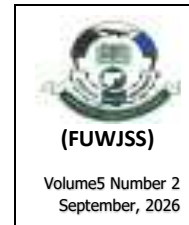


GENDER INEQUALITY AND WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES IN POST-COLONIAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of gender inequality on women's participation in poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria. Despite numerous national and international efforts aimed at promoting gender equality, women in Nigeria continue to face significant socio-economic challenges that hinder their involvement in economic empowerment initiatives. The objectives of the study were to examine the effects of gender disparities on women's access to poverty alleviation programmes, identify the key barriers limiting their participation, evaluate the effectiveness of government interventions, and propose strategies to improve women's inclusion. A descriptive survey design was employed, and data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to a sample of 222 women across N-Power, Conditional Cash Transfer, and GEEP, as well as NGO-supported empowerment schemes in Borno State, Nigeria. The analysis was based on frequency and percentage distributions. Results revealed that gender-based discrimination, cultural and religious norms, lack of education, and limited access to resources are major constraints to women's active involvement in empowerment programmes. Additionally, while various government policies such as N-Power, GEEP, and CCT exist, their implementation has not fully addressed the systemic exclusion of women. The study concludes that achieving inclusive poverty alleviation in Nigeria requires deliberate, gender-sensitive reforms, enhanced community awareness, leadership training for women, and stronger institutional support. The study recommends collaborative efforts among government agencies, NGOs, religious institutions, and women-led groups to create an enabling environment for equitable participation in national development programmes.

Keywords: Gender inequality, women participation, poverty alleviation, N-Power

Introduction

Gender inequality has been an issue for several century all over the world. Though history has it that fewer women have been in power even before colonialism. Instances are the Queen of Daura, the Sarauniya of Zazzau in pre-jihad, the Angwu Tsi who was almost the counterpart of the King, with her own Palace, in the middle belt, Iyayun the Queen who ruled in fifteenth century in Oyo, after the death of her husband (Modupe, 2021). Though from the foregoing, it will be seen that very, very few women have had the opportunity in a leadership position, yet in every one or single case of women, there are several hundreds of the male counterparts.

Sexism has become a major problem in Nigerian politics. Women have been politically considered endangered species and their low participation in Nigerian government and politics is often associated with culture, religious, economic constraint and male chauvinism. The African society in general and Nigerian society in particular has placed most of the leadership roles on the men folk, thereby championing the course of gender inequality. The 2011 general elections presented women with good opportunities to navigate the way to power, those in attendance were female legislators, representative of various women's groups, women and male gender activists, the market women's association, professional associations and media practitioners. All these groups of women are after the actualizing the 35% Affirmative Action Committee by President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan.

The 2011 General Elections was seen as a good platform to authenticate the voting pattern of Nigerian women. It is truly evident the active participation and the support of women to the 2011 campaigns and elections, hence the need for reflection and focused advocacy for the conscious and quality inclusion of women in the structures of the newly elected government and parliament through clear pronouncements and action (AIT's Focus Nigeria, 2012).

Gender inequality continues to be a pervasive issue in Nigeria, significantly hindering women's participation in socio-economic and political spheres. Despite comprising nearly half of the nation's population, Nigerian women often face systemic barriers that limit their involvement in poverty alleviation initiatives. These obstacles are deeply rooted in cultural norms, discriminatory laws, and restricted access to education and economic resources, perpetuating a cycle of disparity and marginalization. Gender-based violence (GBV) is another critical issue that undermines women's participation in poverty alleviation. The alarming increase in femicides and domestic violence cases in Nigeria has led activists to call for a state of emergency to address GBV (The Guardian, 2025). The prevalence of such violence not only affects women's physical and mental well-being but also their ability to engage in economic activities. Despite various governmental

and non-governmental interventions aimed at promoting gender equality, women's roles in economic empowerment and decision-making remain marginalized. Organizations like ABANTU for Development work towards empowering African women by providing training and resources, yet challenges persist (Wikipedia, 2025). This ongoing marginalization underscores the need for more effective strategies to integrate women into poverty alleviation programs.

The intersection of gender inequality and poverty is complex, as marginalized women are often disproportionately affected by economic hardships. Efforts to address poverty without considering gender disparities may fail to achieve sustainable outcomes. Therefore, integrating gender perspectives into poverty alleviation strategies is crucial for gender equality. Empowering women through education, legal reforms, and economic opportunities has the potential to break the cycle of poverty. Educated and economically independent women are more likely to invest in their families and communities, leading to broader socio-economic development. Thus, addressing gender inequality is not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic approach to poverty reduction. The **objectives of the Study are** to examine the impact of gender inequality and barriers hindering women's participation in poverty alleviation in Nigeria.

Women-Focused Poverty Alleviation Programmes in Nigeria

Women-focused poverty alleviation programmes are conceptualized as targeted policies, interventions, and support initiatives designed to improve the socio-economic conditions of women through access to income-generating opportunities, education, healthcare, financial inclusion, and empowerment strategies. These programmes are aimed at reducing the vulnerability of women to poverty while promoting economic independence, social inclusion, and sustainable development. According to United Nations Development Programme (2022), women-focused poverty alleviation programmes are development initiatives that seek to address structural inequalities affecting women by enhancing their access to productive resources, employment opportunities, and decision-making processes. This perspective emphasizes the importance of gender-sensitive policies in reducing poverty and promoting national development.

Similarly, Akinyemi and Isiugo-Abanihe (2021) defined women-focused poverty alleviation programmes as organized efforts by government and non-governmental institutions to empower women economically and socially through vocational training, microcredit schemes, entrepreneurship support, and educational advancement. Their study argues that empowering women contributes significantly to household welfare, food security, and community development. In the same vein, Ibrahim and Mohammed (2020)

view women-focused poverty alleviation programmes as intervention mechanisms aimed at improving women's living standards by addressing barriers such as unemployment, limited access to finance, low educational attainment, and social exclusion. They maintain that these programmes are critical for achieving inclusive economic growth in developing countries such as Nigeria.

According to World Bank (2021), women-focused poverty alleviation programmes encompass social protection measures, financial empowerment initiatives, and capacity-building schemes intended to strengthen women's resilience against economic hardship. This definition broadens the scope of such programmes to include both short-term welfare support and long-term empowerment strategies capable of enhancing women's participation in national development. Likewise, Okeke and Eze (2022) defined women-focused poverty alleviation programmes as policy-driven actions that provide women with access to credit facilities, agricultural support, healthcare services, and entrepreneurial development opportunities in order to reduce gender inequality and improve economic productivity.

Furthermore, Yusuf and Bala (2023) argue that women-focused poverty alleviation programmes involve coordinated efforts directed toward enhancing women's economic capabilities, improving access to social amenities, and promoting gender equality within society. Their study highlights that effective poverty alleviation programmes for women must integrate education, skill acquisition, and institutional support to ensure sustainable outcomes. Similarly, Adepaju (2021) noted that women-focused poverty alleviation programmes include all initiatives that seek to improve the welfare, income level, and social status of women through empowerment and inclusive participation in economic activities. The author emphasized that the success of these programmes depends largely on effective implementation, transparency, and adequate monitoring mechanisms.

Hence, this study defined women-focused poverty alleviation programmes as government and non-governmental interventions aimed at improving the socio-economic well-being of women through empowerment initiatives such as financial support, vocational training, healthcare access, education, entrepreneurship development, and social inclusion programmes designed to reduce poverty and enhance sustainable livelihoods.

Gender Relations in Post-Colonial Nigeria

Gender relations in post-colonial Nigeria are conceptualized as the social, political, economic, and cultural interactions between men and women within the context of Nigeria's historical transition from colonialism to independence. These relations are shaped by power structures, cultural norms, religious beliefs, and institutional practices that influence access to

resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes. According to Oyeronkẹ Oyewumí (1997), gender relations in post-colonial African societies cannot be fully understood through Western feminist frameworks because colonialism transformed indigenous social systems and imposed foreign gender categories that altered traditional power relations. In the Nigerian context, colonial administration reinforced patriarchal systems that marginalized women politically and economically, thereby redefining gender identities and responsibilities.

Similarly, Amina Mama (1995) argues that post-colonial gender relations in Nigeria are deeply connected to state power, militarism, and socio-economic inequalities that continue to shape women's experiences in both public and private spheres. She emphasized that women's marginalization in governance, employment, and access to education reflects the enduring legacy of colonial structures and patriarchal domination. This perspective highlights the relationship between gender inequality and institutional power within post-colonial Nigerian society.

Furthermore, Nwando Achebe (2011) conceptualizes gender relations in Nigeria as historically dynamic interactions shaped by colonial encounters, indigenous traditions, and socio-political transformations. Her study demonstrates that although women in many pre-colonial Nigerian societies exercised economic and political influence, colonial policies weakened these traditional structures by excluding women from formal administration and leadership positions. Consequently, post-colonial Nigeria inherited social systems that often privileged male authority over female participation.

According to Aderinto (2015), gender relations in post-colonial Nigeria also involve changing perceptions of sexuality, marriage, family responsibilities, and social identity. He explains that modernization, urbanization, and Western education contributed to shifts in gender expectations and interpersonal relationships, particularly among Nigerian youth. These transformations created tensions between traditional cultural norms and modern conceptions of gender equality and individual autonomy.

In the same vein, Ekpo-Otu (2013) defines gender relations in post-colonial Nigeria as a continuous negotiation of identity, sexuality, and social roles influenced by historical colonial experiences and contemporary socio-cultural realities. The study notes that women in Nigeria often navigate multiple forms of inequality linked to class, ethnicity, religion, and patriarchy, which affect their participation in politics, education, and economic development. Likewise, Ochonu (2011) argues that post-colonial gender relations reflect broader struggles over cultural identity, masculinity, and women's independence within rapidly changing Nigerian urban societies.

Additionally, Soetan and Akanji (2018) describe gender relations in post-colonial Nigeria as the interaction of socially constructed roles and expectations assigned to men and women within political, economic, and family institutions. Their work emphasizes that despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women continue to face structural barriers such as discrimination, underrepresentation in leadership, and unequal access to socio-economic opportunities. This imbalance continues to shape patterns of gender inequality and social development in contemporary Nigeria.

Hence, this study defined gender relations in post-colonial Nigeria as the socially and historically constructed interactions between men and women shaped by colonial legacies, cultural traditions, political structures, and socio-economic conditions that influence access to power, opportunities, resources, and social responsibilities within Nigerian society.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework anchored the analysis of this study is theory of Liberal Feminist Theory this theory is in one way or the other related to the framework of this research. However, Liberal Feminist Theory is adopted to guide this study.

Liberal Feminist Theory emerged from the ideas of classical liberalism and social contract philosophies developed during the 17th and 18th centuries. The theory was advanced by early feminist scholars such as Mary Wollstonecraft in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792, and later expanded by scholars such as John Stuart Mill and Betty Friedan. Liberal feminism became more prominent during the 1950s and 1960s alongside civil rights movements that advocated equal opportunities and social justice for marginalized groups. The theory focuses on women's ability to achieve equality through legal reforms, education, access to opportunities, and individual empowerment (Tong & Botts, 2018).

Liberal feminism is an individual-centered approach to feminism that emphasizes equal rights and equal opportunities for both men and women in political, economic, and social spheres. Liberal feminists believe that women are disadvantaged not because of biological inferiority but because of discriminatory social structures and patriarchal systems that limit women's access to resources and opportunities. According to Jaggar (1983), liberal feminism argues that society socializes women into subordinate positions while men are placed in dominant roles, thereby creating institutional inequalities that restrict women's participation in governance, education, employment, and development programmes.

The major assumption of Liberal Feminist Theory is that all human beings are naturally equal and deserve equal rights, freedom, and opportunities irrespective of gender. Liberal feminists maintain that women

possess the same intellectual and leadership capacities as men and should therefore enjoy equal participation in all sectors of society. The theory advocates the removal of social, political, cultural, and economic barriers that prevent women from realizing their full potential (Hooks, 2000). Liberal feminists further argue that equal access to education, employment opportunities, property ownership, and political participation are essential for women's empowerment and social inclusion.

Furthermore, Liberal Feminist Theory emphasizes the role of the state and public institutions in promoting equality through laws, policies, and reforms that eliminate discrimination against women. The theory supports legislation that guarantees equal pay, equal employment opportunities, access to credit facilities, educational advancement, and participation in decision-making processes. According to Freedman (2002), liberal feminism views freedom as personal autonomy and believes that women should have the right to make independent choices concerning their social, economic, and political lives without restrictions imposed by patriarchal traditions or cultural practices.

In the context of post-colonial Nigeria, Liberal Feminist Theory explains how gender inequality continues to limit women's participation in poverty alleviation programmes. Despite numerous poverty reduction initiatives introduced by government and non-governmental organizations, women in Nigeria still face barriers such as low educational attainment, restricted access to land and finance, cultural discrimination, and exclusion from decision-making structures. These inequalities reduce women's ability to benefit fully from development programmes designed to alleviate poverty and improve livelihoods. Liberal feminists argue that empowering women through education, economic inclusion, legal protection, and equal opportunities will enhance their participation in poverty alleviation initiatives and contribute to national development.

Therefore, this theory is relevant to this study because it explains the relationship between gender inequality and women's participation in poverty alleviation programmes in post-colonial Nigeria. The theory emphasizes that women can contribute meaningfully to development when discriminatory barriers are removed and equal opportunities are provided. It also highlights the importance of policies and institutional reforms aimed at promoting women's access to education, economic resources, political participation, and empowerment programmes.

On this note, Liberal Feminist Theory is adopted as the theoretical framework for this study because it provides a comprehensive explanation of how gender inequality affects women's socio-economic participation and development. The theory focuses on promoting equality between men and women in political, economic, and social spheres while advocating the

removal of patriarchal barriers that hinder women's advancement. Similarly, the theory supports women's freedom, autonomy, and active participation in poverty alleviation programmes as essential mechanisms for achieving sustainable development and social transformation in post-colonial Nigeria.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive survey research design to explore how gender inequality affects women's participation in poverty alleviation programs in Nigeria. The design allows for the collection of data from a broad population through structured questionnaires and interviews, providing a detailed picture of women's experiences, challenges, and levels of involvement in these programs. By using this method, the researcher can gather both quantitative and qualitative data that reflect real-life situations without manipulating any variables, which is essential for understanding the societal and structural factors that contribute to gender disparities.

The population of this study consisted of 500 women who are currently involved in various poverty alleviation programs across different sectors in Nigeria. These women have been selected from government-led initiatives such as N-Power, Conditional Cash Transfer, and GEEP, as well as NGO-supported empowerment schemes. The population includes participants from both rural and urban communities in Borno State, reflecting diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and experiences. This target group is considered appropriate for understanding the impact of gender inequality on women's participation in poverty reduction efforts.

To determine the appropriate sample size for the study, Taro Yamane's formula is used:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Where:

- n = sample size
- N = population size (500)
- e = level of precision (assumed to be 0.05 for 95% confidence level)

$$n = \frac{500}{1 + 500(0.05)^2} = \frac{500}{1 + 500(0.0025)} = \frac{500}{1 + 1.25} = \frac{500}{2.25} = 222$$

Thus, the sample size for the study will be approximately 222 women.

This study employs both primary and secondary data collection methods to ensure a comprehensive and reliable analysis. Primary data were gathered through the administration of structured questionnaires and the conduction of in-depth interviews with selected participants. The questionnaire was designed to capture key information related to women's participation in

poverty alleviation programs, including their experiences, challenges, levels of empowerment, and perceptions of gender inequality. Interviews were conducted with a subset of participants to obtain deeper qualitative insights into personal stories, cultural influences, and institutional barriers they encountered. The data collected from the respondents was analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. This method is appropriate for summarizing responses to structured questionnaire items and helps in identifying patterns, trends, and distributions among the variables studied.

Results and Discussions

This chapter presents the analysis of data collected through questionnaires distributed to 222 women involved in poverty alleviation programs across Nigeria. The analysis was structured based on the research objectives, using frequency and percentage for clarity.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 222)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18–25	50	22.52%
	26–35	80	36.04%
	36–45	60	27.03%
	46 and above	32	14.41%
Marital Status	Single	70	31.53%
	Married	110	49.55%
	Widowed	30	13.51%
	Divorced	12	5.41%
Education Level	No formal education	20	9.01%
	Primary	40	18.02%
	Secondary	90	40.54%
	Tertiary	72	32.43%
Occupation	Unemployed	50	22.52%
	Self-employed	90	40.54%
	Government worker	40	18.02%
	Private sector	42	18.92%
Residence Area	Urban	130	58.56%
	Rural	92	41.44%
Total		222	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 Revealed that the largest age group is 26–35 years (36.04%), followed by 36–45 years (27.03%), indicating that most participants are in their productive and economically active years. In terms of marital status, nearly half (49.55%) of the respondents are married, which suggests that household responsibilities may influence their economic decisions and engagement with poverty alleviation programs.

Regarding educational attainment, the majority of respondents (40.54%) possess secondary education, while 32.43% have attained tertiary education. This shows a relatively educated sample population, which may positively influence their ability to access and benefit from empowerment programs. The occupational distribution indicates that most women (40.54%) are self-employed, reflecting a strong presence in informal economic activities.

Finally, the residential distribution shows a higher proportion of urban dwellers (58.56%) compared to rural residents (41.44%). While urban women may have better access to information and programs, the significant rural representation ensures that the study captures the diverse realities of women across different locations in Nigeria.

Table 2: Impact of Gender Inequality on Women's Participation (n = 222)

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Are you currently participating in any poverty alleviation program?	Yes	150	67.57%
	No	72	32.43%
Do you believe gender roles affects women's participation in such programs?	Yes	180	81.08%
	No	30	13.51%
	Not sure	12	5.41%
In what ways has gender roles affected your participation?	Denial of access	40	18.02%
	Discrimination	50	22.52%
	Exclusion from decision-making	30	13.51%
	All of the above	102	45.95%

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Do you feel men have more access to poverty alleviation programs than women?	Strongly agree	60	27.03%
	Agree	80	36.04%
	Disagree	50	22.52%
	Strongly disagree	32	14.41%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2: The findings revealed that majority (67.57%) of respondents are currently participating in poverty alleviation programs, suggesting active engagement by women. However, an overwhelming (81.08%) believe that **gender inequality affects women's participation**, which supports the notion that systemic discrimination persists within access and delivery of empowerment initiatives. When asked about how gender inequality has affected them, the largest group (45.95%) selected **“All of the above”**, indicating they face multiple layers of challenges including denial of access, discrimination, and exclusion from decision-making. This reflects the multifaceted nature of gender-based barriers in Nigeria. Moreover, when asked about gendered access, **63.07%** (Strongly agree and Agree combined) of the respondents feel that **men have more access** to these programs than women, showing a perceived gender gap in access and opportunity. These results underscore the urgent need for gender-sensitive policy reforms and more inclusive program implementation strategies that prioritize equity and equal access for women.

Table 3: Barriers Hindering Women’s Involvement in Economic Empowerment Programs (n = 222)

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Major barriers to participation	Cultural/religious restrictions	60	27.03%
	Lack of education	40	18.02%
	Lack of funds	70	31.53%
	Lack of awareness	52	23.42%
Denied participation due to gender?	Yes	85	38.29%
	No	137	61.71%
safe and welcomed in empowerment programmes?	Yes	100	45.05%

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Missing support services	No	60	27.03%
	Sometimes	62	27.93%
	Childcare support	40	18.02%
	Transport allowance	62	27.93%
	Legal protection	50	22.52%
	Training & mentoring	70	31.53%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 3: The data above shows that the most reported barrier to women's participation in empowerment programs is lack of funds (31.53%), followed by cultural or religious restrictions (27.03%). This indicates that financial hardship and traditional beliefs continue to limit women's involvement in economic development schemes. About **38.29%** of respondents reported having been denied access to a program specifically because of their gender, confirming the persistence of gender-based exclusion. When asked about safety and comfort within empowerment programs, only **45.05%** of respondents felt fully welcomed, while **27.03%** felt unsafe and **27.93%** had mixed experiences highlighting the need for more inclusive and supportive environments. In terms of missing support services, the top choice was **training and mentoring (31.53%)**, indicating a strong need for capacity-building. This was followed by **transport allowances (27.93%)**, which is especially relevant for rural women who often face mobility challenges. These findings suggested that addressing logistical, legal, and developmental support gaps could significantly enhance women's access to and success in empowerment programmes.

Table 4: Government Policies and Interventions (n = 222)

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Awareness of women empowerment programs (e.g., GEEP, N-Power)	Yes	170	76.58%
	No	52	23.42%
Benefitted (self or someone known) from such programs	Yes	120	54.05%
	No	72	32.43%
	Not sure	30	13.51%
Fairness of these programs in including women	Very fair	40	18.02%
	Fair	80	36.04%

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Belief that government is doing enough to reduce gender inequality	Unfair	60	27.03%
	Very unfair	42	18.92%
	Strongly agree	40	18.02%
	Agree	80	36.04%
	Disagree	70	31.53%
	Strongly disagree	32	14.41%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 4: The results show that **76.58%** of respondents are aware of government programs like GEEP, N-Power, and CCT, indicating that these initiatives have gained notable recognition. However, only **54.05%** claim they or someone they know has benefitted, suggesting a gap between awareness and actual access. When asked about the **fairness** of these programs in including women, only **18.02%** rated them as very fair, while **36.04%** said they were fair. A combined **45.95%** viewed them as either unfair or very unfair, indicating concerns over gender inclusivity in program design and implementation. Concerning whether the government is doing enough to address gender inequality, opinions were divided: **54.06%** (strongly agree + agree) felt there were efforts being made, while **45.94%** (disagree + strongly disagree) were unsatisfied. This reflects the perception that while policies exist, their **effectiveness and impact remain inconsistent**, especially in rural and marginalized areas. These findings emphasize the need for **better transparency, equitable targeting, and impact assessment** of women-focused empowerment programs in Nigeria.

Table 5: Recommendations for Improving Women's Participation (n = 222)

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
What can be done to increase women's access?	Financial support	80	36.04%
	Community awareness	50	22.52%
	Leadership training	40	18.02%

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Support women in leadership roles?	Gender-sensitive policies	52	23.42%
	Yes	180	81.08%
	No	42	18.92%
Should government increase funding for women-specific schemes?	Yes	150	67.57%
	No	40	18.02%
	Not sure	32	14.41%
Who should promote women's participation?	Government	40	18.02%
	NGOs	30	13.51%
	Religious leaders	20	9.01%
	Women themselves	32	14.41%
	All of the above	100	45.05%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 5 The findings from this section suggest that the most preferred strategy for enhancing women's access to poverty alleviation programs is financial support (36.04%), followed by gender-sensitive policies (23.42%) **and** community awareness (22.52%). This indicates that funding and policy adjustments are perceived as key enablers of inclusion. A strong majority (**81.08%**) of respondents support the idea of more women being included in leadership roles. This reflects the desire for women to have a voice in program planning and decision-making. Additionally, **67.57%** of the participants believe the government should increase funding for women-specific programs, while 14.41% remain undecided suggesting some uncertainty about the government's current efforts or the effectiveness of increased funding.

When asked who should be responsible for promoting women's participation, 45.05% selected "All of the above," highlighting the need for a collaborative approach involving government, NGOs, religious leaders, and the women themselves.

The findings of this study revealed several critical insights into how gender inequality continues to hinder women's participation in poverty alleviation programs in Nigeria. These results are consistent with existing literature and global reports on gender and development. First, a significant number of respondents (81.08%) acknowledged that gender inequality affects women's participation in poverty alleviation programs. This aligns with the findings of Oyekanmi (2021), who argued that traditional norms and patriarchal structures systematically exclude women from mainstream development initiatives. Similarly, UN Women (2022) noted that in many African countries, including Nigeria, cultural and institutional barriers continue to marginalize women in both public and private sectors.

In relation to specific barriers, respondents identified lack of funds (31.53%), cultural/religious restrictions (27.03%), and lack of awareness (23.42%) as the most pressing issues. These results support the work of Akinbobola and Adesina (2020), who observed that access to financial resources and information remains a significant challenge for women in rural communities. Furthermore, Eze and Ezech (2019) emphasized that religious and traditional beliefs often define women's roles as domestic caregivers, which limits their freedom to participate in socio-economic programs.

Regarding access to empowerment initiatives, the majority of respondents (76.58%) were aware of government programs like GEEP and N-Power, yet only 54.05% had benefitted directly or indirectly. This echoes the findings by **Obasi et al. (2021)**, who noted a wide gap between awareness and actual access to social welfare schemes, especially among marginalized groups. Moreover, 45.95% of respondents perceived the programs as unfair to women, reinforcing earlier critiques by Nwankwo and Ibeh (2020) that gender biases often influence beneficiary selection processes. Notably, respondents supported greater inclusion of women in leadership roles (81.08%), suggesting a recognition of the need for women to be decision-makers, not just beneficiaries. This agrees with Chukwu and Chika (2022) who emphasized that women's leadership in community-based organizations leads to more gender-responsive programming and equitable distribution of resources.

In terms of recommendations, respondents advocated for financial support (36.04%), gender-sensitive policies (23.42%), and increased training opportunities (18.02%). These suggestions are mirrored in **World Bank (2022)** strategies on inclusive development, which stress the importance of combining financial inclusion with education and advocacy for women's rights.

Lastly, the view that responsibility for promoting women's participation should be shared among government, NGOs, religious leaders, and women themselves (45.05%) aligns with **Odeyemi (2019)**, who emphasized a multi-

sectoral approach to tackling gender inequality. This holistic perspective acknowledges that sustainable change requires the collective effort of all stakeholders in society. The study's findings confirm that while some progress has been made in addressing gender inequality in Nigeria, significant challenges remain. These include structural barriers, underrepresentation in leadership, and inconsistent implementation of supportive policies. These issues are not unique to this study but reflect a broader pattern documented in both national and international gender studies. The responses of the participants affirm the importance of inclusive, well-funded, and community-driven approaches to poverty alleviation that place women at the center of development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study confirms that gender inequality remains a critical challenge in achieving inclusive and effective poverty alleviation in Nigeria. While various programs exist to empower women, many are either poorly implemented or inaccessible to the majority who needed them most. Cultural norms, financial constraints, and policy gaps continue to undermine the participation of women in socio-economic initiatives. It is evident that sustainable poverty alleviation cannot be achieved without the full participation of women. Gender-responsive policies, inclusive program design, and equitable access to resources are essential in bridging the gender gap and ensuring that women are empowered not just as beneficiaries, but also as key decision-makers in development processes.

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