

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2024: CHEDI CALLS FOR MORE INVESTMENT IN WOMEN NUTRITION

International Women's Day is an occasion used to call attention to critical development issues that affect women directly or indirectly around the world. The occasion has been used severally to call attention to women's rights economically, educationally and health-wise. Unfortunately, in many instances, most of these discourses terminate as mere rhetoric waiting to be repeated in the next anniversary. Meanwhile women around the world keep suffering from deprivations and abuse of the basest forms while the very society that should protect them looks on. Women and girls are the most affected in conflict situations, they are the most victims when it comes to gender-based crimes and most afflicted in draught and famine situations. Little wonder therefore why most African, Caribbean and Pacific countries are still at the level of development they are today. This reinforces the common saying that "a society cannot rise beyond the level at which it treats its women and children".

Most African Countries, Nigeria inclusive, unfortunately have not demonstrated any significant capacity or will in bettering the lot of women and girls. According to an IMF report in 2022; an estimated population of 88.4 million people in Nigeria lived in extreme poverty. Out of this figure, 43.7 are women!¹ This is by all standards alarming as the figures do not seem to be reducing but increasing.

This year's theme: "**invest in women: accelerate Development**" is very apt because it calls attention once again, to a viable approach needed to be taken by any society to achieve sustainable development. In Sub-Saharan Africa, evidence shows that investing in women's and girls' education, health and economic opportunities is fundamental to realizing the continent's human capital potential and spurring sustainable economic growth (WB, 2021).

Citizen's Health Education and Development Initiative, CHEDI joins the rest of the world to call on policy makers, duty bearers and service providers in Nigeria to invest more in women's health and economic wellbeing to achieve a sustainable development. We must as a nation be intentional and pursue this with doggedness. To borrow the UN Secretary General, Anthonio Guterres' words: "This year's theme – "invest in women" – reminds us that ending patriarchy requires money on the table,". This simply means that we must make sincere efforts at unlocking finance for sustainable development so we can have funds available to invest in women and girls' education, health and economic wellbeing.

CHEDI specifically calls on Nigerian government at all levels to increase its investment in women's health. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a devastating retrogression in gains made in women's health pre-COVID; and without increased investment, we will not be able to take back the losses inflicted by the pandemic and regain progress against the SDGs. We must rethink these investments as investing in the greater good of the society because if more women are healthy, it improves the general wellbeing of the family, community and society at large by default. For too long, women and their families have been left to deal with unmet health needs at their physical, economic and social costs. It has been seen as their individual issue, especially in Africa– and this needs to change.

Specifically, nutrition is key to the health wellbeing of women in Nigeria. With the current economic downturn and skyrocketing cost of living, women find it increasingly difficult to eat a meal a day let alone provide nutrient-rich meals for their families; and even where available, from experience, they consider their families first before themselves. Consequently, about 58% of women aged 15 to 49 have some degree of anaemia and 31% are iodine-deficient (Nutrition International, 2023)². Women are often those most affected by the negative consequences of undernutrition. About half of all pregnant women in developing countries are anaemic, which contributes up to 20% of global maternal deaths. Malnutrition for women and girls is an issue of equity, as well as poverty since women and girls are twice more likely

¹ <https://www.statista.com>

² <http://www.nutritionintl.org>

to suffer from malnutrition than men and boys (UNICEF, 2023). From the same evidence, 7.3 million adolescent girls and women of reproductive age in Nigeria are undernourished, putting women and newborn babies at perpetual risk (UNICEF, 2023). There is need therefore for government to prioritise women's nutrition.

Investment in agriculture is one sure way of combatting malnutrition. Women must be encouraged through micro-credits to engage more in agricultural ventures by increasing access to micro-credits. Currently In Nigeria, 20 percent of the workforce is engaged in the agriculture sector, and the sector is characterized by low female participation. Women are 10 percent less likely to work in the agricultural sector than men (World Bank 2022).

Women's low participation and productivity in the agricultural sector come at a high economic cost to Nigeria. It is found that the forgone earnings resulting from the gender gap in agricultural productivity are 0.6 percent of the total gross domestic product (GDP), or US\$2.3 billion annually (World Bank 2022). Further, accounting for GDP multipliers, closing the gender gap in agriculture could represent a total annual increase of up to 2 percent of the GDP, approximately US\$8.1 billion (World Bank 2022). Thus, it is imperative for Nigeria to target investments toward boosting women farmers' participation and productivity to capitalize on the potential economic gains.

Secondly, and equally important, is enhancing household economic strength by increasing women's access to equitably paying jobs. When women thrive in the world of work, they are better positioned to exercise their agency and realize their rights, but not just any job will do. Work must be productive and in conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity. Gender inequality in earnings alone costs the nation more than twice the value of its annual GDP in terms of human capital wealth (WB, 2022). Measures such as pay transparency, equal pay for work of equal value and access to care services can help close the gender pay gaps in pay leading to gender equality in the workplace. When women entrepreneurs are successful, they can create jobs and drive innovations.

Lastly, the formal credit and borrowing environment must be made more accessible to women. Conditions for borrowing must be made more women friendly. In addition, policies must be enacted to enable women find fair and internationally acceptable work-life balance considering their mixed roles as life moulders at home and as bread winners and contributors to the economy in the workplace. If these can be pursued intentionally by duty-bearers, then Nigeria would be charting the right course towards sustainable development.

Citizens' Health Education and Development Initiative (CHEDI) is a non-profit organization established as reaction to observations made bothering on inadequate information on preventive healthcare; especially of communicable diseases like (Malaria, HIV, Tuberculosis) and non-communicable diseases such as (cancer, hypertension, diabetes and malnutrition). Our work focuses majorly on vulnerable populations especially women, children and people living with disabilities in Nigeria. CHEDI has implemented several projects and programmes targeting women development and empowerment in many parts of Nigeria.