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## I WILL SPILL MY BLOOD FOR THE UNITY OF NIGERIA IF...SENATOR



### Editorial

# IWD: Empowering rural women against hunger, poverty

AS Nigerian women join their counterparts the world over to celebrate International Women's Day (IWD) today, the serious challenges confronting them, especially those in the rural areas, must be comprehensively addressed, if the nation is to move forward.

Some of these crushing challenges are the result of gender-based stereotypes and undisguised discrimination that deny women equal access to opportunities, resources, assets and services that are available to men. This year's IWD offers stakeholders the opportunity to right all the wrongs.

The annual celebration traces its roots back to the second International Conference of Working Women held in Copenhagen in 1910, where, over 100 female delegates from 17 countries voted unanimously that every year, in every country, the same day should be observed as Women's Day to call attention to their needs.

The first IWD was, therefore, launched the following year, 1911, and since then, the Day has taken on a broader meaning for women all over the world, now signifying a time to build support for women's rights and equality of the sexes in a number of areas, including education, the economy and politics.

Indeed, the Day has become an important occasion for women and men alike, especially policy makers the world over, to review past struggles and accomplishments and plan strategies for a better tomorrow for women worldwide.

In Nigeria, the lot of women, particularly rural women, is still far from what it should be, especially when issues such as women's rights to basic healthcare, education, economic empowerment and participation in politics and governance are considered.

Although some efforts are being made to redress the glaring imbalance, both by government and non governmental agencies, the fact remains that rural women would for some time to come, remain far from the remedial actions being taken, unless conscious and urgent efforts are made to accommodate them.

One of such efforts, in our view, is the decision to make rural women the focus of this year's IWD by adopting as the theme of the celebration: "Empower Rural Women - End Hunger and Poverty."

This, we believe, is global recognition of the critical role that rural women can play and, indeed, are playing in the economies of their communities, nations and the world as a whole, and the need to properly empower them to do much more than they are doing presently.

Rural women, for instance, currently account for a greater percentage of the agricultural

labour force, producing much of the food grown, especially at the level of subsistence farming. Agriculture provides livelihood for 86 per cent of rural dwellers and offers jobs to about 1.3 billion smallholder farmers and landless workers worldwide, and women constitute a major percentage of this number.

The theme of this year's IWD celebration, therefore, is very apt, especially for Nigeria, against the background

of recent reports of high level of poverty and hunger in the country, which places her among the five countries where half of the world's most malnourished children live, despite her huge potential and abundant natural resources.

With the country rated seventh among oil producing nations of the world, exporting billions of dollars worth of crude oil annually, one would ordinarily not expect Nigeria to be among the countries that are held hostage by food shortages.

But that has been the lot of the country, primarily because the populace, especially rural women, have not been sufficiently empowered and properly mobilized for food production.

Though government has, especially through the Central Bank of Nigeria, CBN, commercial banks and other financial institutions as well as the Ministry of Agriculture and relevant agencies of government, intensified efforts aimed at boosting agricultural production, including elaborate schemes targeted at making credit available to farmers, the questions that must be asked are how many rural farmers are being reached and how many women are being empowered through these well intentioned schemes to contribute their quota towards the elimination, or even reduction, of poverty and hunger?

Women are so critical to the expected agricultural revolution in the rural areas that to consciously or unconsciously side-line them would, indeed, be unfortunate.

If women have the same degree of access to productive resources as men, it is estimated that they could increase yields on their farms

by 20 to 30 per cent, thus lifting 100 to 150 million people in the world out of hunger.

By representing 70 per cent of the agricultural workforce in some parts of the world, and constituting 43 per cent of agricultural workers worldwide, rural women, are clearly, active agents of economic and social change whose potential must be maximised.

But their rights are, largely, denied them while their contributions have been to a significant degree been overlooked.

In many ways, rural women are not to play fully, their roles as farmers, producers and investors in the agricultural sector. Although in some countries, women have equal opportunities in the area of property ownership and inheritance rights, gender disparities in land holdings still persist worldwide, which denies many women access to, and control over, land.

Also due to cultural barriers, security concerns and lack of valid documents for the purpose of securing facilities from financial institutions, rural women often face more difficulties than men when they attempt to access

public services, social protection, and funds for agriculture.

They are also hampered due to difficulties in accessing quality healthcare, education and other social services, as well in exercising their political rights, especially the right to vote and be voted for. These hurdles must be dismantled in the interest of not only the women but mankind in general.

The Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO, has, to support this view, revealed that what the world stands to gain in terms of enhanced productivity from ensuring equal access to fertilizers, improved seedlings and modern tools for women could drastically reduce the number of hungry people worldwide. Incidentally, women and girls still constitute about 60 per cent of the chronically hungry people in the world.

We, therefore, call on government to ensure that institutional frameworks for the participation of the poorest and most marginalized women in agricultural production are established, among other

structures that would promote their political empowerment.

For instance, there must be intensive mass literacy programmes, including adult education programmes, more efforts must be made to organize women into cooperative groups that would help them to access credit and attract partnerships and assistance, especially in the area of mechanization of their production processes and access to land must be made easier for these agents of change.

More improved seedlings should be made available to them while more effective extension workers should be trained and deployed to the rural areas to educate the women on modern methods of farming, including storage options and how to add value to their produce through basic processing.

Because they must be healthy to contribute meaningfully to the transformation of the agricultural sector, all socio-cultural or religious constraints to their taking informed decisions on issues of sexual and reproductive health must be eliminated. The women must also be shielded from harmful practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting, FGM/C, child marriage and other norms and beliefs that sustain gender-based violence, GBV.

Though these measures may seem aimed at favouring women, the fact is that they are, indeed, targeting at delivering mankind, men inclusive from the present danger of food insecurity and the pervasive problem of mass poverty.

All hands must, thus, be on deck to ensure that rural women are, in the interest of all, empowered to play their parts fully in the agricultural sector. The National Assembly must ensure that every legal back up is in place to empower these women including the passage of all Bills on violence against women, the domestication of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Equal Opportunities' Bill and any other bill that is aimed at enforcing the rights of women.

The executive arm of government must also do all that needs to be done to tap this literally, as yet, not fully tapped resource base, including direct funding of their operations.

Once these are done, we are sure that before long the positive effects of the measures will be felt. Poverty would reduce, hunger will be contained and the purpose of this year's IWD celebration will have been achieved.