GENDER AND POVERTY AS STRUCTURAL DETERMINANTS OF SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABLE PEACEBUILDING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the complex interrelationship among gender, poverty, and social empowerment within the context of Nigeria, emphasising the ways in which these interrelated elements affect the prospects for sustainable peacebuilding. It analyses how gender inequalities and persistent poverty lead to social exclusion, marginalisation, and systemic violence, with a particular focus on its impacts on women and youth across both rural and urban communities. Utilising empirical evidence and theoretical insights from peace and conflict studies, the research assesses the efficacy of existing social empowerment initiatives and gender-responsive policies in reducing conflict and promoting inclusive development. It posits that achieving sustainable peace in Nigeria necessitates a multifaceted strategy that incorporates gender equity, poverty reduction, and grassroots empowerment as fundamental components. By outlining transformative strategies including economic inclusion, education, political engagement, and community-driven peace initiatives, this study provides targeted recommendations for policymakers, civil society stakeholders, and development practitioners. Ultimately, it emphasises that the pursuit of lasting peace in Nigeria is inextricably linked to confronting gendered poverty and fostering inclusive social empowerment.

Keywords: Gender, Poverty, Empowerment, Peacebuilding, Nigeria, Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, like many developing countries, faces intertwined challenges of gender inequality, widespread poverty, and social disempowerment, all of which significantly undermine national development and peace-building efforts. Despite various policy interventions and programmes aimed at poverty alleviation and gender mainstreaming in Nigeria, inequalities in access to education, economic resources, political representation, and legal rights persist—particularly for women and other marginalized groups (UNDP,2022; Bank, 2021). These inequalities often translate into structural violence, social exclusion, and heightened vulnerability, especially during conflicts or crises (Akinola A. O., 2018). A critical nexus exists between gender, poverty, and empowerment, with implications for sustainable peace-building in Nigeria. The gendered nature of poverty in Nigeria means that women are disproportionately represented among the poor due to systemic barriers such as patriarchal norms, limited property rights, and restricted

access to credit and decision-making (Olayiwola, 2016). Exploring this nexus helps illuminate how empowering women and closing gender gaps can lead to broader developmental and peace outcomes. Sustainable peace cannot be achieved without addressing the root causes of poverty and gender exclusion (Galtung J. , 1996; UN, 2020).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite decades of gender-focused development programmes and poverty alleviation schemes, the outcomes have largely failed to empower women or reduce gender-based poverty sustainably in Nigeria. Many of these interventions have been top-down, urban-centric, or donor-driven, often ignoring the socio-cultural and structural realities of rural communities and conflict-prone areas. This disconnection hampers peacebuilding, as poverty, gender exclusion, and social disempowerment are linked to grievances, violence, and instability (Akinola, 2020; UNDP 2022) lack of a holistic understanding of how gendered poverty undermines empowerment and peace necessitates a thorough academic inquiry (Adekunle, 2024) as this gap weakens policy and practice, resulting in short-term, exclusionary peace eorts. Addressing the combined effects of gender, poverty, and social empowerment is therefore essential for achieving sustainable peace-building in Nigeria.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to:

1. Examine the relationship between gender, poverty, and empowerment in Nigeria;
2. Identify the ways in which gendered poverty affects peacebuilding efforts;
3. Analyse existing policies and programmes aimed at women's empowerment and their impact on reducing poverty and promoting peace; and
4. Propose strategic recommendations for integrating gender-responsive empowerment into national peace-building frameworks.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Gender Inequality

The concept of ‘gender’ has become the central issue in the academic discourse with divergent perspectives as multidisciplinary approaches vary. There is the view that gender is regarded as the mere classification of the human species into male and female (Eke, 2018). But beyond that notion, gender is more than just the binary division of humans into this identical nature which differentiates males and females. According to Idyrorough (2005, cited in Eke, 2018) gender is:

> *"a social construction of the relations between male and female in terms of roles in power sharing, decision making, division of labour and remuneration on labour both at home and in the workplace"*

Gupta (2000) narrowly differed from Idyrorough (2005) that gender plays an active role in societal development because gender in the society is far beyond sharing power or decision making because of:

> *"widely shared expectations and norms within a society about appropriate male and female behaviour, characteristics, and roles. It is a social and cultural construct that differentiates women from men and defines the ways in which women and men interact with each other"* (Gupta,2000).

For Karla (2024), gender inequality indicates segregation among genders based on unequal distribution of social needs and is a typical violation of social rights. According to her:

> *Gender inequality is the condition in which access to rights, resources, and opportunities are unequally distributed between genders, including men, women, boys, girls, and individuals of other gender identities. This disparity stems from deeply ingrained social norms and power structures that perpetuate discrimination and the unequal distribution of power and privileges* (Karla, 2024).

The fact that scholars' perspectives on gender inequality is not in tandem with constitutional authority some societal traditions and religious laws do not give women equal priority as men over certain issues. Since the female position in every society is central to contributions to socioeconomic development, such pivotal role should not be over ignored. There is a discourse that society too contributes to this social discrimination as a result of the patriarchal system adopted by many Nigerian societies from time immemorial. For instance, the Nigerian society has been patriarchal in nature which is a major feature of traditional societies and in that case, it is a structure of a set of social relations with material base which enables men to dominate women (Dauda, 2021; Musa, 2025).

Poverty

The issue of poverty in academic and multidisciplinary discussion is not a new phenomenon as several definitions have clarified contentions regarding concept. The concept of poverty has become an issue of discussion in public spaces, at community, national as well as global levels. There is no scholarly acceptable definition of poverty as each scholar has defined the concept from personal perceptions. Poverty is a universal concept and its definition is often contested (Spicker, 1999; Simba, 2017). The concept "poverty" is considered to have a cluster of different overlapping meanings depending on the subject area of discourse. Poverty is multi-dimensional in nature and can be perceived in many ways including lack of material wealth sufficient to ensure a high standard of living, hunger and undernourishment, illness, lack of access to

adequate education and healthcare, a steady rise in the mortality and morbidity rates from disease, homelessness and inadequate housing, unstable environments, and social exclusion and discrimination (WorldBank, 2022).From an economic point of view, the indices of poverty include an average income and living below US$1a day.

However, sociologists perceive poverty differently to mean a situation where the environment is not safe for living due to violence, kidnapping, banditry which destroys social provisions and services such as food, shelter, health care, transport and education as has been observed in the northwest part of Nigeria. This view goes beyond the traditional monetary views of poverty to include the social milieu. Human security determines the level of poverty among societies because if the environment is insecure, the average human will likely fall into the poverty trap. The broadest approach to well-being and poverty is that one that has been articulated by Amartya Sen in 1987, who argues that

> *well-being comes from a "capability" to function in a society... when people lack certain capabilities in the society, they have poverty and have inadequate income, education, health, insecurity, low self-confidence, absence of rights such as freedom to of expression or speech* (Sen, 2001).

Social empowerment

Social empowerment is a multifaceted concept centred on enhancing individuals' capacity to make informed choices and convert them into meaningful actions. Narayan (2002) defines it as a process of enabling people, especially marginalised groups, to overcome cycles of exclusion and dependency. Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) conceptualised empowerment through the lens of agency and opportunity structure, reflecting individuals' ability to act purposefully within institutional constraints. Rowlands (1997) deepens this discourse by identifying four dimensions of power-domination, capacity, collective agency, and internal self-worth—arguing that genuine empowerment necessitates challenging structural inequalities such as patriarchy and institutional biases. In the Nigerian context, social empowerment initiatives have primarily targeted poverty alleviation, youth development, and women's inclusion. However, these efforts often face critical setbacks due to inadequate implementation, elite capture, and failure to address entrenched socio-cultural norms (Olujide, 2017). While schemes (like the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) aim to expand livelihood opportunities, they frequently fall short of disrupting deep-rooted power hierarchies (Akinola, 2020). Women's empowerment, essential to achieving broader social empowerment and sustainable development, requires autonomy in decision-making and equitable access to resources and services (Mercy, 2024). Yet, criticisms persist. As Bakare (2022) argues, the term "empowerment" is often vague, depoliticised, or reduced to tokenistic gestures that fail to deliver substantive change.

Peacebuilding

The process of bringing about enduring peace by tackling the underlying causes of hostilities, encouraging reconciliation, and fostering sustainable development is known as peace building. It focuses on creating grassroots social, psychological and economic environments. Historically, peacebuilding has emerged as one of the United Nations' primary approaches to peace processes. Boutros-Ghali 91992) cemented its widespread acceptance through his seminal 1992 speech on peace. In it, he distinguished three phases of peace building cited in Shehu 2024) which includes: pre-conflict, post-conflict, and early warning mechanisms. Demilitarisation, small arms control, institutional reform, enhanced judicial and policing systems, human rights monitoring, electoral reform, and socioeconomic development are all components of pre-conflict peace building. Its objective is to use early warning systems to detect and resolve conflict triggers (Michelle, 2021). Reintegration, reconciliation, reconstruction, and rehabilitation are the primary goals of post-conflict peace building (Reuchler, 2001). To address the underlying causes of violent conflicts and make them less effective in the future, peace building aims to establish nonviolent structures of peace founded on the values of justice, equity, and cooperation. It entails identifying and addressing not only the immediate sources of conflict, but also the underlying causes, such as civil wars, terrorism, communal clashes, and religious violence. Traditional peacebuilding methods frequently involve community leaders who mediate conflicts and foster social harmony using cultural resources like proverbs. In contrast to Western approaches which may be more focused on legal resolutions, traditional methods emphasize mutual understanding, restoration, and communal relationships (Shehu, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Volumes of related reviews abound on gender and poverty in Nigeria with clear perspectives.

Gender and Poverty in Nigeria: A Contextual Overview

Volumes of scholarly works argued that matters concerning poverty and inequality in Nigeria are not due to the lack of resources but rather, they are because of the poor use, misappropriation, mismanagement and misallocation of available resources (Adekunle Alaye, 2024). Available literature also indicates that the state of poverty in Nigeria is beyond underestimation; hence the persistence of problems like widespread of corruption, governance deficiencies, lack of political will by government at all levels, and inconsistent policies with no meaningful objectives (Oxfam Report 2023 cited in Alaye, 2024).

Nigeria is regarded as one of the wealthiest countries in Africa with large amounts of minerals resources but the citizens earn low incomes, have inadequate access to basic goods and services essential for dignified survival, poorhealth and education outcomes, limited clean water and sanitation facilities,insecurity, voicelessness, and insufficient opportunities for socio-economicadvancement.According to the 2019World Bank report, *"Poverty and Inequality in*

Nigeria," "approximately 83 million people are living below the national poverty line of $1.90 per day, equating to about 40% of the population. Additionally, the wealthiest 10% of Nigerians control 40% of the country's wealth, highlighting severe income inequality. This economic gap exacerbates disparities between urban southern regions and impoverished rural areas, hindering Nigeria's socio-economic development.

On the other hand, divergent views have emerged from disciplinary approaches with clear distinction. It is a dimensional phenomenon that has brought about a further discourse among various scholars. The key feature of the discourse is that inequality is reflected in an unequal distribution of income,resources, opportunities or well-beingand power among individuals or groups in a society. Inequality can be measured in numerous waysincluding the Gini Coefficient, which ranges from perfect equality (0) to perfectinequality (1) (Alaye, 2024).

Regional distribution of poverty indicates variations in poverty levels among different regions of Nigeria. For instance, in the north central part of Nigeria, the state of poverty and inequality is higher than expected; as observed by Zainab during the 9th Distinguished Public Lecture, titled *"The Intersectionality of Poverty and Gender in North Central Nigeria"* at the Federal University, Lokoja, Kogi State. According to her, despite several intervention programmes, poverty persists among women.

> *Imagine a land where resources are plentiful, yet the hands that toil hardest remain the most deprived. In the heart of North Central Nigeria, this paradox is the daily reality for millions of women. ...While the region is celebrated for its rich cultural heritage and abundant resources, its women are caught in the relentless grip of poverty working tirelessly but rarely reaping the rewards of their labour* (Marwa, 2024).

She further argued that:

> *These women do not just face economic hardship; they endure a web of systemic inequalities that restrict their progress, dim their potentials, and amplify their struggles ... in predominantly Muslim areas, cultural norms might prioritise early marriage for girls, which could limit their educational opportunities.*

According to her, women especially from rural dwellers are equally faced with significant barriers to owning land due to traditional inheritance laws which favour male relatives than their female counterparts.

> *In urban settings, women from low-income backgrounds may struggle to access quality healthcare. Intersectionality encourages us to consider how gender, along with factors such as ethnicity, marital status, and location, affects a woman's experience of poverty.*

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2020), 70% of Nigerians below the poverty line are women. North Central Nigeria has a 57.3% poverty rate among women, versus 45.5%

among men. Women face education barriers, with 59.3% literacy rate compared to 74.4% for men (UNDP, 2020). From another report, however, only 21% of women engage in paid employment (ILO, 2020). These statistics represent restricted opportunities and lost potentials. This intersection of challenges goes beyond the day-to-day struggles for survival. Women in North Central Nigeria experience the compounding effects of poverty in deeply gendered ways including not only economic exclusion but also cultural marginalisation that diminishes their voices and overlooks their contributions. Despite, their efforts, women remain largely invisible in the economic and social fabrics of their communities, perpetuating cycles of both poverty and disempowerment. Women in north central Nigeria, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, confront simultaneous barriers to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Umeh, 2024).

On 17 November 2022, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in collaboration with NASSCO, UNDP, UNICEF, and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), launched Nigeria's most extensive measure of multidimensional poverty. The 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Survey, conducted between November 2021 and February 2022, sampled over 56,000 households across all 36 states and the FCT, providing multidimensional poverty estimates at the senatorial district level. Findings from the survey indicate that 63% of Nigeria's population—approximately 133 million people—are multi-dimensionally poor. The National MPI score is 0.257, suggesting that poor people experience just over a quarter of all possible deprivations measured. Regionally, 65% of the poor (86 million) reside in the North, while 35% (47 million) live in the South. State-level poverty ranges significantly, from 27% in Ondo State to 91% in Sokoto State (NBS, 17 November 2022).

The survey highlights key areas of deprivation, including lack of access to clean cooking fuels (with many using dung, wood, or charcoal), poor sanitation, inadequate access to healthcare, food insecurity, and substandard housing. It also shows that multidimensional poverty surpasses monetary poverty; while 40.1% of Nigerians were considered poor by income (based on the 2018/19 monetary poverty line), 63% are multidimensionally poor according to the 2022 MPI. Rural poverty is especially severe, with 72% of rural residents affected, compared to 42% in urban areas. The MPI also includes a linked Child MPI, revealing that 67.5% of children aged 0–17 is multidimensionally poor, and children account for 51% of the total poor population. The highest deprivations among children relate to lack of early intellectual stimulation. Child poverty is most acute in rural areas, where nearly 90% of children are poor. Across geopolitical zones, child poverty rates are highest in the North-East and North-West (around 90%), and lowest in the South-East (74%) and South-West (65.1%). In states like Bayelsa, Sokoto, Gombe, and Kebbi, child poverty exceeds 95%. Notably, 4 million Nigerians (2.1%) live in households where a child aged 15–17 is the first to complete primary school. (NBS, 17 November 2022).

Socioeconomic Structures that Perpetuate Gendered Poverty

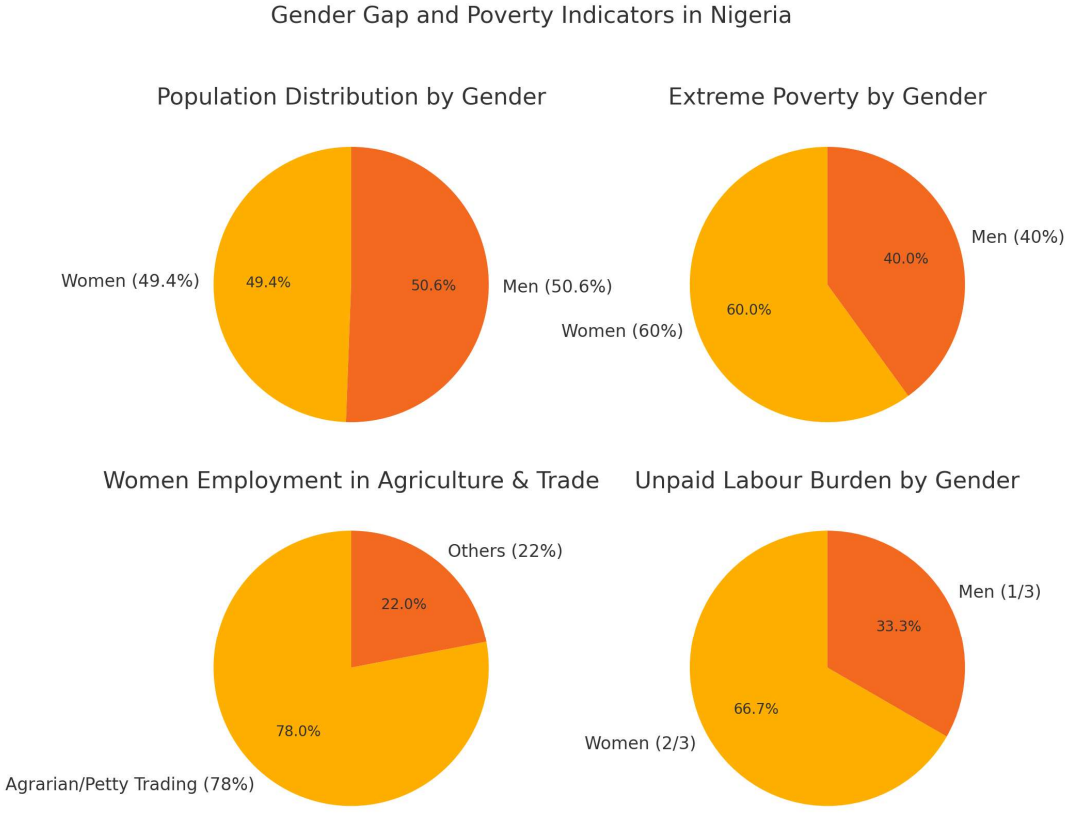
There is no bone of contention that socioeconomic structures cannot be solidified without the improvement of the overall well-being and quality of life of a population within a specific geographical area. These structures comprise of economic growth, poverty reduction, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. It is a process that has to do with the efforts to raise living standards, reduce poverty, increase access to education and healthcare, promote gender equality, enhance infrastructure, foster economic growth, and create opportunities for all members of society to participate in and benefit from development processes. But in some cases, the situation is not exactly as supposedly anticipated. Socioeconomic status is a key factor in determining the quality of life for women and by extension, it strongly influences the lives of children and families. However, women's socioeconomic challenges encompass lowincome, high poverty rate, low educational attainment, lack of financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status, marital status, cultural factors and social class that limits women participation in skill acquisition programmes and formal employment to generate income for their wellbeing.

Some scholars shared various perspectives with regards to socioeconomic disparity involving gender-based poverty. Ogwumike (2019) studied the impacts of socioeconomic factors on access to healthcare services, maternal and child health, school enrolment rates, and educational attainment levels, displaying the desire of addressing social determinants of healthcare systems, provision of housing, clean water, sanitation coupled with the education for sustainable development which are beyond indices that determine income measures as a determinant of poverty. In other studies byBeneria (1995) and Kabeer (1999), they opined that in terms of social status as well as political and economic empowerment, women in civilized countries are in a better position than their counterparts in developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. However, the situation remains different in developing countries like Nigeria. Volumes of existing researches that include Bukar (2020; cited in Oluwaseyi, 2022); Mukaila, Falola and Akanbi (2021; cited in Oluwaseyi,2022); Fapohunda (2020; cited in Oluwaseyi,2022); Milazzo and Goldstein (2019; cited in Oluwaseyi,2022); Mukaila, Falola and Akanbi (2021; cited in Oluwaseyi,2022); have variously examined critical issues related to women underrepresentation in academics, in politics, and marginalisation in economy, education, and the rights of women across Nigeria respectively. The gap left by these studies was that they did not explore the socioeconomic issues women face across the six geo-political zones in Nigeria in the context of national development to fill the existing gaps in the related reviews (Oluwaseyi, 2022).

In a report of 134 countries rankings, Nigeria was placed in the 118th position of countries with gender gap in key sectors of the nation (World Bank, 2022). A report published by National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2021) indicate that 78% of women in Nigeria are mostly agrarian and petty traders. Like in most developing countries, poverty in Nigeria is highly gendered. Although women make up about 50 % of Nigeria's population, more than 60 % of them live in extreme

poverty, the majority of whom are rural women (Mukaila, 2022). Similarly, another report by the National Population Commission (NPC, 2021; cited in Oluwaseyi, 2022) shows that women constituted about 49.4 percent of the total population of Nigeria, but there has been a gross gender gap between men and women, in terms of political representation, educational attainment, and economic status amongst others (Oluwaseyi, 2022). Rural women disproportionately bear the burden of multidimensional poverty, and they continuously experience gender-based discrimination, harmful social norms, underrepresentation in secure and well-paid jobs and unequal access to healthcare, education and property (Ayoo, 2021).

It also revealed that the women's unpaid labour is twice compared to that of their counterparts (men), and its economic value worth estimated to be up to 30% of the nation's Gross National Product (World Bank, 2020 cited in Oluwaseyi, 2022). According to the NWLC report, women are 35 % more likely than men to live in poverty and are more likely to live in extreme poverty in Nigeria (Centre,2020) Women self-advancement has been shortened by the burden of reproduction, particularly in Nigeria where there exists a high birth rate coupled with pivotal roles of culture that places on women the combined roles of childbearing, child raising and as well as domestic chores. These developments have limited women's ability to acquire the necessary capacities to contribute their quota effectively to national development.



Centre (2020).

It is beyond academic discourse that no nation could develop economically and socially without utilising its teeming population inclusive of women. But when socioeconomic development marginalizes women based on cultural or religious tendencies, such country can be easily cut off from the development space (WDI, 2021; cited in Oluwaseyi, 2022). In developing nations, policy measures aiming to improve the conditions of women through access to education, financial empowerment and improved standard of living have a limited impact due to constraints such as laws, cultural norms, traditions, and codes of conduct through social institutions that hinder women (Mohammed, 2021).

Social Norms and Values

In the view of Ndagurwa (2025), the roles and behaviours of people are distinctly prescribed, therefore limiting women's opportunities and choices. One good example is the patriarchal societal setup, where men are expected to be the breadwinners of the family while women take on domestic responsibilities. This set-up goes on to hinder women from participating in the workforce and public sphere, and men on the other hand become individuals with little or no knowledge of domestic responsibilities. Stereotypes and prejudices about genders are culturally ingrained and can perpetuate discrimination and limit opportunities. Portraying women as less intelligent and incapable than men hinders their access to better educational opportunities and attainment of leadership positions, especially in the workplace. This can be termed as gender bias, which has created a male-dominated structure in the typical workplace or organisation, with a negative impact often leading to gender bias and unequal gender practices in the workplace that hinder promoting women into leadership positions. Religious texts and traditions are interpreted to assign different roles and values to people and such interpretations emphasize male dominance and female submissiveness. Also, traditional practices and religious rules restrict women's education, work opportunities and social participation. While women are excluded from religious, traditional and leadership positions which hinders their influence in society (Ndagurwa, 2025).

Social Empowerment a Conflict Prevention Mechanism

It has been observed that Nigerian governments have injected all resources, viable policies and programs aimed at crushing the gender disparity between men and women that could address poverty ratio in favour of women and other marginalised groups to promote entrepreneurship and economic activities such as the You-Win Program, Sure-P, Trader Money, N-Power programmes. Several Nigerian poverty reduction initiatives include NAPEP (2001; cited in Oluwaseyi, 2022), which focused on job creation and vocational training but faced the challenges of corruption and limited impact (NEEDS,2004; cited in Oluwaseyi, 2022). The programme was aimed at economic growth and poverty reduction, though implementation was slow. 'YES', a NAPEP component, offered youth skills training but had limited reach. The Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programme showed promise in improving child outcomes. Rural development efforts, such as agricultural support and infrastructure projects, also

contributed to poverty reduction, though challenges remain in their effectiveness and sustainability. In Nigeria, political inclusion through affirmative action measures, like the 35% gender representation quota, is still not fully realised. On the other hand, when applied, such as happened in the Plateau Peace Building Agency, it leads to improved platforms for inclusive discourse and less political tension(Ogbogu, 2021). There is no doubt that resilience has successfully promoted neighbourhood projects like women's cooperatives, youth peace clubs, and skill-acquisition centres. Community development associations in states such as Plateau and Benue play critical roles in post-conflict recovery and prevention by facilitating local mediation and promoting alternative livelihoods. It is obvious that gender equality is intended to be mainstreamed across sectors through policies like the National Gender Policy (2006). For many of these programmes, however, enforcement is lax while sustainable solutions are hampered in conflict areas by the disregard for women's rights and their underrepresentation in peace processes. Transformative peace requires gender-responsive policy design and budgeting (UN, 2020).

Connecting Poverty, Peacebuilding, and Gender

Research indicates a strong link between economic disenfranchisement and violence. For example, the emergence of insurgencies such as Boko Haram in the Northeast has been associated with youth unemployment and inadequate educational access(Onuoha, 2014). This is made worse by gender-based exclusion, which limits the roles that women and girls can play in the post-conflict recovery process by subjecting them to further layers of deprivation.Case Studies: Northeast Nigeria, the Middle Belt, and militancy in the Niger Delta which was sparked by complaints about resource control and environmental degradation. Through economic inclusion and psycho-social support, women's empowerment programmes, like the Widows for Peace project, promoted reconciliation (Courson, 2009). Interfaith women's organizations that practice dialogue and trauma healing have helped to lessen ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt that are driven by identity politics and competition for land (Krause, 2021). Women's tenacity during the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, demonstrated by their participation in microenterprises and local security watch groups, demonstrates their potential to promote peace when given the opportunity (Matfess, 2017).In times of crisis, women and young people are frequently the first to arrive on the scene. Programs that provide them with skills, leadership training, and political literacy strengthen their ability to lead reconciliation efforts. For example, the Borno Women Development Initiative provides displaced women with skills training and post-conflict trauma counselling (Nigeria. U. , 2021).

Pathways to Sustainable Peacebuilding

It is crystal clear that encouraging economic empowerment through entrepreneurship support, vocational training, and microcredit programs aids in curbing the cycle of conflict and dependency. Access to agri-based microfinance has been associated with lower rates of youth violence in Gombe and Bauchi States (Adebayo, 2018). Research demonstrates that education

fosters tolerance and lessens susceptibility to manipulation. Therefore, by equipping young girls with literacy, hygiene, and civic skills, programs like Northern Nigeria's Safe Schools for Girls (funded by DFID) reduce the likelihood of early marriage and recruitment into extremist organisations (Alaye, 2024). In addition, community-based peace councils, town hall meetings, and inclusion of youth and women in traditional and formal decision-making structures foster ownership and reduce alienation. For instance, Plateau State's Peace Practitioners Network exemplifies this by integrating diverse groups into a coordinated peace agenda(Kwaja, 2018). Addressing the underlying causes of injustice, such as poverty, gender-based violence, political marginalization, and land access, is essential to achieving sustainable peace. Gender-sensitive conflict transformation frameworks, such as the UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan, encourage inclusive peace by ensuring women's active participation and protection (Nigeria, 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study applies Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence and feminist theory to analyse gender inequality, poverty, and systemic marginalisation in Nigeria.

Structural Violence Theory

According to Galtung (2009), violence includes more than physical harm; it encompasses any preventable violation of basic human needs such as well-being, identity, and survival. He argues that when people are denied the conditions necessary to meet these needs—regardless of gender, class, or status—violence occurs, even if not visibly expressed. In this sense, poverty, gender-based exclusion, and economic marginalisation are all forms of violence because they obstruct access to fundamental rights and necessities. Structural violence, as described by Galtung (1969), arises from established political, social, and economic systems that perpetuate inequality. Unlike direct violence, which is immediate and visible, structural violence is embedded in institutions and manifests in unequal access to resources, opportunities, and protections. Galtung further elaborates on cultural violence—ideologies and beliefs that justify and legitimises structural violence—which often arise from misunderstandings or ignorance between societal groups (Burak, 2021; Galtung, 1969).

This theoretical framework mirrors the realities in Nigeria, where access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and employment remains highly unequal, especially along gender lines. Women are disproportionately affected due to entrenched patriarchal structures that limit their participation in both the public and economic spheres. These systemic inequalities are often reinforced by cultural and religious norms, further embedding structural violence in everyday life. For example, women are frequently relegated to domestic roles while men dominate decision-making positions in politics and governance. This not only restricts women's agency but also creates social expectations that disadvantage both men and women (Galtung, 2004). Galtung's work provides a foundational perspective on peace, highlighting that true peace is not just the absence of direct violence but the presence of social justice and the elimination of

structural and cultural barriers. Thus, understanding the roots and manifestations of violence is a prerequisite for sustainable peace (Galtung, 1990).

The above aligns with John Burton's human needs theory, which asserts that persistent conflict arises when basic universal needs—like identity, participation, and security—are unmet (Burton, 1990). Nigeria, despite its vast natural wealth, exemplifies this contradiction: widespread poverty, poor health outcomes, limited access to clean water, insecurity, and inequality illustrate how unmet needs can destabilize society and perpetuate conflict.

Feminist theory

Feminist theory complements Galtung's framework by focusing specifically on the gendered dimensions of structural violence. Feminist theories aim to explain how systemic structures—social, political, economic, and cultural—perpetuate inequality and marginalisation of women. They also propose transformative approaches to address these injustices. Feminist analysis delves into both intrapersonal issues like identity and empowerment, and broader societal concerns such as access to power and representation. Feminist social work emphasizes the importance of centering women lived experiences and addressing the societal roles and expectations that restrict

their autonomy. Historically, feminist movements have evolved in waves—from the first wave's focus on legal rights to the second wave's emphasis on economic and social equality. These historical developments parallel Nigeria's struggles against child marriage, gender-based violence, and discriminatory inheritance laws. Presently, Nigerian women occupy less than 7% of parliamentary seats, underscoring their continued underrepresentation in governance (Union, 2023). Postmodern feminism highlights the diversity of women's experiences—emphasizing the need to include rural women, internally displaced persons, and other marginalized voices in national dialogues (UN, 2020). Furthermore, feminist theory informs the design of grassroots empowerment programs that offer vocational training, financial inclusion, and political education for women. These initiatives challenge patriarchal systems and work toward egalitarian structures. By enhancing women's capabilities and agency, such programmes contribute directly to peace-building and social transformation. In conclusion, both Galtung's structural violence theory and feminist perspectives provide a comprehensive lens to understand and address the root causes of inequality and conflict in Nigeria. They emphasize the necessity of meeting basic human needs and dismantling systemic barriers to achieve meaningful peace and development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study relied heavily on document analysis as secondary data which depended on library materials including journals, books, magazines, newspapers, the Internet as well as other sources basically concerned with gender, poverty, and social empowerment on gender issues and women empowerment. These materials were critically analysed during this study.

FINDINGS

Poverty in Nigeria is rooted in systemic issues such as corruption, poor governance, lack of political will, and erratic policy implementation, which have entrenched inequality and exclusion of women from active participation in social, economic and political power structures (Oxfam Report 2023; Alaye, 2024). The World Bank (2019) notes that over 83 million Nigerians live below the poverty line, while the wealthiest 10% control 40% of the nation's resources. This imbalance is more pronounced along gender and regional lines. Galtung's theory of structural violence is reflected in how institutions deprive Nigerians, particularly women in search of basic needs. According to NBS (2020), women constitute 70% of the poor, with only 21% employed (ILO, 2020). Cultural norms, lower literacy rates, and patriarchal systems restrict women's access to education, employment, and leadership, as explained by feminist theory. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022) shows that 133 million Nigerians live in multidimensional poverty, with the northern region and rural women most affected. While state-led programs like NAPEP and NEEDS have shown limited success due to corruption, grassroots initiatives such as the Plateau Peace Building Agency and Widows for Peace project have demonstrated impact. The findings confirm that economic marginalization contributes to violence, with groups like Boko Haram and Niger Delta militants exploiting exclusion. Empowerment through education, microfinance, and inclusive governance is vital for peace.

Discussion of Findings

The findings underscore a complex interplay between deeply ingrained social norms, structural socioeconomic barriers, and the persistent challenge of gendered poverty in Nigeria. The synthesis of literature and statistical data reveals that while Nigeria possesses significant resource wealth, the translation of these assets into broad-based development is heavily obstructed by systemic inequalities.

1. The Persistence of Patriarchal Norms and Structural Inequality

The evidence indicates that cultural and religious interpretations remain primary drivers in prescribing rigid gender roles. By positioning men as sole breadwinners and women as domestic caregivers, societal structures effectively limit women's agency, restricting their access to education, leadership, and formal employment. This patriarchal framework creates a self-perpetuating cycle where gender bias is not merely a social preference but a foundational element of the workplace and public sphere. The underrepresentation of women in leadership—exacerbated by negative stereotypes regarding their capabilities—highlights a critical failure in mainstreaming gender equity, despite the existence of policy frameworks such as the National Gender Policy (2006).

2. The Paradox of Empowerment Interventions

A significant finding is the disconnect between the intent of government-led poverty reduction programmes (e.g., NAPEP, N-Power, Trader Money) and their actual impact on the ground. While these initiatives aimed to address economic disparity, their effectiveness has been undermined by issues of corruption, limited reach, and a lack of enforcement. Furthermore, while affirmative action measures, such as the 35% gender representation quota, theoretically offer a path to inclusion, they remain largely unrealised. The evidence suggests that where such policies are actively implemented—as seen in the Plateau Peace Building Agency—they successfully reduce political tension and foster inclusive discourse. This highlights that structural transformation requires more than just policy design; it demands political will and rigorous, gender-responsive budgeting.

3. The Gendered Nature of Poverty

The data paints a stark picture of multidimensional poverty, which disproportionately affects women and rural dwellers. With 63% of the Nigerian population classified as multi-dimensionally poor, the burden is heavily skewed toward women, who face compounding barriers including land ownership restrictions, limited access to healthcare, and the "double burden" of reproductive and domestic labour. The regional analysis further complicates this narrative; for instance, the North Central region exhibits a significant gendered poverty gap, where women face both economic exclusion and cultural marginalisation. The distinction between monetary poverty and multidimensional poverty is crucial here: while income measures provide one lens, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) reveals that deprivations in sanitation, clean energy, and early childhood development are equally critical in trapping generations in poverty.

4. Peacebuilding and Economic Resilience

The nexus between economic disenfranchisement and insecurity is well-supported by the evidence. The emergence of insurgencies is frequently linked to youth unemployment and exclusion, with women and girls subjected to heightened deprivation in post-conflict scenarios. Conversely, the findings demonstrate that women act as essential agents of peace when empowered. Projects such as the Borno Women Development Initiative and various interfaith women's organisations show that providing skills training, psycho-social support, and political literacy not only assists in reconciliation but also challenges the conditions that lead to extremist recruitment.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that gender inequality, while a significant concern, is not the primary root of women’s poverty in Nigeria. Rather, entrenched traditional beliefs and cultural norms are the foundational causes of gender-based discrimination. These socio-cultural constructs perpetuate

the notion that the female child is inferior, leading to systemic exclusion from education, economic opportunities, and decision-making roles. Such practices significantly hinder women's access to resources, property ownership, wealth creation, and political agency, thereby structurally entrenching poverty among Nigerian women. Therefore, any meaningful poverty alleviation strategy must critically address and dismantle the socio-cultural and customary frameworks that sustain gender discrimination and entrench poverty among Nigerian women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings of this research, the study has the following recommendations:

1. To advance women's socio-economic empowerment, several targeted strategies are essential. The establishment of women-led agricultural cooperatives would enhance women's voices in decision-making and economic activities;

2. Structured mentorship programmes should be introduced to equip women with skills and leadership capacity;

3. Legislative reforms that promote gender equity within key sectors, especially agriculture, are imperative. Furthermore, promoting collaboration between governmental, non-governmental, international, and private actors will foster resource mobilisation and knowledge sharing; and

4. The development of robust evaluation frameworks is necessary to monitor, assess, and enhance the effectiveness of women's empowerment initiatives, ensuring long-term impact and sustainability.

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