

## **TRACKING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL #5 IN A MULTI-ETHNIC COUNTRY: IYORWUESE HAGHER'S *AISHATU* AND JULIE OKOH'S *AISHA* EXAMINED**

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**Abstract:** Nigeria is one of the 193 signatories to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) slated to be achieved by 2030. SDG #5 is the attainment of gender equality and empowerment of women. The country is reputed for its multiethnic configurations with attendant myriads of cultural imbalances that largely put the women at a disadvantage, thereby presenting a huge problem with reaching this goal by the deadline. This paper interrogates SDG #5 in Nigeria from the prism and interface of drama and its symbiotic relationship with society, deriving lessons in hindsight from Hagher's *Aishatu* and Okoh's *Aisha*, which were written before the SDGs were signed in 2015. Methodologically, the paper used qualitative content analysis with a focus on the interplay of language, characterization, and gender reading of the actions in the play as reflections of gender. This shows that an appreciable result has not been recorded as demonstrated by the wide margin and myriads of practices that discriminate and militate women from contributing to national development like their male counterparts. Thus, this paper recommends that, with less than a decade to the 2030 actualization deadline of the SDGs, critical stakeholders entrusted with the primary responsibility of bridging the gender gap and empowering women should wake up and take necessary actions.

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**Key Words:** SDGs, Gender Equality, Nigeria, Women

### **Introduction**

The fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Striving toward achieving gender equality as outlined by the SDGs is not so much a competition to displace or eliminate men from their already occupied positions but an audacious attempt to tackle the structural constraints that prevent women from making meaningful contributions to the socio-economic and political development of the different countries that are signatories to the SDGs. SDG #5 particularly represents a new window of opportunity to eliminate traditional and cultural stereotypes and prejudices militating the full participation of women in national development.

It is sufficient to mention that cultural practices that militate against any particular gender in any country could be as numerous as the number of tribal, ethnic and regional groupings in that country. In Africa, Nigeria not only ranks as the most populous nation but also boasts of the highest number of ethnic groups so lumped together

through colonialism. Nigeria is a multicultural state with varying cultural practices within the multiethnic compositions of the country, which stand as both a blessing and a challenge, as what Chris Ogbogbo (12) describes as a considerable fusion of people and the emergence of a new breed whose affiliations cut across several ethnic groups as a result of inter-group relations such as marriage, business, settlement and other social engagements are sealed. This is because these diverse groups play diverse roles, responsibilities and expectations that are placed on the different genders in these groups.

Needless to say, applying the same principle, rule or policy such as sustainable development goal #5, which stresses gender equality and empowerment of women and girls irrespective of their cultural background, presents a huge challenge. This, therefore, requires and calls for the deployment of as many apparatuses as possible to even track the level of actualization of SDGs. Hence, this recourse to culture, theater, dramatic literature and criticism.

Drama is one of the core areas that reflect the culture of a people. As an art form, drama inevitably “mediates the given material conditions of its time and society” (John Illah, 3). Drama essentially mirrors a society; it sources its materials from the very society that hosts it and in a symbiotic relationship offers back to the same society possible solutions to the challenges, misdemeanors and puzzles that bedevil the society. The efficacy of drama, just like other arts, to be deployed for any course and especially as a change agent has never been in doubt as such practices as Community Theater, development/entertainment communication, theater for development, etc. are interventions that have proven with success the power of theater/drama as a cultural product wields in a society. It is regrettably surprising that culture was not consciously considered a major component or focus of the SDG. Rather, it is an afterthought or an appendix attached in the SDGs’ implementation (Dugga, 3). As a wake-up call, Dugga identifies and suggests the cultural dimensions of the 17 SDGs as a way of fast-tracking the implementation of the goals in Nigeria as the 2030 deadline approaches. On Goal #5, Dugga suggests that “*Gender equality should also be achieved in cultural life: opportunities for women and girls to take active part in cultural life and lead their own projects and organizations in this area need to be broadened. Further visibility and recognition need to be given to cultural practices carried out predominantly by women and girls. Narratives that address gender discrimination or show the important role of women and girls in cultural life are needed (9).*”

Narratives that address women’s visibility, highlight women’s recognition and broaden the opportunities for women and girls to take an active part in organizations and societies can be found in dramatic works. As characters with creative narratives highlighting the indispensable roles of women and the girl child are written, staged and/or televised to the general public, they set agenda and influence the society to imbibe the same narratives. This is what Iyorwuese Hagher’s *Aishatu* and Julie Okoh’s *Aisha* do to Northern Nigeria in particular and Nigeria in general. With less than a decade to the expected delivery date of the goals (2030), the events and characters in these texts are analyzed to gauge the level of implementation of SDG #5 in Nigeria. These texts were written about a decade before the SDGs pact was signed and are hereby analyzed in hindsight, with less than a decade to the 2030 deadline, juxtaposing the issues raised in the texts viz-a-viz the realities in Nigeria. *Aishatu* and *Aisha* are one and the same name from Northern Nigeria and beside the semblance of title used by the two playwrights who published these plays with two years gap in between (2002 and 2005), they present opportunity for intertextuality exegesis.

### **Nigeria’s National Gender Policy: An Overview**

In 2006, Nigeria replaced the National Policy on Women with the National Gender Policy. The policy document focuses on three areas: gender mainstreaming, women empowerment and the elimination of discriminatory practices against women. The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development spearheads the implementation of this policy. The Ministry targeted four strategic areas of reforms. The strategic areas concerned policy, partnership and program reforms; gender education and capacity building; legislative reforms for gender justice and economic reforms for enhanced gender productivity.

Disappointingly, this policy has not received sufficient practical attention in operationalization. Policy prescriptions to policy actualization remain the greatest bane and albatross of Nigeria's development. Different administrations have shown different levels of commitment to the implementation of issues that affect women and the girl-child. Generally, since the birth of the policy during Olusegun Obasanjo's regime to the current government of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the deep-rooted issues of women have not been properly addressed despite women playing critical roles in Nigeria. In fact, instead of an increase in the implementation of policies that upscale women, a downward trend has been observed with the succeeding government of Bola Ahmed Tinubu. For example, the Jonathan Administration had 30% of key federal appointments given to women, the establishment of gender units in federal MDAs and the conditional cash transfer scheme for women. However, Buhari's tenure in 2015 had only eight women (7.3 percent of 109) senators and fourteen (4 percent of 360) House of Representative members in the National Assembly. Similarly, in 2015, out of the 36 states, only four women were deputy governors while only 5 women were ministers in the over 30 member-cabinet. Pathetically, the Office of the First Lady, which helped in coordinating several of the women-related issues, was made redundant by the President; this he did justify with his infamous speech relegating his wife only to the kitchen.

Abysmally, Nigeria ranks 123 out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) conducted by the World Economic Forum (WEF) and released in July 2022. The Bill on Gender Parity and Prohibition of Violence against Women was presented in 2016 at Nigeria's Senate but was thrown away on the grounds that it was anti-religious, anti-African culture and tradition. The weak or/and lack of a legal framework to enforce gender equality and empower women and the girl-child in Nigeria has left it replete with practices against women such as widowhood rites, inheritance rights, the land tenure system, female genital mutilation and early marriage, especially with a preponderance of unwritten family customs/traditions of diverse ethnic groups.

Discrimination in education, sexual violence, child marriage and pregnancy, and unrecognized domestic work are some of the major factors fueling gender inequality and disempowering women in Nigeria. Women are treated as subordinates to men at home and in the workplace. They constitute the larger percentage of voting sexes but are solicited and used only as a ladder by men to climb to political positions in Nigeria; they have not been able to occupy certain influential positions.

While the condition of the girl-child and women in terms of empowerment and equality with their male counterparts in Nigeria is generally below par, the varying cultural and multiethnic backgrounds where these women are raised present varying degrees of inequality. Northern Nigeria boasts of a region with a high number of people living in abject poverty, bad governance, zero or low-level education, religious and ethnically induced crises, etc. which affect and put the female gender in the category of the worst hit. Aisha and Aishatu are common female names mainly in the Northern part of Nigeria. More nationalistic as the themes and characterization of the two texts try to appear, gender inequality resonates more in Northern Nigeria than in the South. Tracking the level of compliance of MDG #5, particularly in Nigeria, can be done using several parameters and scenarios dramatized in the two texts.

***Aishatu and Aisha: Synopsis***

*Aishatu* satirizes the harsh conditions in Nigeria that force young girls of school age into prostitution and drug trafficking. Aishatu, a teenage girl and a school dropout, is introduced into drug trafficking and prostitution by Rekiya, a sophisticated unemployed city girl. The drug syndicate is coordinated by Alhaji Wadi and Inuwa, who are the male businessmen profiting from the phallogocentric control and exploitation of their vulnerably poor female friends. Against all warnings and entreaties, Aishatu becomes deranged by excessive substance abuse.

Similarly, *Aisha* dramatizes the love, marriage and family life of Ehimare (husband) and Aisha (wife); a couple with different tribal temperaments. With multifarious supporting characters drawn from different ethnic sentiments of Nigeria, the play discusses how sentiments, intolerance, conflict and violence that are largely ethnic-driven and have impeded the optimum productivity of family life and national development and especially cast a heavy toll on the female characters, can be resolved and ameliorated with genuine love, forbearance and collective work. Despite a family feud largely orchestrated by ethnic chauvinism and stereotypes, Aisha, a Kanuri, though born and raised in Lagos, marries Ehimare Osakue, an Edo man but born and raised in Lagos. The marriage is denied parental blessings and is troubled by the lack of an heir apparent to the Osakues and results in miscarriages occasioned by a hostile and inclement environment for the woman (Aisha) to conceive and birth a child. Adesua, Ehimare's intolerant mother, visits the couple, torments Aisha, exonerates her son and prescribes that Ehimare marries another woman, and this time, from his Edo kens. In a twist of events, Ehimare's love for Aisha makes him play on his mother's intelligence and ends up getting his union with Aisha blessed by his kinsmen.

**Issues of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in *Aishatu* and *Aisha***

Thematically, gender equality and women empowerment bestride these texts and are particularly discussed by the authors as a conscious appeal to balance the equation; an equation that phenomenally and particularly lays a heavy burden on the women than the men. Furthermore, this, according to Mbumega Ayo (35), is because women play dual roles in the economy: working both at home and outside the home. To start with, in a situation where society condones and applauds the man remarrying or taking an additional wife (wives) should a challenge or crisis arise in marriage. When critical decisions on marriage and family are taken, women are under-represented or even excluded completely. This is reflected in the absence or the low inputs of women in decision-making bodies and policy formulation processes. Aisha is only drafted in by Ehimare to participate in a script unilaterally drafted by Ehimare (Okoh, 66). However, the plan to outsmart Adesua to get traditional blessings for their marriage concerns both the husband (Ehimare) and his wife (Aisha).

Correspondingly, the men go almost scot-free or buy their way out of the den of law enforcement agencies in the event of a breach of certain laws. This unbalanced and prejudicial treatment is an offshoot of a culture and practice that sees the woman as the first and immediate culprit of any malfunction in society. The case of childlessness is immediately blamed on the woman, thereby exonerating the man even if he is not reproductively healthy. The discussion between Adesua and Ehimare points this out:

**EHIMARE:** Meaning that I am incapable of producing pregnancy in any straight individuals.

**ADESUA:** (*with a wave of the hand*): Nonsense.

**EHIMARE:** It is not nonsense. How can you say it is nonsense when I am seriously in grief?

**ADESUA:** How can you be impotent?

**EHIMARE:** Well, I am.

**ADESUA:** How are you sure?

**EHIMARE:** At first, we thought it was my wife's fault. For many years, she went from one doctor to another. They kept on saying that there was nothing wrong with her ... (Okoh 57).

It takes the swallowing of masculine pride for Ehimare to admit that a man could be susceptible to barrenness like a woman too. In the pursuit of illegal wealth such as drug trafficking, the men use women to launder drugs and other contraband goods. Hagher confirms this as

**REKIYA:** Furthermore, so I want to warn you to lay off the drugs. I know Inuwa, he will stop at nothing until you become hooked on the drugs ... then like a corpse you will follow him wherever he carries you, delivering his cargo of hard drugs around the world (Okoh12).

Women trafficking is a practice against the backdrop of the belief that women are inferior to men. This is evidenced by Aishatu being only who pushes all the narcotic substances abroad for Inuwa, Rekiya's male friend. However, Inuwa shares the proceeds of the bounty without having to inject or smuggle any drugs abroad (Hagher11). This notion of man's superiority to the woman fuels unequal relationships between men and women in matters of sex, reproduction and physical integrity of the human body in *Aisha*. Respect and harmonious partnership between men and women is *sin qua non*-to a blissful marriage. Okoh highlights this thus:

**AISHA:** Violence! Violence! Violence! Tomorrow, you might kill me in a feat of anger

**EHIMARE:** Please, don't talk like that

**AISHA:** How should I talk? The violence is getting too much. It is better we go our separate ways. *Ya she ni*.

**EHIMARE:** Out of question!

**AISHA:** Why not?

**EHIMARE:** We must stay together to realize our dreams.

**AISHA:** Dreams! What dreams do you have? Can a home be built with conflicts and hostilities; or a nation with bullets and gunpowder? (Okoh 48).

Politically, the buildup to the successive elections in Nigeria since the advent of the fourth Republic in 1999 provided, concessions for women to occupy certain positions as advocated on papers but were not realized in real elections or appointments. Women are reduced to praise singers, cheerleaders and party supporters in several instances. This lopsidedness throws women more into poverty, and therefore, it is not accidental that poverty is feminized in critical discussions. How could women not be poorer compared to their male counterparts when they are not granted equal access to education that could empower them to seek enviable positions. Women account for over 60% of Nigeria's illiterate population, and as such, any act that denies a girl-child access to education has a direct upward spiral on the number of females that are denied access to a quality life. Both Rekiya and Aishatu have to abandon schooling because their parents cannot afford the fees.

Accordingly, the character of Ruddy and Emeka in *Aisha*, trace their occupation of a lower rung of the success ladder to a lack of connections and parents. Ruddy particularly has no mother; no father and would definitely get married as an escape from the sad reality of life (Okoh 72). There are more child brides in Nigeria than in any other country in the world. Early and forced marriage can be traced to a lack of access to education and life skills. In *Aishatu*, Tola expresses the frustration of women in a society that values and places the education of male children over the education of female children as follows:

**TOLA:** With three more years of medical school and school fees, I don't think I can make it. My two sisters are in secondary school, and it's just my mother you know. The father doesn't believe in female education. They separated because the mother had no male issues (Hagher 25).

Hagher's crafting of Tola, who is desirous of education, is an expression of the fact that education is an important tool of empowerment for women and the girl-child. In a society where women struggle to become visible and acceptable, yet are oppressed with very limited opportunities, Irene Salami-Agunloye asserts that Aishatu protests against male dominance, which constricts her and, restricts her quest for selfhood. The play also highlights the predicament of women, subjugated to the exclusionary practices of an African society ... the subjugation of women within traditional spaces, forcing them to accept situations of life as presented to them by the society ... the way society hinders women from maximizing their potentials or even destroying them (40). The only way to overcome the above inequalities is to be economically empowered. Empowerment through education can give women a sense of dignity, autonomy and, as Rosemary Asen puts it, freedom from oppression, inequity and the power to control their own lives (20). The search for this empowerment, however, plunges Aishatu further into exploitation and degradation by the males. This, Mama Tola calls "the end of the world?" Without school fees, there is no school. Without school no job, without job no-good husband, no beautiful clothes, no beauty, yes, it is the end of the world" (Hagher, 6).

Women are responsible for more than 60% of agricultural and food processing activities and are responsible for the running of most households in the world (Richard Robbins 325). Yet they have minimal access to agricultural resources; their contributions are hardly valued. Martha Ward (quoted in Ada Okau 54) stated that "women do two-thirds of the world's work, receive 10 percent of the world's income, and own 1 percent of the means of production". It is unexpected that Aishatu owes Mama Tola despite the former's wealth and the latter's recourse to petty trade (corn roasting) to survive and support her children (Hagher 24). This is not just a demonstration of a woman's insensitivity to another woman's economic growth but also a demonstration of the male-controlled powers being oblivious or negligent toward supporting and empowering the low-level yet highly enterprising women.

It is less than a decade to 2030, and many of Nigeria's women have not changed from what was reflected in the dramatic texts that mirrored their conditions a decade before the SDGs were signed. In Nigeria of 2024, the Mama Tolas, Aishatus, Ruddys, Aishas and Rekiyas still face the difficulties created by the imbalances and unfavorable conditions for the attainment of equality and empowerment. The educational system, especially tertiary education, is in comatose. The Academic Staff Union of Universities, on strike for months, requested that the government fund education adequately. Unfortunately, the government prioritizes elections over education. With the shutdown of public universities for months, access to education by girls is further limited.

### Conclusion

Tackling gender equality and women empowerment headlong requires interrogations from different perspectives. This paper has interrogated SDG #5 in Nigeria from the prism and interface of drama and its symbiotic relationship with society, deriving lessons with hindsight from Hagher's *Aishatu* and Okoh's *Aisha*. The reality these two play texts mirror regarding SDG #5 in Nigeria shows that appreciable results have not been recorded as demonstrated by the wide margin and myriads of practices that discriminate and hinder women from contributing to national development like their male counterparts. Thus, this paper recommends that, with less than six years to the 2030 actualization deadline of the SDGs, critical stakeholders entrusted with bridging gender gaps and empowering women should wake up and take necessary actions.

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