

The Indispensable Roles of Women and Youth In Achieving Sustainable Development: Presented at the Kebbi Economic Development Summit in Birnin Kebbi on October 8th and 9th 2025 by Dr Salamatu Hussaini.

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honour for me to be invited to speak at this very important occasion that has the potential to create outstanding impact for our dear State, and indeed the entire country.

I want to first thank the Kebbi State Government and the Kebbi Elders Consultative Forum for this laudable initiative. It is not only timely but a step in the right direction that will help Kebbi state come up with a road map that will help galvanize our God-given resources, both natural and human to mobilize towards attaining our potential.

The theme of this event, "Kebbi Ascends: Unlocking Opportunities for Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development in Kebbi State," was well thought of, and I am most delighted to share some thoughts on the topic "The Indispensable Role of Women and Youth in Achieving Sustainable Development," this is not merely a theme for discussion; it is the very bedrock upon which a prosperous Kebbi State must be built. If we are speaking of development, we cannot afford to ignore more than half of our population, as doing so is akin to running on half mast, which will simply will not take us far.

The importance of women and youth in our society cannot be overemphasized; they are the very fulcrum that holds our society together. They hold the keys to the present and future of our dear state.

A recent survey as seen on www.citypopulation.de and Wikipedia indicates Kebbi state is the 10th largest state in Nigeria in land mass and 17th most populated in Nigeria with a population of approximately 6 million people. More than 50% of this population consists of women and youths. Therefore, it is very important that these two key groups are properly harnessed to contribute to the growth and development of our dear state. A fundamental truth: any society that systematically excludes its women from the economic, political, and social mainstream is, by design, operating at half its capacity. Look at any society that has achieved meaningful and lasting progress—from the Nordic nations to the emerging powerhouses of Asia and even within our own continent—and you will find the undeniable, solid input of their women and youth. They are not passive beneficiaries; they are active architects of that progress.

The question then is, how do we practically empower our women and youth to become these architects of sustainable development here in Kebbi? Allow me to suggest a few pathways:

1. EDUCATION

Building a solid foundation in Education and Skills Development should be our first priority. For the state to chart a path of sustainable development, we must make a bold and deliberate investment in educating our youth both male and female.

Quality education both formal and informal is necessary for the upliftment of any society.

For this, I wish to passionately advocate for a review of our current educational framework. I propose that the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme be expanded to cover the entire secondary school cycle, up to the end of Senior Secondary School Three (SS3).

Making education free and compulsory up to Secondary school will have profound advantages:

a) It will drastically reduce the number of our children, especially girls, who drop out after junior school due to economic pressures. Research shows that in northwest Nigeria, living 20 or more minutes from a school reduces attendance odds by 52% . Expanding UBE would necessitate building more schools, directly tackling this barrier.

b) It will ensure that every child in Kebbi State acquires a complete foundational education. We must learn from top-performing education systems in East Asia, like Singapore and Japan, which have shifted from rote memorization to teaching students "what they can do, with what they know," focusing on critical thinking, problem-solving, and project-based learning .

c) It will provide a larger pool of educated youth who can then proceed to higher institutions or vocational training with a much stronger base. Furthermore, it will keep our youth in a productive and structured environment during their most formative and vulnerable years, shielding them from negative influences. In countries like Bangladesh, extending access to secondary education, especially for girls, has directly led to reduced poverty levels, improved health outcomes, and higher female participation in the workforce. Kebbi State can replicate such successes by prioritizing secondary education for all.

This is not merely an educational policy; it is a strategic economic investment in the future workforce and leadership of Kebbi State.

2. AGRICULTURE

Kebbi is an agrarian state. Empowering women, who constitute a large portion of our farming workforce, goes beyond giving them land. It means providing them with access to improved seedlings, micro-credit specifically for crop cultivation and processing, and simple technologies for storage and transportation, access to seed capital and training, etc will lead to a significant increase in their agricultural output and household income. For our youth, we can promote agribusiness—not just farming. This means establishing schemes that train them in food processing, packaging, and marketing. The Songhai Model in Benin Republic stands as a shining example, where integrated farm training centres have turned thousands of youth into successful agripreneurs.

3. Entrepreneurship and Digital Skills:

Our youth are naturally energetic and tech-savvy. We can channel this energy by creating innovation hubs, IT hubs, vocational training centres focused on skills relevant to our economy. The EdoBEST (Edo Basic Education Sector Transformation)

program in Edo State, Nigeria, provides a powerful blueprint. Through this initiative, over 11,000 teachers received rigorous training and thousands of virtual classrooms were created, leveraging digital technology to improve learning . The program has transformed the learning experience for over 370,000 children across more than 1,000 primary and 232 junior secondary schools. For tech skills, (i.e coding, cybersecurity) the SAP Dual Study Program and Young Professionals Program, active in West Africa, offer a direct bridge from university to the workplace, certifying graduates as IT consultants and making them instantly employable . We can adapt such models here in Kebbi.

4. Community-Led Initiatives

Lasting change is often rooted in the community. For instance In Malawi, "mothers' groups" were established to act as a liaison between schools and homes, specifically encouraging parents, especially girls who had been married off, to return to school . In Mali, the government partnered with organizations to train teachers and principals on providing psychosocial support to address sexual and gender-based violence, using a cascading model that reached local communities . These are cost-effective, culturally sensitive models we can learn from.

I will urge the Kebbi State Government to explore the following initiatives which I believe will go a long way towards empowering our women and youth, and strategically reducing unemployment in the state:

- i) Continuing education or second chance approach for youth (male and female) who have finished Secondary school but did not get the required credits to gain admission into tertiary institutions: Under this program, classes are arranged for these category of youth, to undergo intensive training and retake their exams. The Alkali Hussaini Foundation undertook a model running of this program with 120 girls, women and vulnerable people in 2018 with the State government paying the WAEC examination fees after the training, to help them get into tertiary institutions. This model can be replicated in all local governments.
- ii) Massive training of youths in various skills such as hotel management, catering and confectionery, electrical works, gardening, pop, tiling etc. Such training to be carried out outside the state in places within Nigeria that have reputation for mastery of such skills. In this way, the youth will not only be empowered, but exposed to other parts of Nigeria to broaden their horizons and perspectives, and they can readily find things to do rather than depending on government for jobs.

Any society that wants to be relevant and compete in this modern-day economy and that of the future, must find ways to harness and utilize the strength of its youths and the skill sets and the management prowess of its women. The urgency of this task cannot be overstated. A recent survey carried out in 2023 by Radboud University in the Netherlands on the Human Development Index in all 36 states in Nigeria including the federal capital territory, ranked Kebbi state as the lowest of them all. The state was ranked the 37th state out of all 37 states in which the survey was carried out.

This data is quite alarming and calls for an urgent need in implementing some of the solutions proffered in this summit, especially in areas that affects our women and youths in order to bridge the divide and regain our rightful place of being the land of equity.

In closing, let me state that the progress of Kebbi is not a dream beyond our reach. But to succeed, we must be willing to carry everyone along. Let us make a collective commitment today to deliberately create policies, allocate resources, and champion initiatives that actively integrate our women and youth into the core of our development agenda.

In fact, we do not need to look far to see how empowering women, transforms communities. Through the Nigeria for Women Project, thousands of women across states like Kebbi, Niger, and Ogun have come together in affinity groups to pool savings, access seed capital, and receive training. These groups have already raised over one billion Naira internally, which has helped women expand their farms, increase yields, and support their households. Similar approaches, supported by organizations like the FAO, show that when cooperatives are given improved seeds, small loans, and technical training, agricultural output rises significantly, and families escape poverty. These are practical proofs that when women are given the tools, they lift not only themselves but their entire communities.

Let us move from merely talking about their potential to creating an enabling environment where that potential can flourish. It is my sincere hope that the blueprint that emerges from this summit will have the empowerment of women and youth woven into its very fabric.

Thank you once again for coming up with this Summit. It's a welcome development and I hope this will continue and the gains from it capitalized, ideas duly and promptly implemented. I'm most grateful for the honour accorded to me. May Allah bless Kebbi state and bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria.