

## RURAL WOMEN IN FOOD CHAIN ACTIVITIES: A CASE OF IBO-SPEAKING ETHNIC COMMUNITY OF DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the food chain processes in which women often participate. 480 respondents were randomly selected and used for the study which covered the local government areas in which the Ibo-speaking Delta (Anioma) people reside.

Results of the survey indicate that most women in the area are literate. The farming activities mostly engaged in by the women are weeding, harvesting, marketing, planting and packing in that order.

There is a dearth of adoption of improved agricultural technology among the women, with none utilizing tractor-hiring services, herbicides, harvesters and planters. The most important problems that hinder their level of participation in farming are the women's regular involvement in various domestic affairs and poor financial resources.

Encouragement of women in economic and educational activities by government and the extension services are suggested as a way of improving the level of participation of women in agricultural enterprises.

Key words: Rural women, Food chain activities.

### INTRODUCTION

In a reaction to Nigeria's food crisis, women have become more involved in meeting the goal of self-sufficiency in agriculture, we now know that a woman's place is not just only in the kitchen, but also in the farm field, granary, leadership, and other spheres of life. Unfortunately, the role of women in the economy has, in the long past, been overlooked or neglected. In some parts of Nigeria, it was traditional for women to be confined to the cultivation of

certain crops. On the contrary, rural women account for much of food production in the developing nations, playing also significant roles in the storage and processing of food.

In Nigeria, official statistics not only have biased the role of women in agriculture but often ignored their role entirely (Ay and Nweke, 1984). This is contrary to what obtains in the former Soviet Union. In Soviet enterprises, there is no discrimination in labour pay against women for work (Nzimiro, 1985:70).

Women have also continued to contribute to family and child nutrition.

Although few, studies have tended to focus mainly on women's role in food production while paying less attention to other activities in the food chain. There is still a lack of research that may have immediate practical implications. In addition, there are very few, if any, indepth studies on the level of participation of Ibo-speaking rural women in Delta State in food chain activities (all on-farm and off-farm activities).

In Africa and in some parts of Nigeria women are major food producers but government policies had benefited male farmers who grow cash crops (Badoe, 1985; Enechukwu, 1987). Resources which are under government control such as technology, agricultural credit and expertise or training are generally allocated according to a hierarchy based on sex, with women not benefitting. Women remain the largest group of landless labourers with little security in case of break-up of the family; they face discriminatory inheritance and customary laws largely as land reform programmes usually give sole title to the husbands while agricultural development programmes are usually planned by men for men.

Women growing food crops also shoulder an increasing share of family subsistence farming with sad effect on quality of feeding and health.

The United Nation's International Decade for Women, which was marked in 1985, has helped to stimulate official awareness of the increasing impoverishment of Women in the Third World, and of the central role they have always played in the agricultural economics of the Third World countries. Perry (1985:785) points out clearly that while agricultural planners often tend to stereotype women as consumers rather than producers, rural women actually account for more than half of the food produced in the Third World and also play a leading role in the storage and processing of food. He adds that in Africa, women account for as much as 80 percent of the food production. Women are the nation builders, probably because they bear the burden of shaping the future of their nations

through the raising of their children. They also commonly work 18 hours a day, with their work given no economic value.

Women contribute far more to agricultural production than has been generally recognised. In the Gambia, women produce 84 percent of the rice grown (Badoe, *op. cit.*), and Enechukwu (*op. cit.*) opines that they are active as food producers, processors, and marketers in addition to their matrimonial roles such as house-keeping and up-bringing of their children. Women farmers spend about 1.5 times the energy spent by men in agriculture, due to more hours worked, and this was found to cause much hardship to women (Henn, 1983).

It has been claimed that the increasing monetization has increased women's workload, such as petty trade, brewing, agricultural labour and growing of cash crops (Potash, 1985).

#### Objectives of the Study:

- 1) To describe the food chain processes in which women participate.
- 2) To identify the problems that hinder the level of participation of women in food chain activities.

One major significant use of this study is to offer a systematic and actual empirical evidence to support the claims of active participation of women in agriculture instead of the usual reliance on superficial observations and views regarding the economic role of women in food production.

#### METHODOLOGY

Four hundred and eighty women were involved in this study which covered all the Ibo-speaking local government areas of Delta State. In a random sampling, twenty respondents were interviewed in each of twenty-four villages/towns in all the local government areas using a structured interview schedule. Analysis of data involved frequency

and percentage distribution and ranking.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Personal Characteristics:

All the women were involved mainly in farming (full-time) as their occupation. With an average of 36 years, it was found that active women farmers were between the ages of 26 to 50 years (63.232%). The low percentage of those 25 years and below (13.312%) may be due to the fact that the younger ones were still more in school. Fifty-four percent of the women were married (see Table 1). Their farm sizes were regarded as being small. The women often have joint plots with their husband except for the single ones who own their farms alone. The men were mostly farmers.

Literacy (ability to read and write English language) rate among this Ibo-speaking community was relatively high (75%). This is important extension work because the more literate audience would tend to adopt more innovations than an illiterate group. Contrary to this finding, although limited in sample size, it was stated that some 60 percent of the Third World estimated 800 million illiterates are women (Perry, 1985:786). Still, there is need to intensify the education of women to help them not only become better aware of available services and innovations in agriculture, but also to provide them an organizational base to link them with bureaucratic agencies. Perry concludes by quoting the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD) as insisting that correcting the "maldistribution of income, assets and services between men and women can make a considerable contribution to the primary goals of increasing food production and improving nutrition". WCARRD puts forward one possible remedy which is that women as well as men should be given legal status in the

ownership, control and inheritance of property and non-discriminatory access to inputs and services to agriculture. Secondly, it wants the extension service to recruit and train more women at all levels and train male extension workers to recognise women's contributions.

### Food Chain Activities Involved In:

According to Table 2, most women were found to be largely involved in weeding (74.88%), harvesting (73.22%), marketing (59.90%) and planting (58.24%). Thus, women in the study area participate in all but the most physically demanding farm activities such as bush clearing, tree felling, and bush burning. In Benue and Kogi States, Egunjobi *et al.* (1993) discovered that the major crop activities involved in by rural women are weeding (83.51%), planting (78.95%), and harvesting (77.54%). Not many of the women (9.98%) were involved in pest control probably because they had not been sufficiently exposed to the value and use of pesticide technology. The extension service should lay emphasis on the utilization of pesticides among the rural women.

### Adoption of Improved Practices:

As presented in Table 3, most improved farm technologies were not utilized by the women, except for 51.03% who planted various improved crop varieties (which were mainly cassava, melon and maize). Only 1.60% of the women were trained to use the services of tractors. Safilios-Rotschild (1981) had found that women farm managers have inadequate access to extension services. This is true here. In a recent study by Egunjobi *et al.* (1993), the rural women were found not to adopt the improved technologies adequately, including fertilizer application (22%), livestock housing (13%) and improved crop varieties (12%).

Williams (1978:118) notes that most rural women who cook the meals, keep the house, tend the children, do the marketing, work on family farms, and engage in petty trading, have not benefitted from the facilities offered by extension services, nor

from credit or marketing services, and they very seldom have access to formal training of any sort. He calls for the encouragement of participation of women in a wide range of rural development activities to prevent the loss of the substantial contributions women could make and ensure, also, that this important segment of the population does not fail to reach full human potential.

#### Problems Facing Women in Food Chain Activities:

Inadequate time, poor financial resources and involvement in domestic affairs are the major problems encountered by the women as they participate in agricultural activities (see Table 4).

#### CONCLUSIONS

The average woman in the area of study claimed greater credit for the survival of agriculture. Since women contribute in no small measure to the development of agriculture and of rural areas, their economic and agricultural activities should be supported by a corresponding measure of encouragement by government and relevant agencies.

Therefore, extension programmes must be re-organized to take proper cognizance of the interest of rural women. There should no longer be any discrimination in access to farm inputs and services. Women must be involved in all activities of agriculture in the nation.

Women in the study area are important actors who must not be neglected in food chain processes. They should be organized into cooperative associations in order to benefit more from both food chain processes, training and input supplies.

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Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Selected Personal Characteristics

Variable	No. of Women	%
AGE:		
Up to 25 years	64	13.312
26 to 50 years	304	63.232
51 years and above	112	23.296
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL:		
Lack of formal education	120	25.0
Primary school	168	35.0
Post-primary education	112	23.3
Post-secondary education	80	16.64
MARITAL STATUS:		
Single (including widowed, divorced)	220	45.83
Married	260	54.17

Table 2: Distribution of the Respondents according to Food Chain Activities involved In

Activities	Frequency of Participation	Relative Frequency
Bush clearing and tree felling	120	24.96
Bush burning	96	19.57
Packing of burnt materials	200	41.60
Planting	280	58.24
Weeding	360	74.88
Pest control	48	9.98
Harvesting	352	73.22
Marketing	288	59.90
Livestock feeding	160	33.28
Transport (Portage)	180	37.44

Table 3: Percentage of Women Adopting Improved Cultural Practices

Cultural Practices	Percentage	Rank
Use of planters (machines and tractors)	1.60	5th
Planting improved varieties	51.03	1st
Fertilizer application	30.01	2nd
Use of herbicides	-	-
Insecticide usage	3.82	4th
No adoption at all	13.54	3rd

Table 4: Ranking of Problems Encountered by Women in Food Chain Activities

Problems	Relative Frequency	Rank
Inadequate time for farming activities	41.6	1st
Poor financial resources	37.5	2nd
Too much involvement in domestic affairs	30.0	3rd
Lack of access to labour	11.4	5th
Poor storage facilities	17.1	4th
Low knowledge of innovations	8.3	6th