

**GENDER ISSUES IN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGES FOR POVERTY
REDUCTION AMONG NIGERIA RURAL WOMEN.**

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ABSTRACT

Essentially, the paper examines gender issues in agricultural development, particularly those issues that have limited the active participation of women in agriculture. The patriarchal nature of the Nigerian traditional society and the associated norms and practices which are deep – rooted in the society and which are discriminatory of the women folk are also examined. The paper also discusses the enormous potentials of Nigerian women in agriculture, particularly the rural women farmers and the low socio-economic and political status and poverty conditions which the women suffer. It further examines the various poverty alleviation programmes of the Nigerian government which are targeted at the women. The research methodology was based on secondary sources of information and data collection. The paper concludes that Nigerian women generally and rural women in particular, have been marginalized and economically deprived as a result of the gender role prescriptions that are essentially in favour of the men. It therefore recommends gender mainstreaming as a means of ensuring that women's agenda and women as individual participants are recognized and made central in the construction of policy and programme activities. The government should also formulate friendly policies, possibly through legislation, that would grant women equal rights with men in all aspects of agricultural development.

Keywords: Gender issues, Agricultural development, Challenges, Poverty reduction and Rural women.

INTRODUCTION

Gender role differentiation in agricultural production in the African traditional society and the attendant unequal power relations between men and women have remained issues of great concern among academics, governments and development experts. Instructively, the traditional Nigeria society is patriarchal. The gender role differentiation is purposefully designed to suit the needs of the men folk and to place the women folk in a subordinate and supposedly inferior position. Ufuoku (2009)

explained that there are serious challenges against the encouragement of women in promoting agriculture and rural development, some of which include the patriarchal modes and practices that are rooted in traditions and beliefs. Nwosu (2012) also noted that women in the traditional African Society have remained victims of gender discrimination. Women are confined to such culturally approved duties as child bearing and household management. In the past, female education was relegated to the background, as the women's place was considered to be in the Kitchen. Similarly, too, even today, unlike their male counterparts, women are denied rights to their fathers' and husbands' landed properties. Again, in traditional African society, agriculture is characterized by gender division of labour according to crops and tasks. In this regard, the women are assigned those activities societally adjudged to be relatively low in status. Notably, the women in the developing countries including Nigeria constitute a major force to reckon with in the development process, especially in agriculture, though they are not often recognized.

According to Akpabio (2005):

“Women constitute half of the world's population and about 505 million of them reside in rural areas of under developed countries, where they perform increasingly indispensable roles in agricultural-rural and national development.”

Despite the fact that women in Nigeria contribute immensely to the national economy and agriculture in particular, they are the poorest in society. According to Nnadozie and Ibe (2000):

“Rural women in our country contribute significantly to the national economy, yet they are usually the poorest in the society,

less educated than men, disease ridden and occupy low social, economic and political status."

PLIGHT OF WOMEN

The Nigerian women, particularly the rural women, suffer a lot of deprivations and hardships. They spend long hours toiling on the farms and trek long distances to fetch water from the stream and firewood from the bush for household use. The women are saddled with the extra responsibility of caring for members of their households especially in female-headed households. According to Ogbuagu (2004), taking care of a string of children plus heavy farm/household workloads contributes significantly to the inadequate public and social visibility of rural women while undermining their health.

They are marginalized and occupy low socio-economic Status. Their contributions to agriculture are undervalued and not brought within the mainstream of national development. This is unlike the men folk whose contributions often remain the focus of attention.

Accordingly to Ani (2004),

"Women constitute the group at the bottom of the ladder in developing countries, especially in Africa in respect of employment, poverty, education, training and status".

There are other forms of gender discriminations against women in agriculture which have not only limited their chances of success in life but which also helped to perpetuate their poverty conditions. They include; among others:

- Denial of land rights
- Lack of access to necessary farm inputs like fertilizer, herbicides and credit facilities.
- Exclusion from extension farm information and services.
- Difficulty in acquiring appropriate and gender sensitive labour-saving tools and equipments like agro-processing and storage equipments.
- Lack of equitable opportunities in decision making process as their male counterparts.

Due to the unequal distribution of decision-making power between the men and women and the attendant marginalization of the women in typical Nigerian traditional society, the women suffer economic deprivations, illiteracy, diseases and poverty. These rural women could best be described as the poorest of the poor. They account for over 60% of the Nigerian population, but are more vulnerable than the rural men to economic

dwindling, deterioration of natural resources base and lack of basic community services (Ani, 2004).

Instructively, there is an increasing realization of the critical role of women in agriculture and of the fact that the empowerment of women is necessary for bringing about sustainable development at a faster pace (Okon, Akpabio and Nwosu, 2011). In fact, poverty in Nigeria is not only predominantly a rural phenomenon, but as Duada (2002) explained, poverty in Nigeria has a predominately female face. No matter how hard these women work, they seem to be perpetually immersed in poverty and their ability to lift themselves out of poverty conditions is hampered by deep rooted cultural norms and practices.

SOME WOMEN-ORIENTED POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES

Over the years, there has been some identifiable poverty alleviation programmes targeted at the rural poor women in particular. These include, among others:

- Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW)
- Family Economic Advancement Programme(FEAP)
- Women in Agriculture(WIA)
- Women in Nigeria (WIN)
- Family Support Programme(FSP)
- Agricultural Development Programme(ADP)
- People's Bank of Nigeria
- The National Special Programme on Food Security (NSPFS)

Admittedly, the above stated programmes have, to some extent, succeeded in drawing public attention to the plight of women, particularly the rural womenfolk. The programmes have also created greater consciousness among the women on their poverty conditions and low socio-economic and political status. Some of the objectives of the Better Life Rural Women Programme, for example, include:

- To stimulate and motivate rural women towards achieving better living standards and sensitize the rest of Nigerians to their problems;
- To mobilize women collectively in order to improve their general lot and for them to seek and achieve leadership roles in all phases of society;
- To raise consciousness about their rights, the availability of opportunities and facilities, their social, political and economic responsibility and importantly;
- To mobilize rural women for greater and improved participation in the development process (Obasi, and Oguche, 1995).

Instructively, too, the WIA programme and ADPs were created, essentially, to address the gender-related deficiencies within the existing agricultural extension programme (Ikoro, 2015).

These efforts notwithstanding, much more needs to be done through policy interventions by the government both at the executive and legislative levels. These will help to address the imbalances, injustices and inequalities that are inherent in the gender relations within the agricultural sector in Nigeria. There is an urgent need to formulate appropriate gender-friendly policies and decisions that will empower the women and enable them participate equitably in agricultural activities for increased productivity, higher income and improved standard of living.

In recent time, the concept of gender-mainstreaming in agriculture as a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all agricultural policies and programmes has been advocated, (Ityarvyar, 2008). This calls for giving the women and their male counterparts equal rights and access to land and other farm inputs. While reinforcing the concept and philosophy of gender-mainstreaming, Obinne (2002) has called for recognition of women's agenda and women as individual participants as central in the construction of policy and programme activities. According to Ani (2004):

“Unless development planners and implementers consider equally the roles, views and values of both men and women, their policies, plans and projects will only serve to increase the inequalities which existed among the gender”.

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing, the paper has examined some of the gender related factors that have limited the full contributions of women in agriculture; factors that are deep rooted in societal norms and traditional practices. The paper has also discussed the enormous contributions of women in the agricultural process which are undervalued. The consequences of gender based discriminations against the women in terms of perennial conditions of poverty, poor standard of living and low socio-economic and political status have been highlighted. However, the fact remains that women constitute a greater proportion of the population in developing nations including Nigeria. Again, these women reside in the rural areas and are predominantly engaged in agriculture and seemingly cut off from national development. What is urgently needed now is the formulation of gender friendly policies and decisions by the government that will

grant women equal rights with the men in all aspects of agricultural development. These policies and decisions will not only make agriculture more attractive to the women, but will serve as veritable strategies for reduction of poverty among the women generally and rural women in particular.

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