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## Women and Urbanisation in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria

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### Abstract

This study examines women's role in the urbanisation of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. From the standpoint of feminist theory, urbanisation is believed to create expanded opportunities for the general populace as well as for women, who typically face discrimination in rural economies. However, the initial FCT master plan ended up being distorted by the dynamics and complexities of Abuja's urbanisation and growth process over time, which is driven by political and economic realities. There are drawbacks to urbanisation in civilisations with strong sociocultural norms and values, such as the fact that women must endure various forms of gender inequality, discrimination, and exclusion, particularly in the political sphere, which present significant difficulties. This study makes use of secondary data to demonstrate how the FCT's 2003 reconstruction to its original Master Plan provided chances for active participation in which women were included for both native people and newcomers. In a similar vein, the Federal Capital Development Authority's (FCDA) and other local council offices, which hired indigenous people for their departments and agencies, significantly altered the way of life for women from being rural farmers to empowered workers. In order to address the issues facing women in the FCT, empowerment must be a multifaceted process that transforms the economic, political, social, psychological, and legal conditions of the weak (women). It must also aim to demolish cultural, traditional, and social norms that devalue, disempower, and dispossess women, with a primary goal of meeting their needs.

**Keywords:** Women, Urbanisation, Gender, Inclusiveness, Abuja, Nigeria.

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## Introduction

More opportunities for the general public especially women, who face discrimination in rural economies, have frequently been linked to urbanisation. This is as a result of improved opportunities in metropolitan settings, which are present in both developed and developing nations, for people to work for pay outside of the conventional misogynistic family structure. Better access to services and infrastructure, decreased death rates, business opportunities, and spaces for leisure and relaxation are additional contributing factors. Rigid societal norms and attitudes that characterize women as inferior to men in general and to their husbands and dads in particular also play a role (Tacoli, 2013). Yet, studies have found that most urban women also experience profound disadvantages in their daily lives compared to men (Tacoli, 2013) mainly because of cultural, religious and social norms as seen in African societies and Nigeria is not an exception (Denen, Asaju & Bott 2014). Denen, Asaju and Bott (2014) affirmed that cities in different parts of the world have prevailing ideologies of how women and men should think, feel and act; how access to social, economic and political positions and control of resources should be managed and how relationships between men and women should be conducted which end up institutionalizing private and public patriarchal system.

The relocation of the Nigeria's FCT in 1976 from Lagos to Abuja set the foundation for urbanisation of this geographical location with able men and women at the drive of this developmental activities. It did not only crystalize the urbanisation of Abuja, it gave it a metropolitan nature which is among the features of urbanized cities of the world like Cairo, Johannesburg, London, Accra, Washington DC, Bueno Aires, and Paris, among others. In 1976, when the then head of state, General Murtala Mohammed made it known as one of his five points agenda that the capital of Nigeria will be moved from Lagos to Abuja, soon in 1991, government ministries and agencies began moving their headquarters to Abuja. So many private companies with their headquarters at Lagos began to seek for parcels of land at the new capital in order to transfer their headquarters to Abuja. It was a move that was strategic and significant to the urbanisation of the FCT because large number of people migrated from Lagos and other parts of the country to Abuja since 1991 (Filaba, 2007; Shokwonya, 2023). Land grabbing became one of the ways in which private and government bodies struggled to gain land. This move was important to the dynamics and complexity of urbanisation and development process of Abuja over time which was determined and is still been driven by the political and economic realities that ended up distorting the original master plan of the FCT. Though, there are negative implications of urbanisation within societies with strong socio-cultural norms and values such as women having suffered various forms of gender discrimination inequality and exclusion, especially in the area of politics (Agbalajobi, 2010).

The FCT in 2003 returned to its original Master Plan, this created new prospects for active participation for the region's expanding indigenous and settler populations. Similar to this, the Federal Capital Development Authority's (FCDA) and other local council offices that hired indigenous people for their departments significantly altered the way of life for these groups of people from being rural farmers to empowered workers in these departments (Filaba, 2007). The new companies that engaged in the building of the FCT also employed indigenous women.

But after Nigeria returned to constitutional democracy in 1999, President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration named surveyor and public servant Nasir El-Rufai as the Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in 2003, marking the beginning of the FCT's restoration to its original master plan. The goal of this project was to ensure that the indigenous people was suitably resettled and that the FCT was urbanized in a planned and appropriate manner (Jibril, 2009). Studies have shown that as the pace of urbanisation and urban growth proceeded almost unabated in Abuja from that 1991 and with the return to democracy in 1999, the government's capacity to manage the consequences of undesirable urban trends decreased due to inadequate funding and institutional incapacities (Agbalajobi, 2010; Filaba, 2007). To this end, the FCT authority in 2003 were so concerned with evident poor services delivery, lack of adequate and affordable housing, proliferation of slums, chaotic traffic conditions, poverty, social polarization, crime, violence, discrimination of the female gender, unemployment and dwindling job opportunities (Filaba, 2007).

Though the rapid urbanisation of the FCT was characterized by massive migration of job seekers, professionals, apprentices, streets hawkers which made the city highly congested and then had direct implications on the empowerment as the indigenes were forced to seize opportunities and earn better life. It is in order to say the urbanisation have created empowerment opportunities, it also increased women's roles and posed new challenges for women (Filaba, 2007).

This study, which is relies on the feminist theory, used historical methodology as a research approach to investigate the roles that women have played in promoting urbanisation in Abuja and to look at the issues and challenges that women have encountered. From a historical perspective, women have always participated in the urbanisation process. However, their roles have not received enough attention or scrutiny. Women have been crucial to Abuja's development and urbanisation. Their participation in paid jobs, urban social networks, social and political movements (including feminist movements), and entrepreneurial endeavours are a few examples of these positions. The particular difficulties and obstacles that women encounter include, among other things, limited access to economic opportunities, violence against women, and underrepresentation in urban politics and decision-making.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Liberal Feminist theory which primarily focuses on women's ability to show and maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. It is a form of feminism that argues that equality for women can be achieved through legal means and social reform.

Liberal feminism which believes that women may claim equality with men on the basis of an essential human capacity for reasoned moral judgement (Ajilore & Oyelade, 2009) is itself anchored on four cardinal propositions:

1. That men and women are differently and unequally situated in society and that women have less access to material resources, social status, power and opportunity for self-actualisation;
2. That this inequality is traceable to the organisation of society, not from any significant biological or personality differences between women and men;
3. That despite individual differences, all human beings are characterised by a fundamental malleability that conditions them to adjust, to the constraints and opportunities of their immediate environment; and
4. That both sexes will respond fairly easily and naturally to more egalitarian social structures and situations (Rhodes, 1995; Ajilore & Oyelade, 2009).

For the purpose of this study, the liberal feminist theory will help to explain how advertising has helped in creating inequality between men and women in the society.

The critics of the liberal feminist theory have argued that its individualistic assumptions make it difficult to see the ways in which they argue that underlying social structures and values disadvantage women (Rhodes, 1995). They contend that even if women are no longer dependent upon men, they are still dependent upon a patriarchal state. They believe that institutional changes like the introduction of women's suffrage are insufficient to emancipate women. Additionally, this theory has also been faulted on the basis of an over emphasis of the rational above the emotional, while arguably, a human is intrinsically both.

Feminist theory can be used to analyse how gender roles, norms, and inequities appear in urban settings in the context of urbanisation. It investigates the ways in which gender gaps are exacerbated and men and women are affected differently by urban development processes, including migration, employment opportunities, housing

policies, and service accessibility. Through the application of a feminist lens, scholars can examine how urbanisation and gender disparity are influenced by established gender norms and how policy interventions can support gender equality in urban environments.

Women are actively involved in various sectors of the FCT Abuja as a result of the urbanisation trend. Their participation in paid jobs, urban social networks, social and political movements (including feminist movements), and entrepreneurial endeavors are a few examples of these positions. The indigenous communities of Abuja should have received compensation under the FCT Act of 1976 for the acquisition of their land, which is detrimental to the development of women. However, the relocation policy gave way to integration throughout time, which entailed preserving their customs and ways of life. Since they are also citizens and have the freedom to reside anywhere in Nigeria, this is not improbable. However, none of these policies were put into practice to the fullest extent possible, which has left the indigenous population of the FCT severely marginalised in national governing structures designed to support the less fortunate, such as women.

### **Urbanisation and Women**

Urbanisation process has been seen as global phenomenon that has transformed and continues to alter environment, landscapes, societies and the ways in which these societies function and develop (Akunnaya & Adedapo, 2014). The cities socio-economic and political activities attract better employment, services such as education, health care, and sociocultural entertainment and they contribute immensely to subnational economies. Urbanisation is one of the major sociocultural and economic phenomena in both developed and developing countries, with important consequences for economic development, energy use, and well-being of citizenries.

Basically, urbanisation is understood as the shift from a rural environment to an urban society, and involves an increase in the number of people being attracted by the opportunities in urban areas during a particular period (Dixon & McMichael, 2016). The United Nations Habitat in 2006 described it as the increased concentration of people in cities rather than in rural areas (UN-Habitat, 2012). Urbanisation is the outcome of social, economic and political developments that lead to urban concentration and growth of large cities, changes in land use and transformation from rural to metropolitan pattern of organization and governance (Bodo, 2020).

Despite the frequent treatment of the theme of urbanisation in studies, there have been little systematic research of the differential effects of urbanisation on men and women in developing countries like Nigeria (Denich, 1976; Lipton, 2005).

Massive rural-urban migration under the jurisdiction of FCT government officially stresses the equality for women and men in the different sphere of the territory. These official values are in opposition to the traditions of gender hierarchy whereby, in the rural communities, women are excluded from political roles in the public sphere and, within the household, are subordinated to its male core.

During the early 2000s, the city's population grew by almost 140%. Today, most areas of the city still see annual growth of 35%, making it one of the fastest-growing cities in the world (Klugman et. al., 2014). Because of the city's reputation for being welcoming to all groups, no matter their ethnicity or religion, the population is only expected to continue to grow for Nigeria's capital city. Abuja is one of the wealthiest cities in Africa. The city was planned in order to bring together all of the various tribes, religions and ethnic groups found throughout Nigeria. The city was planned to be a safe city, unlike many other Nigerian cities that experience high rates of violence.

Increasingly, the urban world simultaneously brings great benefits and daunting challenges to the world's growing cities as seen in the FCT. For the women in FCT, urbanisation is linked to progress in a number of areas, including increased legal protections, political inclusiveness, a narrowing gender gap in education and ICT knowledge, and greater numbers of women attending Universities (Klugman et. al., 2014) so as to be active in the social, economy and partake in political activities. Urban women of FCT, on the whole, are expected to have greater access to services and infrastructure, more opportunities to engage in paid employment, and a relaxation of gendered sociocultural restrictions when compared with their rural counterparts (Chen & Skinner, 2014).

### **Experience of Women in Abuja**

The general notion on the urbanisation and development of Abuja after its choice as the FCT is that there will be automatic opportunities to the indigenes and the settlers. The construction of infrastructures in the City and the government and private entities' activities were expected to open up employment opportunities. Though studies have acknowledged that the building of the infrastructure of the FCT and by extension the urbanisation of the City have brought ample opportunities to the women who before were majorly known to be farmers and potters to be seen actively engaged in the economic activities of the city and also taking jobs in the FCT departments (Filaba, 2007; Jibril, 2009; Akunnaya & Adedapo, 2014). However, the struggles of women in FCT have shadowed the gains of the achievements as a result of the FCT policies during our period of study.

The economic, social, and political consequences of growing inequality, discrimination and exclusion in the politics can be seen in the lives of FCT women, particularly poor women, who experience profound additional disadvantages when compared with their male counterparts (Denen, 2014). The FCT women and girls are more likely to live in poverty, to experience discrimination, and to be marginalised in urban power structures. Poor women and girls, older women, disabled women, and women who defy traditional social norms, such as women who identify as feminists and women who live independently, are seen to face the most significant barriers to capitalizing on the benefits of urban living and experience the greatest risks to their health and well-being (Chant, 2014).

As the pace of urbanisation and urban growth proceeds almost unabated in Abuja, even though the government's capacity to manage the consequences of undesirable urban trends decreased due to inadequate funding and institutional incapacities continue to increase the woes of the FCT women and continue to deter their contribution for the urbanisation of the city (Akunnaya & Adedapo, 2014). This is evident in poor services delivery, lack of adequate and affordable housing, proliferation of slums, chaotic traffic conditions, poverty, political exclusion, social polarisation, discrimination, crime, violence, unemployment and dwindling job opportunities (Jibril, 2009).

Recently, a leader of women wings of the Rotary Club in Jabi Abuja, Sa'adatu Abubakar Gamji, noted that the challenges women face in accessing political and leadership positions, despite their qualification, experience, zeal and commitment to the cause. She said, "we have women that are qualified and have the experience and passion to lead in any political position. We are often neglected and not given a level-playing ground for our potentials to be harnessed". She attributed the barrier to cultural and religious stereotypes, lack of financial resources, poor leadership initiative, crime, gender-based violence and lack of media exposure as hindrances affecting their participation in the city politics (The Peoples, Gazette, April, 2024).

### **Roles of Prominent Women in the Urbanisation of the FCT**

The conscious attempt to empower women started during the Babangida regime when his wife established Better Life for Rural Women programmes which ended up empowering the urban women in the FCT (Filaba, 2007). This meant that a lot needed to be done by women in FCT as their presence was not been felt much in the socio-cultural, economic and political activities in the city.

FCT Abuja has not been lucky to have a high number of prominent women that have contributed to the development of the FCT or the country at large. For instance, there are prominent women that contributed in the country's socio-cultural political and economic development such as Hajiya Gambo Sawaba from Kano, Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Mrs. Margret Ekpo, Prof. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Prof. Dora Akunyili and Ladi Dosai Kwali, the eponymous woman from FCT to mention but few. However, there are thousands of women in the FCT that are active in the civil service, markets, companies, streets, contributing in the socio-economic and political activities of the city.

Nevertheless, prominent women in the politics and socio-cultural sphere of FCT, Abuja are contributing and have contributed in the urbanisation of the FCT. For instance, the current Senator representing FCT in the National Assembly, Mrs. Ireti Heebah Kingibe, is an active political leader in the FCT. Similarly, Mrs. Ramatu Tijani was a junior Minister for the FCT between 2015-2023 and contributed in the urbanisation of the FCT.

Another woman contributing to the advancement of women in the FCT is Mrs. Adebayo Benjamin-Laniyi, the Mandate Secretary for the newly created Women Affairs Secretariat of the Federal Capital Territory Administration. She has also showcased her commitment to women's political participation by aspiring for a senatorial position in the All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2022. As the Grand Matron of "Hope Again for FCT Women in Politics," she has played a vital role in encouraging and mentoring women in the political arena. She has deep understanding of the political landscape and her ability to navigate complex policy challenges will undoubtedly contribute to the advancement of women's rights and well-being in the FCT.

### **Response to the Challenges Faced by Women in the FCT**

The world has shifted its focus to a new post-2015 sustainable development agenda, women's empowerment and gender equality have become priorities for sustainable development that lifts up the well-being of all global inhabitants. Nigeria's Capital is not expected to be seen operating a system that sees women as being discriminated against and disadvantaged in the development and urbanisation of the FCT. Change is contingent upon the establishment of good governance so also inclusiveness. Inclusive governance that is accountable, equitable, transparent, and which necessarily includes women as stakeholders in policy and decision-making processes (Bodo, 2020; Dixon & McMichael, 2016). The incorporation of women's voice in policy and planning would contribute to the building of cities that allow all urban inhabitants to thrive equally.



The empowerment of the indigenous population in the FCT started with employment opportunities in the FCDA which recruited the indigenes into its various departments. Now, the indigenes have been seen to dominated the FCDA and AMAC. Also, private organisations are encouraged to employ indigenous women and as such, many women are seizing the opportunities and learning new ways of earning a living (Filaba, 2007).

Also, better resourced local governments that are inclusive of women can help ensure FCT policies recognise the needs of women and girls as distinct from those of men and boys. Gender-aware urban planning and design can more effectively accommodate women's significant care and domestic responsibilities, facilitating their ability to support their families through paid employment and relieving substantial demands on their time and wellbeing and applying a gender lens to the development of a sustainable urban environment can help mitigate urban vulnerability to climate change which has become a source of worry for many environmentalists.

As women in FCT are increasingly participating in paid jobs, but without a significant change in their responsibilities for domestic and family work or significant public supports such as child care and elderly care, they are experiencing a "diversification and intensification" of responsibilities and obligations (Chant, 2014). The type of poverty that women face as a result of such dual responsibilities leave women with restricted ability to pursue the range of opportunities, economic or otherwise, offered by urban areas. Improving access to basic services, infrastructure, and public transportation, as well as affordable, accessible child care, would drastically reduce demands on women's time and energy and facilitate their ability to participate fully as urban citizens. Enhancing women's empowerment, therefore, must be accompanied by simultaneous changes in law, in policy, and in sociocultural norms to effectively address the gender disparities that obstruct their full economic, social, and political participation in urban life.

The Babangida Regime as stated above was among the first to respond to the challenges of the women in the FCT. The regime introduced the Better Life for Rural Women programmes which was targeted at empowering women in the FCT and across the country.

Forum of Nigerian Women in Politics (FONWIP) is another example of an organisation whose central objective is to promote women empowerment and eradication of all forms of violence and discrimination against women. It supports women in decision making in both public and private sector. The group organises seminars on empowerment and inequality among other things (Tacoli, 2013).

Initiative for Education and Development initiated the idea of Financial Inclusion and Empowerment (FINER) for women groups. Most of the women have businesses in the communities and cater to the needs of the members such as providing meals in Bukkas (local eating place), restaurants as well as street side vendors that provide bean cakes (akara), fried yam and sell food items on a small scale. These services are necessary in the community and therefore a convenient channel to reach the community. The project was implemented in the FCT. It covered slum communities namely Karu, Tudun-Wada, Sauka, Wumba, Durumi, Apo, Kabusa, Apo-Dutse, Kapwa, and Garki areas. The organisation is a non-profit one and it focuses on poverty alleviation, equitable distribution of resources and qualitative education for all (Abass & Achegbulu, 2018).

### **Approaches to an All-Inclusive Urban Development**

The empowerment of FCT women has to be a multi-dimensional process involving the transformation of the economic, political, social, psychological and legal circumstances of the powerless (women) with the aim of dismantling the cultural, traditional and social norms, which disvalue, disempower and dispossess women. This approach should have its central objectives tied to the needs of women, more opportunities, facilities, skill acquisition and positions of authority, especially within the political sphere for holistic and an all-inclusive urbanisation. The recent development around the world affords women the opportunity to develop their individual talent and contribute more meaningfully to societal development, helping subvert cultural as well as the societal norms which have been of disadvantage to the women folk. This has been seen as a good headway for inclusiveness in urbanisation (Agbalajobi, 2010).

Generally, when women live home to urban centers, the immediate thought of all and sundry is “automatic good life” through good employment opportunities. Urbanisation affords women the opportunity to obtain paid employment that gives them both socio-economic emancipation and a voice into some neighborhoods’ discussion and decision making (Agbalajobi, 2010). Women that have access and often participate in operating community saving schemes have many a times built women’s leadership organisations and upgraded the social and even physical infrastructural development of such urban communities. Ensuring to also understand that income, education and ideology influence women’s decision making in urban centers and as such, creating equality in these areas will go a long way in creating inclusive system. It is important to note that the opportunities that exist in cities for women to engage in formal and non-formal paid employments often without the occupational glass ceiling will see how women can be encouraged to do more in any endeavours of urbanisation process. When there is a relaxation of rigid sociocultural

values and norms that define women as subordinates to fathers, husbands, brothers; then women can contribute hugely to the urbanisation process and be more independent when taking important decisions (Denen, 2014).

Also, a collective action, in the form of unions, grassroots organising, social justice movements, and the use of technology and social media, to help women access existing social, economic, and political resources will see women being empowered to contribute to urban development. This can come in form of gender quotas at the local, regional, and/or national levels. This will ensure that inclusiveness is achieved in the urbanisation process (Denen, 2014).

Well-resourced and strategically-located governmental bodies such as parliamentary caucuses or bureaucratic offices, dedicated to the advancement of women's interests in policy is a good legal and constitutional basis for inclusive urbanisation. The equal provision of funds and increased financial resources for women running for office will encourage political participation and then inclusive governance (Agbalajobi, 2010). Workshops and trainings in political literacy in schools, markets and at different community levels will raise the consciousness of the women to participate in policy and decision-making process. Thus, a strong system for improved social supports, like child care for women elected officials and bureaucrats and in the corporate world should be advocated for and put in place. Equally, there is the need to create incentives for all girls to complete primary and secondary school education and prioritise innovation and technical skills and those that desire university degrees should be encouraged (Agbalajobi, 2010). It is important that a review of all discriminatory laws and policies in the country should be done to ensure inclusive system. Also, the provision of incentives to banks in geopolitical zones to locate branches closer to rural and semi-rural populations as well as the urban small businesses is a great means for women empowerment.

Promoting financial literacy through collaborations with Federal Ministry of Education, Federal Ministry of Information, Women Affairs Ministry, State and Local Governments and religious institutions will help in building the capacity of women. Literacy programmes on economics, politics, health, social and legal issues should be taken to where women are for them to benefit (Denen, 2014). More so, there is the need to consult and involve organisations such as the Nigerian Women Farmers Association, the Market Women Associations, Volunteer Women Associations in designing initiatives aimed at supporting women entrepreneurs and capacity building (Akunnaya & Adedapo, 2014; Denen, 2014).

## Conclusion

Rapid urbanisation in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) was and continues to be marked by a large-scale influx of professionals, job seekers, apprentices, and street vendors, earning the city the unenviable title "another Lagos." This has had a negative impact on empowerment as locals were compelled to take advantage of opportunities to improve their lot in life. It would not be incorrect to state that urbanisation has enhanced women's roles, given rise to chances for empowerment, and presented new obstacles, some of which can be resolved if the recommendations made in this study are implemented.

Urban women, especially impoverished ones, bear the brunt of the economic, social, and political fallout from rising inequality. These women face significant disadvantages over their male counterparts. The likelihood of poverty, discrimination, and marginalisation in urban power structures is higher for women and girls. In addition to facing the greatest risks to their health, safety, and well-being, poor women and girls, older women, disabled women, and women who defy conventional social norms such as feminists and independent living also face the greatest obstacles to gaining the most from living in cities.

In Abuja and Nigeria at large, women are less economically empowered than men owing to unequal inheritance and property rights and also discriminatory policies and practices by banks in lending to women. With its abundant natural resources, dense population, and established democratic system of governance, the FCT economy has enormous potential. But if it stays exclusive, the economy's growth will be, at most, flimsy and unsustainable. The former governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria stated that action must be taken to guarantee that Nigeria's social and economic development is inclusive, strengthening the ability of the national and state gender machinery to carry out and oversee the implementation, and using the National Gender Policy as a tool for holding the country accountable for its commitments, helping the FCT to create and execute a gender and social inclusion policy that is appropriate for the context.

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