



Original Research Paper

Rural Women Agri-preneurship Opportunities for Poverty Reduction and Improved Livelihood in Imo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined the economic role of rural women agri-preneurs in poverty reduction and improved livelihood in Imo State, Nigeria. The specific objectives were to identify rural agri-preneurship opportunities in the area; examine effects of agri-preneurship opportunities on poverty reduction and improved livelihood, identify barriers to rural women agri-preneur business growth, and identify strategies for solving the problems. A total of 250 rural women agri-preneurs were randomly selected from a list of 2500 registered women farmers of the All Farmers Association of Nigeria (AFAN). Data were collected with the aid of a structured questionnaire and analyzed using percentages and mean. Results showed that the agri-preneurship opportunities in the states included crop production, fish farming, poultry production, charcoal making, zobo drink making, rabbit/grass cutter rearing, snail farming among many others. It was observed that most of the respondents made more money/income from their sales as indicated by a mean (M) response of 3.75, sent children to better schools (M= 3.05), purchase household items (M = 2.80) among others. The following barriers were identified –transportation problems, limited access to finance, lack of access to land among others. To address these problems, gender equitable programmes should be put in place to favour both men and women.

Key words: Rural, agri-preneur, poverty, livelihood, women.

INTRODUCTION

All over the world, entrepreneurship particularly among women has become an important component of academic and policy conversation. This will not be unconnected with the fact that women entrepreneurship is vital to the economy of a nation with respect to economic development and poverty reduction. In as much as the government of a country is required to provide the

adequate empowerment programmes and the enabling environment for entrepreneurship development, women entrepreneurship has been recognized as an important untapped source of economic growth and poverty reduction for the past one decade throughout the world. Entrepreneurship is the dynamic process of creating incremental wealth by individuals who assume the major

risks in terms of equity, time and / or career commitment of providing value for some products or services (Robert, 2013).

Entrepreneurship as the engine of economic growth and wheel that pedal the vehicle of economic development has been recognized for its importance in the area of job creation, revenue generation, poverty alleviation and wealth creation (Josiane, 1998). Entrepreneurship is important for the support of small and medium enterprises (United Nations, 2006). Entrepreneurship is therefore a process that involves a willingness to rejuvenate market offerings, innovate, risks taking, trying out of new and uncertain products, services, markets and being more proactive than competitors towards exploring new business opportunities (Wiklund and Shepherd, 2005).

The importance of entrepreneurship integration of the people in a nation cannot be overemphasized especially, women who have been under appreciated for a long time in developing economies. Women play essential and dynamic roles in economic life, they adapt easily to change and are very creative. As agents of development in all societies women play tremendous roles through creativity and innovations both in the formal and informal sector although, highly prevalent in the informal sector. Women are therefore becoming increasingly important in the socio-economic development of both developed and developing economies as they account for significant percent of the operators of Small and Medium Enterprises (Kjeldsen and Nielson, 2000).

Women entrepreneurs make a substantial contribution to national economies through their participation in start-ups and their growth in small and medium businesses. Their interests and activities in the economic growth and development especially in the area of Women entrepreneurship have received outstanding interest of researchers.

Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2005 confirm that women participate in a wide range of entrepreneurial activities across the 37 GEM and their activities in different countries have paid off in form of many newly-established enterprises for job and wealth creation. The role of entrepreneurs as agents in the labour market for creation of employment, wealth creation, poverty alleviation and provision of resources has helped tremendously to increase the number of women owned entrepreneurial ventures in the world (United Nations, 2006). Women entrepreneurship contributes more than 50% to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of most nations both developed and less developed. Its contributions to economic development have been predominantly in the area of job creation, poverty alleviation, environmental vitality, wealth creation and human capital (Ojo, 2006).

However, the operation of Women entrepreneurship involves considerable risks, hard work, enormous sacrifice and sincerity of purpose which cut across various obstacles. The risks, challenges and obstacles affect women entrepreneurs more than their men counterparts,

making their chances of success to be considerably lower than men (Hisrich and Brush, 1986). Considering the various challenges and obstacles facing Women entrepreneurship particularly in Nigeria which include; capital inadequacy, unavailability of the required infrastructures, shortage of manpower to mention but few, someone may quickly conclude that women are usually discouraged from venturing into enterprise development. But today the story is a different one; women are starting and growing businesses at an unprecedented rate.

Women agripreneurs are simply women that participate in total agricultural activities, who take the risks involved in effective utilization of human and material resources in a unique way so as to take advantage of the opportunity identified in their immediate environment through production of goods and services. A woman entrepreneur is the person who accepts challenging role to meet her personal needs and become economically independent. With the advent of media, women are aware of their own traits, rights and also the work situations. Presently, across the world women are found indulged in every line of business from provision of service to product. A strong desire to do something positive is an inbuilt quality of entrepreneurial women, which is capable of contributing values to both family and social life.

However, female entrepreneurs in some parts of Nigeria are often underestimated and overlooked. They are often hindered because of family responsibilities, cultural barriers and religious beliefs. Furthermore, Amaka (2007) observed that Nigerian women are more vulnerable to poverty owing to a number of factors including absence of opportunities and autonomy, lack of access to economic resources (credit, land ownership and inheritance), lack of access to education and support services and minimal participation in the decision making process.

Women entrepreneurs make a substantial contribution towards entrepreneurship development in Nigeria; however, the realization of these potential contributions has been flawed by a lot of challenges. Despite the potential contributions of women entrepreneur towards entrepreneurship development, entrepreneurship in Nigeria has continued to perform below expectation and hence the expected role women entrepreneur will play towards Entrepreneurship development in Nigeria has been constrained by challenges they face in Nigeria such as Government regulations, gaining access to finance, lack of access to information technology, lack of access to control property, family dependence, restriction to family business with limited leadership role, which has been the cause of the failure of many Women entrepreneurship in Nigeria. The study focuses on assessing the contributions of rural women involvement in agripreneural activities to poverty reduction and improved livelihoods. The specific objectives were to- a) identify agripreneural opportunities in the area; b) ascertain reasons for women involvement in agripreneural activities; c) determine perceived effects of

agri-preneurship activities on poverty reduction on the respondents, d) examine barriers to women involvement in agri-preneurial activities; e) identify perceived strategies for overcoming the barriers to women involvement.

Literature review

The concept of entrepreneurship is rapidly gaining ground both in the academic and professional environments in many countries of the world as a way out of poverty through sustainable growth and development of global economies. Entrepreneurship is a concept in business environment that assures the psychological and financial risks of creating new ventures. The new ventures are created out of totally new ideas invented to fill existing gaps or opportunities in an environment (Agbionu, *et al.*, 2013). New ventures can also be created from innovations of existing businesses. The whole essence in the second instance is to make "common things uncommon for sustainable growth and development in order to alleviate poverty.

The supposedly two ways of creating new ventures as discussed above were necessitated from popular view in the literature that entrepreneurship has been recognized as the bedrock of the economic growth which contributes more than 60% of a nation's GDP and GNP as reported by Chinonye (2010). One may wonder why this has been so since before, entrepreneurship products were being produced at different economic and social environments. What is the magic which entrepreneurship does? In answer to the above questions, Garth stated that, the entrepreneur provides a dynamic economic system within the old inefficient method by applying new and modern efficient method of producing goods and services. It is now referred to as the central force for economic and social change and as a result, it requires that everyone (men and women) be involved in its operations. This further means that it should not be an exclusive concern of men. In other words, women are totally involved even from cradle.

Women on their own part have been strong agents of growth and development in many economies long before the origin of entrepreneurship. Studies by UNIDO found that the productivity of women especially in many industries empowers them and propels them to contribute significantly to the growth and development both in small and medium scale activities (UNIDO, 2001). The contributions of women in economic activities, the report continued, are not only as a means of economic survival but also have a positive social repercussion for the women themselves and their social environment. This justifies the involvement of women not just in entrepreneurial activities but also in many social endeavors in the society at large instead of just being conscripted to be home keepers and children bearers.

Women involvement in entrepreneurship for poverty alleviation through sustainable growth and development

of economies has been remarkable and tremendous in the recent times. It has resulted to significant economic growth and development of many economies globally. For instance, during the 20th century, women activities in entrepreneurship have witnessed monumental changes and have transformed women to be income earners and assets to their societies" (Egwu, 2011). This dynamism in the recent times on the roles of women according to her has led to the recognition of the potentials in women and their contribution to the national and international economies all over the world. In support of the above assertion, Chinonye (2010) observed that traditional roles of women in families are constantly changing as a result of changes in the family configuration and setting which have allowed women to undertake more practical and functional roles within the society. In view of these changes, "there has been an influx of women into the main stream labor market, leading to the re-organization, the resolution of women's movements and the civil rights movements which have propelled women into non-traditional roles, and the explosion in the number of women entrepreneurs particularly over the last two decades".

The above changing roles of women have led to immeasurable contributions of women in entrepreneurship. Ubong have explored the contributions of women entrepreneur as (a) empowering women especially the moral women (b) enhancing national productivity, (c) generating employment (d) development of economic and financial independence and social capabilities among women, (e) improving standard of living and self-confidence, and enhancing awareness, sense of achievement, improvement in decision making status, increasing of social interaction and improvement in leadership quality.

Contributions of women are clear indication of their roles in poverty alleviation (Ubong, 2007). Poverty alleviation is a serious business in under-developed and developing countries of the world. Nnamani noted that Nigeria is fully identified as sitting uncomfortably in the bowels of poverty and so earned 154th of 172 countries in the World Marginal Index (WMI). In 2010, Eyuiche categorically asserted that poverty persists in Nigeria due to economic backwardness; occasioned by low labor efficiency, factor immobility, limited specialization, in occupation and in trade, economic ignorance, values and social structure that minimizes the incentives for sustainable economic change. Poverty affects almost every nation developed and developing alike. The difference is the type of poverty a nation faces. Some nations face absolute poverty while some others face relative poverty. Absolute poverty according to Agbionu is a state where majority of the citizens do not afford the basic necessities of life while relative poverty is a state where an aspect of the population are affected by poverty due to one reason or the other which ordinarily should not have been so (Agbionu *et al.*, 2013).

The contribution of women is highly needed in Nigeria

Table 1. Agri-preneurship Opportunities in the Study Area.

Agri-preneurship Opportunities	Frequency	Percentage
Crop production	250	100
Fish rearing/farming	245	98.0
Poultry farming	250	100
Rabbit rearing	154	61.6
Grass cutter domestication	197	78.8
Soya milk preparation	174	69.6
Kunu making	167	66.8
Zobo making (roselle juice)	149	59.6
Farm input supply	224	89.6
Agro-processing	201	80.4
Farm produce distribution (making)	184	73.6
Snail production	135	54.0
Charcoal production/sales	164	65.6
Weed killer production	181	72.4
Plantain chips production	204	81.6
Groundnut processing	191	76.4
Cashew nut processing	183	73.2

now that many poverty alleviation programs introduced by successive governments failed to achieve their objectives. Agbionu stated that one of the major reasons for the failure was because many of the programs were usually politically motivated with selfish interests (Agbionu and Agbionu 2013). For instance Eyuiche stated that Obasanjo led PDP government announced a ten billion naira poverty alleviation program sometime in May 2000. The program was criticized according to the report for its political undertone. The critics confirmed that the money was used to attract voters to PDP. Specifically, the report stated that ₦3, 500 of the money was given to each of the relations of party members while the poor people were left out. Many other programs aimed at alleviating poverty in Nigeria have all failed as well because of insincerity of the policy makers and policy implementers. Some of the policies for poverty alleviation would have yielded fantastic results but selfishness, insincerity, and other social ills crippled them. This is why poverty in Nigeria has persisted and if drastic measures are not put in place to address it, it will definitely drag the name and reputation of Nigeria to the mud. In addition to the view above, McConnel is of the opinion that women have enormous potential to bring prosperity in the world and therefore encouraging women entrepreneurship is very important.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Imo state, Nigeria. Imo State lies within latitudes 4°45'N and 7°15'N, and longitude 6°50'E and 7°25'E with an area of about 5,100 sq km. The estimated population is 4.8 million and the population density varies from 230-1,400 people per square kilometer. Purposive random sampling technique was employed in selecting a total of 250 rural women agripreneurs from a list of 2500 registered women farmers of

the All Farmers Association of Nigeria (AFAN). Data were analyzed descriptively. Objectives 1 and 2 were achieved using percentages, while objectives 3 and 4 were achieved on a 4-point likert – type scale measurement of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree assigned weight of 4,3,2 and 1. The weight was added and divided by 4 to give 2.50. And mean 2.50 and above was regarded as strongly agree to the statements, while mean less than 2.50 was not regarded as disagree. Again, objective 5 was also achieved on a 3 point likert – type scale measurement of very important, important and not important assigned weight of 3,2 and 1. The weight was added and divided by 3 to give 2.0 and mean 2.0 and above was regarded as very important strategies used, while mean less than 2.0 was regarded not important strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Agri-preneurship Opportunities in the Study Area

Table 1 showed that agri-preneurship opportunities are varied and plenty for individuals to choose and pursue. The available opportunities were crop production (100%), poultry production (100%), fish farming (98%), farm input supply (89.6%), agro-processing (80.4%), plantain chips production/sales(81.6%),grass-cutter domestication(78.8%),farm produce distribution/marketing (73.6%), weed killer production (72.4%), groundnut processing (76.4%) cashew-nut processing (73.2%). Other agri-preneurship opportunities were rabbit rearing (61.6%), Soya milk production (69.6%), Kunu making (66.8%), Zobo (reselle) making (54.6%) and snail production (54%). According to Carter and Cannon (1992) women entrepreneurship is seen to attract considerable amount of attention as a

Table 2. Reasons for involvement in Agri-preneurship.

Motivating reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Desire for independence/autonomy	167	66.8
Desire to create something new	208	83.2
Achievement of personal objectives	194	77.6
To provide for material need of family	230	92.0
For increased women empowerment	197	78.8
Have a voice in decision making	154	61.6
To create jobs	184	73.6
To help reduce family poverty	245	98.0

subject of academic debate in its own right, such interests are due mainly on the fact that female entrepreneurs are now considered important forces in economic growth and development of their nations which is the crux of poverty alleviation. Women entrepreneurs are women who take part in entrepreneurial activities either in full time, or part time small scale or large scale or even in a multinational environment. In support of the above, Chinonye (2010) affirmed that women entrepreneurs are simply women that participate in total entrepreneurial activities, who take risks involved in combining resources together in a unique way so as to take advantage of the opportunities identified in their immediate environments through the production of goods and services. This no doubt hinges on the fact that women have been and are still agents of poverty alleviation because any meaningful growth and development must address the tenets of poverty alleviation.

Reason for involvement in Agripreneurship

There were factors which motivated the respondents to be involved in agripreneurial activities. Table 2 showed the following reasons for involvement in agri-preneurial activities ;the desire to help reduce family poverty (98%), desire to create something new (83.2%), to provide for material needs of the family (92%), for increased women empowerment (78.8%), to have a voice in decision making (61.6%), and to create job (73.6%). The gender division of labour in family households influenced women to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Women, as principal providers of food and other basic necessities; such as education and health care services venture into business to provide for the material needs of their immediate and extended family members.

Rutashobya and Nchimbi (1999) supported this assertion when they contended that, in Africa, women venture into business because of their reproductive roles. Owing to societal expectations, women's reproductive roles compel them to venture into business in order to be able to combine business activities with household chores, hence the predominance of home-based enterprises by women entrepreneurs in the study. Several authors contend that women venture into business to enable them to interface work with family responsibilities

(Aidis, 2002; Buttner and Moore, 1997; Chell and Baines, 1998) for example, argues that the motivation for business start-up by female entrepreneurs indicates that for a woman a business is not a separate economic activity as the case with men, but women perceives their businesses as "cooperative networks" of relationships. The author maintains that 'women's reality is 'web-like' connecting family, work and community relationships'.

Another motivational factor noted in the study for business start-up is the failure of the formal labour force to absorb a large number of black women in South Africa. There are a number of factors for this state of affairs, for instance the lack of required skills in respective industries due to limited education among black women in South Africa and to a lesser extent, gender discrimination in the formal labour force (Butter and Moore, 1997). The under-representation of women relative to men in formal employment has been cited in a study in the Northern Province in South Africa as motivation for business start-up. The study revealed that 87.5% of the male entrepreneurs were previously employed as opposed to 44.71% of women entrepreneurs (Mitchell,2004). The findings indicated that women entrepreneurs, in both the younger and older groups, started their business ventures as a result of negative/push factors.

Agri-preneurship for Poverty Reduction and Improved Livelihood

Entries in table 3 showed the benefits/effects of rural women involvement in agripreneurship opportunities on poverty reduction and improved livelihood. The high mean response of the respondents on the statements revealed that agripreneurial activities could reduce poverty and improve living standards of individuals.. The table showed that involvement in agripreneurial activities could lead to higher income (M= 2.04). This is evident in the fact that the women were able to save money which helps them solve their problems.

Other effects were ability of the respondents to send their children to school (M=2.75), buying of nutritious food for the family (M = 2.60), building of block houses (M = 2.52), improvement in the type of fuel energy used (M = 2.82), receipt of better medical services (M = 2.70), children not sent to labour market (M = 2.64), improved

Table 3. Effects of Agri-preneurship on Poverty Reduction.

Perceived effects	Mean	SD
Leads to higher income	2.84	1.516
Sends children to school	2.75	0.530
Buy nutritious food for family	2.60	0.556
Built block house	2.52	1.575
Improve type of fuel energy used	2.82	0.614
Receipt of better medicare services	2.70	0.582
Children not sent to labour market	2.64	0.611
Improved source of drinking water	2.70	0.617
Leads to higher productivity	3.03	0.617
High investment in farm/non-farm ventures	2.94	0.610
Production of goods for the market	2.87	0.574
Repayment of old debts/loans	3.04	0.631

Table 4. Barriers to Women Agri-preneurship Participation.

Barriers	Mean	SD
Low level of education	2.98	0.960
Low capital/income	2.96	0.803
Lack of access to information	3.12	0.730
Lack of modern technology	3.16	0.920
Lack of rural infrastructure	2.84	1.085
Social and cultural barrier	3.25	0.888
Lack of access to land	3.24	0.914
Lack of access modern technology	3.38	0.487
Access to support sources	3.27	0.709

sources of drinking water ($M = 2.70$), leads of higher yield/productivity ($m = 3.03$), production of goods for the market ($m = 2.87$), high farm investment ($M = 2.94$) and ability to repay debts/loans owed ($M = 3.04$). The high mean response of the respondents on the issues related to poverty yielded a standard deviation of between 0 and 1 which did not deviate much from the mean.

Barriers to Women Entrepreneurship Participation.

Table 4 showed that women participation/involvement in agri-preneurial activities is not without challenges. The respondents faced the following barriers, low level of education ($M = 2.98$), low capital/income ($M = 2.96$), lack of rural infrastructure ($M = 2.84$), social and cultural barrier ($M = 3.25$), lack of access to land ($M = 3.24$), lack of access to modern technology ($M = 3.38$) and lack of access to support services ($M = 3.27$). The above is in line with REOPA (2014) who mentioned the following :

Lack of social capital: Due to lack of social capital, poor people at the rural area do not have the social networks and this deprives the target groups of a key linkage with business partners which could otherwise have provided valuable assistance regarding different aspects of business development.

Lack of entrepreneurship knowledge and skills: The rural poor do not have enough skills in using and mobilizing local resources for developing their

entrepreneurial skills and this often leads to serious gaps in the fields of managerial skills, strategic planning, etc. which are vital for meeting the challenges of the marketplace.

Lack of modern technology: Micro and small entrepreneurs of the rural area do not have access to modern technology for producing quality products and also suffer from inadequate marketing channels for distributing their products. This reduces their returns and results in low income, leading to low investment for future business activities.

Behavioural barriers: Rural women in general have little confidence in taking risks that are needed to start an enterprise. This lack of self-confidence is coupled with the community's lack of confidence in the woman entrepreneur. As a result, family members and others are not willing to support women entrepreneurs.

Social and cultural barriers: Women entrepreneurs are subjected a number of social and cultural barriers that compel them to occupy secondary position to male entrepreneurs. Moreover, women's dual responsibility to perform productive and reproductive responsibilities within households places a huge demand on their time which poses as a constraint.

Strategies for overcoming challenges

Entries on table 5 showed the perceived strategies

Table 5. Strategies for overcoming challenges.

Strategies	Mean	SD
Promote women's basic education	2.35	0.697
Access to land for all	2.45	0.638
Access to information	2.41	0.576
Access to support services	2.30	0.626
Provision of basic infrastructures	2.25	0.709
Access to credit/loans	2.32	0.615
Removal of discriminatory loans/practices against women	2.43	0.065
Access to labour saving technology	2.26	0.733

to overcome the barriers of rural women involvement in agripreneurial activities. The strategies included promotion of women basic education with a mean response of 2.35, removal of discriminatory laws/practices against women (M = 2.43) and access to land for all (M = 2.45). Other strategies were access to information (M = 2.41), access to support services (M = 2.30), provision of rural basic infrastructure (M = 2.35), access to credit/loan (M = 2.32) and access to labour saving technology (M = 2.26).

Conclusion

Agri-preneurship opportunities abound in the study area. Women engage in them to be independent, to care for their families and help out in terms of need. Their participation in agri-preneurship ventures has led to increased income, higher productivity, solve so many family problems. They are faced with the problems of access to land, low education level, access to information among others. They should be given access to education, credit and information among others.

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