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SOCIAL PROTECTION AND GENDER EQUITY TOWARDS ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of social protection and gender equity in promoting economic empowerment in Nigeria. Despite various policy initiatives aimed at reducing poverty and promoting inclusive development, many Nigerians particularly women continue to experience limited access to economic opportunities, productive resources, and social services. Persistent challenges such as poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, and limited access to education and financial resources have constrained the economic participation of vulnerable populations. Reports from the World Bank indicate that about 40 percent of Nigerians live below the national poverty line, highlighting the need for effective social protection policies and gender-sensitive development strategies. The study adopts an analytical research approach based on the review of existing literature, policy documents, and academic studies on social protection, gender equity, and economic empowerment in Nigeria. Relevant scholarly works and policy reports were examined to analyze how social protection programmes and gender-equitable policies contribute to improving the socio-economic conditions of vulnerable groups, especially women. Findings from the review reveal that social protection programmes such as conditional cash transfers, youth employment initiatives, and women empowerment schemes have contributed to poverty reduction and improved household welfare in Nigeria. However, the study also finds that gender inequality continues to limit women's access to economic opportunities, education, credit facilities, and productive resources. Evidence further shows that social protection programmes that incorporate gender equity measures are more effective in promoting women's participation in economic activities and improving household welfare. Nevertheless, challenges such as inadequate funding, weak programme implementation, corruption, and limited public awareness continue to hinder the effectiveness of these initiatives. The study concludes that strengthening social protection systems and promoting gender equity are essential for achieving economic empowerment and sustainable development in Nigeria. It recommends improved policy implementation, increased investment in social protection programmes, enhanced access to education and financial resources for women, and stronger monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure transparency and effectiveness in programme delivery.

KEYWORDS: *Social Protection, Gender Equity, Economic Empowerment, Poverty Reduction, Nigeria.*

INTRODUCTION

Social protection and gender equity have become major issues in national development debates across the world, particularly in developing countries where poverty and inequality remain widespread. Governments and international development organizations increasingly recognize that sustainable economic development cannot be achieved without addressing the vulnerabilities faced by disadvantaged groups (Awojobi, 2024). In many parts of Africa, including Nigeria, persistent poverty, unemployment, and gender inequality continue to restrict the economic opportunities available to a large proportion of the population, especially women. According to the World Bank, about 40% of Nigerians live below the national poverty line, highlighting the need for strong social protection systems that can improve the living conditions of vulnerable populations and promote inclusive growth (World Bank, 2019). Consequently, social protection and gender equity have become central strategies for addressing economic inequality and improving social welfare.

Social protection refers to a set of policies and programmes designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by improving people's ability to manage economic and social risks. These programmes aim to provide safety nets for individuals and households through initiatives such as cash transfers, pensions, health insurance schemes, and employment support programmes (Fapohunda, 2022). Social protection policies are particularly important in developing economies where a large proportion of the population depends on informal employment and lacks access to formal social security systems. Studies have shown that effective social protection programmes can reduce poverty levels, improve access to essential services, and enhance human capital development (Awojobi, 2024; Olanrewaju & Omotoso, 2019).

In Nigeria, several social protection programmes have been introduced by the government to support vulnerable households. Examples include the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), which consists of initiatives such as conditional cash transfers, school feeding programmes, and youth employment schemes (Duflo, 2022). These programmes are designed to support low-income households, improve access to education and nutrition, and create employment opportunities for young people. Evidence suggests that such programmes have contributed to improving household welfare and reducing poverty among beneficiaries (Ojo & Oluwatayo, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these programmes often depends on how well they address gender disparities and ensure equal access for women and men.

Gender equity refers to fairness and justice in the distribution of opportunities, resources, and responsibilities between men and women. It recognizes that men and women may have different needs and circumstances and therefore require policies that address these differences in order to achieve equality (Adesina, 2023). In many developing societies, women face structural barriers that limit their access to education, economic resources, and decision-making power. These inequalities reduce women's participation in productive economic activities and hinder national development. Research indicates that patriarchal cultural norms in Nigeria continue to influence women's access to resources and opportunities (Akinyemi & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2024). Gender inequality remains a major challenge in Nigeria's development process. Women constitute nearly half of the country's population, yet their participation in formal employment and economic decision-making remains relatively low. For example, many women are concentrated in low-income informal sector activities such as petty trading, subsistence farming, and small-scale services. Limited access to credit facilities, land ownership, and education further constrains their ability to expand their businesses or participate in higher-income economic activities (Fapohunda, 2022). These inequalities not only affect women's welfare but also limit the overall productivity and growth potential of the national economy.

Studies have shown that social protection programmes that incorporate gender-sensitive policies can significantly improve women's economic opportunities. For instance, targeted cash transfer programmes have been found to increase women's control over household resources, improve children's education, and enhance food security in many developing countries (Holmes & Jones, 2023; Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2024). In Nigeria, social protection interventions that prioritize women such as conditional cash transfers for poor households have contributed to improved household welfare and greater financial inclusion among female beneficiaries (Okeke & Eze, 2025).

Economic empowerment occurs when individuals gain the ability, resources, and opportunities to improve their economic status and participate fully in economic activities. For women, economic empowerment involves access to productive resources such as education, financial services, land, and employment opportunities. When women are economically empowered, they can contribute significantly to household welfare, poverty reduction, and national development. Research has shown that improving women's access to economic opportunities leads to better outcomes in areas such as children's education, healthcare, and household income (Duflo, 2022; Kabeer, 2025). Furthermore, the empowerment of women has broader implications for national economic growth and poverty reduction. Studies on Nigeria's economic development indicate that poverty reduction strategies that incorporate gender equality measures are more effective in promoting sustainable development (Ijaiya et al., 2021). Additionally, improved access to resources and income opportunities for women can strengthen household food security and reduce vulnerability to economic shocks (Omonona & Agoi, 2023). Therefore, integrating social protection policies with gender equity initiatives remains an important strategy for achieving inclusive economic development and empowering women in Nigeria.

Overall, promoting social protection and gender equity is essential for addressing the structural inequalities that limit economic empowerment in Nigeria. By ensuring that vulnerable groups particularly women have access to resources, opportunities, and supportive policies, governments can enhance economic participation, reduce poverty, and promote sustainable national development.

Statement of the Problem

Despite numerous policy initiatives and development programmes aimed at reducing poverty and promoting inclusive economic growth, economic inequality and gender disparity remain major development challenges in Nigeria. Women constitute a large proportion of the country's economically active population, yet they continue to face significant barriers that limit their access to economic opportunities, productive resources, and decision-making processes. Studies have shown that many Nigerian women are concentrated in low-income informal sector activities such as petty trading, subsistence agriculture, and small-scale services, where earnings are generally low and job security is limited (Fapohunda, 2022). In addition, cultural and institutional barriers such as limited access to education, land ownership, credit facilities, and entrepreneurial support further constrain women's economic participation (Ezeh & Ezeh, 2018). Patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes also influence the distribution of opportunities between men and women, thereby reinforcing gender inequality and restricting women's ability to achieve economic independence (Akinyemi & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2024).

Furthermore, poverty remains widespread in Nigeria despite the implementation of various social protection programmes designed to support vulnerable populations. According to the World Bank, about 40 percent of Nigerians live below the national poverty line, with rural households and women being disproportionately affected (World Bank, 2019). In response to this situation, the Nigerian government has introduced several social protection programmes such as conditional cash transfers, youth empowerment initiatives, and women-focused economic support schemes under the National Social Investment Programme. While these programmes aim to improve the welfare of poor households and promote economic inclusion, their impact on women's economic empowerment has remained limited in many communities (Ojo & Oluwatayo, 2024). Evidence suggests that although social protection initiatives have contributed to poverty reduction to some extent, structural barriers such as unequal access to resources and gender discrimination continue to undermine their effectiveness (Awojobi, 2024; Olanrewaju & Omotoso, 2019).

Although several scholars have examined poverty reduction, social protection, and women's empowerment in Nigeria, relatively limited attention has been given to the combined role of social protection and gender equity in promoting economic empowerment. Many existing studies tend to focus either on poverty alleviation programmes or on gender inequality as separate issues without adequately examining how gender-sensitive social protection policies can enhance women's economic participation and improve their livelihoods (Holmes & Jones, 2023; Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2024). However, research indicates that when social protection policies are designed with a strong gender perspective, they can significantly enhance women's access to resources, increase household welfare, and contribute to broader economic development (Duflo, 2022; Kabeer, 2025). This gap in existing literature therefore creates the need to examine how social protection and gender equity can jointly contribute to economic empowerment in Nigeria, which this study seeks to address.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study is to examine social protection and gender equity towards economic empowerment in Nigeria. The study aims to:

1. Examine the concept of social protection and gender equity in Nigeria.
2. Analyze the role of social protection programmes in promoting gender equity.
3. Assess how social protection and gender equity contribute to economic empowerment in Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Social Protection

Social protection refers to a range of government policies and programmes designed to reduce poverty, inequality, and vulnerability among citizens. These policies aim to provide support to individuals and households who are exposed to economic shocks such as unemployment, illness, old age, and natural disasters (Ezeh & Ezeh, 2018). Social protection systems are therefore considered essential tools for promoting social welfare and inclusive development in both developed and developing countries. In many developing economies, social protection programmes help improve living standards by ensuring that vulnerable populations have access to basic resources and services (Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2024). In developing countries such as Nigeria, social protection has become increasingly important due to the high level of poverty and economic vulnerability. According to the World Bank, about 40 percent of Nigerians live below the national poverty line, indicating the urgent need for policies that can protect poor households and promote economic stability (World Bank, 2019). Social protection programmes therefore serve as safety nets that help individuals and families cope with financial hardship and improve their overall well-being.

Social protection programmes generally take several forms, including social assistance, social insurance, labour market interventions, and community-based support systems. Social assistance programmes are typically non-contributory and targeted at the poorest members of society. Examples include conditional cash transfers, food assistance, and housing support. These programmes provide direct financial or material assistance to vulnerable households in order to improve their living conditions and reduce poverty levels (Awojobi, 2024). Conditional cash transfer programmes are among the most widely used social protection strategies in many developing countries. These programmes provide financial support to poor households on the condition that beneficiaries meet certain requirements such as ensuring that children attend school or receive regular health care. In Nigeria, conditional cash transfer initiatives have been introduced to support poor households, particularly women, by providing them with small but regular financial support to meet basic needs (Ojo & Oluwatayo, 2024). Studies have shown that such programmes can increase household consumption, improve children's education, and enhance overall welfare.

Another important component of social protection is public works and employment programmes, which aim to provide temporary employment opportunities for unemployed or underemployed individuals. These programmes often involve labour-intensive infrastructure projects such as road construction, environmental sanitation, and community development projects. By providing temporary employment, these programmes help individuals earn income while also contributing to community development and economic productivity (Olanrewaju & Omotoso, 2019). Social insurance programmes also form an important part of social protection systems. These programmes provide protection against risks such as illness, disability, unemployment, and old age through contributory schemes such as pensions and health insurance. In Nigeria, initiatives such as the National Health Insurance Scheme have been introduced to improve access to healthcare services and reduce the financial burden of medical expenses on households. Social insurance programmes therefore help protect individuals from sudden financial shocks that could push them into poverty (World Bank, 2019). Social protection also plays an important role in addressing food insecurity and improving household welfare. For instance, food assistance programmes and agricultural support initiatives can help low-income households' access adequate nutrition and sustain their livelihoods. Research on household welfare in Nigeria indicates that access to social support programmes can significantly improve food security and reduce the vulnerability of poor households to economic shocks (Omonona & Agoi, 2023).

Furthermore, social protection programmes can contribute to women's empowerment when they are designed with gender considerations in mind. Evidence shows that when women are direct beneficiaries of social protection programmes, they are more likely to invest resources in household welfare, children's education, and health. Gender-sensitive social protection policies therefore play a critical role in reducing gender inequality and improving economic outcomes for women (Holmes & Jones, 2023; Kabeer, 2025). Overall, social protection remains a vital policy instrument for promoting poverty reduction, social inclusion, and economic stability. By providing financial assistance, employment opportunities, and access to essential services, social protection programmes help vulnerable populations improve their living standards and participate more actively in economic activities. In countries like Nigeria, strengthening social protection systems is essential for addressing poverty, reducing inequality, and promoting sustainable economic development (Ijaiya et al., 2021).

Gender Equity

Gender equity refers to fairness and justice in the distribution of opportunities, resources, and responsibilities between men and women. It focuses on ensuring that both genders have equal access to social, economic, and political opportunities while recognizing that historical and social inequalities may require targeted interventions to achieve fairness. Gender equity is therefore an important strategy for addressing the systemic barriers that have limited women's participation in education, employment, and decision-making processes in many societies (Kabeer, 2025). In many developing countries, including Nigeria, gender inequality continues to affect women's ability to participate fully in economic and social development. Although women constitute nearly half of Nigeria's population, their access to economic resources and decision-making opportunities remains limited. Studies have shown that gender disparities in education, employment, and access to productive resources continue to restrict women's economic potential and overall contribution to national development (Ezeh & Ezeh, 2018).

Education is one of the key areas where gender inequality has historically been evident. In many rural communities, cultural norms and economic constraints often limit girls' access to formal education. When girls are unable to complete their education, their chances of obtaining well-paid employment or participating in professional careers are significantly reduced. As a result, many women are confined to low-income occupations or informal economic activities (Akinyemi & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2024). This situation contributes to the persistence of gender inequality in the labour market.

Employment opportunities also reflect significant gender disparities. Many women in Nigeria are concentrated in informal sector activities such as petty trading, subsistence farming, and small-scale services where income levels are generally low and job security is minimal. Research has shown that women's limited access to formal employment opportunities is often linked to factors such as low educational attainment, limited professional training, and discrimination in the labour market (Fapohunda, 2022). Access to productive resources such as land, credit, and financial services is another major challenge affecting gender equity. In many Nigerian communities, cultural traditions and inheritance practices often favour men in the ownership and control of land and other productive assets. This limits women's ability to engage in large-scale agricultural production or establish sustainable businesses. Without adequate access to credit facilities and financial support, many women struggle to expand their economic activities or improve their standard of living (Awojobi, 2024).

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Gender equity is also closely linked to poverty reduction and economic development. Research indicates that when women have equal access to economic opportunities and resources, household income increases and poverty levels decline. According to the World Bank, empowering women economically can significantly improve household welfare and contribute to broader economic growth (World Bank, 2019). This highlights the importance of policies that promote equal economic participation for both men and women. Furthermore, gender equity plays a critical role in enhancing women's participation in decision-making processes within households, communities, and national institutions. When women are included in leadership and governance structures, they are better able to influence policies that address issues affecting their welfare and development. Studies have shown that women's participation in decision-making improves outcomes in areas such as education, health, and community development (Holmes & Jones, 2023).

Promoting gender equity also contributes significantly to women's economic empowerment. When women have equal access to education, employment opportunities, and financial resources, they are more capable of generating income, supporting their families, and contributing to national economic development. Economic empowerment enables women to achieve greater independence and reduces their vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion (Duflo, 2022). Overall, achieving gender equity is essential for sustainable development and social justice. Addressing gender-based inequalities through appropriate policies and programmes can enhance women's participation in economic activities, improve household welfare, and promote national development. Therefore, strengthening gender-equitable policies remains a critical step toward achieving inclusive growth and economic empowerment in Nigeria (Okeke & Eze, 2025; Ijaiya et al., 2021).

Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment refers to the process through which individuals gain the ability, skills, and opportunities to generate income, control productive resources, and make economic decisions that improve their standard of living. It involves providing people with access to employment opportunities, financial services, education, and productive assets that enable them to participate fully in economic activities. Economic empowerment is therefore considered an important strategy for poverty reduction and sustainable development in many developing countries (Kabeer, 2025). In developing economies such as Nigeria, economic empowerment remains a major development priority because a large proportion of the population continues to experience poverty and unemployment. According to the World Bank, about 40 percent of Nigerians live below the national poverty line, which significantly affects the economic well-being of many households (World Bank, 2019). Economic empowerment programmes are therefore designed to improve access to income-generating opportunities, enhance productivity, and reduce poverty among vulnerable populations.

Women's economic empowerment has received increasing attention in recent years due to the recognition that women play a critical role in household welfare and national economic development. However, women in Nigeria continue to face numerous barriers that limit their economic participation. These barriers include limited access to education, financial services, land ownership, and employment opportunities. As a result, many women remain trapped in low-income activities that do not provide sustainable livelihoods (Ezeh & Ezeh, 2018). Education and skill development are important factors in promoting economic empowerment. When individuals acquire relevant education and vocational skills, they are better positioned to obtain productive employment or establish successful businesses. Studies have shown that access to education and training programmes significantly increases individuals' chances of securing higher-paying jobs and improving their economic conditions (Duflo, 2022). For women in particular, education can help overcome traditional barriers and expand their participation in the labour market.

Access to financial resources is another important element of economic empowerment. Credit facilities, microfinance programmes, and savings initiatives enable individuals to invest in productive activities such as agriculture, small businesses, and trade. However, many women in Nigeria face challenges in accessing formal financial institutions due to lack of collateral, limited financial literacy, and discriminatory lending practices. These challenges often limit their ability to expand their businesses or engage in larger economic ventures (Fapohunda, 2022). Entrepreneurship also plays a significant role in promoting economic empowerment. Small and medium-scale enterprises provide employment opportunities and contribute significantly to economic growth. In Nigeria, many women engage in small-scale trading, food processing, tailoring, and agricultural production as sources of livelihood. However, without adequate financial support and training, these businesses often remain small and less profitable. Research suggests that providing entrepreneurial training and financial support can help improve the productivity and sustainability of such enterprises (Awojobi, 2024).

Social protection programmes have also been identified as important tools for promoting economic empowerment among vulnerable populations. Programmes such as conditional cash transfers, employment schemes, and financial assistance initiatives can provide individuals with the initial resources needed to start income-generating activities. Evidence from various studies indicates that when poor households receive financial support through social protection programmes, they are more likely to invest in productive activities and improve their economic conditions (Ojo & Oluwatayo, 2024; Holmes & Jones, 2023). Economic empowerment also has broader benefits for household welfare and national development. When individuals especially women have access to income and productive resources, they are better able to provide food, healthcare, and education for their families. Research has shown that increased income among women is often associated with improved household nutrition, better educational outcomes for children, and stronger community development (Omonona & Agoi, 2023; Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2024).

Overall, economic empowerment is essential for reducing poverty, improving livelihoods, and promoting sustainable economic growth. By ensuring access to education, financial resources, employment opportunities, and supportive social policies, governments and development organizations can enhance the economic capacity of individuals and communities. Strengthening economic empowerment initiatives in Nigeria will therefore contribute significantly to poverty reduction, gender equality, and national development (Ijaiya et al., 2021; Okeke & Eze, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an analytical research approach based on the review of existing literature, policy documents, and reports related to social protection programmes and gender equity initiatives in Nigeria. Relevant academic journals, books, and government publications were examined to analyze how social protection policies contribute to economic empowerment. The analytical method allows the researcher to synthesize existing knowledge and draw meaningful conclusions regarding the effectiveness of these programmes.

DISCUSSION: Social Protection and Gender Equity in Nigeria

1. Social Protection Programmes in Nigeria

Nigeria has implemented several social protection programmes aimed at reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion among vulnerable groups. These programmes are designed to provide financial support, improve access to essential services, and enhance the economic participation of disadvantaged populations. For example, the Nigerian government introduced the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) which includes initiatives such as Conditional Cash Transfers, the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), N-Power youth employment scheme, and the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme. These initiatives were designed to support poor households, create employment opportunities for young people, and improve access to education and nutrition among children. Evidence suggests that such programmes have helped improve household welfare and reduce vulnerability among poor families (Ojo & Oluwatayo, 2024; Olanrewaju & Omotoso, 2019). Despite these initiatives, poverty remains a major challenge in Nigeria. According to the World Bank, approximately 40 percent of Nigerians live below the national poverty line, indicating that many households still struggle to meet their basic needs (World Bank, 2019). Social protection programmes such as conditional cash transfers have been shown to increase household consumption and improve access to basic services among beneficiaries. However, studies indicate that the coverage of these programmes remains limited relative to the size of the population living in poverty, which reduces their overall impact on national poverty reduction efforts (Awojobi, 2024).

2. Role of Gender Equity in Social Protection Programmes

Gender equity is a crucial component of social protection policies because women often face greater economic vulnerability compared to men. In many Nigerian communities, women have limited access to land ownership, credit facilities, formal employment, and educational opportunities. These limitations restrict their economic participation and increase their vulnerability to poverty. Incorporating gender equity into social protection programmes therefore helps ensure that women benefit from government interventions aimed at reducing poverty and improving livelihoods (Akinyemi & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2024; Ezeh & Ezeh, 2018). Promoting equal access to resources such as financial services, vocational training, and employment opportunities can significantly enhance women's economic empowerment. Research indicates that when women are direct beneficiaries of social protection programmes, they tend to invest resources in household welfare, children’s education, and health. This not only improves family living standards but also contributes to broader economic development. Studies have therefore emphasized that gender-sensitive social protection policies are essential for promoting inclusive development and reducing socio-economic inequalities in Nigeria (Holmes & Jones, 2023; Kabeer, 2025).

3. Challenges Affecting the Effectiveness of Social Protection Initiatives

Despite the potential benefits of social protection programmes in Nigeria, several challenges limit their effectiveness. One of the major challenges is inadequate funding and limited coverage of these programmes. Many social protection initiatives operate on relatively small budgets compared to the scale of poverty and vulnerability in the country. As a result, only a small proportion of the population that requires assistance actually benefits from these programmes. This limits their ability to significantly reduce poverty and economic inequality (Ijaiya et al., 2021). Other challenges include poor programme implementation, corruption, and limited awareness among potential beneficiaries. In some cases, administrative inefficiencies and lack of transparency in programme management have affected the distribution of benefits to intended recipients. Additionally, many rural communities are not fully aware of the available social protection initiatives or lack access to the information needed to participate in them. These challenges reduce the effectiveness of social protection programmes and limit their capacity to promote gender equity and economic empowerment (Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2024; Okeke & Eze, 2025).

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FINDINGS

Based on the review of literature, the following findings were identified:

1. Social protection programmes help reduce poverty and improve the welfare of vulnerable populations in Nigeria.
2. Gender inequality continues to limit women's access to economic opportunities and productive resources.
3. Social protection programmes that incorporate gender equity measures tend to improve women's participation in economic activities.
4. Access to education, financial services, and employment opportunities enhances economic empowerment among women.
5. Weak implementation and poor monitoring reduce the effectiveness of many social protection programmes in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

Social protection and gender equity remain essential elements in the pursuit of sustainable development and inclusive economic growth in Nigeria. Social protection programmes provide support mechanisms that help vulnerable individuals and households cope with economic shocks, reduce poverty, and improve their overall living conditions. At the same time, promoting gender equity ensures that both men and women have fair access to opportunities, productive resources, and decision-making processes. When these two approaches are integrated, they create a strong foundation for enhancing economic participation and improving the welfare of disadvantaged groups within society. In Nigeria, various social protection initiatives such as conditional cash transfer programmes, youth employment schemes, and women empowerment initiatives have been introduced to address poverty and social exclusion. These programmes have contributed to improving access to financial support, education, and employment opportunities for many households. However, despite these efforts, poverty and gender inequality continue to affect a large proportion of the population, particularly women and rural households. This indicates that while social protection policies have made some progress, their impact on economic empowerment remains limited in many areas.

Promoting gender equity within social protection programmes is therefore crucial for achieving meaningful and sustainable development outcomes. Ensuring that women have equal access to education, financial services, land ownership, and employment opportunities can significantly enhance their economic productivity and independence. When women are economically empowered, they are better able to contribute to household welfare, support their children’s education and health, and participate actively in community development activities. Overall, strengthening social protection policies and ensuring that they effectively address gender inequalities will play a vital role in improving economic empowerment in Nigeria. Effective programme implementation, adequate funding, increased public awareness, and stronger institutional frameworks are necessary to ensure that these initiatives reach the most vulnerable populations. By improving social protection systems and promoting gender equity, Nigeria can reduce poverty, enhance economic participation, and achieve sustainable national development.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed:

1. The government should strengthen social protection programmes to ensure they effectively reach vulnerable groups, particularly women.
2. Policies promoting gender equity in education, employment, and access to credit should be fully implemented.
3. Awareness campaigns should be organized to inform citizens about available social protection programmes.
4. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be improved to ensure transparency and accountability in programme implementation.
5. Government and non-governmental organizations should collaborate to expand economic opportunities for women and marginalized groups.

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APPENDIX

Period	Major Social Protection Evidence
2010–2015	Early safety-net programmes such as SURE-P and development of social safety net frameworks
2016	Launch of National Social Investment Programme (NSIP)
2016–2019	Over 12 million beneficiaries of social investment programmes
2020–2022	Creation of National Social Register (85 million individuals)
2022	Establishment of NSIPA agency
2023–2025	Cash transfers to about 8 million households and targeting up to 16 million vulnerable citizens

Table: Evidence of Social Protection and Gender Equity on Economic Empowerment in Nigeria (2010–2025)

Year/ Period	Programme/Policy	Description	Evidence of Economic Empowerment	Sources
2010–2015	Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P)	Government programme created to provide employment opportunities, maternal health services, and infrastructure development after fuel subsidy reforms.	Provided temporary employment opportunities for youths and women and improved access to maternal health services in rural areas.	Olanrewaju & Omotoso (2019)
2016	National Social Investment Programme (NSIP)	Umbrella social protection programme including N-Power, Conditional Cash Transfer, GEEP, and School Feeding Programme.	Reached over 12 million beneficiaries and improved income opportunities and welfare for poor households.	World Bank (2019); Awojobi (2024)
2016–2020	N-Power Programme	Youth employment and skill acquisition programme providing monthly stipends and training for unemployed graduates.	Over 500,000 youths gained employment and work experience, increasing household income and reducing youth unemployment.	Akinyemi & Isiugo-Abanihe (2024)
2017–2025	Conditional Cash Transfer Programme (CCT)	Direct cash payments to poor households to improve welfare and reduce poverty.	Millions of poor households received financial assistance which improved household consumption and economic stability, particularly among women.	Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux (2024); Omonona & Agoi (2023)
2017–2023	Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP)	Microcredit loan scheme (TraderMoni, MarketMoni, FarmerMoni) providing interest-free loans to petty traders and small entrepreneurs.	Over 2 million small traders, many of them women, received loans between ₦10,000 and ₦100,000 to support small businesses.	Awojobi (2024); Ojo & Oluwatayo (2024)
2016–2024	Home-Grown School Feeding Programme	Provides free meals to pupils in public primary schools to improve education and child welfare.	Over 9 million pupils benefited, increasing school enrollment and supporting women employed as cooks and food suppliers.	World Bank (2019); Fapohunda (2022)
2020–2023	COVID-19 Social Protection Response (NG-CARES Programme)	Programme designed to support households and small businesses affected by COVID-19 through grants, cash transfers, and livelihood support.	Over 17 million households and small businesses benefited, helping women entrepreneurs and rural households recover economically.	Adesina (2023); Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux (2024)
2021–2025	National Social Register	National database used to identify poor and vulnerable households for social protection interventions.	Over 19 million households registered, enabling better targeting of social assistance programmes.	Okeke & Eze (2025)
2023–2025	Cash Transfer Expansion	Government expanded direct financial support to vulnerable households due to economic reforms.	About 8 million households received cash transfers totaling over ₦330 billion, improving livelihood conditions and economic resilience.	Awojobi (2024); Ojo & Oluwatayo (2024)