwu, there are gender roots in the sizes of a lot of families in Nigeria.<sup>10</sup> This gender effect is expressed in two ways; first the preference for male children and second, the influence of males when it comes to family planning and contraceptive use. Women are marginalised at both family and community levels in terms of education, finances and role-playing in decision-making processes.<sup>11</sup> This marginalisation results in several ills and violations directed toward women. Some of these factors will be outlined below.

**a. Early/Child Marriage**

Child marriage refers to any formal union between a child under 18 to another child or an adult. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, more than 100 million girls worldwide were expected to be married before their 18th birthday.<sup>12</sup> Child marriage is often a result of gender inequality making girls the major victims of this practice. This is evident in the fact that globally, cases of child marriage among boys are only one-sixth of the cases among girls.<sup>13</sup> Child marriage contributes to higher total fertility as girls who marry early tend to bear more children in their lifetime. Married girls often lack the ability to negotiate sexual

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<sup>8</sup> John Aduwa, 'Population Explosion in Nigeria: Causes, Its Effects on The Educational Sector and The Ways Forward' [2020] *International Journal of Educational Research* <<https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ijer/article/view/205032>>

<sup>9</sup> F. A Fan and B. J Besong, 'Implications of Population Growth for Nigeria's Development' [2010] 13(1) *sophid. An African Journal of Philosophy*

<sup>10</sup> Daisy Nwachukwu, 'The Gender Factor in Family Size and Health Issues in Modern Nigerian Homes' [1996] SAGE Publications <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43054941>>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> Sophie Cousins, '2· 5 Million More Child Marriages due to COVID-19 Pandemic' [2020] *The Lancet* 396.10257: 1059

<sup>13</sup> Anju Malhotra and Elnakib Shatha, '20 Years of the Evidence Base on What Works to Prevent Child Marriage: A Systematic Review' (2021) 68 (5) *Journal of Adolescent Health* 847,862

activity, contraceptive use, or birth spacing with their husbands.<sup>14</sup> Analysis across fifteen countries in Africa shows that women married at age 13 have 26.4% more live births than they would have had if they had married at 18.<sup>15</sup> Nigeria has some of the highest rates of child marriages in Africa. According to a 2020 development report by the UN Development Program, 43% of women between the ages of 20-24 had been married before they were 18.<sup>16</sup> While this practice prevails in various parts of the country, it seems to be a more popular occurrence in the North. 39% of girls are married off before they turn 18, and 15% are married off before they turn

15. When juxtaposed against child marriage rates in other parts of the country, figures are as high as 76% in the North-West compared to the 10% in the South-East.<sup>17</sup> According to a report by the Council of Foreign Relations, if the harmful practice of child marriage is abolished, national fertility rates across 15 focus countries including Nigeria would be reduced by one-tenth.<sup>18</sup>

#### **b. Illiteracy/Lack of Sexual Education**

The average birth rate is between 5.5-6 per woman in Nigeria.<sup>19</sup> Nigeria accounts for more than one in five out of ten children globally.<sup>20</sup> Of this number, girls suffer more than boys in terms of missing out on education. This is because females are deemed less important than men as many of them would eventually end up as housekeepers in their husbands' houses.<sup>21</sup> In this belief system, women have one fundamental role; to bear children and so

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<sup>14</sup> A Raj, 'When the Mother is a Child: The Impact of Child Marriage on the Health and Human Rights of Girls' [2010] 95 (11) Archives of Disease in Childhood <<https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.2009.178707>> 931,935

<sup>15</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, 'Child Marriage, Family Planning, Population, and Development' [2017] <<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.cfr.org/blog/child-marriage-family-planning-population-and-development>>

<sup>16</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Nigeria: Child Marriage Violates Girls' Rights' [2022] <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/17/nigeria-child-marriage-violates-girls-rights>>

<sup>17</sup> Nigeria Health Watch, 'Reclaiming Girlhood: Early Marriage a Challenging Public Health Dilemma in Nigeria' [2021] <<https://nigeriahealthwatch.com/reclaiming-girlhood-early-marriage-a-challenging-public-health-dilemma-in-nigeria/>>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, CFR above

<sup>19</sup> Olanrewaju Olaniyan, 'Efforts at Discussing Fertility in Nigeria' (2016) 10. 13140 /RG. 2. 2. 26917. 24807

<sup>20</sup> UNICEF b, 'Situation of women and children in Nigeria' <<https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/situation-women-and-children-nigeria>>

<sup>21</sup> J Cerrato and E Cifre, 'Gender Inequality in Household Chores and Work-Family Conflict' [2018] Front Psychol Aug 3; 9:1330. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01330. PMID: 30123153; PMCID: PMC6086200

education is deemed a waste of time. In fact, a well-schooled woman would only become proud and disrespectful to her husband. In the North East of Nigeria, only 41% of girls receive primary education, while in the North-West, only 47% do.<sup>22</sup> Data shows that the higher a woman's education level, the fewer children she's likely to bear.<sup>23</sup> These statistics are evident because, in the North, where female literacy is at its lowest, early marriages and childbirth rates are higher. Uneducated women are likely to be married off early to secure financial support and stand the highest risk of having unwanted and adolescent pregnancies. While child marriage is a significant contributor to the rates of adolescent pregnancies, the lack of comprehensive sexual education cannot be overlooked. In 1999, despite social opposition, the government approved a sexuality education policy.<sup>24</sup> Since then, there have been some cases of implementation though efficacy varies amongst the states. Despite this policy being in existence, conservative social values are widespread in the country and sex education touches on highly sensitive issues including adolescent sexuality and marriage.<sup>25</sup> Traditional and religious values are more concerned with preaching abstinence than properly educating the girl child on how to deal with sexual matters. This thought is rooted in the belief that a woman's worth or value is somehow determined by her sexual purity, and that receiving sex education can inadvertently lead to her becoming promiscuous. The irony is that such emphasis is not placed on a boy's sexual purity. In some cultures, having sex or having multiple sexual partners is seen as a feat for males. These horrendous belief systems contribute in no small way to high birth rates and the consequent population explosion.

### **c. Contraceptive Use**

Family planning is deemed an important contributor in addressing the range of challenges facing several developing countries. It is a

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, UNICEF b; UNICEF a, 'Child Marriage' [2021] <<https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>>

<sup>23</sup> Elina Pradhan, 'Female Education and Childbearing: A Closer Look at the Data' [2015] World bank blogs <<https://blogs.worldbank.org/health/female-education-and-childbearing-closer-look-data>>

<sup>24</sup> J Shiffman, and others, 'International Norms and The Politics of Sexuality Education in Nigeria' [2018] Global Health <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-018-0377-2>> 14, 63

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

key factor in achieving sustainable development goals and getting it right can empower women and girls and give them access to education. Contraceptives are an essential part of family planning, but their use is determined by several factors including cultural and religious norms.<sup>26</sup> Myths and misconceptions also play a huge role in this. Many believe that the use of contraceptives may result in infertility and encourage female promiscuity. Other factors include limited access to healthcare facilities and the generally patriarchal nature of society. According to Demographic Health Survey in 2013, about 85% of women and 95% of men attested to knowing about contraceptives but only 15% of the sample population used them.<sup>27</sup> There is nothing to suggest that this percentage has increased significantly as the population is still on the rise despite the widespread awareness about contraceptive methods. This is a pointer to the fact that other variables are at play when it comes to the use of contraceptives in the country.<sup>28</sup> Some individuals due to religious reasons believe birth control is a sin as God's profound desire was for humans to fill the earth. Children are blessings from God and inhibiting their production in any way is inhibiting divine blessings.<sup>29</sup> "God who gives children will also provide the means to cater for them" is a popular conception. Male partner perception regarding contraception is another significant factor affecting its use. Men who viewed contraceptives as an enabler for promiscuity often disallow their wives from using them.<sup>30</sup> Adoption and use of contraception have typically been framed by researchers and practitioners as issues that only affect women (distorting their emotions and circle), better health results for population control may be an illusion where family planning and the use of

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<sup>26</sup> Funke Fayehun, 'Contraceptive use in Nigeria is extremely low. A lack of knowledge may be why' [2017] *The Conversation*. <<https://theconversation.com/contraceptive-use-in-nigeria-is-incredibly-low-a-lack-of-knowledge-may-be-why-81453>>

<sup>27</sup> S.R Blackstone, and J Iwelunmor, 'Determinants of contraceptive use among Nigerian couples: Evidence from 2013 Demographic and Health Survey' [2017] *Contracept Reprod Med* < <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40834-017-0037-6>> 2, 9

<sup>28</sup> A Adeyemi, and others, 'Contraceptive prevalence and determinants among women of reproductive age group in Ogbomoso, Oyo State, Nigeria' [2016] *7 Open Access J Contracept* <https://doi.org/10.2147/OAJC.S94826>> 33,41

<sup>29</sup> Popular Bible verse; Psalms 127 v 3; It is also an African adage

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, See S.R Blackstone, and J Iwelunmor



contraceptives are seen as the duty of women and not men.<sup>31</sup> This especially points to the presence of gender inequality as several women still exercise no control over their bodies and fertility simply because they are subject to their husband's whims and desires.

**d. The Desire for Male Children**

In Nigeria, the preference for sons is still very prevalent and exists in several cultures, especially Igbo culture. This custom goes back to historic times and is tied to inheritance but unfortunately, it persists today.<sup>32</sup> As a result of this, undue pressure is placed on wives to bear male children and hereby encouraging the notion of female inferiority. Repeated births of girls would only encourage women to keep conceiving in the hopes that they would one day birth a male child. Women who fail to birth male children risk their husbands having multiple wives and might not secure a place in the household. Although awareness about the essence of promoting gender equity is gradually increasing, inheritance, succession and custody of symbols and traditional titles are still exclusively reserved for men. Hence, perceptually individuals and groups show approval for gender equality, but attitudes and behaviours still show otherwise and depict a favourable disposition toward male children.<sup>33</sup>

However, it is no longer news that the Supreme Court discourage cultures that deprives women/girls' inheritance and declares depriving women inheritance unconstitutional.<sup>34</sup> In *Ukeje vs Ukeju*<sup>35</sup>, delivering the lead judgment, Bode Rhodes-Vivour, JSC held, "no matter the circumstances of the birth of a female child, she is entitled to an inheritance from her late father's estate.

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<sup>31</sup> Obasanjo Joseph Oyedele, 'Gender, Media, and Contraceptive Use in Nigeria: Men Need Help, Not Women' (2021) 22(5) *Journal of International Women's Studies* <<https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss5/17>> 266,283

<sup>32</sup> Ine Nnadi, 'Son Preference – A Violation of Women's Human Rights: A Case Study of Igbo Custom in Nigeria' [2013] 6 (1) *Journal of Politics and Law* 6. 10.5539/jpl.134

<sup>33</sup> Ezebunwa Ethelbert Nwokocha, 'Male-Child Syndrome and the Agony of Motherhood Among the Igbo of Nigeria' [2007] *ResearchGate* <[https://www.Research\\_gate.net/publication/254147145male-childsyndrome\\_and\\_the\\_agony\\_of\\_motherhood\\_among\\_the\\_igbo\\_of\\_nigeria](https://www.Research_gate.net/publication/254147145male-childsyndrome_and_the_agony_of_motherhood_among_the_igbo_of_nigeria)>

<sup>34</sup> See section 42 (1) and (2) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, P. 408, paras. C- E)

<sup>35</sup> (2014) 11 NWLR 384 at 408-414

Consequently, the Igbo customary law which disentitles a female child from partaking in her deceased father's estate is in breach of Section 42(1) and (2) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, a fundamental rights provision guaranteed to every Nigerian. The said discriminatory customary law is void as it conflicts with Section 42(1) and (2) of the Constitution.” This is a good development that would change attitudes towards the girl child.

**e. Financial Inequality**

Though several factors account for the gaps in gender-based earning, over the years research has shown that there is an imbalance in gender allocation in society and sectors of the economy. Income inequality is more pronounced in wage-paying jobs than in self-employment. Women get lesser paying jobs or do not earn as much as men due to gaps in skillsets and education and sometimes discrimination based on gender.<sup>36</sup> Many women are relegated to childcare which is mostly unpaid labour. Such women might then become dependent on their husbands. Similarly, when women are less educated or lacking in skillset in comparison to their male counterparts, they are not equipped to compete in the job market. According to UN Women, the global employability rate of men is 94% while that of women is 63%.<sup>37</sup> There are even cases where women who are skilled enough are rejected in favour of men due to certain stereotypes that still exist about the positions and roles of women in society.<sup>38</sup>

These manifestations of gender inequality in society contribute to the current disadvantageous rate of population growth in the country. Within the last 2 decades, we have seen practices and consequences which predominantly affect female empowerment and inclusion. These practices contribute and are also responsible for high infant and mother mortality rates. According to the World Health Organisation, the mother mortality rates (MMR) of Nigeria is 814 per 100,000 live births. The lifetime risk of a

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<sup>36</sup> O.T Adeosun and K.E Owolabi, 'Gender Inequality: Determinants and Outcomes in Nigeria' [2021] 1(2) *Journal of Business and Socio-economic Development* <<https://doi.org/10.1108/JBSED-01-2021-0007>> 165,181

<sup>37</sup> UN Women, 'Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' [2019] <[Unwomen.org](https://unwomen.org/digital-library/sdg-report)>digital-library>sdg-report>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

Nigerian woman dying during pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum or post-abortion is 1 in 22, in contrast to 1 in 4900 in developed countries.<sup>39</sup> To curb population explosion, reduce mother mortality rates, and achieve SDGs 5, 6, 7, 11, and 13, there is a need to tackle these existing misconceptions, customs and stereotypes. Female empowerment is vital to the economic growth and development of the country and addressing these issues is an important step towards this goal.

### **3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON GENDER EQUALITY AND POPULATION IN NIGERIA: A GAP ANALYSIS**

Gender inequality is a social problem that affects women all over the world and serves as a barrier to human development. The United Nations is committed to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls and hence, the sustainable development goals aim to do so by 2030.<sup>40</sup> Women's rights are part of the fundamental human rights that are recognized in international human rights and treaties. Nigeria, a member state of the United Nations has adopted some international instruments for the promotion and protection of women's rights. However, these rights are yet to take full force. The 1999 constitution clearly prohibits discrimination based on sex and recognises the equal rights of women when it comes to obligations and opportunities before the law.<sup>41</sup> The National Policy on Women of 2000 also launched specific guidelines for promoting

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<sup>39</sup> Beatrice Wuraola Ope, 'Reducing maternal mortality in Nigeria: addressing maternal health services' perception and experience' [2020] 4 *Journal of Global Health Reports* <<https://www.joghr.org/article/12733-reducing-maternal-mortality-in-nigeria-addressing-maternal-health-services-perception-and-experience>> accessed May 18 2020

<sup>40</sup> O.C Okongwu, 'Are Laws the Appropriate Solution: The Need to Adopt Non-Policy Measures in Aid of the Implementation of Sex Discrimination Laws in Nigeria' [2021] 21(1) *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1358229120978915>> 26.46

<sup>41</sup> See the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended to 2018; UN Women, <<https://constitutions.unwomen.org/en/countries/africa/nigeria?ProvisionCategory=b21e8a4f9df246429cf4e8746437e5ac>>

gender equality in all sectors of the economy.<sup>42</sup> However, despite years of these legal provisions, women continue to be victims of discrimination in society. One of the reasons for this is the underrepresentation of women in parliaments and general decision-making processes. Women constitute about half of Nigeria's current population but occupy less than ten percent of political positions.<sup>43</sup> The report from the National Bureau of Statistics<sup>44</sup> shows that the literacy level of women stands at 59.3% compared to the 70.9% of men in positions of power and decision making. Similarly, in the National Assembly, women are underrepresented with 5.8%, 29.4% in federal courts and 15.4% as professors in universities.<sup>45</sup>

In 1985, Nigeria ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which was meant to bring to focus and promote women's rights. This convention covers for the protection of the civil and legal status of women and addresses the impact of cultural factors on gender relations such as traditional stereotypes and customs which give rise to the advancement of women.<sup>46</sup> The government set up panels to propose recommendations to bring existing laws in conformity with CEDAW and other conventions. Despite this, CEDAW is still unable to protect women's rights in Nigeria because it has not been domesticated.<sup>47</sup>

According to Section 12 of the Nigerian constitution, treaties which have been signed and adopted will not have any effect until a corresponding law is made by the National Assembly.<sup>48</sup> On December 15, 2021, the Nigerian Senate pushed back the Gender and Equal Opportunities (GEO) Bill, a bill designed to secure the rights of women and girls in the country equal opportunities to

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<sup>42</sup> United Nations, <<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>>

<sup>43</sup> Bolanle Oluwakemi Eniola, 'Gender Parity in Parliament: A Panacea for the Promotion and Protection of Women's Rights in Nigeria' [2018] <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2018.00034>>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, (O.C Okongwu) emphasis on percentage/rates

<sup>45</sup> See Ibid. p.28

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. CEDAW p.28,35

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> See Section 12 (1) Federal Republic of Nigeria, 'Constitution' [1999] <<http://www.nigeria-law.org/ConstitutionofTheFederalRepublicOfNigeria.htm>>

their male counterparts for the second time.<sup>49</sup> This legislation sponsored by Senator Biodun Olujimi representing Ekiti South was determined to guarantee the rights of women to equal opportunities in employment, inheritance, marriage and divorce, access to quality education, and land ownership. This bill had first been introduced in 2016 but had not met with much progress regarding deliberation and enactment. While some senators spoke in support of the bill, other senators notably from the North opposed the motion raising concerns over the possible violation of Islamic morals and beliefs, although by law Nigeria is a secular state.<sup>50</sup>

The first population control policy was launched in 1988.<sup>51</sup> The policy was designed to reduce fertility from the then level of 6 children/family to an average of 4 children/family. The policy also suggests an optimum marriage age of 18 years for women and 24 years for men and that pregnancies be restricted to the 18-35 range with intervals of two years.<sup>52</sup> A revised edition of the policy was published in 2004. This edition took into cognisance the challenges encountered from the results of the population census of 1991, the 1994 conference on population and development, the 1999 HIV/AIDS summit and the 2000-2015 Millenium Development goals. These challenges were pointers to the relationship between population and health.<sup>53</sup> This policy was geared towards reducing the population growth rate of Nigeria to 2% or lower by the year 2015, reducing the total fertility rate to 0.6 children every 5 years; increasing the prevalence of contraceptive use by 2% every year; reducing the infant mortality rates to 35 for every 1000 live births by 2015; reduce child

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<sup>49</sup> Gideon Fakomogbon, 'A Law to Empower Women and Girls Was Just Rejected Again in Nigeria'. *Global Citizen* [2021] <<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/gender-equalopportunities-bill-nigeria-setback/>>; as reported on *Global Citizen*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>51</sup> K Mazzocco, 'Nigeria's New Population Policy' (1988) 9(3) *International Health News* PMID: 12179884 <<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12179884/>> 1, 12

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>53</sup> Michael O Turnwait and Mayowa A Odeyemi, 'Nigeria's Population Policies: Issues, Challenges and Prospects' [2017] *ResearchGate* <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317589487\\_Nigeria's\\_Population\\_Policies\\_Issues\\_Challenges\\_and\\_Prospects](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317589487_Nigeria's_Population_Policies_Issues_Challenges_and_Prospects)>

mortality to 45 per 1000 live births by 2015; reduce maternal mortality to 125 per 100,000 live births by 2010 and 75 by 2015.<sup>54</sup>

These two policies managed to create more awareness about contraception, increase the availability of modern contraceptive methods and improve maternal health.<sup>55</sup> In February, President Muhammadu Buhari launched the Revised National Policy on Population control for sustainable development. The overall goal of this policy is to improve the quality of life and standard of living of citizens in Nigeria through expanding access to modern fertility control, counselling and promoting birth spacing.<sup>56</sup>

The fact remains though that population policies are largely ineffective in Africa. According to Okongwu, this points to the fact that several other factors come to play when population growth is considered. Nigeria has certain religious and ideological beliefs that revolve around the value of more children and in some cases early marriage.<sup>57</sup> Again, these policies do not provide incentives for families and couples who choose to have fewer children.

It is not enough to enact laws or formulate policies geared against population explosion and gender inequality when the root causes of these phenomena have not been addressed. The multicultural nature of the country and the complex belief systems that exist within must be recognised. It is a tremendous task to get the government of Nigeria to enact laws which protect women against discrimination and empower them because of the ingrained beliefs about the subordinate status of women to men in the country. While efforts made by women's rights activists are beginning to have effect as laws to promote gender equality are being passed, there are still huge challenges because several states still refuse to domesticate them with the objection that these laws are contrary

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<sup>54</sup> See Federal Republic of Nigeria, 'National Policy on Population for Sustainable Development' [2004] Lagos: Federal Ministry of Health

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Michael O Turnwait and Mayowa A Odeyemi, (2017)

<sup>56</sup> See Premium Times, 'Nigeria Launches Revised Population Policy to Address High Fertility Rate' [2022] <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/>>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, (O.C Okongwu) p 38

to their religious and cultural beliefs.<sup>58</sup> In the North especially, besides from cultural beliefs, the existence of discriminatory Sharia law is a problem in the struggle for gender equality.

This now raises the question of whether laws or policies are the appropriate solutions to eradicating gender equality and slowing population growth in Nigeria. The answer is obvious. There are laws to protect women's rights and policies to control population growth. However, they will continue to be ineffective as long as discriminatory cultural and religious practices and stereotypes still exist; stereotypes that are even ingrained in the minds of learned lawmakers charged with formulating policies for the advancement of the people. Therefore, laws are not necessarily the first step toward combatting the problem. This is because laws do not address the mindsets and beliefs of the people nor end discriminatory practices but instead focus on equal rights while ignoring societal assumptions about gender which contribute to the systemic discrimination of women.<sup>59</sup>

#### **4. ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: RECOMMENDATIONS**

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but a necessary foundation for a peaceful prosperous and developing world. Empowering women-that is, creating conditions that build their confidence, independence and the ability to make strategic life choices is an important key to achieving sustainable development goals. Research and policy have only confirmed that women's empowerment fosters economic prosperity and healthy communities.<sup>60</sup> Commendably, notable progress has been achieved

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<sup>58</sup> Eghosa Osa Ekhaton, 'Women and the Law in Nigeria: A Reappraisal' [2015] 16(2) *Journal of International Women's Studies* <<https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol16/iss2/18>>285,296

<sup>59</sup> S Smith, 'Limitations to Equality: Gender Stereotypes and Social Change' [2014] 21(2) *Juncture* <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2050-5876.2014.00795.x>> 144,150

<sup>60</sup> Kirsten Stobenau and Anju Malhotra, 'Does Access to Contraception Empower Women?' [2011] *International Centre for Research on Women* <<https://www.icrw.org/news/commentary-does-access-to-contraception-empower-women/>>

over the last few decades as more girls are going to school and fewer are forced into early marriages and women occupy more positions of leadership. Despite this, discriminatory laws still permeate society and women remain largely unrepresented in politics.<sup>61</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic has only helped to exacerbate social stagnation, impacting women disproportionately, while widening the long-existing pay gap. Although women represent 39% of the global workforce, they accounted for 54% of the total jobs lost as a result of the pandemic as of May 2020.<sup>62</sup>

Overall, SDGs 5,6,7, 11 and 13 serve as effective tools and frameworks for building the society of our dreams. These goals: gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, sustainable cities and communities and climate action are essential targets for achieving development in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. The question comes as to how to advance these goals. We put forward the following recommendations:

**a. Develop equality policies to empower women in key economic sectors**

To attain sustainable development, it is not only imperative but sacrosanct to pursue gender equality. To empower women and push for equality, it is necessary to place women as leaders and give them decision making roles in positions that matter and in positions where they can make an impact.<sup>63</sup> Women have started participating in tech, the food industry, resource management, entrepreneurial work as well as energy and climate change. Yet, from the statistics exemplified above, many women still don't have access to good job opportunities and resources to get better paid jobs. This is because challenges still exist, and several social ideals and discriminatory practices still stand as barriers to empowerment. It is necessary to continue to push these barriers by taking affirmative action especially when it comes to putting women in positions of leadership. As the focus shifts towards

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<sup>61</sup> United Nations, <<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>>

<sup>62</sup> De Paula Nicole, 'Gender Equality: The Formula to Accelerate Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' [2021] <<https://www.iisd.org/articles/deep-dive/gender-equality-formula-accelerate-implementation-2030-agenda-sustainable>>

<sup>63</sup> Hira Saeed, '5 Ways we can empower Women Globally' [2019] Atlas Corps <<https://atlascorps.org/5-ways-we-can-empower-women-globally/>>



inclusive economic and social structures, providing women with leadership opportunities can go a long way in achieving equality and women's empowerment. On March 1, 2022, one of the five gender bills that were rejected during the Senate and House of Representatives constitutional amendment meeting was the Reserved Seat Bill.<sup>64</sup> This Bill aimed to provide quota seats for women in the National Assembly.<sup>65</sup> If this bill had been passed, it would have increased women's access to political participation and decision making and helped to overcome the structural barriers that women face in male-dominated electoral politics. The nature of being special does not necessarily suggest special favours for women but serves a specific purpose.<sup>66</sup> It is important to push ideals like these; to take steps in policymaking while simultaneously attacking unfavourable gender stereotypes and prejudices.

**b. Develop support programs for women entrepreneurs**

Establishing equal rights programmes can go a long way in promoting decent jobs and decent and equal pay for women. Nigerian women have shown themselves to be industrious. The state can encourage this by taking initiatives to train women in business skills so they can stand on their own and gain access to good job opportunities. By investing in women's education, Nigeria can help bridge the pay gap that currently exist and encourage women to increase their participation in business ventures. Creating such economic opportunities for women to do well on their own would discourage many from getting married and having children early to secure financial assistance.

**c. Promote Rural Agricultural Development**

Promoting rural agricultural development is not just effective for empowering women but is also a sustainable way to produce resources while also catering to the environment. Women make up almost half of the world's agricultural workforce. They know the local landscapes and resources including the wealth of

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<sup>64</sup> As reported by Bukky Shonibare in The Cable Nigeria. <<https://www.The.cable.ng/the-brazen-legalization-of-gender-inequality-in-nigeria/amp>>

<sup>65</sup> See Bukky Shonibare, 'The Brazen Legalisation of Gender Inequality in Nigeria' [2022] The Cable Nigeria. <<https://www.The.cable.ng/the-brazen-legalization-of-gender-inequality-in-nigeria/amp>>

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

biodiversity. In many developing countries they are responsible for feeding their households. When women have an equal say in decision making, their households and communities will cope better with the changing climate. This will then lead to more effective, comprehensive and inclusive solutions.<sup>67</sup>

d. **Targeted policies to promote health services for women**

If menstrual health and hygiene are well managed from the start, it has a high potential to increase female empowerment at a critical stage in a girl's life.<sup>68</sup> The new definition of menstrual health and hygiene as brought together by the global menstrual collective sets out clear requirements for achieving menstrual health. This includes access to clean water, good sanitation and hygiene, access to information about the menstrual cycle and self-care, diagnosis and treatment for menstrual disorders and discomforts, a positive and respectful environment and the freedom to participate in all spheres of life throughout the menstrual cycle.<sup>69</sup> A lack of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in public places like schools and offices means that millions of women and girls are unable to manage their periods with dignity. This not only affects their health but contributes to fostering inequality in society. Governments, individuals and NGOs should increase access to sanitary products and encourage menstrual hygiene through resource mobilisation, provision of environmentally friendly menstrual hygiene products and education to help foster equality, empower women and cultivate a safe and sustainable environment for women and girls to thrive.

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<sup>67</sup> IFAD, 'To Tackle Climate Change, We Need to Empower Rural Women. Here Are Four Ways to Do That' [2022] <<https://www.ifad.org/en/web/latest/-/to-tackle-climate-change-we-need-to-empower-rural-women-here-are-four-ways-to-do-that>>

<sup>68</sup> Jennifer J Sara and others, 'Menstrual Health and Hygiene Empowers Women and Girls: How to ensure we get it right' [2021] <<https://blogs.worldbank.org/water/menstrual-health-and-hygiene-empowers-women-and-girls-how-ensure-we-get-it-right>>

<sup>69</sup> WaterAid 'New Definition of Menstrual Health Set to Galvanise Action to Advance Gender Equality and Global Health' [2021] <<https://www.wateraid.org/ng/media/new-definition-of-menstrual-health-set-to-galvanise-action-to-advance-gender-equality>>

Furthermore, today most women around the world have fewer children than they did a few years ago. This is made evident by the dramatic decline in the average family size in many countries around the world— a result of the voluntary use of contraceptives by women. A woman who can choose from easily accessible, widely available contraceptive methods to control when and how many children she wishes to have, is better positioned to undertake roles outside of her home. Having such control may also lessen the prevalence of gender roles and norms within households and encourage women to become educated and join the labour force or become civic and political leaders. Contraceptive use is more prevalent amongst learned women. There is the need to take this awareness to the grassroots, particularly in rural communities where women have little or no access. As stated above, it has been ascertained that spousal disapproval, religious beliefs, cultural disapproval, fertility desires, fear of side effects, cost, and long distances of sources amongst others discourage contraceptives within the country. Thus, there is a need to address these challenges and beliefs.<sup>70</sup> Training, awareness programs, engaging religious leaders and encouraging male involvement in the discussions about family planning within rural communities will go a long way in increasing contraceptive use. Contraceptives are not just for married women but for both married couples, generally, sexually active individuals/adults should also be encouraged to consider using one form of contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

**e. Formulate birth control policies and family planning incentives**

Women in Nigeria often bear the disproportionate burdens of raising children and serving as primary care giver.<sup>71</sup> The traditional roles as housekeepers assigned to women become even more difficult in households with several children. Providing incentives to discourage arbitrary reproduction can help with slowing down

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<sup>70</sup> I. C, Akamike and others, 'Why Does Uptake of Family Planning Services remain Sub-Optimal Among Nigerian Women? A Systematic Review of Challenges and Implications for Policy' [2020] 5(30) *Contracept Reprod Med* < <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40834-020-00133-6>>

<sup>71</sup> Damilola Olawuyi, 'Gender, Indigeneity and the Search for Environmental Justice in Post-Colonial Africa', in Carmen Gonzalez, Sara Seck and Sumudu Attapatu (eds) *Cambridge Handbook of Environment Justice and Sustainable Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

population growth in the country which could enhance the economic productivity and opportunities for women. Targeted policies aimed at reducing overpopulation can therefore also have additional sustainable development benefits, in terms of empowering women to play more active roles in high paying economic sectors.

One way forward is for the government to formulate a tax policy whereby families with more children pay more taxes or they can limit the amount of government support for families to just two children. For the environment and the general good of the community, this will help to reduce resource consumption and minimise congestion and pollution both in urban areas and rural communities. Creating a national population policy built around an optimal population size would provide greater opportunities for women to re-enter the labour force, while also creating an equitable and sustainable workforce that leaves no one behind.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

To encourage gender equality and discourage high reproduction rates, non-policy measures must be undertaken. These measures could include education and creating awareness about the dangers of population explosion. To bridge the gap between the laws and policies that exist regarding gender equality and population, individuals need to be made aware of the harmful effects of gender roles and stereotypes. An equal environment for both genders will put Nigeria on the path to sustainable development and make her better suited to tackle the problems related to climate change and the environment. Only when there is a mindset change and stricter policies with sanctions and incentives will they become effective. Until religious and cultural beliefs that promote discrimination are eradicated through sensitization, discrimination based on sex will continue to be a problem in Nigeria. Change needs to start from the grassroots and the government should demonstrate its support by contributing to education, policymaking and fundraising.