



POLICY BRIEF

THE ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

Summary

Gender equality and the empowerment of women are central to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Agenda, not only as goals in and of themselves, but also as a means to achieve sustainable societies for all. The private sector is increasingly being recognized not only as a driver of economic growth, but also as a promoter of sustainable social development, with companies being held to account for their impact on societies. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are critical to accelerating progress if we are to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment under the 2030 agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. Empowering women to participate fully in economic life is essential to building strong economies; establishing more stable and just societies; achieving internationally agreed goals for development, sustainability, and human rights; improving quality of life for women, men, families, and communities; and propelling business operations and goals forward.¹

This brief presents emerging evidence on the role the private sector can play in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in Nigeria by highlighting the key measures companies can take to move beyond traditional corporate social responsibility to combine profits with gender progress. Realizing the growing need for gender equality is also germane to the survival and development of girls and the building of healthy communities, a healthy society, and a healthy nation. The economic empowerment of women simply cannot be achieved without the engagement of the private sector. If the expected growth benefits are to occur and if the programmes that support women's successful engagement are to be sustained, then it is necessary to integrate female inclusion into the actual systems of businesses.

The Status of Women and Girls in Nigeria

Despite women accounting for almost half of the total population of Nigeria (49.3 per cent),² the developmental problem of gender disparity plagues the nation. Discrimination against women remains a common occurrence today and is a key hinderance to economic prosperity.

¹ UN Women (2010), *Women's Empowerment Principles: Equality Means Business*.

² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=NG>.

According to the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, Nigeria has so far closed 63.5 per cent of its gender gap, which gives it a global ranking of 128 out of 153. Annual incomes are estimated to be 40 per cent less for women when compared to men. Additionally, women represent a higher share of skilled professionals than men (64.6 per cent), but still have a significantly lower share of senior positions (30.3 per cent).³ Literacy rates are also insufficient and skewed in favour of men (52.6 per cent for women and 71.3 per cent for men). Similarly, the participation of women in formal education is relatively low compared to other countries. Only 58 per cent of girls go to primary school, 47 per cent attend secondary school, and 8.3 per cent go to university.

Among politicians, only 3.4 per cent of parliamentarians are women (ranking Nigeria 149th) while 8 per cent of ministers are women (ranking it 124th).⁴ The entrepreneurial spirit is strong, and Nigerian women account for 41 per cent of ownership of microbusinesses in Nigeria – 23 million female entrepreneurs operate within this segment.⁵ In the formal sector, at the lower levels there is almost an even fifty-fifty split in the workplace between men and women. However, as both sexes climb up the corporate ladder, women begin to decline in representation on the senior leadership teams and at the board level. As a result, women own only 20 per cent of enterprises in the formal sector in Nigeria. Furthermore, only about 19 per cent of directors on corporate boards of directors are women. And taken all together, at the rate Nigeria is changing on these critical dimensions, the Nigerian gender gap in the economy will only close in about 100 years.⁶

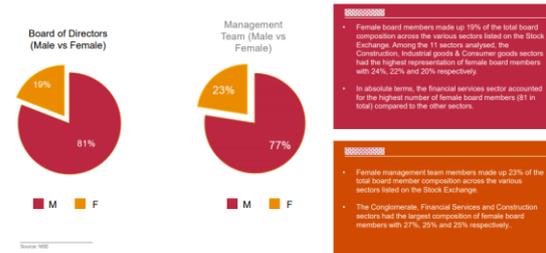


Figure 1: Assessment of women's participation and representation in the private sector (source: PricewaterhouseCoopers, March 2020, *Impact of Women on Nigeria's Economy*)

The COVID-19 pandemic is also likely to exacerbate gender gaps in labour force participation. Women in Nigeria are likely to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by reducing their labour supply for several reasons, including their high concentration in self-employment activities and their disproportionately high caregiving responsibilities.⁷ The shadow pandemic of gender-based violence has emerged as a crisis of its own, with reports from 24 states across Nigeria showing that the number of reported incidents of domestic violence spiked by 56 per cent during the first two weeks of April 2020 compared with the same period in March, after the government enacted lockdown measures on 31 March.⁸ Women also faced increased expectations and demands, particularly as caregivers, with the closure of schools during the lockdown. Overall, it has become imperative to focus on an approach that highlights opportunities for private and public sector collaboration and for the private firms that are leading the way in empowering women economically and supporting gender equality.

UN Women's Interventions with the Private Sector in Nigeria

Drawing on our convening capacity, which is an area of comparative advantage, UN Women has in recent years supported a series of convenings with private sector actors. At the policy and advocacy level, UN Women has convened a series of policy dialogues and consultations, including a consultative dialogue in January 2018 on private sector companies' contribution to the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality. A consultative dialogue was also held in

³ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.pwc.com/ng/en/assets/pdf/impact-of-women-nigeria-economy.pdf>, 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ World Bank, 2020.

⁸ Women at Risk International Foundation.

2018 between women in the private sector and women in politics. This was done in advance of the 2019 elections to facilitate strategic partnership-building between these two sectors. At the programmatic level, UN Women collaborated with Procter and Gamble and Mastercard to support women's financial inclusion in Kaduna State, and is currently implementing a project with Stanbic IBTC Bank on climate-resilient agriculture in Ebonyi and Niger States.

Private sector institutions and organizations were also convened in September 2019 for consultative dialogues on promoting and implementing gender-responsive procurement policies. The main objective of the meeting was to conduct a preliminary scoping of gender-responsive procurement practices in the private sector and to agree on a specific strategy for popularizing gender-responsive procurement. A key meeting outcome was the formation of a private sector working group on gender-responsive procurement, which was to partner with UN Women to successfully implement the strategies in Nigeria's private sector. In March 2020, UN Women Nigeria convened Women's Empowerment Principle signatories and non-signatories in a training workshop to explore the intersection between aspects of the principles – in particular Principle 3 on health, safety, and freedom from violence – and the Spotlight Initiative's focal areas of eliminating violence against women, sexual and gender-based violence, and harmful traditional practices.

In commemoration of the 2021 International Women's Day/Month and in line with the Generation Equality campaign, UN Women Nigeria convened an inter-generational webinar during which a dialogue was held between private sector women leaders and young female professionals as part of the private sectors' contribution to fostering the gender equality outcomes from the Beijing Agenda. The webinar had 500 participants in attendance and discussed themes around the

biases and stereotypes women face in accessing leadership roles. It discussed strategies to overcome these barriers, with a key call to action for companies to sign on to the Women's Empowerment Principles.

Emerging Trends in Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

Nigeria's gross domestic product (GDP) could grow by 23 per cent – or US\$229 billion – by 2025 if women participated in the economy to the same extent as men, according to a McKinsey report.⁹ Forty per cent of girls are out of school in Nigeria, according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics; those who make it into school have an average school life expectancy of only 9 years, compared to 17 years in the developed world.¹⁰

In health care, Nigerian women are heavily short-changed when it comes to their reproductive rights, and they suffer one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. Regarding financial literacy, not surprisingly, financial exclusion stands at 36 per cent for women and 24 per cent for men, placing Nigeria below its peers.¹¹ Across legal institutions and family structures, sociocultural determinants continue to lead to a situation in which women are treated as inferior to their male counterparts. Results from the 2019 West African Senior School Certificate Examination in Nigeria show that 50.23 per cent of the candidates who got five credits, inclusive of English and Mathematics, were female, even though girls made up just 48.30 per cent of the total number of candidates.¹²

The rate at which positive changes in attitudes will translate into concrete results towards narrowing the gender gap will vary across different sectors depending on their starting points and, in some cases, the broader regulatory environment, which may present additional hinderances to progress.

For instance, the Central Bank of Nigeria's mandate that all banks in the country should have

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<https://www.pressreader.com/nigeria/thisday/20190612/281814285372590>.

¹⁰ 'Gender Equality: Nigeria Must Mind the Wide Gap', <https://newafricanmagazine.com/19891/>.

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<https://www.cbn.gov.ng/out/2020/dfd/assessment%20of%20womens%20financial%20inclusion%20-%20exec%20summary.pdf>.

¹² <https://newafricanmagazine.com/19891/>.

a minimum of 30 per cent female representation on their boards – part of its Sustainable Banking Principles¹³ – appears to be behind the above-average performance of the sector, with women making up 25 per cent of directors as of 2015. Although this level still falls short of the Central Bank of Nigeria’s target, it is the highest of any single industry in the private sector.¹⁴

At the other end of the spectrum, the information and telecommunications sector had the lowest proportion of female board members, at just 10 per cent,¹⁵ reflecting global patterns of male dominance in industries related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

However, the story is not all doom and gloom, as some industry bodies have taken measures to address gender disparities in their sectors. The Nigerian Content Development and Monitoring Board,¹⁶ which is responsible for developing the local supply chain in the oil and gas sector, has recently started rolling out special initiatives to improve female participation in the traditionally male-dominated sector. Although no specific targets have been set, these initiatives will include increasing the award of contracts to women-owned businesses in the sector; improving access to finance; and increasing the number of women trained in STEM subjects to boost the number of women in highly skilled technical roles.¹⁷

Women are also at the forefront of health and social care initiatives in the country, starting and running more care-focused NGOs than men. They also dominate the entrepreneurial space. A BBC report states that 40 per cent of Nigerian women are entrepreneurs,¹⁸ which is the highest ratio of female business owners in the world. Driven, innovative, and passionate about uplifting themselves and others around them, Nigerian

women are also running more formal businesses, leveraging technological advancements to build innovative companies, and they are increasingly becoming more supportive of each other.

Levers for Private Sector Impact on Inclusive Economic Growth

To live up to its economic potential, Nigeria needs to invest more in educating girls and should do more to economically empower women. The evidence is clear: countries that reduce the gender gap are more prosperous than those that fail to do so. Educated women act as a ‘magic multiplier’, as one *Guardian* newspaper report¹⁹ aptly described it. They are in a better position to have healthy children, educate them, and provide a better lifestyle for the entire family. Better education also drives higher incomes, which benefit the household as well as the overall economy.

Leveraging the UN’s Women’s Empowerment Principles, the pillars for the private sector’s impact on inclusive economic growth can be placed in four broad categories: workplace practices, procurement practices, investment and financing practices, and advocacy and community practices. In the workplace, companies should look to institute human resource and operational policies and procedures that attract, retain, and nurture female talent. This should include robust health and childcare offerings, mentorship and leadership opportunities, flexible schedules, and zero tolerance towards harassment.²⁰

Companies should consider adopting gender-responsive procurement practices across their value chains by increasing access for women-owned microenterprises, as well as small and medium-sized enterprises. This includes financing and investment practices that improve access to

¹³ Principle 4 of the Sustainable Banking Principles is on women’s economic empowerment: ‘We will promote women’s economic empowerment through a gender-inclusive workplace culture in our Business Operations and seek to provide products and services designed specifically for women in our Business Activities.’ Central Bank of Nigeria (24 September 2012), ‘[Nigerian Sustainable Banking Principles](http://www.cbn.gov.ng)’, www.cbn.gov.ng, p. 4.

¹⁴ DCSL Corporate Service Limited (2017), ‘[Summary of Survey on Gender Diversity on Corporate Boards in Nigeria](http://www.dcsl.com.ng)’, www.dcsl.com.ng.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See: <https://ncdmb.gov.ng/>.

¹⁷ O. Ajayi (19 October 2019), ‘[NCDMB to Roll Out Gender Friendly Policies for Oil Industry](http://www.ncdmb.gov.ng)’, www.ncdmb.gov.ng.

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-38918048>.

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/01/educate-women-and-their-community-will-prosper-deny-them-education-and-the-world-will-suffer>.

²⁰ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/a-dispatch-from-women-deliver-how-the-private-sector-is-ensuring-women-are-included-in-more-inclusive-growth/>.

credit for women-owned businesses. Finally, the private sector can contribute to women's economic empowerment by leveraging its branding, communications, advocacy, and social community practices to shift social norms and consumer awareness and attitudes towards women's economic participation.²¹

Recommendations to Improve the Private Sector's Role in Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Nigeria

Specific measures private sector companies can adopt include the following:

- Accelerating the adoption and implementation of the UN's Women's Empowerment Principles to demonstrate their commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace, marketplace, and community.
- Supporting women-owned businesses through engendering gender-responsive procurement practices across value chains. Companies with notable representation of women at the executive and board level can serve as advocates for amplifying the importance of gender-responsive procurement and can initiate changes to corporate policy.
- Providing single-digit interest rates on loans to women-owned businesses, with eased criteria such as offering flexible loan collateral, and providing capacity-building training to teach women how to structure their businesses and become credit ready.
- Addressing gender-based violence in COVID-19 recovery efforts – Private sector companies must invest in company policies that aim to prevent all forms of gender-based harassment and violence, and should collaborate with the government and civil society in increasing investment in services such as a COVID-19 response packages to support shelters for women facing sexual and other forms of gender-based violence. In addition, they

can partner with UN Women to provide multisectoral essential services for the two one-stop centres for women (Nana Khadija and Mirabel) under the Spotlight Initiative.

- Interventions such as providing childcare services and introducing training for couples that promote men's involvement in household work can ease women's time constraints and address unpaid care work. In addition, rethinking performance reviews and promotions, as well as ensuring senior- and middle-management buy-in to guarantee the widescale adoption of such changes.
- Addressing gender stereotypes that inhibit women's access to mobile phones, improving women's digital literacy, and decreasing occupational segregation by providing training on sector-specific skills or information on sector-specific earnings to help women enter male-dominated occupations and secure higher-paying jobs will positively improve women's economic participation.

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UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five

²¹ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/a-dispatch-from-women-deliver-how-the-private-sector-is-ensuring-women-are-included-in-more-inclusive-growth/>.

priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. The main roles of UN Women are:

- To support inter-governmental bodies, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, in their formulation of policies, global standards, and norms
- To help Member States to implement these standards
- To lead and coordinate the UN system's work on gender equality as well as promote accountability