



## **EXPLORING THE ROLES OF INTERNATIONAL AID ORGANIZATION ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND POVERTY REDUCTION IN NIGERIA; A STUDY OF OXFAM IN TARABA STATE**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the roles of international aid groups in promoting women's empowerment and reducing poverty in Nigeria, with a specific focus on Oxfam's interventions in Taraba State. Oxfam has implemented livelihood empowerment programmes, microfinance support, agricultural interventions, and advocacy initiatives targeting marginalized women. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) comprising 20 participants drawn from Oxfam beneficiaries, community leaders, and programme facilitators. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes from the data. Findings reveal that Oxfam's interventions have significantly improved women's decision-making power, enhanced their income-generating activities, and contributed to household welfare. However, challenges such as nepotism in beneficiary selection, cultural barriers, and limited sustainability of programmes persist. The study concludes that while Oxfam's interventions play an important role in women's empowerment and poverty reduction, more effort is required in strengthening transparency, ensuring sustainability, and addressing socio-cultural limitations. Recommendations include improving programme monitoring, fostering community ownership, expanding skill acquisition, and enhancing collaboration with government for long-term impact.*

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Oxfam, Poverty. Poverty Reduction, Poverty Alleviation

### **1. Introduction**

Poverty Challenge remains a global issue, disproportionately impacting women and girls. Globally, nearly half of the world's poorest people are women, while gender inequalities exacerbate poverty, hindering sustainable development. Women's Empowerment, recognizing the vital role of women in development, investing in women's empowerment has become a central principle in international aid efforts. Empowering women through education, economic opportunities, and political participation strengthens families' community, and nations. Poverty, a persistent global scourge, disproportionately impacts women and girls (World Bank, 2020).

Gender inequalities, acting as both cause and consequence trap women in a cycle of deprivation, hindering economic growth and sustainable development (Alkire & Santos, 2024). Recognizing this, international aid agencies have shifted their focus towards women's empowerment as a critical pathway to poverty reduction (UN Women, 2023). This shift is particularly relevant in conflict-affected regions like the Northeast of Nigeria, where deep-rooted gender inequalities and insecurity exacerbate vulnerabilities for women, further entrenching poverty (USAID, 2022). The roots of 'women's social and economic empowerment' in academics can be tracked back in 70s, when Boserup (1970) argued that, women's are lacking in vocational training and under-educated though they make up half of the adult population of the developing countries (Nassani et al, 2021).

Furthermore, the empowerment of women has become a central pillar of international development efforts, and international aid groups have emerged as key players in these endeavors. This introduction delves into the diverse landscape of international aid groups working on women's empowerment, highlighting their contributions, challenges, and avenues for collaboration. The 17-point agenda of United Nations sustainable development goals is the vital factor to promote global peace and harmony. The Goal-5 for gender equality and women empowerment is considerable important for transformation our world through providing equal opportunity of boys and girls for getting education and employment. It is evident that the Goal-5 agenda is suffered in almost every part of the world, which embarrassed the sustainable development goals in the civilized world. The contribution of international tourism development to empower women is the key initiative of the developed world to provide an equal opportunity to the women to sustain their livelihoods (Nassani, 2021).

In Nigeria, despite its burgeoning economy, female entrepreneurial involvement lags behind developed nations due to cultural norms and familial duties that hinder women's success in business. However, there's a gradual shift as more women venture into non-traditional sectors, propelled by increasing education and evolving societal perceptions. Despite, persistent challenges. Women are diversifying into technical and unconventional fields, marking a departure from traditional roles like beauty or household-related businesses towards more diverse opportunities in technology and innovation (Sinha et al, 2023).

International aid agencies play a crucial role in supporting developing countries and tackling poverty. Many aid programs focus on women's empowerment, recognizing its link to poverty reduction and overall development. These agencies actively operate in the Northeast, providing various forms of support. Programs targeted at women's empowerment aim to address gender inequalities, equip women with skills and resources, and improve their livelihoods (Asad et al, 2020).

Within the Northeast tapestry, Taraba state stands out as a microcosm of these challenges. Despite its agricultural potential, poverty remains rampant in Taraba, fueled by limited access to resources. education, and healthcare for women (NBS,2023) Harmful traditional practices like early marriage and female genital mutilation, coupled with pervasive gender discrimination, further hinder their development and perpetuate poverty cycles (UNICEF, 2022). In this context, international aid groups play a vital role, implementing programs specifically aimed at empowering women in Taraba and tackling these entrenched inequalities (DFID, 2017).

Several international aid groups apart from those under the United Nation's charter comprising of the WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNDP, etc are active in Taraba State, Nigeria, focusing on various aspects like peace building, health, and development. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) supported a conflict mitigation project focused on farmers and herders. Additionally, ActionAid Nigeria has a presence in the state, implementing Local Rights Programmes. Other organizations include the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) which has supported healthcare and tracing efforts. The Center for Initiative and Development (CFID) is another local organization with potential international partnerships.

OXFAM as one of the international aid agencies working within Taraba state is an international confederation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working together in more than 80 countries to fight poverty, reduce inequality, and promote social justice. It was founded in 1942 in Oxford, England as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (hence the name *Oxfam*).

Oxfam operates through local partnerships, meaning it works with grassroots organizations, governments, and communities to implement development projects, humanitarian relief, and advocacy campaigns. in Taraba and Adamawa States, Oxfam has worked with smallholder women farmers through programmes like the Women's Economic Empowerment and Market Access Project, helping them improve income, join cooperatives, and gain access to microfinance.

Investigating the impact of these international interventions on women's empowerment and poverty reduction in Taraba becomes crucial. Delving into specific program activities, successes, and challenges faced, we can gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of these efforts and refine future strategies. The study seeks to understand how empowering women in Taraba translates into meaningful poverty reduction, both on an individual and community level, contributing to a more equitable and prosperous future for the state and the broader Northeast region. Despite the prevalence of international aid programs in Taraba, the impact of these efforts on women's empowerment and poverty reduction in the state remains under-researched. It is on this background that this study aimed to investigate the impact of *Oxfam* in mitigating poverty and promoting empowerment among women population in Taraba state, Nigeria.

## 2. Literature Review

This Chapter, delve into the multifaceted realms of literature pertinent to privacy concerns. This exploration navigates through these pivotal domains' conceptual framework, Conceptual Review of Empowerment, Empowerment theory, Empirical Literature, Challenges, Review of Related studies, Review of Foreign Aid and Research Gap. Then embark on a journey through the profound insights and scholarly contributions. Dissecting the conceptual frameworks, theoretical underpinnings, and empirical evidence offered by distinguished researchers. This comprehensive review aims to illuminate the intricate tapestry of ideas surrounding privacy, providing a holistic understanding of its complexities and implications.

### The Concept of Women Empowerment

The concept of women's empowerment encompasses various terms like "gender equality," "female autonomy," or "women's status," focusing on women's ability to make life choices. It involves acquiring knowledge, skills, overcoming obstacles, and accessing resources, not just as an outcome but also as a means to observe developmental outcomes, particularly poverty reduction. Empowerment relates to power relations but

differs from the empowerment of other disadvantaged groups due to intra-household dynamics. It's often seen as intertwined with gender equality, where progress in one lead to advancement in the other. Empowerment involves women's ability to control their lives, make decisions, and access resources, not just material and financial but also social and human resources like education, employment, and social capital. Empowerment is multidimensional, spanning decision-making authority, financial control, and freedom of movement (Zulfiqar, 2017).

It is a complex concept, encompassing various aspects and domains, including being a process or outcome, a capacity, a matter of gaining power, and having agency. Scholars have explored numerous topics related to empowerment, such as education, political participation, domestic violence, resource control, well-being, household decision-making, time poverty, and health. Studies have shown that empowering women not only benefits them but also improves children's health and education, reduces child mortality, enhances business effectiveness increases agricultural productivity, and fosters economic growth while reducing poverty (Cheng et al,2019). Empowerment and poverty reduction are interconnected, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria, where empowering women within poor households contributes to household empowerment in general (Wei et al, 2021).

However, the significance of political empowerment for women within the context of development is highlighted by various scholars which outline three forms of power-social, political and psychological which are interconnected. Social power encompasses skills and knowledge that enhance household production and serve as a basis for political influence. Political power influenced by collective action, shapes policies and structures at micro and macro levels. This collective social power, as proposed by Friedmann (2018), impacts political power and subsequently leads to personal and psychological empowerment. Emphasize women's control over their lives and the need for political change to sustain advancement. She argues that political empowerment has key for sustained individual

empowerment. Moreover, stresses the necessity of women's involvement in political processes and gaining control over macro-structures to bring about empowering changes at both individual and societal levels (Nadim & Nurlukman, 2017).

#### Obstacles to Women's Economic Empowerment

(a) Lack of Fund: Many of these women rely on personal savings or on contributions from relatives and friends to fund their enterprises, and without property ownership they lack collateral to access credit from formal financial institutions.

(b) Scale of Operation: Most women in developing countries especially Nigeria has small enterprises operating mainly in the informal sector of economy. They face multiple challenges that diminish their opportunities and dampen their potential as businesswomen and entrepreneurs.

(c) Education and Training: They have limited access to education and training, have less or no freedom to choose their business, and are faced with discriminatory attitudes in property, marital and inheritance laws.

(d) Structural and cultural factors: These make it more difficult for women to access vocational training programmes due to their care giving responsibilities and societal expectations about which jobs are suitable for them.

(e) Female illiteracy: women's lack of access to information, illiteracy, and gender discriminatory norms that prevent women from using and/or owning land are examples of obstacles that limit their access to and control of economic resources.

(f) Exploitative and discriminatory working conditions; gender segregation in the labour market, restricted mobility, women's double work burden and diminished health caused by gender-based violence, for instance are examples of factors that limit women's ability to access and/or enjoy the returns on their work.

(g) Lack of Infrastructure: Women who live in rural communities with low infrastructure, (transport, water

and sanitation, communication and electricity) are worse affected. A World Bank study (Malmberg, 1996) reports that 87 percent of trips in rural Africa take place on foot. (h) Greater vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse at the community level, if not the household level (Mayoux, 2009).

(i) Unpaid work: both in the productive and domestic spheres is one of the most important challenges to women's economic empowerment for economic sustainability. As indicated earlier, women's ability to be more actively engage themselves in their economic activities is partly affected by the heavy labour burden and time poverty associated with their family responsibilities.

#### The Concept of Poverty

The word poverty comes from the old (Norman) French word *poverté* (Modern French: *pauvreté*), from Latin *paupertās* from *pauper* (poor) (Walter, 2005). The United Nations, (2004) publication titled "Human Rights and Poverty Reduction: A Conceptual Framework," defined poverty, with respect to human rights, as "a denial or non-fulfillment of human rights." The rights, according to the organization, include fundamental freedoms like "freedoms from hunger, disease and illiteracy." It also looked at poverty as "low levels of capability (i.e. a person's freedom or opportunities to achieve well-being)" and "the failure of basic capabilities, as Sen Puts it, to reach certain minimally acceptable levels" (pp. 5-6). United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), on the other hand, noted that poverty could be defined in either relative or absolute terms. Absolute poverty, it notes, "Measures poverty in relation to the amount of money necessary to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter" while relative poverty has to do with "the economic status" of individuals. In relative terms, "people are poor if they fall below prevailing standards of living in a given societal context" (Mohammed, 2018). According to World Bank (1999) poverty refers to "shortage of food, lack of shelter, being ill, and not being able to go to school, not being able to read, fear for the future, not having a job, not being able to speak correctly, losing a child due to illness brought about by dirty water, lack of



representation, powerlessness, not being able to speak correctly and inadequate freedom”. In 2011, World Bank also defined poverty as “distinct deprivation in the living condition which comprises multiple dimensions; these include inability to have access to basic needs...” (Musa et al., 2016). To same financial institution again, poverty means living on less than \$1.90 a day (Vyas & Bhargava, 2024).

The concept of poverty defies a single universally accepted definition. It has come to mean different things to different people; it has been defined variously as humiliating dependence. Okhiria (2021) opined that, poverty is an extreme state of social and economic deprivation. It is a situation where an individual or household fails to attain and maintain a specific level of wellbeing which is considered as the acceptable minimum standard of living in a given society. In a similar vein, he opined that, poverty is a high degree of difficulty encountered in making ends meet. Poverty means lack of multiple resources that leads to hunger and physical deprivation, while to (Eze; 2018) it is "moneylessness" and "powerlessness", Yakubu and Aderonmy (2021).

United Nation High Commission for Refugees defines poverty as a human condition characterized the sustained or chronic deprivation of resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political as well as social rights.

### Measuring Poverty

Poverty is measured in different ways by different bodies, both governmental and nongovernmental. Measurements can be absolute, which references a single standard, or relative, which is dependent on context. Poverty is widely understood to be multidimensional, comprising social, natural and economic factors situated within wider socio-political processes. The capabilities approach argues that capturing the perceptions of poor people is fundamental to understanding poverty (Sen,1999) By measuring poverty, we learn which poverty reduction strategies work, and which do not. Poverty measurement also helps developing countries

gauge program effectiveness and guide their development strategy in a rapidly changing economic environment (World Bank, 2022).

### Causes of Poverty

Many factors were attributed as the causes of poverty anywhere but some of the general causes of poverty include the changing trends in a country's economy, high level of illiteracy, high rate of divorce, which causes feminization of poverty, having a culture of poverty (Primitive cultures that will not enhance poverty alleviation), bad governance, mismanagement of public funds, and unemployment. This work will focus on the causes of poverty and impacts of empowerment programs towards alleviation of poverty in Nigeria

Its in Taraba state and Nigeria by extension includes but not limited to bad governance, Unemployment, Corruption, over dependence on oil as a measure source of revenue, Inequality among others.

### An Overview on OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working together in more than 80 countries to fight poverty, reduce inequality, and promote social justice. It was founded in 1942 in Oxford, England as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (hence the name *Oxfam*).

Oxfam operates through local partnerships, meaning it works with grassroots organizations, governments, and communities to implement development projects, humanitarian relief, and advocacy campaigns. The current focus of Oxfam's campaigns includes economic inequality (including tax justice), gender justice and climate change.

#### What Does Oxfam Do?

Oxfam's work is grouped into several core areas:

##### 1. Poverty Alleviation and Livelihoods

Provides agricultural inputs (seeds, tools, training) to smallholder farmers.

- i. Supports women and youth with skills training and access to microcredit.
- ii. Promotes sustainable livelihoods to reduce dependence on aid.

## 2. Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice

- i. Works to strengthen women's rights, decision-making power, and economic participation.
- ii. Advocates for ending gender-based violence and harmful cultural practices.
- iii. Supports women's cooperatives, savings groups, and leadership training.

## 3. Humanitarian Relief

- i. Responds to crises caused by natural disasters or conflicts by providing food, clean water, and shelter.
- ii. Played a significant role in humanitarian relief during famines, floods, and conflicts in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

## 4. Governance and Accountability

- i. Promotes good governance, transparency, and citizens' participation in decision-making.
- ii. Campaigns against corruption, inequality, and unfair policies.

## 5. Climate Change and Resilience

- i. Helps communities adapt to the effects of climate change.
- ii. Supports sustainable farming and environmental conservation.

## Oxfam in Nigeria

In Nigeria, Oxfam has been active since the 1960s, working in areas such as:

- i. Agriculture & Livelihoods: Supporting farmers (especially women) with inputs, training, and access to markets.
- ii. Humanitarian Response: Providing food, clean water, and shelter in conflict-affected areas, especially the North-East (Borno, Adamawa, Yobe states).

Gender Empowerment: Supporting women's savings and loans associations (VSLA), advocacy for land rights, and campaigns against gender-based violence.

Governance & Inequality Reduction: Implementing programmes like *Even It Up* (campaign against inequality and poverty)

## Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework can be said to be a plan or map for the study. It is a structure base on theory in the area of investigation which is interrelated as well as reflecting assumption of a study. Refers to design which is usually 'borrowed' by researcher toward constructing own investigation. (Grant, 2014).

In the course of this study, Empowerment theory will be employed to extensively discuss the phenomenon under review.

## Empowerment Theory

This framework focuses on enhancing individuals' ability to make choices and control their circumstances. It assists in assessing the extent to which aid initiatives enable women in Taraba State to gain autonomy, agency, and decision-making power in economic, social, and political spheres, contributing to poverty reduction. Hussaini, & Chibuzo, (2023) Empowerment theory posits that individual particularly marginalized groups, can enhance their control over their lives, resources, and decision-making processes. In the context of international aid groups' efforts in women's empowerment for poverty reduction, the theory underscores the significance of granting agency. Resource, and opportunities to women, enabling them to challenge and alter power structures that perpetuate poverty (Hussaini, & Chibuzo, 2020).

International aid organizations often employ empowerment strategies aimed at women in impoverished regions to address multifaceted issues. These strategies encompass education, economic opportunities, health services, and legal support, aiming not just at immediate relief but sustainable change. For instance, organizations like CARE, Plan International, and the World Bank (2023) have implemented programs

focused on women's empowerment. CARE's "Pathways to Empowerment" program in Bangladesh, using a mix of economic, social, and political strategies increase women's participation in decision-making and income generation. This initiative not only improved individual lives but also contributed to community-level development (Fuseini et al, 2021).

### 3. Methodology

The chapter highlighted the method used in the conduct of this study, and it comprises: The research design, area of the study, population of the study, sample technique as well as sampling size, instruments for data collection, method of data collection and method of data analysis.

A qualitative method of enquiry was employed through the focus group discussion where data was generated from informants which included the officials of Oxfam, Program beneficiaries drawn from various LGAs across the state and Community Leaders.

### 4. Results and Discussion

Interpretative approach was used alongside thematic analysis to examine the data. The study adhered to rigorous protocol during the interviewing process ensuring that all procedures were clearly communicated to each of the participants.

#### Theme 1: Women's Economic Empowerment through VSLA and Asset Transfers<sup>1</sup>

Participants consistently reported that Oxfam's Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) enhanced their ability to save, access small loans, and invest in petty trading and farming. Many women indicated that they no longer relied solely on male household heads for financial support.

This aligns with Oxfam's documentation, which shows that 42,886 individuals in Taraba State were reached through VSLAs, mobilizing collective assets worth over ₦1 billion (~€1 million) (Oxfam, 2024).

#### Theme 2: Improved Household Food Security and Livelihood Assets

Women highlighted that agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizers, and training) increased their farm productivity, while some received goats and poultry, which diversified household nutrition.

These findings are supported by Oxfam's evaluation, which recorded an 83.2% increase in household livelihood assets and an 82.1% improvement in livestock and fisheries production under PROSELL (Oxfam, 2024).

#### Theme 3: Gender Empowerment and Social Change

Several women emphasized that Oxfam programs enhanced their decision-making power within households and communities. They noted a shift in gender roles as men began to accept women's participation in cooperatives and household budgeting.

This resonates with Oxfam's goal of ensuring 55% of women gained access to and control over resources (Blueprint, 2024).

#### Theme 4: Poverty Reduction and Resilience Building

Respondents observed that their improved incomes reduced their dependence on external aid, while training on climate-smart agriculture improved resilience against flooding and drought.

### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that Oxfam has played a pivotal role in transforming women's socio-economic conditions in Taraba State. Its interventions, particularly through the PROSELL project, directly contributed to poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, and rural resilience. These achievements underscore the importance of international aid in complementing government efforts toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly **SDG 1 (No Poverty)** and **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)**.

Based on the findings above, the study recommends the following:

For Oxfam and other International Aid Groups

**i. Sustainability Mechanisms:** Strengthen post-project structures (e.g., cooperatives) to ensure continuity beyond donor cycles.

**ii. Scale-up Interventions:** Expand coverage to other underserved LGAs in Taraba and neighboring states.

**iii. Deeper Gender Mainstreaming:** Continue addressing cultural barriers that limit women's leadership.

#### For the Government of Taraba State

1. Integrate Oxfam-supported VSLAs and cooperatives into state agricultural programs.
2. Provide complementary infrastructure (roads, irrigation, schools) to sustain development gains.

#### For Future Researchers

1. Explore longitudinal impacts of Oxfam's interventions on intergenerational poverty reduction.
2. Compare the effectiveness of different aid groups to draw broader lessons for policy.

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