

Original Article

Rural Women and Socioeconomic Development in a Gender-Conscious Society: The Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract - Women have always played noteworthy roles in the socioeconomic development of both their immediate environments and in their nations at large. Specifically, the supposedly micro contributions of women dwelling in rural areas significantly enhance nations' macro socioeconomic growth, regardless of the multifarious challenges they face. Therefore, this paper focused on the rural women of Bomadi Local Government Area (LGA) of Delta State, Nigeria. Anchored on the Feminism and Motivation theories, the study investigated the activities of rural women, with the aims of finding out the sectors where they are mostly engaged and the major barriers that prevent them from realising their full potential in the process of socioeconomic development, and the level of government intervention in enhancing the women's efforts. The study adopted the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method. Data for the study was derived from a total of 30 respondents from the ten political wards spread across Bomadi LGA. One rural community was purposively selected from each of the ten wards. Three women were selected from each of these communities. Findings indicated that rural women are involved in different types of socioeconomic activities in varied degrees and extent. The results also showed that the constraints the rural women face include social, illiteracy, poverty, gender inequality, and marginalisation, amongst others. The study likewise revealed that both the State and local government authorities are not doing much to support the women in their aspirations. Based on these findings, the study recommended that the government should give soft loans, with a long payback period to these women to carry out their petty trade and businesses.

Keywords - Development, Gender, Prospects, Rural, Socioeconomic, Women.

1. Introduction

Women have always played noteworthy roles in the socioeconomic development of both their immediate environments and their nations at large. Specifically, the supposedly micro contributions of women dwelling in rural areas significantly enhance nations' macro socioeconomic growth, regardless of the multifarious challenges they face. However, due to gender consciousness and imbalance, their contributions are belittled. Gender, according to Amiriheobu and George (2020), refers to the social roles that men and women play, as well as the power dynamics that exist between them. These factors greatly impact how natural resources are used and managed. Biondo (2019) views gender as "a construction perceived through several learning, social practice and related experiences, in a thorough subtle never-ending process" (p. 34). The environmental development goals are inextricably linked to gender equality, fostering structural innovation across industries.



Efanodor-Obeten and Igechi (2022) contend that gender issues are inextricably linked to progress and development since these goals will not be attained if women are not sufficiently incorporated into the socioeconomic and political structure of the contemporary state. They contend that the post-colonial patriarchal rule that African politicians have supported has impeded progress in parts of Africa.

According to Klasen and Lamanna (2009) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development-OECD (2012), economies expand when more women are employed. They also contend that a rise in female labour force participation or a narrowing of the gender wage gap leads to quicker economic growth. According to Bajpai (2014), women today are the foundation of communities and have the greatest potential to unleash economic progress in Africa because they supply the majority of the labour while using the fewest resources.

Every society's progress and development have always been facilitated by women. Women living in rural areas of countries are one group of women who participate in development processes due to their numerous contributions from microbusinesses to the macroeconomics of nations. Due to their expertise in farming, the majority of them serve as the primary food suppliers to towns and cities. For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa, women produce more than 80% of the food, compared to 50% to 60% in Asia, 26% in the Caribbean, 34% in North Africa and the Middle East, and more than 30% in Latin America (Bajpai, 2014).

Women are represented in all sectors of the economy, including trade, politics, public service, academics, and transportation. For instance, Ibukun Olukoya, a woman, started driving for Uber because she did not want to be perceived as being idle. Oparada (2022) claims that the chatty Lagos State University undergraduate is beating the odds to capture a piece of the market. She hopes to make between N80,000 and N100,000 per week from her profession.

Be that as it may, women tend to face a lot of challenges that hamper their further contributions to society's development. Impactful and effective development can be said to start from the grassroots, mainly in rural areas, and women are always the driving force behind it. Therefore, this study highlighted some of the activities of these rural women and the problems they confronted and suggested possible ways to surmount their challenges.

Up to 50% of all people on the African continent are women (Bajpai, 2014; Africa Population, 2022). The female (% of the total population) in Nigeria was recorded at 49.31% in 2021, according to the World Bank's collection of development indicators, which was put together from officially recognised sources (as cited in Trading Economics, 2022). However, this sizable segment of the population frequently lacks the necessary social support to significantly contribute to the socioeconomic development of their countries.

Sadly, Bajpai (2014) reports that only 14% of Africa's 50% female population participates in activities that attempt to boost the continent's earnings. This demonstrates how women, who are a necessary part of strengthening the economy, frequently get the short end of the stick and face discrimination (Guanah, Dalung & Anho, 2018).

The contributions of rural women to the socioeconomic development of society are enormous, but they have not been appropriately recorded; this is a major gap this article set out to address. Hence, the objectives of this study were to find out the sectors where the rural women of Bomadi Local Government Area (LGA) of Delta State, Nigeria, are mostly engaged, ascertain the major barriers that prevent them from realising their full potential in the process of socioeconomic development, and to examine the level of government intervention in enhancing the women's efforts.

2. Theoretical Foundation

The radical feminism theory served as the basis for the study. From roughly 1967 to 1975, radical feminism represented the cutting edge of feminist theory; however, it is no longer as widely recognised as it once was, and as a result, it is no longer the only definition of the term "feminism" (Amiriheobu & George, 2020). According to this theory, women are subordinate to men because patriarchy pervades all cultures and historical eras. Radical feminists believe that male aggressiveness and control of women's sexuality are the roots of patriarchy and the subjection of women within it (Hines, 2008, as cited in Ibrahim, 2020; Jelena, 2017).

This school of feminists believes that the most fundamental type of oppression is one that affects women the most and which transcends barriers of race, culture, and economic class. They are committed to social change, change that they consider to be of fairly revolutionary proportions (Jelena, 2017). Radical feminism assesses how much the patriarchy contributes to maintaining male domination. In a patriarchal society, the viewpoint and contributions of men are valued more highly, which silences and marginalises women. Women must have the right to participate in public life alongside men on an equal basis since men frequently use their influence in politics and the economy to oppress women in society. According to radical feminism, women need to be able to make decisions for themselves, be financially independent, and be able to overcome obstacles, particularly in the public sphere.

According to Julie (2012), radical feminism is a feminist theory course that begins with the notion that the gender oppression of women is a direct result of patriarchy and that there is a fundamental conflict between the sexes. Radical feminism, therefore, blames patriarchy, which guarantees women's exclusion from the public sphere, mostly due to sexual division of labour, for their unequal status and social position (Dauda, 2004, as cited in Ibrahim, 2020). According to Julie's (2012) research, this theory is predicated on the idea that all social systems have particular types of interactive limitations; these constraints do not necessarily result in repression. This is so because the radical feminism theory challenges both the idea that males must accept particular roles based on gender and the idea that women must adopt certain duties based on their biology.

Given that radical feminism aims to ensure that women have more access to a variety of vocations and positions of decision-making authority within them, it warranted the choice of this theory for this study. Considering that women in rural areas unintentionally face discrimination due to their locations, the theory fits this study well. They must take extreme measures to obtain their fair share of empowerment that will allow them to fully participate in the socioeconomic development of society. They cannot receive what is owed to them on a golden platter.

2.1. Rural Areas of Nigeria

Anam (2011) defines a rural area as a place that is not urbanised and lacks the essential amenities of modernisation. The characteristics of "rural areas" include a spatially separated population, agricultural pursuits, a connection to the land, cultural traditions, boundary markings, cluster housing, and social homogeneity. Inadequate or non-existent development, inadequate sanitation, a lack of electricity or an epileptic electricity supply (when available), starvation, illiteracy, and a lack of proper medical services are further characteristics of rural areas. Ering (2000) and Oluwasola (2000) claim that the absence of motorable roads, primary education, recreational facilities, and pipe-borne water in Nigeria's rural areas is a major problem.

In addition, Oluwasola (2000) notes that rural areas are characterised by high rates of population growth, high rates of infant and maternal mortality, low life expectancy rates, and a peasant population that lacks modern tools to exploit the natural resources on which they live. These factors have led to high rates of unemployment and apparent underemployment, low productivity, low per capita income, and low living standards (Ering, 2000). Hamilton Sipho Simelane (2007) holds the views that:

rural areas are characterised with poor infrastructural facilities, poor access roads, poorly equipped health centres, inadequate employment opportunities, inadequate physical asserts such as land/capital, and reduced access by the poor to credit, even on a small scale and insufficient access to market where the poor can sell goods and services (p.206).

Antai (2007) asserts that rural areas are where the majority of the poor live in developing nations. Dele (2006) wants the government to make sure that portable water is available to its citizens if rural health must be improved and sustained. He asserts that a responsible government offers fundamental amenities for the benefit of its rural population.

2.2. Rural Areas / Communities

The term "rural area" or "community" has been defined differently by different authors. According to the United Nations Development Programme- UNDP (2004), rural areas are home to some of the most vulnerable populations that have continued to live in poverty as a result of social stratification or immigration. According to the report, these include rural communities, ethnic minorities, and disproportionately women and children.

According to Sule (2007), who is cited in Anam (2011), street children, residents of substandard housing, asylums, people who live beneath bridges and next to drains, and people who live in slums are those who experience the worst levels of poverty in rural areas. To sociologists, "rural areas" are those that lack urban characteristics. Although rural sociologists in America sometimes adopt the US Census Bureau's definition of rural as a region with less than 1000 people per square mile, the distinction between urban and rural is largely arbitrary. According to the 2000 Census, about 215 of the US population (59,274,000 people) lived in the rural areas of America (Griffiths, 2010).

2.3. The Exploits of Women

Every society's progress is important for the advancement of women. Women are a cornerstone of African economic development (wikigender.org, 2017, as cited in Guanah, Dalung & Anho, 2018). Women are projected to provide over 70% of agricultural labour and produce about 90% of all food. According to reports, with a value of 61.9, women's economic activity rate—a measure of the proportion of people who provide the labour supply for the production of economic goods—ranks highest among all other regions of the world, including the nations that make up the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2012) countries.

One lucid example of how women display the dignity of labour is when you go out to some markets in Nigeria; as early as 5.00 am, the women are already there arranging their wares in readiness for the day's business, especially in the market sections where raw food items are sold in bulk. Invariably, some of them might have travelled overnight to arrive at the market that early.

It is also common in most of Nigeria's highways to see women on lorry backs sitting on high heaps of bags of garri or other staple foodstuffs that they transport from one part of the country to the other. Even though there is no reliable data on women and their achievements and activities in Nigeria. In developed climes, women take up activities of their choice, such as hotel management, civil engineering, medical professionals, and the like, which are considered the exclusive preserve of men in the African continent.

Even with the inevitable place of development women occupy, they are still derided and discriminated against. For instance, Ekwelie (2005) categorise as "double standard" a scenario in which a wizard (a male witch) connotes a highly clever man, and the reality that it is the males who make the rules and create the lexicon to their benefit, and the disadvantage of the women. He points out that the English language has a limited lexicon for women,

much of which is disparaging. Men are given heroic titles such as man-of-war, points-man, chairman, and so on, while women are labeled as seductive, chesty, call-girls, and so on (Ekwelie, 2005).

Both in rural and urban centres, if women are given the opportunity, they will excel in their different areas of calling and endeavour. Women, especially Nigerians, have really been exploiting diverse fields. During Lizz Truss's short-lived period as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, she appointed Kemi Badenoch into her cabinet as her international trade secretary. Badenoch was a former minister in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Equalities Minister. Ekanem (2022) recalls that Badenoch also contested the position of UK prime minister and surprised many by reaching the last four in the contest. Badenoch was a former software engineer who worked in banking and later as a director of the Spectator magazine before being elected to the London Assembly.

Usulor (2022) reports that a Nigerian woman identified as Professor Oghenetega Ighedo is said to be the first black woman to receive a PhD in Pure Mathematics at the University of South Africa in the 149-year history of the school. Also, on October 7, 2022, Folasade Ogunsola, a professor of clinical microbiology, was appointed Vice Chancellor of the University of Lagos (UNILAG). She became the first female vice-chancellor of the school in 60 years and the 13th vice-chancellor of UNILAG (Ikeji, 2022).

Guanah (2022) recounts that when it comes to the issue of performance in different areas of life endeavours, the case of gender is irrelevant because women are always excelling in the various assignments committed into their hands. Some of the Nigerian women who are breaking the silver ceilings include Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Director-General of the World Trade Organisation, and Funmi Badejo, a Special Assistant to the United States President, Joseph Biden. She is also an Associate Counsel in the White House Counsel's Office. Bukola Smith, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of First Securities Discount House Merchant Bank; Enoch Obong was appointed in 2021 by US President Joe Biden to the post of Director of United States Trade and Development Agency; Oluwakemi Badenoch currently serves as Minister of State for Levelling Up Communities, and Minister of State for Equalities in the United Kingdom; Amina Mohammed is currently the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and others.

2.4. Review of Empirical Studies

A study entitled "Women's Equality Means Economic Development and Prosperity" revealed that achieving women's equality leads to greater equality and agency (i.e., empowerment) for the family, community, and economy as a whole in developing economies. According to Inpowercoaching.com (2013), the study asserts that women's equality is a global economic issue that both women and men should be concerned about, in addition to a social justice and human rights issue. The study also notes that numerous gender inequalities can hinder economic growth and concludes that eliminating these gaps will provide economic stability and possibilities for future generations.

According to Sabitha Devi (2015), World Bank research demonstrates that gender-equality-focused development initiatives see greater economic growth than gender-neutral ones. The importance of ensuring equitable participation for women in the global economy and taking steps to close the gender gap is emphasised. Lakshmi Puri, a prominent Indian and the Deputy Executive Director of UN Women emphasised that nations' GDP would increase exponentially with women's equal participation, at least by USD 12 trillion and at most by USD 28 trillion by 2025. This is documented in a study by the consulting firm McKinsey and UN Women (Financialexpress.com, 2017).

Throughout the world, women represent a substantial, underutilised force for Women are a powerful, underutilised force for sustainable development all over the world. Equal rights for men and women are a

fundamental component of sustainable development. It is not just a problem for women. According to studies cited in an article in *The Economist* (2006), women overall have contributed more to global GDP development over the previous few decades than either new technology or China's and India's developing economies. Therefore, ongoing attention to this issue is necessary since any success in boosting gender diversity in the workforce would have a measurable positive influence on economic growth in both developed and developing countries (PricewaterhouseCoopers - PwC, 2007). The foregoing confirms that when women are allowed to take their rightful place in the economy of any country, such a country will experience speedy economic growth.

3. Methodology

This paper focused on the rural women of Bomadi Local Government Area (LGA) of Delta State, Nigeria. The study adopted the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method. Data for the study was derived from a total of 30 respondents drawn from the ten political wards spread across Bomadi LGA. One rural community was purposively selected from each of the ten wards. Three women were selected from each of these communities. Three focused group interviews were organised at the convenience of the women participants (Chenail, 2011) while maintaining their natural grouping to ensure reliable responses. Interviews were digitally recorded for security and easy transcription of data. Data collected were sorted, configured into themes and analysed in narrative form in line with the (Yin, 2014) explanation-building method based on the study's objectives.

4. Discussion of Findings

In finding out the sectors where the rural women of Bomadi LGA are mostly engaged, the participants from three focus groups admitted that the rural women are involved in different types of socioeconomic activities to varying degrees and extents. They handle the sanitation of their villages and are also involved in other activities.

Regarding this, all the 30 women rural dwellers used as research participants admitted they are also involved in trade, mat and basket weaving, fishing, hair plaiting, snailry, garri frying, palm oil production, and farming in varying degrees and extents. This finding indicates that rural women are involved in different types of socioeconomic activities; they are not limited to a single type. This implies that women engage in diversified businesses.

The finding concurs with Adebimpe's (2012) assertion that African women, in comparison, are very different from most Western women. She argues that women have had some economic prospects within the socioeconomic system going back to pre-colonial times and that before the middle of the 20th century, African women traditionally had a larger part in society than did Western women. Women are the primary wage earners in African traditional or tribal civilization. Alongside the males, women worked in agriculture, fishing, herding, and commerce (which included creating pottery, cloth, and other crafts).

Yakubu Dogara, a former Speaker of Nigeria's House of Representatives, acknowledges women's economic and political power and says it is imperative that the country's leaders act on their promises of gender parity after years of rhetoric. He claims that nations welcoming women's involvement in politics and governance have seen rapid economic growth and development while Nigeria has lagged behind. According to the previous Speaker, "they have borne the pains of this struggle with grace just like a woman in travails," as cited by Yesufu (2017, p. 1). Only strong men are capable of healing these aches, but our strong women know how to bear them. Explaining why success still seems far-fetched, the Speaker asserts, "To my mind, that is the case because we Nigerian men are too weak and insecure" (Yesufu, 2017, p. 1).

As a second finding, while wanting to ascertain the major barriers that prevent women from realising their full potential in the process of socioeconomic development, 25 out of 30 participants enthusiastically stated during interviews that socio-cultural, transportation, lack of financing, gender discrimination, marginalisation, poverty,

and illiteracy are obstacles to women achieving their goals. These unmistakably demonstrated the numerous limitations faced by rural women. This suggests that both institutional and individual issues are present. These difficulties make it difficult for the women to stand on their own two feet. Guanah, Dalung, and Anho (2018) claim that socioeconomic, as well as cultural and societal prejudices, are some of the obstacles that prevent women from fully engaging in the economic concerns of nations, even though they have what it takes to run an economy, regardless of its size.

Also, there are no durable roads connecting their farms to bigger towns and city centres where they can sell their farm products, as most villages and settlements are in riverine areas. Sea transportation is the major means of movement, and some women have to paddle their canoes for long distances to get to their destinations. The richer ones travel by engine boats after paying very high transport fares. They are exposed daily to the risk of boat capsids, turbulent sea waves cum dare-devil armed sea pirates and bandits who parade the rivers daily.

Expressing their views on the level of government intervention in enhancing their efforts, interviews with the 30 sample participants revealed that the Delta State and Bomadi local government authorities are not doing much to support the women in their aspirations. This has implications for policy formulation. This buttresses the declaration of the World Economic Forum (2022) that it will take 151 years to close the economic participation and opportunity gender gap. This finding brings to the fore the fact that governments must augment the individual efforts of rural women to grow the economy in their small ways.

Just like the Bank of Industry is partnering with MTN to train Nigerian female entrepreneurs and also provide a credit facility for them, states and local government authorities are expected to assist women in rural areas in their socioeconomic activities. Ibemere (2022) reports that the MTN's partnership will give female-led businesses a chance to be well-equipped to grow their businesses.

Also, in a recent programme of the Voice for Empowerment Advancement Nurturing Initiative (VEANI), sponsored by the European Union and British Council, to train over 100 women on new technology in garri processing in Abua/Odual Local Council of Rivers State, the Executive Director of VEANI, Veronica Joseph, said the programme was designed to allow women in rural areas to have a strong means of livelihood, and viable income to boost food production. According to Iheamnachor (2022), Veronica Joseph said: "Women have a good potential for greatness, but they need a little push. We chose the rural women because they are the ones that generate the agricultural products we use in feeding the nation" (p.2).

Governments at the federal, state, and local government levels must assist women in rural areas in breaking even in their areas of interest. This is consistent with Nwaukoni and Omilo's (2022) claim that a country's progress is directly correlated with the personal growth of its citizens. They cite Aziza (1998), who defines national development as an advancement through gradual changes in a country's socio-political existence. Through encounters with governmental institutions, people grow educationally, socially, economically, politically, and culturally. According to Nwaukoni and Omilo (2022), human development is sustained when people are given new and better opportunities that enable them to reach their full potential.

5. Conclusion

This study looked at women's socioeconomic responsibilities in society despite their obvious marginalisation. This shows that women in rural areas are still on the margins; they rarely enjoy the government's presence in their environment. Any society's socioeconomic advancement might be hampered by the continued discrimination against women on all fronts. Despite the dire state of Nigeria's economy, women can actively participate in economic development to help the country's economy be restructured and grown. This demands that the inclusion of women be given top priority in all discussions about socioeconomic development.

5.1. Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommended that:

- i. Women in the rural areas should be encouraged to do more by way of various governments providing some basic social amenities for the rural areas. The rural areas should be linked with motorable roads so that the women can easily transport their goods to urban areas.
- ii. All forms of obstacles hindering women in rural areas from realising their socioeconomic roles in society should be removed, especially discrimination based on their gender.
- iii. The government should give soft loans, with long payback periods, to these women to carry out their petty trade and businesses.

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