

CONSTRAINTS TO EFFECTIVE EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN IN NIGERIA.
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Abstract

Rural women empowerment is a complex strategy that sits within complex environments. Effective empowerment strategies may depend as much on the agency and leadership of the people involved, as the overall context in which they take place. Rural women are important in terms of rural development and food security. Their importance is derived from their prevalence as home makers, their role in agricultural and economic development and the concentration of poverty in rural areas. Ultimately economic situation of the rural population is dependent on the ability of women to fulfil their roles as farmers, mothers, cooks, housekeepers, health care providers, water carriers, fuel gatherers, food processors, produce vendors, artisans and more. Poor access to land, lack of quality education, inadequate access to credit, poor political representation and a range of social, cultural and legal factors among others are the constraints that bedevil women empowerment. Others are constraints that rural women encounter as food producers which are highlighted in this paper. The various ways through which women can be empowered in order to complement rural development efforts in Nigeria were further discussed. This paper concludes that for effective empowerment some of the social and cultural factors that militate against effective empowerment should be addressed and more attention given to women issues; and this will require the review of existing policies in order to promote gender equality.

Keywords: Rural women, empowerment, constraints, sustainable, rural development, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

It has been established that women are important in rural development. According to Ani (2004) the woman as the producer of producers constitutes the most effective means of production. However, he maintained that because of the disproportionate reliance on women's work, agricultural productivity and ultimately economic health of the population are dependent on the ability of women to fulfil their roles as farmers, mothers, cooks, housekeepers, health care providers, water carriers, fuel gatherers, food processors, produce vendors, artisans and more. In spite of these numerous roles played by women, they are faced with myriads of constraints that undermine their relevance. For example, Ani (2004) noted that

many policies made in Nigeria with the objective of improving the standard of living of people through enhanced income and generation of employment opportunities neglected women. He further observed that although, some measures such as the Women in Agriculture (WIA) have been taken to address these issues yet some socio-cultural problems obscure the realization of the intended results.

Access to land and natural resources is among the major challenges facing women. According to UN-Habitat (2006) women own only an estimated 1 - 2% of all titled land worldwide which is often cited as an indication of low levels of inheritance of property. A survey in India for example showed that 80% of the women interviewed stated they could not plant trees because they had no lands (Skutsch, 1989). Inheritance is one of the commonest ways for women to acquire or access land. Since women are not generally able to purchase property or usually benefit from land reforms, in most cases, a woman could become only landowner by inheriting the land from her husband or companion on his death.

However, FAO (2011) observed that men's access to land do not necessarily translate into the household's right to land. One primary reason for this situation is that households in rural areas of developing nations are not nuclear families functioning as solitary units. Rather these households generally include the parents of one of the spouses and operate within a large family system, which often uses ancestral lands and sometimes tribal lands. Moreover, when these households break down and change, women whose property rights exist only through their husbands immediately become very vulnerable. Clever and Schreiber (1992) support this by positing that women's property rights in community-based systems derive from their status as wives or wards i.e. as mothers, daughters, sisters or widows rather than their own right, women often lose their rights when their status within the household changes. Thus women can lose their rights if they become divorced, widowed, or abandoned (Bruce, 1989).

A range of social, political, cultural and legal factors contribute to women's lack of access to property and inheritance rights though the obstacles to security tenure vary widely (Wanyeki, 2003). Although, customary tenure systems often do provide women with some basic security in situations when they are not living with a husband, this same system only favours men when control over land is determined. Because the men in the community usually control

land allocation, they are able to claim individual rights when land scarcity converts the land into an asset and when family land becomes private property (FAO, 2011).

Furthermore, it is observed that women's secondary status, lower socialization, undervalued productive work and illiteracy in many communities often make them reluctant to claim legal rights and participate in those institutions and activities seen as men's domain. In addition women incur significant social costs for going against cultural norms. In some cases a backlash of domestic violence occurs against women who claim their land rights. As observed in Macedonia and Uzbekistan, daughters do not inherit land, in spite of Muslim norms that entitle them to inherit some family land. Daughters concede their rights to their brothers to avoid conflict and maintain support from the extended family. Also in Bolivia, it was observed that some men were titling lands in their sons' names, stripping their daughters and wives of legal rights (Gioverelli et al. 2005).

Access to credit is another important factor that seriously constrains the relevance of women in rural development. According to Ani (2004) banks rarely look beyond women's lack of land titles and other collaterals, or small size of their plots and enterprises, steps taken to make credit available to the poor mostly benefited males, leaving poor women little access to financial markets, both because they are poor and they are women. High level of illiteracy, lack of information about the availability of loans, lack of collateral or surety of loans, and the unwillingness of many credit institutions to deal with new and small scale borrowers who are mostly women is a problem. An analysis of credit schemes in five African countries where women predominate in food production found that women received less than 10% of the total credit directed to agriculture as a result in part of their lack of collateral (and title) required to guarantee loans, and in part of their exclusion (FAO, 1990).

Inadequate access to extension services is viewed also among the major barriers to the active participation of women in development activities. According to Okwu and Umoru (2009) the women folk do not have needed technical knowledge to enable them derive productive use of farm inputs for optimum yield. Also, Gellen (1994) observed that African woman farmer labours without crucial support that could raise their agricultural productivity. It was further observed that only recently has the whole farm family been put into consideration in the planning of extension and rural development programmes. Scarce inputs like credit, improved seeds and others rarely flow to women in the African country side. Generally, it is known that male farmers have more access to extension services in Nigeria. Osuman (1997) observed that agricultural extension services in Nigeria are mostly staffed by

men and are inclined to helping the men folk. Similarly, Protz (1997) posited that due to the multiple roles women play in the rural household, they do not benefit from extension services particularly when the time of delivery conflicts with their other household activities.

Women lack access to quality education. Yahaya (1999) observed that cultures and sub-cultures in Nigeria give preference to the male children as they are usually regarded as the heirs or the pillars of the family. Female children are usually less privileged and consequently not given opportunity to acquire education and formal training. According to Umar (1996) the girl-child is valued not for whom she is, her potentials or achievements but for her services, submissiveness and at best her looks. It is also believed that the woman's place is in the kitchen or at home and therefore there is no need for them to go to school. Women have been socialized into accepting the traditional roles of bearing and rearing children and maintaining the welfare of the family. The domestic responsibilities women perform in their families conflict with the time they should be in the school and this seriously hampers their participation and learning ability. This is further strengthened by the erroneous assumption that the woman is naturally made to be under the husband and as such should not be as educated as him in order to check their powers. In some cultures, for example the Muslim culture, women are forbidden from interacting with men and since acquiring western education would expose them to this, they are not allowed to receive it. Furthermore, their exemption from working in the formal employment sectors either by cultural, social or religious reasons naturally reduces their cravings for western education.

Sex stereotyping is another challenge women face. According to Yahaya (1999) during the period of socialization females are usually trained to believe that there are different roles for males and females as well as the superiority of males over the females. Generally, adults discourage competition between females and males and the two groups are thus exposed to different roles. However, other problems women face include lack of power, massive participation in unpaid work at home that leaves them without income, rivalry among them, discriminatory attitudes of men, lack of political rights, poor access to healthcare services and so on (Yahaha, 1999).

Strategies for the empowerment of rural women in Nigeria

Following the institution of the millennium development goals (MDGs) in 2002, women empowerment has continued to receive a strong recognition and attention both in the international and national communities. According to Sako (1999)

empowerment is the process of strengthening the existing capabilities and capacities of disadvantaged groups in society so as to enable them perform towards improving themselves, their families and the society as a whole. He further maintained that it involves the provision of enabling environment for their productive and intellectual abilities to be realized. Enemuo (1999) viewed empowerment as a multi-dimensional process involving the transformation of the economic, social, psychological, political and legal circumstances of the powerless. Central to this process are actions which both build the individual and collective assets of the poor and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational or institutional contexts that govern the use of these assets.

Ojobo (2008) defined women empowerment as a process of enabling women to develop the capacity to actualize their potentials. However, Enemuo (1999) posited that empowerment in the case of women entails not only positive changes in these critical respects but also the dismantling of the cultural norms and traditional practices that devalue, disempower and dispossess women. The process must necessarily also include the expansion of women's access to educational opportunities, facilities for skills acquisition and positions of authority.

According to Amin, *et al* (1998) the concept of women empowerment can be split into three components: inter-spouse consultation index, which seeks to represent the extent to which husbands consult their wives in household affairs; individual autonomy index which represents women's self-reported autonomy of physical movement outside the house and in matters of spending money; and the authority index, which reports on actual decision-making power (which is traditionally in the hands of the patriarch of the family).

Measures to overcome constraints to effective empowerment of rural women

Agricultural trainings and provision of farm inputs: This has been described as a serious problem undermining women productivity in developing countries. Women are noted to provide the bulk of agricultural labour force and produce staple crops upon which the households rely for nutritional security (Luqman *et al.* 2006). However, adequate access to agricultural inputs and services can improve their contributions to food production which will benefit the entire family's nutritional security. A study by Okwu and Umoru (2001) revealed that women farmers interviewed in Benue State Nigeria indicated that about 39% of them had no access to extension information. In cases where they had, their husbands were indicated to have first access to such information before it got to them. Hill (2001)

reported that women face gender disparities in accessing (and controlling and owning) resources such as agricultural inputs (fertilizer, pesticides, water etc) often because of their lack of access to and more importantly, control and ownership over land.

Providing women with modern and efficient farm inputs like improved seeds, animal breeds, information on market prices, extension/advisory services etc will go a long way to improve their economic productivity. It is noted that the establishment of ADPs nationwide has enhanced the timely access of farm inputs to farm families and this has translated into increased agricultural productivity and improved food security. In addition, it has increased the level of income of rural women which will assist them in catering for their families. Women can also be equipped with modern farm tools to reduce the extent of manual labour they use in agriculture, increase their scale of production, better the quality of their produce and above all preserve their health. Also, organizing trainings on agricultural production and home-making from time to time is necessary. This will encourage group actions among them and enhance the spread of information more especially during emergencies like disease outbreak or natural disaster. If women's access to productive resources were the same as men's, women's contribution could reduce the total number of hungry people by 12 – 17% (FAO, 2011).

Exposing women to entrepreneurial skills: Rural women can be empowered through the provision of entrepreneurial skills. According to United Nations Development Programmes, UNDP (2005) women have been producing cottage industry products of marketable quality for over 30 years now in Malaysia. However, the lack of design, branding and packaging has left the products very much a localized merchandize. It further maintained that it is therefore very important that women are trained to produce products that carry brand and packaging that could go beyond the borders of Malaysia. This idea can be replicated in others countries like Nigeria where a vast majority of rural women engage in one productive activity or the other and need improvement and access to international markets for their products.

Training them on better ways of making these products will enable their wares to compete favourably with others from foreign countries. Furthermore, rural women can be empowered with modern ICTs like mobile phones. With these they can set up phone call business which will improve communication in addition to serving as a source of income for the women. The use of ICTs can also boost rural women's agricultural productivity and economic enterprises – through accessing information on credit, inputs, processing and markets as well as accessing information about transportation

to move their goods to markets in urban and peri-urban areas and to access health services (FAO, 2011).

Improving women's access to land and other natural resources: Increasing women's access to land and other natural resources will increase their contributions to development. This can be achieved through the review of existing land tenure laws. According to FAO (2011) land projects that incorporate legal reform must consider family law as well as land law to have an impact on women's rights. Judicial enforcements of land rights are also critical and can save or harm women's property rights. In Tanzania for example, the land Act and constitution are progressive and mandate equality for men and women. Similarly programme initiated in Namibia in 1993 which increased women's participation in sustainable local management of natural resources recorded an increase in the income generation capacity of the female members in addition to exposing them to knowledge on renewable energy use. Similarly, the homestead land purchase programme tried in India provided supplemental income to women which improved household nutrition and food security. They also provided space for productive activities under women's control (FAO, 2011).

Provision of financial resources and credit for women: Without access to credit rural women often lack the capacity to deal with the costs associated with innovation such as establishing or growing a rural enterprise or improving their productivity. However, recently, there has been growing interest in developing comprehensive inclusive financial sectors that include a diverse range of financial services to rural areas including agricultural and non-agricultural finance (World Bank/FAO/IFAD, 2009). Both financial institutions and governments at national and local levels have taken interests in increasing the access of female entrepreneurs to financial instruments, including regular banking services, debt financing and equity financing (UN, 2009). Through financial service access women can become economically empowered through using credit, savings and insurance to promote their own economic activities, as well as create and protect their assets, enter or strengthen their links to markets and diversify their economic activities (World Bank/FAO/IFAD, 2009).

Micro-credit according to the United Nations Report of is a veritable tool for the empowerment of rural women. This report argued that there has been a growth in the recognition of the importance of empowering all people by increasing their access to all factors of production, most especially through micro-credit. Hence, it is in this context that micro-credit has recently assumed a certain degree of

prominence. Building on the assumption that all economies rely upon the financial intermediary function to transfer resources from savers to investors, it was recognized by this report that the latent capacity of the poor (especially women) for entrepreneurship would be encouraged with the availability of small-scale loans which will introduce them to the small-enterprise sector. This could allow them to be more self-reliant, create employment opportunities, and not least, engage women in economically productive activities. Nkpoyen and Bassey (2012) noted that micro-credits are potentially a very significant contribution to the gender equality, as well as pro-poor development and civil society strengthening.

At this point, worthy of mention are the various efforts made by the Federal government of Nigeria to provide credit to the rural women which include the establishment of the People's Bank and the Nigerian Agricultural and Cooperative and Rural Development Bank (NACRDB). There is a great need to revive these programmes as almost all of them have gone moribund and no longer serve their purpose.

Education: It is without doubt that the most fundamental prerequisite for empowering women in all spheres of society is education for without education of comparable quality and content to that given to boys and men, and relevant to existing knowledge and real needs, women are unable to access well-paid jobs, formal sector jobs, advance within them, participate in, and be represented in government and gain political influence (World Economic Forum, 2005). It is further noted that improving women's access to education is the single most important policy instrument to increase agricultural productivity and reduce poverty. Basic education is the foundation for developing flexible skills needed to participate in the knowledge-intensive economic activity. Those who lack access to basic education are likely to be excluded from new opportunities, and where long-lasting gender gaps persist, women will be increasing risk of falling behind men in their ability to participate in development (Ojo and Yaro, 2012). Popular education is regarded by adherents of empowerment approach as an important component of a strategy that challenges gender subordination. Popular education is concerned with developing critical consciousness among the marginalized groups with strengthening behaviours and attitudes which lead to more confident and assertive practices and to formulating strategies to contribute to the changing of their marginalized position.

Similarly, increasing women's access to formal education will help to empower them. Educated women are more likely to use health services and to have fewer and better nourished children and their

children are more likely to survive. According to DHS (2008) a woman's educational status is strongly associated with the uptake of antenatal care and with delivery in a healthy environment. Girls who are educated will contribute to the future economic growth. Making policies that will make education free will help to empower the women folk. For example it was recorded that the Universal Basic Education 1999 which enshrined free education as one of the rights of the child up to the secondary school level boosted enrolment by ensuring that all children of school going age had access to primary and junior secondary education. Furthermore, the National Policy on Women 2001 enhanced access to education by locating facilities close to communities, enhanced teacher recruitment, and provided incentives for girls to study Mathematics and Sciences.

Adult literacy is important for women who are aged. The importance of adult education for the development of human potential will lead women to build a sense of solidarity, which in turn will require the establishment of group structures. It is from this that women will be exposed to the public arena, rather than living their lives in isolation (Shilubane, 2007). Education will unleash the productive potential of rural women and enable them to participate more equitably in the growth process of the country. A literate woman will be able to participate in community matters, where some of her problems may be solved. As it is said, when you educate a woman you educate her family (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2006). It is important to review the existing policies and programmes on education in Nigeria to better provide for the education of the women folk.

Access to health: The MDGs specifically mentioned the improvement of maternal health as one of the ways of empowering rural women and increasing their contribution to development. Nigeria has been working towards this and has made progress, but it still needs to make a 75% reduction in deaths to reach the goal. It is however reported that Nigeria has the highest rates of maternal mortality in the world. In 1990, the base year for the indicator, the maternal mortality rate for Nigeria was 1,100 per 100,000 live births (USAID, 2008). The target was to reduce it to about 275 per 100,000 live births. Currently maternal mortality is estimated to be around 545 per 100,000 (compared to 340 in South Africa and 480 in Botswana). This figure is still nearly double the current global average of 290 per 100,000 live births (British Council, 2012). A strong link however has been established between women's health and their productivity as healthy women are more likely to be more productive than unhealthy ones. Also, the health of the household members is strongly related to the economic performance of the

woman. For example, when a child is sick the mother will not only sit back and look after him/her but will be forced to suspend her economic activities in the time being.

Therefore, creating favourable environments that would boost the health of women will contribute greatly to development. This can however be achieved through the review of existing health policies to give them a gender dimension. Also, the provision of health facilities such as ultra-modern hospitals, women and childcare centres etc will help to improve the access of women to health services in rural areas. Furthermore, scaling up the provision of safe, affordable family planning services is a key element in any effective strategy to reduce the number of maternal and neonatal deaths (British Council, 2012).

Political empowerment: This refers to the equitable representation of women in decision making structures, both formal and informal, and their voice in the formulation of policies affecting their societies. The Inter-Parliamentary Union reports a world average of only 15.6% in combined houses of parliaments. The reports from regions offer few surprises, ranging from 6.8% in the Arab States to 18.6% in the Americas and 39.7% in the Nordic States (Human Development Report, 2004). While women are poorly represented in the lower levels of government, they are rarer still in the upper echelons of decision making. The absence of women from structures of governance inevitably means that national, regional and local priorities - i.e. how resources are allocated - are typically defined without meaningful input from women, whose life experience gives them a different awareness of the community needs, concerns and interests from that of men. For example, a study in three countries, Bolivia, Cameroon and Malaysia showed that were women to have greater say in spending priorities, they would be far more likely to spend family and community resources for health, education, community infrastructure and the eradication of poverty as opposed to military, alcohol and gambling (World Economic Forum, 2005).

Indeed the demand for changed priorities is heard from virtually all women's organizations, from the most advanced and politically savvy in developed countries to fledging women's NGOs in developing countries. However, in order for spending and development priorities to change, there must be at least a critical mass of women represented, who are learning rules, using the rules and changing the rules of decision-making 'game' and thus having an impact on discourse and decisions at all levels, from the family, to the nation, to the international community.

Conclusion

It has been observed that so many factors constrain women from effective empowerment. This as a consequence has kept them behind in other development activities which do not only tell on them alone but also on every member and segment of the society. Above all, it causes the under-exploitation and in extreme cases loss of meaningful resources and potentials. Rural women constitute a significant proportion of developing countries' populations. By their number and the roles they play they are essential components of the society and are important in the attainment of development. They are however globally considered to be the driving force in sustainable development especially in rural societies. Nevertheless, women can still be further transformed into veritable tools for accelerating the attainment of sustainable rural development if proper attention can be paid to their circumstances and potentials. Empowering them becomes the magic wand for achieving this. Empowerment efforts should not be shouldered by the government alone but can be done through collaboration between government and other relevant organizations and bodies like the non-governmental organizations. This however will require the review of existing policies and programmes on development to promote gender equity. The paper further identifies the various ways through which they can be empowered in order to complement rural development efforts in Nigeria. This paper concludes that for effective empowerment some of the social and cultural factors that militate against effective empowerment should be addressed and more attention given to women issues and this will require the review of existing policies in order to promote gender equality.

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