GENDER EQUALITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT
Gender equality is widely acknowledged as a key driver of economic growth and social advancement. However, in Nigeria, severe gender inequities exist, limiting women's access to school, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political representation. These disparities jeopardize human rights and limit the country's capacity for long-term growth. Civil society groups (CSOs) have emerged as critical players in tackling these issues, pushing for gender parity, empowering women, and holding legislators responsible for enacting inclusive policies. This study investigates the role of civil society in promoting gender equality and economic development in Nigeria. It examines the techniques used by CSOs, assesses their impact on policy reforms and public attitudes, and analyzes the hurdles to accomplishing their goals. This study emphasized the literature rather than the major concerned respondents that have been the focus of previous researchers. Using a systematic literature review, the research synthesizes existing studies on gender equality, economic development, and the contributions of CSOs to identifying gaps based on various authors' submissions on gender parity, trends, and best practices. The findings emphasize the necessity of collaboration among the government, civil society, and other stakeholders in building a more equal and prosperous Nigeria.

Introduction

Globally, the role of civil society in advancing gender equality and economic development has been well-documented, Edwards (2004) argued that civic society creates an equitable society. International experiences demonstrate that civil society can advocate for women's rights, facilitate access to economic opportunities, and challenge patriarchal norms that hinder gender equality (Molyneux (2008).

In Nigeria, as in other democracies, civil society has been instrumental in driving social change and economic progress (Utsaha, 2014; Ibrahim and Ibeanu, 2014). Despite the country's vast resources, Nigeria faces profound challenges, including pervasive poverty, gender inequality, and systemic corruption. Civil society organizations (CSOs) have emerged as pivotal actors in addressing these issues, advocating for policy reforms, and implementing grassroots initiatives aimed at improving socio-economic conditions. Ibrahim and Ibeanu (2014) argued that civil societies are crucial in bridging the gap between the government and the populace, ensuring that the voices of the marginalized are heard and acted upon.

The role of civil society in modern political systems has accumulated significant attention in recent scholarly discourse. Generally, civil society represents one of the essential institutions that facilitate communication between citizens and policymakers (Williamson and Rodd, 2016). Edward (2021) Submits that a robust civil society is essential for a well-functioning and dynamic modern society, as it complements governmental policy formulation cum implementation and positive stimulation of market forces, ensuring a balance of power and a thriving participatory democracy as well as economic growth. As a multifaceted concept, civic society has attracted varying interpretations that reflect its complex role in modern democracies. By the way of description and identification of roles expected of civil society organizations, Scholte (2002) identified that civil society encompasses a vast array of non-governmental organizations, community groups, and advocacy networks critical to connect the government and the general public. This is an indication that civil society plays a crucial role in bridging the gaps between the government and the public, enhancing participatory democracy, and ensuring that diverse voices are heard in the policy-making process. Conversely, Gramsci (2004) presents a more critical view of civil society, by submitting that the organization can be used or manipulated by the state for unpopular policy implementation or better put an appendage of the state. In buttressing the above submission, Gramsci further analyzes civil society as a sphere where the ruling class exercises hegemony, using cultural and ideological means to maintain control over the populace. This perspective suggests that civil society can be co-opted by the state or dominant social forces to reinforce existing power structures and legitimize the status quo, rather than challenging or transforming them.

Both perspectives are essential for a comprehensive understanding of civil society as they both offer a distinct analysis of the roles and impacts of civil society in different political and social contexts. From both views, it is observed that civil society is distinct from the state but closer to it as a cooperating partner that operates within the state in the advancement of civil liberties and voluntary services to the community (Chambers and Kopstein, 2008). Its importance lies in promoting democratic values, fostering economic development, and ensuring social justice. A well-structured civil society enhances participatory democracy by empowering citizens to engage in governance processes and hold public officials accountable. Moreover, it plays a vital role in advocating for marginalized groups, thus promoting gender equality and inclusive development (Aiyede, 2001).

Many literatures have discussed the role of civil society in ensuring gender equality and economic development in Nigeria. However, none has focused on the gap between theoretical discussions and practical outcomes which this study is all out for.

Statement of the Problem

Despite global efforts to promote gender equality as a critical component of sustainable development, Nigeria continues to experience persistent gender gaps that impede economic growth and fair development. Structural impediments, cultural norms, and systematic gender prejudices impede women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. This inequality not only harms human rights but also limits the country's capacity to reach its full economic potential. The persistent gender gap in Nigeria raises critical

questions about the effectiveness of CSOs in addressing these issues and fostering inclusive economic development. This gap is expected to be breached by focusing on various identified authors' submissions on gender parity, trends, and best practices.

Conceptual Review of Relevant Literature

The study is based on three thematic main concepts of the research, which include civic society, gender equality, and economic development. In this section, these concepts are presented, along with definitions cum relevant literature.

Civil Society

Different writers have explored the complexity of the concept of civil society, showing different dimensions of the concept. For example, Kukah (1999) posited that a flurry of the definitions of the concept, no matter their impressions, should not be seen as evidence of the weakness of the concept. Rather, it should be seen as evidence of the international interest and the vitality of the concept. Civil society exists in virtually all countries of the world and this makes its definitions vary from one region to another (Omodia and Erunke, 2007). It comprises voluntary assemblies and organizations that function as a critical component of modern democratic systems, acting as pressure groups that promote justice and social order. Hence, civil society manifests through societal interactions between individuals and the government, reflecting values of cooperation, self-help organizations, and networks of public activities (Adibe, 2015). Chambers and Kopstein (2008) submit that civil society is a realm of association and activity that can operate independently of, in opposition to, in support of, in dialogue with, in partnership with, or beyond the state. This submission underscores the multifaceted nature of civil society, highlighting its ability to coordinate, contradict, or mediate based on varying interests and issues. Civil society serves as an agent or tool for enhancing democratic governance, often working closely with governments, particularly in democratic states. Civil society flourishes more in democratic contexts than in authoritarian regimes, highlighting its association with democratic governance.

For the current study, civil society is defined as a diverse network of voluntary, non-governmental organizations and associations that operate independently from the state in line with the various above descriptions. These entities advocate for gender equality and facilitate economic development through varied interactions with the state, including support, opposition, dialogue, and partnership.

Gender Equality

Gender equality is difficult to define due to cultural and societal variations, structural inequality, and intersectionality. However, gender equality is a concept that ensures that all individuals, regardless of their gender, have equal rights, opportunities, and treatment in all spheres of life (Sen, 1990). This includes areas such as education, employment, political participation, healthcare, and social interactions. At its core, gender equality aims to eliminate discrimination and bias based on gender, promoting fairness and equity for people of all genders. It highlights the principle of equality in implementing gender-related policies within the state framework. The study asserts that equitable treatment of men and women is imperative for societal advancement, as any form of discrimination based on sex hampers societal progress. In addition to these perspectives, other scholarly definitions of gender equality shed further light on its multifaceted nature.

The current study sees gender equality as the state where individuals of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities across all sectors of society. It also substantive equality in practice, addressing systemic and structural barriers that perpetuate gender disparities.

Economic Development

Development is a highly debated concept in the social sciences, with varying perspectives from scholars of Western backgrounds and those from third-world societies. Traditionally, it is understood that economic growth differs from economic development. While economic growth refers to an increase in a country's gross domestic product (GDP), economic development encompasses economic growth alongside other positive changes within society. This is evident in the incorporation of the Human Development Index (HDI) by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as an indicator for

measuring development since 1990. Economic development is often described as a gauge of human welfare within a society, extending beyond mere economic growth to encompass transformative changes in living conditions, essential for maximizing productivity. Indicators of economic development include income measures such as GDP, gross national product (GNP), and gross national income (GNI), as well as non-income measures like the HDI. Unemployment, poverty, and inequality are mutually reinforcing, with unemployment leading to poverty and widening the gap between the affluent and the impoverished. Creating more job opportunities holds the potential to gradually alleviate poverty and inequality.

For the current study, economic development is understood as a process encompassing not only the growth of a nation's economy, as measured by indicators such as GDP, but also broader societal changes aimed at improving the well-being and quality of life of its citizens.

Methodology

Due to the nature of the research work and the scanty number of authors that have written on the subject matter, the researcher decided to use the purposive sampling technique which allows for the selection of a limited number from the available population. A process of gradual screening was followed and twenty-five authors were selected purposively. All the data, evidence, and information about civil societies' roles in promoting gender equality and economic development were searched on different databases such as Google Scholar, Web of Science, PubMed, and Microsoft Academic. This selection method aligns with the PRISMA method of systematic literature review that assumes that a single database is likely not to contain all relevant references (Moher et al., 2015).

The search on those databases was made with the following expressions: "grassroots movements" AND "gender mainstreaming" AND "sustainable livelihoods"; "advocacy groups" AND "anti-discrimination" AND "entrepreneurship"; "social enterprises" AND "women's cooperatives" AND "financial inclusion"; "capacity building" AND "women leaders" AND "policy influence"; "awareness campaigns" AND "gender stereotypes" AND "workforce participation"; "legal literacy" AND "property rights" AND "business development"; "collective action" AND "social norms" AND "economic transformation" and many more. The search expressions were made to capture the numerous ways in which civil society organisations and initiatives promote gender equality and economic development in Nigeria. Following an examination of the identified papers' abstracts, both theoretical and empirical studies were discovered. A substantial number of publications were retrieved. At the initial stage, about 53 publications were retrieved.

Inclusion Criteria

These criteria include language, demographics, nature of research, and year of publication.

Method of Analysis

The content analysis is chosen to analyze the data gathered from the search process. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) argued "that qualitative content analysis can be fruitfully used to examine virtually any kind of communication materials, including narratives responses, open-ended survey questions, interviews, focus groups, observations and print media such as articles, books or manuals." This method of data analysis is highly flexible, (Boyatzis, 1998) it also enables the researchers to evaluate the language used in the selected publications and make inferences about the messages in the publications. According to Krippendorff, (2004), content analysis is a methodological tool that could be "considered valid to the extent that it captures what it sets out to capture."

Results

This section is divided into two sub-sections. The first part presents the nature of publications, the historical series of selected papers, and the resulting documents. The second part presents the results by the main themes embraced in the research objectives.

Nature of Publications

The nature of publications encompasses the types and characteristics of written works, including academic journals, books, conference papers, and reports. These publications serve as mediums for disseminating research findings, theoretical advancements, and practical applications across various fields of study. For

this study, academic journals, reports from international organizations, and publications from civil society organizations were selected.

The analysis which categorizes the selected publications by their nature, reveals a diverse array of sources used for the study. This includes academic journals, which provide peer-reviewed and rigorous research findings. Reports from international organizations, such as the International Labour Office, offer authoritative and globally recognized data and insights. Publications from civil society organizations contribute perspectives rooted in grassroots experiences and advocacy efforts. The combination of these sources ensures a comprehensive and balanced view, integrating scholarly rigor, authoritative data, and practical, on-the-ground insights. This diversity enhances the study's credibility and depth, allowing for a well-rounded analysis of the role of civic society in gender equality and economic development in Nigeria.

The historical series of selected papers shows fluctuations over the years, with a peak in 2016 (5 papers) and a dip in 2020 (2 papers). Overall, the numbers suggest variability in the selection process or research output, without a clear increasing or decreasing trend.

Table 1 below shows the references and the focus of the selected papers.

Table 1: Resulting Documents

S/N	Reference(s)	Focus
1.	Lafenwa (2016)	Civil society and anti-corruption in Nigeria.
2.	Abdullahi and Gana (2017)	Civil society and good governance in Nigeria.
3.	Tonye and Oarhe (2015)	Civil society and corruption management in Nigeria.
4.	Martin and Amos (2021)	Civil society and accountable governance in Nigeria.
5.	Oke and Atufe (2021)	Civil society organizations and democratic tenets in Nigeria.
6.	Bernhard, Hicken, Reenock, and Lindberg (2015).	Civil society and democratic sustainability in Nigeria
7.	Egbosa (2016)	Civil society and regulation of the extractive industry in Nigeria.
8.	Akinyetun, Erubami, Salau, Bakare and Ahoton (2021)	Civil society and social inclusion in Nigeria.
9.	Christopher (2020)	Civil society and Nigeria's Covid-19 response.
10.	Essien (2020)	Civil society, social inclusion and sustainable development in Nigeria.
11.	Monica (2019)	Civil society, women political participation and economic development in Nigeria.

12.	Oboh, Andrew, Zarina and Sofian (2019)	Gender inequality and economic development in Nigeria.
13.	National Bureau of Statistics (2016)	Reports on Men and Women in Nigeria.
14.	NGO Coalition Shadow Report (2017)	Periodic Report of Nigeria on Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
15.	Oloni (2015)	Gender inequality and employment in Nigeria.
16.	Ette (2017)	Gender equality in Nigeria.
17.	International Labour Office (2018)	Gender and employment.
18.	Chukwuemeka, Ezeodili and Aduma (2018)	Development and civil society.
19.	Chukwuemeka (2016)	Women development.
20.	Emmanuel, Deeker and Doreen (2021)	Civil society and socio-economic development.
21.	Samuel (2015)	NGOs and development.
22.	Williamson and Rodd (2016)	Civil society advocacy and democratic norms.
23.	Federal Inland Revenue Service (2018)	Tax obligations of NGOs
24.	ICNL (2018)	Factsheet on NGOs
25.	Fidelis (2019)	Civil society and democratic process in Nigeria.

Source: *Researcher*

Data Presentation and Analysis

From the review process, the researchers discovered specific code trees for each of the themes. This made it easier for the researchers to present the results using ten code trees for each of the themes. As shown in section 1, there are three objectives of the study, which are; (i) to investigate how civil society promotes gender equality and economic development in Nigeria (ii) to identify the challenges that civil society organizations face in their efforts to promote gender equality and economic development in Nigeria (iii) and to pinpoint the best practices and successful strategies to improve civil societies' roles in promoting gender equality and economic development in Nigeria. Therefore, each research objective has a series of questions that are presented below in code trees. The essence is to numerically present the results of the systemic review.

Research Objective One

Objective 1: To investigate how civil society promotes gender equality and economic development in Nigeria.

In determining the role civil society played in promoting gender equality and economic development in Nigeria, the researchers used

ten code trees found in the selected literature. These results from the systemic review as presented below in the code tree.

Code Tree

Table 2: Popular roles of Civil Society in promoting gender equality and economic development in Nigeria

Codes	Count				
	Pivotal Role	**Significant Involvement**	**Moderate Involvement**	**Minimal Involvement**	**Total**
Advocacy for gender-inclusive policies	3	5	8	9	25
Community mobilization to challenge stereotypes and ensure women's empowerment.	12	6	4	3	25
Capacity building through provision of training and support for women and girls to participate in the economy.	9	7	4	5	25
Research and data collection on gender disparities and economic development	3	4	7	11	25
Provide access to resources	5	6	6	6	25
Gender-sensitive services	1	2	9	13	25
Promotion of women's political participation	11	8	4	2	25
Awareness raising about economic development	10	7	5	3	25
Monitoring and accountability	8	7	6	4	25
Networking and collaboration	7	7	7	4	25

Source: *Researcher*

By looking at the code counts from the review, it can be said that the roles of civil society in promoting gender equality and economic development in Nigeria are multifaceted and vary significantly across different initiatives and contexts. The analysis of code counts from literature reveals diverse levels of involvement in various activities, as documented by various authors. It is revealed that civil society organizations (CSOs) play a minimal role in advocating for gender-inclusive policies. However, several studies indicated that civil society plays a significant and pivotal role in the promotion of gender equality and economic development. For example, Lafenwa (2016) highlights the importance of policy advocacy in

fostering an environment where women can thrive economically. This is echoed by Abdullahi and Gana (2017), who discuss the effectiveness of CSOs in influencing policy changes that support gender equality.

Given the code counts in the second data set, it is safe to say that civil societies in Nigeria are greatly involved in communication mobilization as the results showed significant involvement. For example, Tonye and Oarhe (2015) provide examples of how local organizations have mobilized communities to challenge stereotypes and empower women in their study. Martin and Amos (2021) further elaborate on community-driven initiatives that have led to increased participation of women in local governance and economic activities in Nigeria. In terms of capacity building, civil society's role is indispensable as indicated in the data set. Oke and Atufe (2021) discuss various training programs aimed at enhancing the economic participation of women and girls. Some popular training programs organized by civil society in Nigeria include the Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON), Girls' Power Initiative (GPI), and many more. Also, Bernhard et al. (2015) opined that training programs by civil society organisations in Nigeria have helped to bridge gender gaps in economic participation.

The fourth data set shows a minimal involvement of civil society organisations in research and data collection on gender disparities. Some of the studies that discussed the essential roles of civil society in research and development include Egbosa (2016) and Akinyetun et al. (2021). For example, Egbosa (2016) depicts how civil society utilises data to inform advocacy and policy-making process in Nigeria. Providing access to resources is another area where civil society has made notable contributions. Christopher (2020) discusses the role of CSOs in facilitating women's access to financial resources and business opportunities. Essien (2020) adds that resource provision is critical in enabling women to overcome economic barriers. While the provision of gender-sensitive services has been highlighted by Monica (2019), it is revealed that most of the literature reviewed did not give optimal attention to how gender-sensitive services can help mitigate the effects of gender-based violence and discrimination (Oboh et al. 2019). The rest of the data sets show significant involvement of civil society in political participation promotion, awareness raising, monitoring, accountability, and networking (Oloni, 2015; Ette, 2017; Chukwuemeka, 2016).

Research Objective Two

Objective 2: To identify the challenges that civil society organizations face in their efforts to promote gender equality and economic development in Nigeria

To achieve this objective, the researchers used ten codes trees found in the selected literatures to discuss the challenges faced by civil society organizations in Nigeria.

Code Tree

Table 3: Common challenges that civil society organizations face in their efforts to promote gender equality and economic development in Nigeria

Codes	Count			
	Major challenge	**Moderate challenge**	**Not a challenge**	**Total**
Inadequate funding	21	2	1	25
Cultural norms	6	14	5	25
Government patronage	18	5	2	25

Socioeconomic inequalities	15	6	4	25
Lack of state support	9	11	5	25
Lack of unity	8	10	7	25
Limited capacity	8	13	4	25
Ethnic and religious divisions	14	7	4	25
Environmental challenges	8	15	2	25
Lack of access to information	6	12	7	25

Source: *Researcher*

From the code counts, it can be seen that the major challenges identified in the literature reviewed include inadequate funding, government patronage, socioeconomic inequalities, and ethnic and religious divisions. In his study, Lafenwa (2016) found that many civil society organizations struggle to sustain their activities due to limited financial resources. This sentiment is shared by Abdullahi and Gana (2017) who both noted that insufficient funding hampers the ability to implement large-scale initiatives. Also, the literature indicated that government patronage and political interference are critical issues. Oke and Atufe (2021) explained that reliance on government support undermines the independence and effectiveness of CSOs in Nigeria. This may have explained why Bernhard et al. (2015) pointed out that favoritism and patronage skew the focus of initiatives away from genuine gender equality goals. From the code counts, moderate challenges include cultural norms (Tonye and Oarche, 2015; Martin and Amos, 2021), lack of state support, lack of unity (Egbosa, 2016; Akinyetun et al. 2021; Christopher, 2020), limited capacity and environmental challenges (Coalition Shadow Report, 2017; Emmanuel et al. 2021; Ette, 2017). These challenges illustrate the complex environment in which CSOs operate, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategies to overcome these obstacles and promote gender equality and economic development in Nigeria.

Research Objective Three

Objective 3: To pinpoint the best practices and successful strategies to improve civil societies' roles in promoting gender equality and economic development in Nigeria.

To achieve this objective, the researchers used ten codes trees found in the selected literatures to pinpoint the recommendations made in the literature reviewed.

Code tree

Table 4: Recommendations to improve civil societies' roles in promoting gender equality and economic development in Nigeria

Codes	Count		
	Highly Recommended	Not Recommended	Total
CSOs funding	21	4	25
Effective public policy	14	11	25
Creation of enabling environment for CSOs	16	9	25
CSOs national trust fund	8	17	25
Behavioural modification	19	6	25
CSOs collaboration with NGOs	22	3	25
Improve sustainability	17	8	25
CSOs collaboration with donor organizations	21	4	25
Social change initiatives	18	7	25
Capacity building and technical assistance	14	11	25

Source: *Researcher*

The code counts in Table 3 above showed the recommendations in the literature reviewed. Most of the literature stressed the importance of diversified funding sources for CSOs to ensure sustainability (Lafenwa, 2016). This implies that establishing stable funding mechanisms to reduce dependence on sporadic donations can help to improve the role of civil society organizations in the promotion of gender equality and economic development in Nigeria (Abdullahi and Gana, 2017). Most of the literature indicated that social change initiatives, CSOs collaboration with donor organizations, improving sustainability and behavioural modification is essential (Oboh et al. 2019; Monica, 2019; Akinyetun et al. 2019). However, capacity building and technical assistance, CSO national trust fund, and effective public policy are not highly recommended (Martin and Amos, 2021; Oke and Atufe, 2021). From the above results, it can be concluded that by addressing funding, collaboration, sustainability, and capacity-building issues, CSOs can significantly improve their impact and be able to promote gender equality and economic development in Nigeria.

Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis highlights several persistent challenges faced by civil society organizations (CSOs) in Nigeria, including inadequate funding, government patronage, and socioeconomic inequalities. Despite the diverse roles CSOs play in promoting gender equality and economic development, these challenges undermine their effectiveness. The findings also reveal that civil societies face moderate challenges related to cultural norms, limited capacity, and environmental factors. Furthermore, while there

are numerous recommendations to enhance the impact of CSOs, the effectiveness of these strategies often depends on the broader socio-political environment. It is in this light that this study recommends that the Nigerian government create a more supportive environment for CSOs by engaging in open dialogues and actively incorporating their perspectives into policy-making. This can be achieved through regular consultative forums and collaborative platforms where CSOs can voice their concerns and contribute to national policies on gender equality and economic development. The government can establish a national trust fund dedicated to supporting CSOs working on gender equality and economic development. This fund can provide grants and subsidies to CSOs, ensuring a steady flow of financial resources necessary for their operations. Studies have shown that stable funding mechanisms enhance the sustainability and impact of CSOs (Lafenwa, 2016). Implementing legal protections for CSOs is essential to safeguard their independence and effectiveness. The government should enforce laws that prevent political interference and ensure a transparent regulatory framework for CSOs. Effective legal frameworks can protect CSOs from undue political pressure and enable them to operate freely and advocate effectively for gender equality and economic development. While capacity building was not highly recommended in some studies, it remains critical for the long-term sustainability of CSOs. The government can partner with international organizations to provide technical assistance and training programs that enhance the operational capabilities of CSOs. Such programs can focus on strategic planning, financial management, advocacy skills, and monitoring and evaluation techniques, ensuring that CSOs are better equipped to achieve their objectives.

Given to the limitations embedded in this study, it is recommended that future research should focus on the longitudinal impact of CSO interventions on gender equality and economic development. Research should also examine the intersectionality of gender with other social factors, such as ethnicity and class, to better understand the diverse experiences of Nigerian women. Finally, investigating the partnerships between CSOs, government, and private sectors could highlight best practices for collaborative efforts in promoting gender equality and economic development.

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