
WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND FOOD SECURITY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The hidden and obvious roles which women have been playing in the area of food production in the world have been highlighted in this paper. Statistics have shown that in many countries of the world, women provide 33% of the workforce, 70% of the agricultural labour. But very disturbing is the fact that, in doing this, women face a lot of constraint and as a result their potentials were fully tapped. Although there were conferences, workshops, seminars and publication with recommendations that have contributed to a greater recognition of women's key participation in rural and other domains of development nationally and globally, this paper posits that much remains to be done. Thus, it is in the recommendation of this paper that if Nigeria really want to improve food production for the household and the economy as a whole, greater priority should be given to increasing women's participation in market production and other income generating ventures.

Key words: food, security, women, empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

The fact that women if given the chance can contribute meaningfully to the development of the nation has attracted the attention of United Nations Organisation (UNO) and individual nations. It is said that women constitute one half of humanity, yet they have been marginalised for long, relegated to the background, their contributions are unacknowledged and unappreciated. Worst of all, many of them have been subjected to unfavourable treatments and injustices that had affected their lives. For example, the female child is being seen as a weaker sex and therefore inferior to her male counterpart. From the time immemorial women were seen rather than heard, their roles being restricted to domestic circles of home-making and child bearing and rearing and as a result, their potentials were never fully exploited. Sixty percent of the poorest people in the world are women. In every society, women shoulder the lion's share of responsibility for children and the household, a responsibility they manage to combine with economic activity. Women work as farmers, employees, independent entrepreneurs and managers. The priority they give their family responsibilities is reflected in the fact that they spend a large proportion of their income on food, medical care and education for their children and other family members. Their families, in turn, make a major contribution to the local community and economy. Since balanced economic growth and food security can be achieved only if women are able to fully participate, issues on gender policy need to be revisited. Looking at the millennium development goals (MDG) 1; eradicate extreme hunger and poverty by 2015, this MDG cannot be achieved without extra support for women providing food in developing countries.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of this paper is to bring to fore, the hidden and obvious roles which women have been playing in the area of food production and also to look at constraints to effective participation of women, and then to see ways and means whereby the contributions of women can be enhanced especially in the field of agriculture that would ultimately ensure food in abundance in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This paper made extensive use of secondary data emanating from internet, periodicals, journals, and such other related literatures on women empowerment and food security.

The Concepts of Food Security and Women Empowerment

Food security has been defined in the general parlance as the availability of, and accessibility to food. This however has been defined by Food Agricultural Organisation (FAO) not only in terms of access to, and availability of food, but also in terms of resource distribution to produce food and the purchasing power to buy food where it is not produced.

Food security, in fact, has been defined by FAO not only in terms of access to, and availability of food, but also in terms of resource distribution to produce food and the purchasing power to buy food where it is not produced. Given women's crucial role in food production and provision, any set of strategies for sustainable food security must address their limited access to productive resources. Women's limited access to resources and their insufficient purchasing power are products of a series of inter-related social, economic and cultural factors that force them into a subordinate role, to the detriment of their own development and that of society as a whole. International initiatives and efforts, developed especially since the 1975 World Conference on Women in Mexico, have contributed to a greater recognition of women's key participation in rural and other domains of development. However, much remains to be done. Global availability of food must be increased in a sustainable manner. Until the beginning of this century small-scale farming and livestock breeding were barely acknowledged as fully-fledged economic sector. This despite the fact that small holder farmers supply the vast majority of the world with food. A trailblazing World Development Report published by the World Bank 2008 opened our eyes. It showed not only that most poor countries are highly dependent on agricultural sector for their economic development, but also that three-quarters of the 2.1 billion poorest people in the world are entirely dependent on agriculture for survival. The report also showed that growth in the agricultural sector contributes directly to food security and prosperity among lower income groups, who spend a much greater proportion of their income on food than wealthier groups. Focussing on greater food security in low and middle-income countries, economic empowerment and economic growth in developing countries must be enhanced. The best way to maximize the chances of achieving the objective of food security is to involve local food producers which are essentially women.

An Overview of the Hidden and Obvious Roles which Women have been Playing in the Area of Food Production in the World

In sub-Sahara Africa, studies have shown that women play a crucial role in many aspects of crop production. In what we can call gender division of labour, while men are often responsible for land clearing, burning and ploughing, women specialise in weeding, transplanting, post harvest work and, in some cases, land preparation. Both however, take part in seeding and harvesting. In household production enterprises, women tend to have the primary responsibility for the husbandry of small animals and ruminants, and also take care of large animals systems – herding, providing water and feed, cleaning stalls and milking. In all types of animal production systems, women have a predominant role in processing, particularly of milk products, and are commonly responsible for marketing. In many countries women are also responsible for fishing in shallow waters and in coastal lagoons, producing secondary crops, gathering food and firewood, processing, storing and preparing family food, and fetching water for the family. In the same vein, in many countries women provide 33% of the workforce, 70% of the agricultural labour, 60-80% of the labour to produce food for household consumption and sale, 100% of the processing for basic food stuffs, 90% of household water and firewood, 80% of food storage and transport from farm to village, 90% of hoeing and weeding work, 60% of the harvesting and marketing activities. In Nigeria, over 50% of the Nigerian rural population are women. They contribute substantially to family income as documented in Amali (1989). In her work as confirmed by our observation, women have made contributions in four major areas:

1. Provision of workforce, in which case much of the agricultural labour in Nigeria for doing the less strenuous agricultural work of weeding is made up of women. The job of weeding is left for women because it is easier than digging and making of heaps and ridges. Secondly, many farmers agree that women are more careful with the growing plants and tend to destroy fewer growing plants when weeding than men labourers.
2. In the area of food crops production, statistics by United Nations (UN) show that close to 60% of food crops are grown by women farmers.
3. In the area of food processing, most of the processed food in Nigeria is done by women especially that which is done manually. The food is produced into either semi-finished products like akamu, yam flour, cassava flour, cooking oil, gari, milled-rice, just to mention a few, or into finished foods which may be consumed as snacks, masa, cake, kulikuli, kunu, fufu, eba, pounded yam e.t.c.
4. The marketing especially retailing of most agricultural products in Nigeria is done by women. Thus, a cursory look at any Nigerian food market shows that most of the retailers are women.

Better still, the rural African women's contributions to the rural economy in terms of food security can best be illustrated with the following quotation by UNECA/FAO (1973) in Amali (1989):

Who farms Africa? Who feeds Africa? Who raises her sons and daughters?

Who has least access to the tools of development? We of UNECA/FAO team believe that the failure to acknowledge women's work in rural areas makes a mockery of rural development strategies..... The life of the rural women has always been hard, it is often cruel. She rises before dawn, walks two hours or more to fetch water, spends some ten hours in the fields during the peak season, carries food and wood home, grinds and pounds the grains cooks while nursing the babies, minds the children, cares for the men, the elders, and markets the excess produce. She works this way until the day she dies. They have a major responsibility for farm and home, but they are denied access to the knowledge and the resource to go forward, and they are often too exhausted from sheer physical labour to do so.

Issues and Problems in Women's Contribution toward Food Security in Nigeria

The foregoing has shown that women are active participants in ensuring food security the world over and in Nigeria in particular. However, in doing this, women face a lot of constraints as discussed below:-

Access to Resources: In developing countries, women have limited access to critical resources and services. Although it is true that in most developing economies both men and women farmers do not have access to adequate resources, women access is even more limited due to cultural, traditional and sociological factors that inhibit the development of food security strategies. Women also need to know about production techniques, and they need money to invest in seed, fertiliser and pesticides. Women generally, find it more difficult to gain access to the means of production. And since they do not officially own the land, women are often turned down for loans and financial advice. Fewer resources and less knowledge means that they cannot achieve optimum production.

Access to Land: Studies show that women barely own land and that their user rights are limited. In African for example, women own only 2% of the land. In many African countries, widows do not inherit the land owned by their deceased husbands. In absence of land rights, women also have less access to credit, because land is often used as collateral for loans. This inevitably means they are less motivated to invest in sustainable agriculture. Access to land is the basis of sustainable food production. Secure user rights, tenancy rights or ownership are vital for entrepreneurship. This is particularly relevant today, as land issues are high on the international agenda. Especially in Africa, large areas of land are being allocated to private investors, foreign state-owned companies and foreign governments. Local women – who already have little land and inadequate user rights – face the real risk of an even worse situation if nothing is done.

Access to Credit: For countries where information is available, only 10% of credit facilities are extended to women mainly because generally women cannot provide the collaterals required by lending institutions.

Access to Agricultural Inputs: Women's access to agricultural inputs like improved seeds, fertilisers and pesticides is limited owing to (1) They are frequently not reached by extension services (2) They are rarely members of cooperatives which often distribute government subsidized inputs to small farmers and (3) they lack the cash income needed to purchase inputs even when they are subsidized.

Access to Educational Training and Extension Service: Statistics have shown that 2/3 of 100 million illiterates in the world are women and girls. Available figures show that only 5% of extension services have been addressed to rural women, while no more than 15% of the world's extension agents are women. In addition, most extension services are focussed on cash crops rather than food and subsistence crops, which are the primary concern of women farmers and the key to food security. Empowering women is a key to achieving food security. Improving women's education is probably the single most important policy instrument to increase agricultural productivity and reduce poverty (Saito et al; 1994). Increasing women's education is a key ingredient for women's empowerment. Many studies worldwide have documented the importance of women's education for its impact on child schooling and nutrition, however, such studies did not emphasise the importance or association between women's education and their empowerment for food security.

Basic education is the foundation for developing the flexible skills needed to participate in knowledge-intensive economic activity. Those who lack access to basic education are likely to be excluded from new opportunities, and where long-standing gender gaps in education persist, women will be at increasing risk of falling behind men in their ability to participate in development.

Access to Decision-Making: Women's needs, interests and constraints are often not reflected in policy making processes and which are key to poverty alleviation, food security and environmental sustainability because they are edged out by traditions in decision making process at the household, village and national levels in most cultures.

Women have little access to the benefits of research and innovation, especially in the domain of food crops. In addition, women farmers' roles and needs are often ignored when devising technology which may cause labour displacement or increased workload.

Women Empowerment Vital for Food Security

Empowering female farmers in developing countries is crucial to solving the world's food problems in a time when food price hike looms. Rural women actually account for more than half of the food produced in the world and also play a leading role in the storage and processing of food. In Nigeria, for instance, women actually account for as much as 80 percent of the food production, as well as work at least 19 hours a day. With no economic value attached to their labour, though they contribute for more to agricultural production.

Some of the constraints of women include poor farming schedule, poor financial resources, poor storage facilities, lack of access to labour and government incentives, as well as their ignorance of recent innovations. Women are constrained by the fact that they don't have

enough access to productive resources and they don't have enough access to assets and if they did they could increase yields on farms which would have a really big impact in achieving food sufficiency of the country. Meanwhile, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), recently said that if women upped their production, the agricultural output of developing countries would rise by between 2.5 and 4 per cent, potentially slashing the number of undernourished people by 12 to 17 per cent. The agency noted that women account for around 43 per cent of agricultural labourers in developing countries.

Despite women's extensive and varied participation in agriculture, they continue to have less access to modern agriculture inputs. Consequently, Nigerian women agro-entrepreneurs work under very difficult and laborious conditions, using crude traditional technology. Technology is closely related to finance and education. There is urgent need for the provision of modern, cost effective and affordable technological equipment for the use of women. Moreover, some new technology has often been inappropriate to women's needs. There is a need to define some priority actions to promote the role of women in the economy because it has been showed that women are productive and efficient when they have access to the right technologies and opportunities. Since women contribute greatly to agricultural development through their various activities, they should be supported and appreciated by the government, relevant agencies and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Consequently, extension programmes should take proper cognisance of the interest of rural women. Modern amenities and health facilities should be provided at the rural areas to enhance the productivity of women farmers as this would enable them contribute more meaningfully to the financial and nutritional well-being of their families in particular and the nation as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Empowerment as a process of change, entailing struggles at the individual and collective levels as women take up new roles – defies traditional gender relations and creates new models for women. Linking food security to women's empowerment is thus a pre-condition to addressing the complexity of constraints faced by poor rural women in providing food for their families. Ensuring food security in a sustainable manner therefore necessarily entails improving women's status by aligning food security programme with an agenda for women's emancipation.

To this end, the researchers recommend as follow:

- Government should as a matter of policy create conditions conducive to the mobilisation of rural women groups as their cooperative licence will no doubt grant them access to the credit facilities of commercial banks
- If Nigeria really wants to improve food production for the household, greater priority has to be given to increasing women's participation in market production as well as other income generating ventures. This is because in Africa, Asia and Latin America has shown that women need for income is higher as they tend to spend a significantly higher proportion of their income than men on food for their family.

- Relevant education must be given to the rural women to enable her function effectively. And that this training has to gear towards rearing of poultry and small animals, applying fertilisers and other agricultural practices.
- Research for appropriate technology: since research has shown that research is usually carried out with male food producers in mind, which stands to reason that equipment are invented which need men to operate them, women too need small pieces of equipment which can easily be handled by women without exerting too much energy. In other words, research for appropriate technology too should be conducted with the female producers in mind.

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