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Achievements and shortcomings of Nigeria's national gender policy in agriculture: a call to action

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Summary

Agriculture is the cornerstone of Nigeria's economy and a vital source of livelihood for millions. Despite the significant contribution to the sector by women, who comprise a substantial proportion of the agricultural workforce, gender disparities remain pervasive. Gender inequalities are evident in access to resources, decision-making opportunities, and representation within agricultural institutions. To address these challenges, the National Gender Policy in Agriculture (NGPA) was launched in 2019.

This policy brief assesses NGPA's successes and shortcomings, focusing on its implementation, reporting, and monitoring mechanisms in relation to women's experiences in the food and agriculture sector. While NGPA has made strides in raising awareness about gender disparities, gaps in its implementation and monitoring and in stakeholder coordination have hindered its effectiveness. The policy's inability to address intersectional challenges such as those associated with disabilities, climate change and social issues like conflict and gender-based violence further limits its impact. Additionally, the lack of a robust monitoring and evaluation framework undermines its accountability and transparency, leaving critical gender gaps unaddressed.

Background

Agriculture remains a critical sector in Nigeria not only for its contribution to national food security but also for its role in the livelihoods of millions of Nigerians. Despite its significance, the sector is marred by deep-seated gender disparities, particularly in terms of access to resources, benefits, and decision-making opportunities. These disparities persist even though women and individuals with special needs constitute a substantial portion of the agricultural workforce. The result is the hampering of the sector's full potential, as a significant segment of the population, that is women and people with special needs, face considerable challenges that limit their productivity and contribution to agricultural value chains.

A 2021 UNICEF survey highlighted these challenges, revealing that in Nigeria only 33.3% of women were literate compared to 53.9% of men, and a mere 18% of women had bank accounts as opposed to 46.9% of men. These statistics underscore the significant barriers that women face in accessing essential services and resources that further entrench their marginalization in the agricultural sector.

Among Nigeria's key responses to the gender disparities and to promote equity in the agricultural sector was the launching of NGPA in 2019. The goal was to create an enabling environment for women and other marginalized groups to participate fully in agriculture by providing them equal access to resources, training, and decision-making platforms. NGPA is a mainstreaming strategy document that complements existing policies in the agriculture sector and the National Gender Policy of 2006. Initially drafted in 2014, NGPA was reviewed and refocused in 2016 to align with the vision articulated in the 2016–2020 Agriculture Promotion Policy and Strategy, also known as the Green Alternative, which emphasizes the importance of inclusive growth in achieving national food security.

This policy brief assesses the successes and shortcomings of NGPA in achieving its gender-related objectives, with a particular focus on its implementation, reporting, monitoring, and tracking mechanisms. The brief further provides insights into the effectiveness of NGPA and makes recommendations for improving its impact on gender equity in the agricultural sector. We call for integration of intersectional perspectives, gender-responsive budgeting, enhanced monitoring and evaluation, partnerships, approaches to address cultural barriers, a need to build policy-makers' capacity, and making of women's contributions visible.

Methods

This analysis relied on a desk literature to evaluate NGPA's performance and identify areas for improvement. To contextualize the policy's successes and gaps, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken of reports from organizations such as the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). To complement this secondary research, the Gender in Agricultural Policy (GAPo) tool developed by FAO (2016) was used to assess how well gender considerations relevant to the agricultural sector were integrated. In simple terms, GAPo helps to grade policies on their ability to address the specific challenges women face in agriculture, such as access to resources and participation in decision-making.

Key findings

Gaps exist in women's representation and leadership

While NGPA has increased women's inclusion in agricultural policy discussions, their involvement in policy design, implementation, and leadership remains minimal. There is limited representation of women in key decision-making bodies such as agricultural committees and government ministries, as articulated by the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Governance (WEAGov) assessment conducted by IFPRI (2023) (for the WEAGov methodology, see <https://www.ifpri.org/project/womens-empowerment-agrifood-governance-weagov/>). In addition, the absence of formal and informal feedback mechanisms such as gender audits limits the integration of gender considerations into broader policy domains like climate change and nutrition.

Progress has been realized in awareness and training

NGPA has succeeded in raising awareness on gender issues and increasing participation in agricultural training programs. Notably, more women have engaged in training initiatives owing to the policy's inclusivity focus. However, challenges persist in translating awareness on gender issues into equitable access to agricultural resources and opportunities (PIM, 2019).

Gender integration and intersectionality are inadequate

NGPA has not sufficiently integrated gender considerations with other critical domains such as disability, neurodivergence, and climate change. This lack of an intersectional focus means that challenges specific to women with disabilities or those dealing with the impacts of climate change are inad-

equately addressed. This oversight prevents the development of comprehensive solutions tailored to the diverse needs of these women, affecting their resilience and adaptive capacity (Crenshaw, 1989; FAO, 2018).

Gender-responsive budgeting and accountability are limited

Gender-responsive budgeting and accountability mechanisms within NGPA are weak, with insufficient tracking and reporting of gender-specific expenditures. This issue is particularly problematic when it comes to rural women farmers in Nigeria, where only 5% of agricultural budgets are explicitly allocated to gender-focused initiatives (World Bank, 2022). The lack of effective gender-responsive budgeting means that resources are not equitably distributed and the specific needs of rural women farmers are often overlooked.

Data collection and gender-responsive reporting are inadequate

Data collection methods and resources are insufficient for capturing gender-responsive data, leading to a neglect of gender-specific issues. For example, sex-disaggregated data on farm productivity and income are sparse, making it difficult to design and implement effective inclusive policies. As a result, policies and programs fail to address the real challenges faced by rural women, leading to sub-optimal outcomes and perpetuating existing inequalities (UN Women, 2021).

Partnerships are fragmented and private sector engagement is limited

Efforts to address gender issues in agriculture are impeded by fragmentation of partnerships and a lack of coordination among stakeholders. Additionally, there is insufficient engagement from public-private partnerships and deficient private sector investments in gender-focused agricultural initiatives. The results are a stagnation of progress and a lack of innovative solutions to support rural women farmers (ILO, 2019; UNDP 2022).

Cultural and structural barriers hinder progress

Despite advocacy efforts, entrenched cultural norms continue to engender marginalization of women and hinder their access to resources. Cultural resistance and inadequate sensitization efforts perpetuate practices that limit women's access to land, finance, and technology. According to EFInA's (2024) access to financial services in Nigeria survey of 2023, the most significant drivers of women's economic empowerment in Nigeria are "education, digital and financial literacy" and "household and group membership agency". However, consistent



gender disparity in financial inclusion still persists, where men have consistently higher rates of being banked compared to women.

Linkages and collaboration among actors are weak

The weak linkages among government bodies, financial institutions, cooperatives, and other actors result in poor networking and limited market access for rural farmers. The lack of effective collaboration between agricultural and educational institutions further impedes the development of a supportive ecosystem for women in agriculture (Budlender & Hewitt, 2002).

NGPA's shortcomings in addressing these critical issues result in significant barriers for rural women farmers. To effectively promote gender justice and optimize agricultural productivity, it is essential that policy-makers at the forefront address these gaps through targeted interventions, improved data collection, strengthened partnerships, and culturally sensitive approaches.

Conclusion

NGPA represents a critical step toward achieving gender equity in Nigerian agriculture. By addressing its gaps and building on its successes, policy-makers can unlock the full potential of women's contributions to the sector. Implementing the recommendations below will not only advance gender justice but also strengthen Nigeria's food security and economic resilience.

Policy recommendations

To strengthen NGPA and enhance its effectiveness, the following actions are proposed:

- **Integrate intersectional perspectives.** Update NGPA to address the specific needs of women with disabilities, elderly women, and those affected by conflict and gender-based violence. This can be complemented by developing tailored interventions to enhance their resilience and participation in agriculture.
- **Enhance gender-responsive budgeting.** Establish dedicated funds for women farmers, including low-interest loans and grants. Also, increase resource allocation by state governments towards establishing well-defined gender units within the state ministries of agriculture. These units will drive awareness
- **Strengthen monitoring and evaluation.** Invest in data collection systems that prioritize sex-disaggregated information. Develop and implement a comprehensive M&E framework with indicators for gender outcomes, regular reporting schedules, and accountability mechanisms. Incorporate annual reviews of agricultural initiatives and gender audits on policy advocacy and implementation that interconnect with other crucial domains such as climate change and nutrition.
- **Foster collaborative partnerships.** Create a multi-stakeholder framework to enhance coordination among the government, private sector, and civil society using evidence generated from data captured, in order to incentivize private investment in gender-responsive agricultural projects through tax breaks and recognition programs.
- **Address cultural barriers.** Expand the reach and impact of financial literacy and advocacy programs for rural women and facilitate community dialogs to challenge restrictive norms and promote gender equity. In addition, work directly with rural women's groups to equip them with leadership, advocacy, and negotiation skills to enable them to champion inclusion and mobilize their peers to advocate for gender provisions within NGPA.
- **Build capacity of policy-makers.** Equip policy-makers with the tools to champion inclusive practices across agricultural initiatives. Curate and conduct tailored and all-inclusive workshops on gender-responsive policy design and implementation. This could involve partnerships with universities, gender-focused nongovernmental organizations, agricultural institutions and women-led initiatives.
- **Increase visibility of women's contributions.** Highlight the achievements of rural women in agriculture through recognition programs and media campaigns. This will attract investments and encourage broader women participation in formal value chains and their expansion into traditionally male-dominated areas in agriculture.

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