
GOVERNMENT ENTERPRISE EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME: ITS EFFECT ON WOMEN DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES IN AKWA IBOM STATE

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Abstract

The study investigated the effects of government enterprise empowerment programme on women development in rural communities in Akwa Ibom State using four selected local government councils namely; Abak, Ibiono Ibom, Uruan and Etinan as case studies. The study adopted the modernization and empowerment theories which promote women empowerment and establish a link between cultural modernity with a high value for gender equality. It also adopts a simple percentage method of data analysis, especially the use of frequency tables and convenient sampling technique to collect data from 399 respondents with the aid of a 12 item questionnaire. The respondents comprised rural women empowered by government based on marital status, mode of occupation and age. The findings revealed that most rural women have benefited from government empowerment programme where free fertilizers, sewing, knitting and hand craft training programmes have been provided to rural women. On the contrary, the findings revealed that most empowerment officials have diverted funds and facilities meant to develop rural women. This is why government should put monitoring team in place to assess how empowerment schemes are executed.

Keywords: *Government, Women Empowerment, Women Development, Rural Development, Akwa Ibom State*

Introduction

Empowering women especially those in rural communities does not only increase the wealth of the nation but also bridges the gap of gender inequality where women also own means of production and can be employers of labour (Oluwatoyin, 2013). Empowerment means to give a particular task be it in the realm of business or agricultural sector. With this Garba (1999) notes that “empowerment involves the transformation of patriarchal societies through a process of enlightenment. It means assistance which maybe in form of cash, materials or training provided to women and even men to enable them to influence changes in their socio-economic status and the milieu”. Iheduru (2002) posits that women empowerment entails full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society including participation in decision making process and access to power, land, loan which are fundamental to the achievement of peace and equality in the society. Women empowerment programmes in terms of interest-free loans, provision of oil and cassava mill processing facilities, free fertilizers to farmers and good breeds of seeds like maize will potentially strengthens women’s economic decision making capacity, improve their skills and improve their economic status in the society (Garba, 1999).

According to Alemayehu (2014) government is “the system or group of people leading an organized community, generally a state”. It is the political system by which a country or a community is administered or regulated. In order for government to ensure that women are well equipped to be productive citizens of Nigeria, provision of micro credit and support to women in agricultural products like fertilizer, good breed seeds and support to women in provision of oil mill processing facilities in areas with enough palm trees are necessary. This is why Latifee (2003) refers to Micro Credit as programmes that are poverty focused and which provide financial and business services to very poor persons for generation of self-employment and income. In the views of Sule, J. and Anyigba Alinno, F. (2013) rural development is used to “denote

the actions and initiatives taken to improve the standard of living in non-urban neighbourhoods, country side and remote villages where practice of agriculture is prevalent". In order to realize effective development of women in rural communities as a result of government enterprise empowerment programme, Federal Agricultural Development projects like National FADAMA, Development Project (FADAMA), National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE), a sub-division of Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development aligning with Nigerian Agricultural Cooperative and Rural Development Bank (NACRDB) have been set up to empower rural women in the areas of agriculture, small businesses, to enable them to have access to grants, micro loans and mill processing facilities.

Regrettably, government efforts towards women empowerment through the above agencies at times are still hindered by some factors and attitude of corrupt officials involved in the discharge of empowerment functions as some divert some of the items and funds. An empirical research has been done to showcase government enterprise empowerment programme towards developing rural women in Nigeria, especially in Akwa Ibom. This study will unravel the conception and views of rural women in some selected local government areas in Akwa Ibom State towards access to grants, interest-free loans and economic empowerments on the provisions of oil mill and cassava processing facilities and agricultural facilities.

Women Underdevelopment in Rural Communities in Nigeria Especially in Akwa Ibom State

Women act as the fulcrum and backbone to every community since they participate in economic activities for their self-reliance, children upbringing, farming, food production and preservation (Ukommi, 2014). Ayithey (2005) posits that "women's economic activities in Africa fall mainly into two categories; market trading and subsistence agriculture or farming". However, the inadequacy of mechanisms to transform these small scale businesses into formal economic structure and having access to existing supportive facilities and equipment becomes the major problem faced by these women. Nwanesi (2006) reporting broadly on Africa submits that "there are more than two hundred million women in Africa involved in different economic activities, but one group of women almost entirely peculiar to West Africa and particularly Nigeria is that of the market women".

However, lack of capital, especially at the start up stage of business is one of the challenges faced by market women; and women engaged in mechanized farming, where they lack funds to finance their businesses. Another cause of women underdevelopment in Africa is the sociological factor of patriarchy where most communities in Nigeria especially in most ethnic groups in Akwa Ibom State for example, Abak Local Government Area in Anaang tribe do not see women as heirs of their parents' property. Properties are left in the hands of men to be heir of their father and mother's property thereby thwarting the development of women in the society.

Besides the above factors, the inability of government through its agencies and enterprises to provide support in the form of grant, interest free loan, empowerment facilities like palm oil and cassava processing machines, corruption on the part of the implementers, family burden, cultural restrictions where women cannot engage in certain occupations like fishing in rivers in riverine communities like Ibeno in Akwa Ibom even mining of mineral resources in the sea has contributed to women underdevelopment. Oluwatoyin (2013) adds that "husband influence and illiteracy especially in the interior villages are also causes of women underdevelopment in most zones in Nigeria".

Micro Credit Scheme and Women Empowerment

In order to ensure women development and rural development in general since women constitute the greater number in the population of most communities in Nigeria (Nwanesi, 2006). It is pertinent to seek suitable alternatives towards poverty reduction and promotion of gender equality to ensure women are part of decision making and are economically independent. Taking into consideration the government enterprise empowerment programme in Nigeria, the Federal Government and even some States have set up various group to empower women like the National FADAMA Development Project, Better Life for Rural Women

Programme which was introduced by the former First Lady Maryam Babangida, Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE) to provide skills, inputs and start-up capitals to help develop women especially those in the rural areas. Based on the researcher's standpoints, the National FADAMA Development Project had equipped hundreds and thousands of women in Abak Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State with fertilizers, maize seeds, cassava stems to boost agricultural yield. Support in terms of free interest loans were given to farmers at the time the FADAMA project was functioning properly.

Hence, in Ibiono Ibom Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State, most oil mills, cassava mills still operational in some villages like, Oko-Ita were supported by government to aid the women in oil and cassava processing to boost their economic standard. The Federal Government through the Bank of Agriculture (BOA) has supported women with Micro Credit Schemes. In the case of Akwa Ibom State, the Akwa Savings Investments and Loans have also supported rural women with Micro Credit Loans to expand their businesses especially in the aspect of trading.

With this, Yunus and Jolis (2013) submit that "a review of several studies on the impact of micro credit schemes on women empowerment shows that Micro Credit Schemes have significantly increased women's security, autonomy, self-confidence, and status within the household". Though our concern is on government enterprise empowerment programmes on women development, there is need to demarcate between 'women's practical needs' (economic empowerment) and 'strategic gender needs' (socio-political empowerment). Mayoux (2003) posited that women's practical need include food, health, water, fuel, child care while strategic gender needs entail a combination of women's micro-enterprise activities, increase in income generation, increase wage employment, mobility and networking, status and ability to negotiate gender relations". The Micro Credit Scheme acts as an entry point for a wider strategy for women's economic and socio-political empowerment as it functions as a virtuous spiral and a springboard toward a holistic empowerment of powerless women.

Effect of Government Enterprise Empowerment Programme towards Women Development in Rural Communities in Nigeria

There is an urgent demand to strengthen and encourage effective and adequate implementation of policies for rural development programmes especially as it concerns women. This will help to reduce the challenges of rural women development which is of great concern to the three levels of government in Nigeria. With the government enterprise empowerment on women development in rural communities, the issue of rural-urban migration will reduce. There will be more opportunities for the youths and young women to work (Okwe, 2019). As a result of government empowerment programmes women are exposed to new skills in the rural communities. For example most women farmers are opportune to use modern farming facilities like sprayers to kill insecticides and to spray chemicals that will enhance rapid growth of farm products. With this even in the dry season, there still exist abundant food for consumption for the teeming population in Nigeria. Alemayehu (2014) adds that "the effect of government enterprise empowerment programmes has encouraged women in mass participation in areas of agriculture where food processing machines are issued to some women to empower them". Afolabi (2004) in the same vein posits that "with government empowerment most rural women who may not afford fee to acquire skills have benefited in hair dressing and weaving, sewing and knitting, hand craft and creative art".

Challenges of Government Enterprise Empowerment Programme on Women Development in Rural Communities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

There are many challenges faced by women in the Nigerian society. Some of the barriers faced by rural women in benefitting from Government Enterprise empowerment programmes are:

- unequal allocation of grants as a result of gender inequality where men may be given greater percentage of grants;
- high cost of service delivery and poor transport network faced by government empowerment agencies on safe delivery of farming facilities, processing machines and skill acquisition facilities;

- cultural factors such as patriarchy where women are mostly seen as house wives and many are not allowed to strive for economic Independence.
- corruption of government empowerment administrators who may divert grants, part of interest-free loans, skill acquisition facilities like sewing machines. Nwakeze and Oguniyi (2014) lay it bare that “research evidences show that some of the loans are mostly diverted politically motivated and sponsored.

Theoretical Framework

There are several theories that can be used to understand government enterprise empowerment programmes on women development. However, this work focuses on the premises of **Modernization and Empowerment Theories**. Modernization can be felt in many spheres like economic modernization, cultural modernization, and political modernization among others. Bell (1999) is of the view that “modernization theory which utilizes a human development approach holds that adoption and diffusion of modern cultural attitudes such as gender egalitarianism and increased economic empowerment have the potentiality to increase self-reliance, improve human choices, democratic rights and self-actualization”.

Also, another theory underpinning this study is the empowerment theory. The theoretical foundations of empowerment relate to two transitions, On the one hand are those who see empowerment as something related to founding and growing a business enterprise (Schumpeterian entrepreneurs) (Azam, 2016). On the other hand, are those who see an opportunity and gather all the resources required to pursue it (Kirznerian entrepreneurs). The different perspectives put forward by various schools of empowerment thought have provided insight into empowerment tendencies. However, based on the above categorizations two broad schools of empowerment thoughts emerged: The Empowerment Traits also known as Psychological Characteristics School of thoughts and the Managerial Skills School of thought. The Empowerment Traits School believes that entrepreneurs are ‘born’ and that the behaviour of an individual is determined by his/her attitudes, values, beliefs and drives. This indicates that certain values and needs are precondition for empowerment. This essential approach has led many people to assume that entrepreneurs are ‘born’ not ‘made’ and that it is not possible to teach empowerment (Azam, 2016).

Following this theory, increased economic development associates with a more broad based distribution of educational and occupational resources. The theory promotes women empowerment and establishes a link between cultural modernity and publics that value greater gender equality. The theory promotes autonomy of women where skills rural women will acquire through government empowerment programme grants and agricultural facilities will turn them into employers of labour.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive research design that is, reporting phenomena as observed in the population studies without manipulating the data. The population of this study comprised all the rural women in the selected local government in Akwa Ibom State with an estimated population of 84,206 (National Bureau of Statistics 2021). The sample size of the study was 399 rural women found in the area. Four (4) local government were selected namely Abak, Ibiono Ibom, Uruan, Etinan using convenient sampling technique to select the local government and simple random sampling technique was used to select the study participant. The main instrument used to collect information from the respondents was a 12-item Questionnaire. The questionnaire had an opening letter of confidentiality to ascertain the trust of the respondents with two sections A and B. Section A was designed to obtain demographic data of respondents while section B was designed to obtain information about the variables.

The researcher visited the selected rural communities, after obtaining a verbal permission, from the village heads. The researcher was accompanied by the women leaders in the various villages of the community who helped in locating the beneficiaries of government empowerment programmes. The purpose of the study was explained to them with proper guidance on how to fill the questionnaire before they were distributed. Questions were entertained and clarifications were made to reduce errors in the filling of questionnaires. The data generated from copies of questionnaires were summarized and analysed using

descriptive analysis for the observation scale, simple percentages were used to answer the research questions.

Data Presentation and Discussions

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

(N = 399)		
Age	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Below 25 years	76	19.05
26 – 30 years	85	21.30
31 – 35 years	94	23.56
36 – 40 years	62	15.54
41 – 45 years	52	13.03
46 and above	30	7.52
Total	399	100
Marital status	Frequencies (n)	Percentage (%)
Single	98	24.56
Married	156	39.10
Widow	145	36.34
Total	399	100
Mode of Occupation	Frequencies (n)	Percentage (%)
House Wives	123	30.83
Business Women	23	5.76
Civil Servants	133	33.33
Farmers	120	30.08
Total	399	100

Source: Field data (2021)

The result in Table 1 above, shows that most of the respondents were within the age bracket of 31 - 35 years with a frequency of 94 (23.56%) while the age brackets of 25 years and below, 26 - 30years, 31 - 40years, 41 - 45years and 46 and above had 76 (19.05%), 85(21.30%), 62(15.54%) and 30(7.52%) respectively. The first finding in this study was the level of participation in agricultural enterprise. This is due to the fact that most rural women perceive that government empowerment have positive influence in their economic status.

It was also found that 98 (24.56%) respondents were single women while 156 (39.10%) were married women and finally 145 (36.34%) were widows who the need to sustain their families. The result is consistent with the observation of Garba (1999) who maintained that free fertilizer, seeds like maize given to farmers in rural communities will potentially strengthen rural women economic status in the society. It therefore implies that majority of the women in this area that were empowered are married women. It was further found that only 123 (30.83%) respondents were house wives who benefited from the government empowerment while 23 (5.76%) respondents were Civil servants, 133 (33.33%) were Business women and 120 (30.08%) were farmers. It therefore means, that majority of rural women who benefited from government empowerment programme were business women.

Table 2:

- Percentage analysis of level of participation of rural women in agricultural empowerment programme.
- Percentage Analysis of benefits of Government Enterprise empowerment programme towards rural women development in trade transaction.
- Percentage analysis of rural women having access to government empowerment programme in the area of sewing and knitting.

(N=399)

S/N	Items	Yes%	No%
1	Do you ever participate in agricultural empowerment Programme?	158 (39.60%)	241 (60.40%)
2	Has the government organized any agricultural empowerment programme in your community before?	340 (85.21%)	59 (14.76%)
3	Have you received any agricultural products from government during their empowerment programme?	105 (26.32%)	294 (73.68%)
4	Have you registered in any government agricultural enterprise?	149 (37.34%)	250 (62.66%)
5	Does government always give women free interest loan as empowerment?	288 (72.18%)	111 (27.82%)
6	Have you ever benefited from government grant as empowerment?	104 (26.07%)	295 (73.93%)
7	Have you received any empowerment scheme like provision of oil and cassava mill processing facilities from government?	44 (11.03%)	355 (88.97%)
8	Did government enterprise empowerment improve your economic status?	214 (53.63%)	185 (46.37%)
9	Have you ever had access to government empowerment programme in the area of sewing and knitting?	226 (56.64%)	173 (43.36%)
10	Have you ever benefited from government grant as an empowerment programme in your community?	104 (26.07%)	295 (73.93%)
11	Have you received empowerment in the form of provision of oil and cassava mill processing facilities from government?	44 (11.03%)	355 (88.97%)
12	Has government enterprise empowerment programme improved your economic status?	214 (53.63%)	185 (46.37%)

Source: Field data (2021)

The result in the Table 2 above shows that 158 (39.66%) respondents agreed that they always participate in agricultural empowerment in their community while 241 (60.40%) respondents refused. The result further shows that 340 (85.21%) respondents agreed that government do organized agricultural empowerment programme in their community while 59 (14.79%) respondents refused, 105 (26.32%) respondents indicated that they have received agricultural products from government during the empowerment programme while 294 (73.68%) respondents refused. The result also shows that only 149 (37.34%) agreed that they have registered in some government agricultural enterprise while 250 (62.66%) respondents indicated otherwise. Again, the result in the table above shows that only 288 (72.18%) respondents agreed that government always gives them free interest loan as empowerment while 111 (27.82%) refused. In item two, 104 (26.07%) respondents agreed that they have benefited from government grant in their community while 295 (73.93%) respondents do not. The result also shows that only 44 (11.03%) respondents agreed that they have received empowerment scheme like provision of oil and cassava mill in the community while 355 (88.97%) respondents refused. Finally, the result in item four shows that 214 (53.63%) respondents agreed that government enterprise empowerments have improved their economic status while 185 (46.37%) respondents did not.

However, it was found that 226 (56.64%) respondents agreed that they have access to government empowerment programme in the area of sewing and knitting while 173 (43.36%) respondents do not. This further shows that only 104 (26.07%) respondents agreed that they have benefited from government grant as an empowerment in their community while 295 (73.93%) refused. It also indicates that 44 (11.03%) respondents agreed they have received empowerment scheme like provision of oil and cassava mill processing facilities from government while 355 (88.97%) respondents said No. Another also shows that only 214 (53.63%) respondents said government enterprise empowerment always improve their economic status while 185 (46.37%) refused.

The result further revealed the benefits of government enterprise empowerment programmes towards rural women development in trade transaction. This result conforms to Latifee's (2003) report that Micro Credit is a programme that is poverty focused and provides financial and business services to very poor persons

for the generation of self-employment and income. Finally, the findings revealed the access to government empowerment among rural women in the area of sewing and knitting. This result aligns with the study of Afolabi (2004) who maintained that with government empowerment, most rural women who may not afford fee to acquire skills have benefited in sewing and knitting, crocheting.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is deduced that the role played by government enterprise empowerment programmes toward women development in rural communities in Nigeria cannot be undermined. Based on this axiomatic fact as research findings have unravelled, the government empowerment programmes have created positive impacts in developing women. Considering the result of this study, with government empowerment programmes, rural women who were financially handicapped to acquire skills in the realm of sewing and knitting besides others, procure fertilizers to improve crop yields, procure cassava and palm oil processing facilities even to afford capital start-up businesses in the area of trade have been given relief.

Notwithstanding the challenges encountered in the implementation of government enterprise empowerment programmes as a result of the officials of some empowerment agencies like National FADAMA Development Project, National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE) diverting funds and empowerment facilities meant to empower rural women thereby crippling women development, most women have become employers of labour as a result of this empowerment. Hence, government should not relent its efforts in women empowerment, no matter the challenges.

With regard to the findings and conclusion reached in this study, the following recommendations have been proffered:

- Government should make a concerted effort to ensure that all rural women benefit from its empowerment programmes rather than marginalizing some women.
- In cases of insincerity of purpose, corruption, embezzlement of funds and diversion of empowerment facilities by government enterprise empowerment officials, the federal government should put in place monitoring teams and urge concerned citizens to act as watch dogs toward activities of empowerment officials.
- Government and the stakeholders should increase the opportunities for empowerment. There should be an increase of opportunities for continued participation of both urban and rural unemployed persons in productive work. Efforts should be made to encourage unemployed persons to engage in self-empowerment, which would not only enable them to do things at their own pace but would also encourage them to introduce innovations for productivity and profit. In addition, the provision of opportunities for job training and continued education would enhance their self-employability.
- Women education should be encouraged because the facilities and grants provided for women to improve their skills will be a waste if there is no adequate knowledge of how to use the machines or utilize the finances.

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