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POVERTY AND THE COPING STRATEGIES OF RURAL WOMEN IN AKWA IBOM STATE

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Abstract

The problem of rural poverty especially as it affects women has attracted the attention of scholars, governments and non-governmental organizations nationally and internationally due to the negative consequences it has on both women and the society everywhere around the globe. Strategies are being adopted by governments, people and non-governmental agencies to minimize or alleviate the menace of rural poverty. Yet rural poverty persists. The study was therefore an attempt to look at the strategies adopted by rural women in Akwa Ibom State to deal with the problems of poverty. The study builds on data sought and obtained from observations, questionnaires and interviews. Findings in the study indicate that the coping strategies adopted by rural women had resulted in the alleviation of poverty. Also, government policies have not provided any significant reduction of poverty in rural areas. The paper concludes by making a number of recommendations.

Introduction

The problem of rural poverty especially as it affects women has attracted global attention over the years. Much concerns border on the deplorable conditions of women which have forced them to lead a lifestyle that is best described as below the margin of human dignity. In Nigeria, women are considered to be at the lowest rung of the poverty ladder (Iheduru, 2002). This implies the vulnerability of women to the incidence of poverty, some of which Ekong (2003) identified as poor health, high susceptibility to health problems, poor housing, low life expectancy and inability to feed well. These factors have combined in one form or the other to make escape from poverty very cumbersome for defenseless women especially those residing in rural areas where social infrastructures are insufficient or lacking.

The need for improving the socio-economic status of women had long been recognized. This had prompted several policy

measures geared toward the socio-economic development of the population. Since she obtained impendence in 1960 successive governments in Nigeria had initiated strategies targeted at improving aggregate welfare of the citizens. It is however, obvious that the various strategies embarked upon by governments to tackle poverty have not resulted in any significant reduction of poverty, as it has continued to soar unabated. Factors that account for the failure of these strategies in stemming poverty problems are well documented in the literature (Ajakaiye and Adedeye, 2001). These include poor conceptualization of the strategies, emphasis on top-down approach rather than bottom up, corruption and non-sustainability of the projects.

Notwithstanding the fact that poverty alleviation strategies have failed substantially to alleviate the incidence of poverty, rural women in Nigeria, and Akwa Ibom State in particular are unrelenting in their efforts to eke out a living. Studies have shown that these women engage themselves in a variety of livelihood activities to cope with poverty, by securing the goods and services needed by their households. Little, however, is known about these strategies. The study will be useful in providing understanding into women's notion of poverty, in addition to exploring the various interventions engaged by them in dealing with poverty.

WOMEN AND POVERTY

According to IFAD Rural Poverty Report (2001), three quarters of the poor live in rural areas and depend on agriculture and related activities. They are often small-scale operators, tenants and not only are they locked out of modern amenities; their incomes are only minimal to meet basic needs (Izugbara and Ukwai, 2002). Also, in some developing countries females are often exposed to excess poverty-induced nutritional and health risks within households (Dreze and Sen, 1989).

Modo (1997) noted that over a third of Nigeria's rural population lived below the poverty line. They are vulnerable to a broad-spectrum of problems ranging from poor health to insufficiency in obtaining basic necessities of life. However, what is more worrisome is that rural poverty tends to be gender related (Alarape 1996). She argued that even though women are and still

remain the productive force in the economics of rural areas, their conditions are not better than those of their male counterparts. The implication is that women are worst affected by the incidence of poverty. In support of this view, Bardham (1995) noted that over the past two decades researchers have brought into focus, the predicament of vulnerable groups in society, such as women, for whom escape from poverty is very cumbersome. Moshen (1991) also noted that people more likely to be poor and malnourished in third world countries are women and children.

It has been observed that women face institutional and cultural constraints in overcoming poverty. The findings of a National Consumer Survey in Nigeria, carried out by World Bank (1996) confirms that institutional, regulatory and cultural barriers kept women disadvantaged relative to men. Women are denied jobs in the labour market, and even if they manage to obtain job, they are often made to take up casual or low paying ones.

The poverty situation of rural women becomes so precarious and pathetic when women take up positions of household heads due to circumstances beyond their control, such as divorce, separation or death of husbands. Besides, their efforts to overcome poverty are often crippled by lack of collaterals to obtain financial assistance from credit facilities, since they may not have land rights to do so.

METHODOLOGY

The population for the study covers only female respondents residing within the study area. This includes rural women of different ages, occupations, marital statuses and educational background. The reason for choosing only female population is that since the scope of the study is limited to women, they are in a better position to provide more reliable data for arriving at a useful conclusion of the study.

The study was conducted in Akwa Ibom State which has thirty-one local government areas. To obtain a sample size of six hundred (600) respondents, a multi-stage sampling technique was employed. The first stage involved the use of cluster and simple random sampling to select six (6) local government areas; two from each of the three Senatorial Districts in Akwa Ibom State. The local government areas chosen were Itu, Oron, Ikot Abasi, Ibeno, Essien

Udim and Etinan. A second stage was the sampling of four (4) villages from each of the local government areas chosen using cluster and simple random sampling techniques. Thus, a total of twenty-four villages were chosen. The third stage involved the selection of households from each of the twenty-four (24) villages. From each of the villages, twenty five (25) respondents were systematically selected after every five (5) households in such a manner that only one (1) respondent came from a household. Thus, a total of six hundred (600) respondents were used for the study.

In order to have effective communication with the respondents since some of them were not properly educated; the researcher employed the services of two Ibibio speaking research assistants with sufficient knowledge in the techniques of data collection. The research assistants helped to interpret the questions to the respondents and recorded their responses.

During the period of the study, the researchers visited the study areas several times and made a number of observations concerning the inhabitants, their lifestyles and the impinging effects of poverty on them and by so doing appreciated the techniques adopted to cope with poverty. The researchers also looked at the availability of infrastructure and the projects undertaken by government to help alleviate poverty.

DATA PRESENTATION

Table 1- Socio-economic characteristics of the respondents

VARIABLES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1. AGE		
21-30	120	20
31-40	130	21.7
41-50	150	25
51-above	200	33.3
TOTAL	600	100
2. EDUCATIONAL LEVEL		
Primary	150	25
Secondary	110	18.3
Tertiary	40	6.7
Non-Educated	300	50
TOTAL	600	100
3. MARITAL STATUS		
Single	200	33.3
Married	250	41.7
Divorced	50	8.3
Widowed	100	16.7
TOTAL	600	100
4. MONTHLY INCOME		
Below N1000	181	30.2
N1100-N2000	243	40.5
N2100-N3000	88	14.7
N3100-N4000	60	10
Above N4000	28	4.6
TOTAL	600	100
5. POOR AND NON POOR		
Poor	554	92.3
Not poor	46	7.7
TOTAL	600	100
6. OWNERSHIP OF GOODS		
Bicycle	200	33.3
Radio	111	18.5
Television	60	10.0
Fridge	21	3.5
Table fan	18	3.0
Car	2	0.3
None	188	31.4
TOTAL	600	100

Out of 600 respondents interviewed, 200(33.3%) fall within the age bracket of 51 years and above while 120(20%) fall within the ages of 21- 30 years. The implication is that poverty affects more the respondents of the age bracket of 51 years above, because, by this time, they might be too weak to engage in economic activities due to old age or sickness. FOS (1999) revealed that older farming households have more poverty incidence than younger farming household.

With respect to education, 300 (50%) of the respondents have no formal educational background to their credit whereas only a minimal 40 (6.7%) respondents have procured tertiary education. Lack of education accounts for the inability of the rural people to adapt to new and modern technology, access innovative and pragmatic ideology capable of revolutionizing their lives, as well as be equipped with necessary qualifications needed for advancement in society. Hence, they find themselves quite unable to do much to overcome their unpleasant situations.

The marital status of the respondents reveals that 250 (41.7%) are married whereas 200 (33.3%) are single ladies, closely followed by the widowed who constitute 100 (16.7%). Interestingly, the impact of poverty seems to be more demanding on rural women who are without husbands, especially on widows who may have children to cater for, and with little or no support from friends and relatives.

The monthly income profile of the respondents shows that 181 (30.2%) earn below ₦1000 each month while 243(40.5%) earn between ₦1100- ₦2000, 88(14.7%) earn between ₦2100- ₦3000, about 60(10%) earn between ₦3100-₦4000. it is only negligible 28 (4.6%) that earn above ₦4000 per month. This depicts the terrible state of rural poverty, given the meagre income of the rural dwellers.

Furthermore, 554 (92.3%) considered themselves as being poor while only 46(7.7%) disagreed to being poor. These figures show the extent to which poverty is common in the study area. The incidence of rural poverty in the study area was further ascertained by assessing the ownership of durable household goods by the respondents. 200 (33.3%) of the respondents had bicycles. 111(18.5%) radio; 60(10%) television; 21(3.5%) fridge; 18(3%) table fan; 2 (0.3%) car; and about 188(31.4%) had non of these items in

their households. It is pertinent to note that the durable good listed herein are regarded as luxuries by significant proportion of rural dwellers. The findings, however, confirm that poverty is real in the rural areas of our society.

Table 2- Coping strategies adopted by the respondents

COPING STRATEGIES	YES(%)	NO(%)
Credit Association	220(36.7)	380(63.3)
Farming	430(71.6)	170(28.4)
Fishing	110(18.3)	490(81.6)
Social network/Exchange of items among neighbours	400(66.6)	200(33.3)
Hired Labourer	93(15.5)	507(84.5)
Reduction in Spending	450(75.0)	150(25.0)
Trading	300(50.0)	300(50.0)
Giving out wards as househelps	180(30.0)	420(70.0)

Table 2 above shows the respondents engagement in coping activities. Out of 600 respondents, 220(36.7%) are members of credit associations or "osusu". Credit associations are formed when women participants make regular and stipulated contributions on weekly or monthly basis to a common fund which is later given out in turn to such contributors in part or in whole. The contribution given to a member enables her establish a small scale business. Members of credit association could be of the same family, members of the same trade, age-group and so on.

430(71.6%) of the respondents also take to farming as a way out of poverty although they farm at a very subsistent level (providing barely enough to feed only the nuclear family). Subsistence level of farming is boosted by fragmentation of land which is a common feature in farm practices in the rural areas of Akwa Ibom State. Understanding that poverty can not be successfully tackled under the land tenure system, rural women are advancing their farming practices through the operation and membership of Farm Multi-Purpose Co-operatives Societies (FMCS). Some rural women admitted that ever since they became

members of Farm Multi-Purpose Co-operatives Societies (FMCS) their levels of income have continued to soar or better still, remained at a constant level.

Further, the table shows that 110(18.3%) of rural women defied turbulent waves and other sea hazards to actively engage in fishing which, hitherto, was exclusively the occupation reserved for men. They do so in response to their survival instincts triggered by the harsh and poignant conditions of poverty. Fishes caught are either sold to customers while still fresh, or are processed (in the form of drying) to avoid decay while being preserved for future use. Apart from providing income for rural women, fish is a good source of protein which families so much require for sustaining themselves on daily basis.

Also, about 400(66.6%) of the respondents saw social network as a coping strategy against poverty. In the rural areas, there are close-knit social relationships among women who are neighbours, and these stimulate and sustain efforts aimed at suppressing the scourge of poverty. Evidence abound in the study area that women habitually exchange multifarious favours across households, ranging from the borrowing of money, foodstuffs to the exchange of farmland on demand. Although such practices are age-long, rural women are always inclined to helping one another to overcome problem of any sort. For instance, the study witnessed women rallying round neighbours with relief materials and farm produce during period of distress. Women who are sick or baffling with any special problem are always the greatest beneficiaries of benevolent acts.

About 93(15.5%) of the respondents migrated to urban centers to work as hired labourers, after which they returned back to their homes. These women are often the targets of greedy contractors, who capitalized on their disadvantaged positions to exploit their (women) labour with inadequate rewards or compensations. Notwithstanding the fact that the labour assigned these women were tasking and demanding, they did not seem to bother much provided they went home with something at the end of the day. Some women confessed, however, that they did not enjoy even for a second doing the kind of menial jobs they were often engaged in; attributed survival instinct as the single motivator that

had always seen them through all odds and inconvenient jobs. Sitting at home and doing nothing was not a good alternative, they added.

The study further reveals that rural women in the study area cope against poverty by devising short-cuts, as revealed by 450(75%) of the respondents. It means strategically devising alternatives to satisfy most crucial needs. It involves the drastic reduction in spending and consumption. The premise guiding its workability is "half bread is better than none", which, unfortunately, has become a familiar rhetoric amongst rural dwellers. It was evident during the study that some rural women ate once a day, bought low quality or inferior goods, feasted on spoilt or rotten foods etc, just for the purpose of saving money for future use.

300(50%) of the subjects engage in trading activities with the belief that they will always have cash in hand, no matter how little, to meet their basic needs. Produce from farms such as cassava, okro, fruits are sold to customers on important market days. They also prepare snacks, such as akara, moi-moi which they give to their wards to hawk around the neighbourhood. To encourage the wards to work harder, the mothers would ensure that they receive incentives from time to time.

Further, the study shows that 180(30%) of rural women, mostly those who are household heads often give their children or wards out as house-helpers to friends, relatives or to complete stranger in return for gifts, cash and other benefits. This is done with the intention of relieving themselves of the burden of poverty. They do so with wisdom knowing that with fewer months to feed, chances of weathering the storms of poverty appear high.

It is important to note that the respondents were asked if the coping strategies adopted had brought increase in their annual income. 398(66%) respondents agreed that their annual income increased as a result of their engagement in coping strategies, while 202(33.7%) opined that their annual income did not increase even though they engaged in coping strategies. Thus, the importance or significance of coping activities to the economic lives of the respondents cannot be over-emphasized.

However, on their assessment of government poverty alleviation programme 310(51.7%) respondents were not satisfied

with government poverty alleviation programmes whereas 290(48.3%) expressed satisfaction. The implication is that government poverty alleviation programmes are yet to be fully appreciated by rural dwellers due to high incidence of poverty.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Following the research, data presentation and analysis, the researcher now presents these important findings:

- a. Poverty is pervasive among the female population residing within the rural areas as was evident during the study. Unlike their male counterparts, women are indirectly sentenced to life of poverty due to certain cultural practices that seem to work against their socio-economic advancement.
- b. Furthermore, findings betray poverty as a potent factor hindering socio-economic development of rural people, thereby frustrating hope and expectation of a promising future. In short, poverty muddles the aspirations of those considered poor, preventing them from enjoying a decent or dignified life.
- c. The rural women are unrelenting in their efforts to cushion the impact of poverty on their lives and those of their families. They endeavour to devise a coping strategy such as taking the short-cuts; becoming members of co-operative and thrift societies, involvement in menial jobs such as carrying blocks to building sites, farming, small-scale trading, fishing and participation in daily savings
- d. It is also apparent from the study that government efforts to alleviate poverty are yet to be a reality even though large sums of money are known to have been budgeted to provide infrastructures in the rural areas over the years.

In the course of the research, it was discovered that the coping strategies adopted by rural women had mitigated to certain extent the impact of poverty among them. Rural women are sure of their daily bread (even if it be deficient in nutritious value) as they engage in one form of activity or the other. Though, some coping strategies are so strenuous on rural women, there seem not to be any suitable alternative since they are motivated by the philosophy of "man must survive". Hence, rural women eke out a living without

minding how odd the job is, provided proceeds accruing from it are utilized in solving their problems and needs

The study also revealed that government programmes and policies had not directly tackled the problem of poverty even though government had been budgeting large sums of money or fund for the provision of infrastructure in the rural areas over the years. The problem is either the government had not taken enough time to study the special needs of rural women before imposing any project on them, or government had failed to put proper machinery in place to ensure that projects meant for the development of rural women are properly executed for the overall benefit of those concerned. Failure of government to overhaul its policies toward rural development and take a proactive step in meeting the needs of rural populace will continue to undermine poverty alleviation programmes in rural areas.

Findings from the study show that poverty affects the social life and health of women. This is due to the fact that when people are poor they are not likely to afford certain social infrastructures and leisure activities that could boost their social interaction processes in positive ways. It was evident in the study that poor rural women exhibited inferiority complex and fear during interaction, in addition to shunning interaction with those considered above their class.

CONCLUSION

Based on discussions with the respondents, it is asserted that inequality in decision taking is related to women economic statuses. A situation where rural women do not have a say in matters affecting them is detrimental to their well being and aspirations. It is a well known fact that cultural values work against involvement of women in decision taking in the study area. Consequently, women cannot take decisions independently without the consent of their husbands, on key issues that concern their economic advancement. Rural women should be encouraged to be active participants in taking decisions that affect them. Cultural limitation imposed on women and routinely administered by their counterparts should be discouraged immediately if rural poverty must be checked.

Furthermore, there should be intensified efforts on the part of governments to develop the rural communities through the construction of roads, establishments of business enterprises, provision of electricity and pipe borne water. This will attract investors to rural areas, thereby creating the platform for economic transformation of the areas.

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