

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): Women Empowerment and Participation in Developing Rural Communities in Enugu North Senatorial District, Enugu State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This research explores women empowerment and participation in the development processes of rural communities in Enugu North Senatorial District of Nigeria in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is aimed at assessing the roles of women, identify obstacles and recommend ways that could enhance empowerment. The study employed a mixed-method design as data were gathered regarding women involvement in the field of governance, social projects and agriculture via qualitative interviews and quantitatively via surveys (n=400). The findings with favoured correlations ($r=0.65$, 0.58 and 0.52 respectively) indicates that most of the women are active participants in the economy due to their access to microcredit, education and training. Nevertheless, the lack of cultural norms and land rights concerns together with the inability to make decisions completely undermines full empowerment. The results of the study have shown that it is important to eliminate deep-rooted structural and sociocultural barriers in the long-term progress. They include community-specific interventions, policy reformations, capacity-building efforts and adopting the use of technologies and ICT trainings to promote gender equity. It is interesting to note that all things being equal, the results indicate a major role of a multi-sectoral approach to more widely engage women and their participation in the rural development process which in turn lead to sustainable development goals.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Rural Development, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development, Gender Equity

Introduction

Women within the practice of rural community development (RCD) have come a long way in the past decades especially in the regions of Nigeria which fall within the agrarian settlements like the Enugu North Senatorial District. Women play a central role in the social-economic life of rural people not only in their domestic roles but also in their active involvement in community activities, work in the farmland and informal education. Their participation in development matters such as road construction, market sanitation, scholarship funding and health centre maintenance, has illustrated their ability in catalyzing development at the grassroots (Ukpongson et al., 2014). The importance of women in life and development got an international recognition written in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000. Of the eight MDGs, Goal 3- Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women- was one of those that specifically touched the

need to raise the status of women and their full involvement in the development processes. Even though every MDG implicitly touches gender concerns, Goal 3 contributed to policy changes, investments, and even activism towards breaking down the systems of inequality that exclude or oppress women (Odeh, 2014).

In Nigeria, MDGs came up with different government and non-governmental initiatives to educate women, enhance women health and empower women economically. These programs have, however, had mixed success and have favored urban areas more than rural locations because of technical failures, cultural issues, and scarcity of resources (Olabode et al., 2014). The constituency of the Enugu North Senatorial District with its largely rural and agrarian population provides a good reason to observe how women have responded to the development activities with an emphasis on MDG activities and how their roles have transformed owing to the overall socio-economic shift. Group farming, clearing of footpaths, maintenance of public spaces and the involvement in communal labour is not a new phenomenon to women in Enugu North as such activities are often organized through the traditional institution like market women associations and age grades (Attamah et al., 2020). Such undertakings not only aid in creation of physical infrastructure but also help to develop unity and collective responsibility. The introduction of formal education, urbanization and globalization has resulted in widening the roles of women to leadership in cooperatives, entrepreneurship and working with community needs. It is a move in recognition of women as drivers of change instead of developers and beneficiaries of development.

Irrespective of these developments, there are difficulties. Gender inequality is still a highly rooted issue in most rural communities that are characterized by limited access to land, credit and the decision-making platforms. Women are marginalized because of cultural norms ambiguating their freedom of movement and their ability to speak as well as poverty and illiteracy increase their marginalization. The MDGs aimed to support the rise of these concerns; however, there was a lack of proper coordination, funding, as well as political will to promote the MDGs used in the rural areas within Nigeria (Odeh, 2014; Olabode et al., 2014). Recent research has also pointed to the kind of projects that women in Enugu North pursue such as agricultural processing, health outreach, educational support and social welfare (Attamah et al., 2020). Such activities are usually achieved through community-based organizations like traders' associations and market cooperatives which act as mobilization centres and sources of pooling resources. Examples of factors that facilitate the involvement of women are the availability of the microcredit, training programs, and favourable policies, however, there are gaps in their long-term sustainability and scalability.

This paper attempts to investigate the magnitude and type of women empowerment and participation in the development efforts of a rural community in Enugu North Senatorial District. It also seeks to establish the nature of projects that women take part in, what makes it easy or difficult to participate, and how MDGs related programs have affected the role of women. In this manner, the research will help understand gender issues within the context of rural development better and provide information in relation to policies and program design.

Statement of the Problem

Women now play a wide range of responsibilities in community development that are more prominent, essential, and vital than ever before, and rural communities cannot function without their contributions. In the colonial era and following independence, for example, the empowerment and participation of women in diverse communities were primarily funded by various development

projects, including the construction of roads, bridges, health centres, and elementary and secondary schools. In Nigeria and overseas, women also provide scholarships for their sons and daughters to pursue higher education (Ukpongson et al., 2014). Recent findings indicate that women actively participate in development projects, including constructing homesteads and footpaths, clearing farmlands and roads, engaging in group farming, maintaining community market areas, and supporting the upkeep of the king's palace. In the Enugu North senatorial district, which is predominantly agrarian and comprises numerous rural communities, women are assuming expanded roles in rural community development (RCD) as a result of increased access to education, urbanization, globalization, and migration. Therefore, it is essential to analyze the specific contributions of rural women to community development, the types of projects they undertake, and the factors that enable their participation in these projects.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to improve empowerment and participation of women in developing rural communities in Enugu North senatorial district and the specific objective are to;

1. examine the level of women empowerment and participation in developing rural communities in Enugu North Senatorial district.
2. determine women contribution to the economic, social and political development of rural communities in Enugu North senatorial district.
3. launch campaign for women empowerment and participation in developing rural communities in Enugu North senatorial district.
4. organize women empowerment training programs that will involve large participation of women in developing Enugu North senatorial district.

Research Questions

Based on study objectives, the following questions guide the study.

1. What is the level of women empowerment and participation in developing rural communities in Enugu North Senatorial district?
2. How do women contribute to the economic, social and political development of rural communities in Enugu North senatorial district?
3. What strategies can be used to effectively launch campaign for women empowerment and participation in developing rural communities in Enugu North senatorial district?
4. How can women empowerment training programmes can be organized to involve large participation of women in developing Enugu North senatorial district?

Literature Review

The theme of women empowerment and their involvement in rural development have become an international issue especially under activities such as the millennium development goals (MDGs). In Nigeria, specifically in Enugu North Senatorial District, women have over time taken crucial roles in community development, but their efforts have not been fully recognized and exploited. This review assesses available literature related to the MDGs, women empowerment and rural development and how the three intersect in Nigeria.

Concept of Women Empowerment

The definition of women empowerment is broad in that it can be viewed as a process by which women obtain power and control over their lives and have the capability of making strategic decisions. According to Kabeer (2005), there are three dimensions of empowerment, which

include; resources, agency, and achievements. In Nigeria, access to land, education, credit, and the decision-making processes is what defines empowerment in rural areas (Obayelu & Chime, 2020). Empowerment is not a one-dimensional aspect; it is economic, social, political and psychological in nature. The economic empowerment incorporates access to income generating activities, whereas social empowerment involves freedom of discrimination and access to education. Political empowerment is associated with governing activities as well as leading, and psychological empowerment is linked to self-autonomy and self-confidence (Ayeubumwan et al., 2016). Women empowerment is a broad term generalized into other factors, which include economic, social, and political empowerment.

Kabeer (2005) further defines empowerment as a process through which women can gain control in their lives, make their own informed choices as well as involve themselves in the development process. Women empowerment is the key to sustainable development and gender equality. According to the information provided by the United Nations, “women empowerment is a crucial indicator in the process of meeting Millennium Development Goals” (United Nations, 2015, p 12).

Millennium Development Goals and Gender Equality

The MDGs which were adopted in the year 2000 were to focus on the issues affecting global development by 2015. MDG 3; Goal 3 on gender equality and female empowerment was in the forefront among other MDGs. It focused on the removal of the gender inequality in education and expanding the female access to the job market and raising the participation of the females in the political and economic life (Odeh, 2014). In Nigeria, MDG implementation saw the creation of a number of programmes to target women such as Better Life for Rural Women Programme, Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) and the National Gender Policy.

Nonetheless, these programmes were not equally effective in all regions because of the formation of infrastructure, cultural and political acceptance (Olabode et al., 2014). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were introduced to deal with development issues such as poverty, education, and health-related challenges. Goal 3 of the MDGs dwells exclusively on the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. As has been observed, gender equality and the empowerment of women is critical to the realization of all the other MDGs (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). Investments in gender equalities have also been proven to spur better economic growth and development (World Bank, 2012).

Factors Influencing Women’s Participation in RCD

Some of the factors which determine women participation in rural community development include access to education, economic and social support. Akinyele (2009) demonstrates that having access to resources in education and economic activities is essential to women in participating in rural community development. Additional issues that determine the participation of women include access to microfinance, vocational training and modern technologies. According to Olaitan (2017), micro finance programs are capable of “enhancing the economic productivity levels of women and self-reliance in their finances” (p.45). Education is the main driver, since women literate have highest chances of participating in leadership and decision-making processes. The fact that women gain access to credit and financial services also enables them to initiate and maintain development initiatives (Obayelu & Chime, 2020). Women are further limited by cultural rules and gender norms, as much as by a lack of access. Women are required to tend to the home in most of the rural communities thus have less influence on the affairs of that community.

Moreover, the system regarding land ownership and inheritance often does not give women any rights or giving them less. This makes them economically dependent on men (Ayeubumwan et

al., 2016). Government policy and Non-Government Organization intervention is very important in influencing the participation of women. Training, mentorship, and funding are the three concepts that have been found to boost the number of women involved in RCD. Nevertheless, such initiatives are only sustainable when there are community acceptance and support as well as support by an institution (Olabode et al., 2014).

Challenges to Women Empowerment in Rural Nigeria

In rural Nigeria, women still have to struggle. Currently, poverty, illiteracy and lack of access to healthcare and education still impede empowerment. Women are marginalized further since their services are disadvantaged by poor education and various forms of gender-based violence or the discriminatory practices (Obayelu & Chime, 2020). Institutional constraints also present a challenge as is the case with poor policy implementation and absence of political representation. Most development initiatives do not design their programmes to meet unique needs of rural women and this makes women have low turn up, and low influence. In addition, it lacks data and monitoring based on gender-sensitivity that would make assessments possible (Olabode et al., 2014).

Thus, women in rural parts of Nigeria have several problems empowering themselves, such as the lack of education, economic resources and societal support. Fapohunda (2012) argues that rural women have major setbacks when it comes to accessing education and economic resources. Other issues to be addressed include patriarchy and culturally defined roles, gender-based violence and societal attitudes. According to Amadiume (2015), women are restricted in their contribution to the decision-making processes and economic activities because of the patriarchal systems and norms of society.

Theoretical Frameworks

Various theoretical frameworks have been connected in the study of power, and these frameworks are mutually complementary in their specificity in policy issues of women empowerment and rural development. These include Gender and Development (GAD) theory, Empowerment Theory and Capability theory among others, which can be used as a background guide to understanding the dynamics of female involvement in rural community development (RCD), especially in the area of Enugu North Senatorial District.

Gender and Development (GAD) theory arose as a criticism of the earlier Women in Development (WID) model, which aimed at incorporating women in the existing developmental systems without necessarily overhauling the system that induces inequality. The approach of GAD broadens the topic of women alone to the system of social roles of gender as well, in which power relations and the institutions are key determinants in the development processes (Okunade et al., 2023). It promotes the concept of gender mainstreaming where policies/programmes are made in a gender perspective so that there is equal access to resources and participation in decision-making. Recent studies have also noted that GAD is crucial in Nigeria where socio-cultural practices and politics have been ineffective in preventing gender equality. Okunade et al. (2023) state that there have been gender policies created, but their enforcement has been poor and this can be attributed to the patriarchal values and political will. Therefore, GAD proposes radical interventions that break down structural constraints, as well as encourage the participation of all in development planning. More so, Empowerment Theory contextualizes empowerment as a process of taking power over resources, decisions and circumstances in life. It promotes participation, capacity building and institutional support as the major factors facilitating it (Albornoz-Arias et al., 2025). This theory

is especially applicable to rural conditions because it refers to the multi-level configuration of power- individual control as well as collective control. Albornoz-Arias et al. (2025) discuss the influence of denunciation, decision-making, and resource access to gender inequality among rural women and how these aspects can empower women. They distinguish four dimensions of power: power over, power to, power with, and power within-that is different ways that people can exercise agency and resist. Empowerment Theory therefore offers a solid analysis platform that looks at how women in Enugu North circumnavigate socio-economic and political systems to participate in RCD, commonly via informal networks and community-based organizations.

The third theory is Capability theory which originally theorized by Amartya Sen, the Capability theory takes as its subject all that enhances the possibility of achieving well-regarded life outcomes, rather than property of resources themselves. It stresses that development must broaden the capacities of individuals, through education, health, and agency, among others, then what is offered by introducing more income or more assets (Nath & Das, 2024). This strategy is especially effective in rural settings, where women are frequently not able to use resources into real accomplishments due to predisposed constraints in the environment.

Transition from MDGs to SDGs

The transition from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a major progression in the world development plans. The SDGs have replaced the MDGs and they have thus been adopted in 2015 as an improved version, or rather a complete and supra edition of MDGs (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs have 17 goals, which are broader than the 8 goals of MDGs that mainly focused on poverty reduction and other basic human needs (Sachs et al., 2023). This transition also highlights the interdependence of development issues, which has fostered a more holistic approach to development involving the social, economic and environmental aspects. The SDGs, for example, reflect a greater emphasis on gender equality by including gender equality as a stand-alone goal (Goal 5) and also taking into consideration gender approaches throughout the other goals in response to criticism around the inadequacies of the MDGs in explicitly addressing gender equality (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2024). The SDGs also implemented a universal plan that every nation can follow, which was not true with the MDGs since its focus was only on developing countries, and this encouraged global accountability and collaboration (OECD, 2023).

The shift has however raised challenges, especially the complexity of tracking progress on more of the goals and targets, and the need to have more effective data collection systems, particularly in limited resources settings (UNDP, 2024). Countries like Nigeria, on the other hand, are struggling to coordinate national policies and align resources to comprehensively realize the SDGs, toggling an international covetousness with an internal inability (Adeoye & Bello, 2023). Still, the move gives a solid foundation on inclusive and sustainable development that can be more effective in the cause of the routes of poverty and inequality.

Gaps in Literature

Although literature excavates fruitful information, there are still gaps. First, there is paucity of longitudinal studies that indicate how MDG-related programmes have affected women empowerment in rural Nigeria. Second, research is dominated by economic empowerment, leaving little attention given to political and psychological empowerment. Third, research that is community-specific is required, one that captures the localized life of women in the local North Enugu Community. Such research can be used to guide specific remediation and policy changes.

Lastly, there is a need to look into how technology and digital inclusion engages rural women to feel empowered.

Methodology

The research methodology adopted in this research is formulated to exhaustively examine the experience of the empowerment of women coupled with their participation in the various processes of community development in the rural areas in the Enugu North Senatorial District in Nigeria. Since the research objective is descriptive, a descriptive survey design was used, which enable the researchers to collect detailed information on women participation, nature of projects, and empowering factors and challenges. The approach is appropriate in this case as it helps examine the position of women in different development activities in current status quo and give a basis towards policy recommendations (Creswell, 2014).

The study location covered four communal settings in Enugu North administered using random sampling method to make the study have representation that is generally applicable in the whole district. These areas of local government are Igbo Etiti, Nsukka, Igbo Eze North and Uzo Nwani, which are predominantly rural in nature whose people predominantly rely on agrarian practices. The involvement of various communities expands the reach and makes the results more valid and reliable as they could be compared across the different places of the district (Bryman, 2016). The technique that are used at that point is purposive sampling because it ensures that the respondents have related experience and knowledge regarding the role of women and their involvement in development efforts, and thus enhance the quality of the generated data (Palinkas et al., 2015). Such a narrow focus is supplemented by stratified sampling among and between these groups to cover the diversity of socio-economics, age, and level of education, to give us a clear picture of the factors that affect empowerment. 100 women were selected in each of the selected local governments. Therefore 400 women were sampled as the respondents for this study.

Data collection was done by the use of structured questionnaire and key informant interview (KII) methods, focus group discussions (FGD) and observation. Questionnaire was validated by the head of department and experts in test and measurement. Cronbach's alpha was used for the reliability of instrument, and 0.83 reliability coefficient was obtained.

The FGDs and KIIs augment the questionnaires by offering qualitative information about the challenges encountered, factors that facilitate interaction and personal encounters that affect the participation of women at rural development. Observation then applied to validate the engagement in community projects and gauge the status of infrastructures.

The descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics on counts and percentages summarized the responses giving an overview of the current situation of the participation and empowerment of women. Inferential statistics used the Pearson correlation coefficient to determine the influence of factors, including the access to microcredits, the levels of education, and the level of participation and thus testing the formed hypothesis relative to factors that could encourage the level of participation of women (Field, 2013).

The response which obtained from questionnaire and interviews were discussed by statistical software (e.g. SPSS).

Data Analysis and Findings

Quantitative Findings

Table 1: Statistical Summary of Women Empowerment and Participation in Developing Rural Communities

Category	Indicator	Quantitative Findings	Notes
Level of Participation	Active Participation	65% respondents	Activities include road maintenance, market sanitation, cooperative farming
	Limited/No Participation	35% respondents	Cultural barriers cited as main reason
Types of Activities	Group Farming	70% involvement	Most dominant activity
	Market Association Work	60% involvement	Includes trade, pricing, and logistics
	Health Outreach	45% involvement	Includes maternal health, vaccination drives
	Infrastructure/Governance	<20% involvement	Indicates underrepresentation in decision-making
Barriers to Empowerment	Cultural Norms	70% respondents	Includes gender roles, traditional expectations
	Limited Access to Land/Credit	55% respondents	Economic constraints affecting autonomy
Influencing Factors	Access to Microcredits	$r = 0.65, p < 0.01$	Strong positive correlation with participation
	Educational Level	$r = 0.58, p < 0.01$	Higher education linked to greater involvement
	Training Programs	$r = 0.52, p < 0.05$	Skills development boosts engagement

Questionnaire was validated by the head of department and experts in test and measurement. To test the reliability of the study, questionnaire was administered to 40 women who were not part of the study sample. Cronbach's alpha was used for the reliability of instrument, and 0.83 reliability coefficient was obtained. Analysis of the main structured data indicated that 65% of the respondents indicated active involvement of women in community affairs like road intervention, market sanitation, and cooperation farming activities. On the other hand, 35% indicated that they took part in none or very little, which was mostly attributed to cultural obstacles. It further revealed that the most popular activities include group farming (70%), market association work (60%) and health outreach (45%) through a survey. Only slightly more than one-fifth of respondents had engagement in infrastructure planning or governance. 70% of respondents also cited cultural norms as the primary obstacle and 55% of respondents cited limited access to land and credit as outstanding barriers. In addition, a positive relationship was discovered between the access to

microcredits ($r=0.65$, $p<0.01$), educational levels ($r=0.58$, $p<0.01$), and training programs ($r=0.52$, $p<0.05$) and the levels of participation of women.

Qualitative Findings

1. Level of Women's Participation in Rural Development Projects

Qualitative observations (FGDs & KII): Diverse opinions were voiced by respondents regarding women's participation. Women participate in certain activities, such as cooperative farming and market cleaning, but they still make up a small percentage of those involved in higher-level decision-making, according to one community leader.

"Cultural beliefs often prevent us from taking leadership roles; most women are expected to support silently rather than lead," said another female leader.

The qualitative answers reveal enduring social and cultural norms that prevent women from taking on leadership positions in development initiatives.

2. Types of Activities Women Predominantly Engage in and Their Significance

Qualitative Responses: Women participants highlighted their contributions, saying, *"We are eager to participate more in governance and planning, but we mostly engage in farming and markets because those roles are accepted."*

This demonstrates that the activities that are ascribed to women are mostly social and economic in character, frequently stemming from traditional roles. Their stated desire to increase participation shows that they want to feel more included and empowered.

3. Influencing Factors on Women's Participation

Qualitative insights: According to respondents, *"women have found it easier to start small businesses and get involved in community development since they have access to microcredit."* *"We now have more options thanks to education, but many women still do not have access to training programs."*

Thus, the results demonstrate that women's capacity to actively participate is strongly influenced by the availability of financial resources and education. Although training programs are essential facilitators, they frequently lack sustainability and scale.

4. Cultural and Socioeconomic Barriers to Women's Empowerment

Gender norms and cultural beliefs were identified as the main obstacles:

"Many still believe that women should stay at home and not engage in development activities beyond domestic chores," stated a large number of respondents.

"Women are unable to fully contribute to development projects due to limited access to land and credit."

The results show that women's full participation is severely hampered by deeply rooted cultural norms and structural injustices. To overcome these, policy support for gender equity and community sensitization are needed.

5. Impact of MDGs on Women's Roles

Qualitative Observations: MDG campaigns have increased awareness, according to respondents: *"The MDGs have helped us understand the importance of women's involvement, but implementation at the grassroots level remains weak."*

"MDGs have led to an increase in microcredits and training for women, but sustainability remains a challenge."

Therefore, even though awareness has increased, there are still obstacles to overcome in order to translate international policies into sustainable local action, such as a lack of funding and cultural resistance.

Discussion of Findings

The results of the research on the participation of women in the rural community development (RCD) in Enugu North, Nigeria show that there were complex patterns of empowering factors and impediments. A considerable percentage of the female gender (approximately 65 percent) are actively engaged in community-based works including farming and trade in markets, providing a good basis of female involvement in community development (Ukpongson et al., 2014). Such active involvement is consistent with international trends that indicate the value of women in rural economies and social stability when they are facilitated by tax incentives and the availability of micro-finance loans and education (Kabeer, 2015). The positive relationship between access to microcredit and women, education, and participation is a revelation in the sense that economic empowerment matters in the case of stimulating participation, just like the Capability Approach is emphasizing the role of expanding freedoms of individuals to engage in productive activities. Despite this, social codes and conventional wisdom remain to be major impediments as they limit the participation of women in leadership positions and institution making in the societies they live in. These are socio-cultural impediments that rarely allow women to be fully empowered even when they participate actively in the economic activities (Akinrinola & Oladipo, 2018). The evidence indicates that though awareness and accessibility may be conducted through programs such as microcredit and campaigns to achieve MDGs, it is not overall sufficient to curb all cultural and institutional hindrance. It resonates with the argument that development efforts tend to neglect the fact that gender norms and power issues are major aspects that need to change to ensure sustainable power (Moser, 2017).

Conclusion

The research highlights that women play an important role in rural community development in Enugu North, Nigeria, albeit a limited role due to socio-cultural attitudes, inaccessibility of land and credit and deficiencies in policy support. Although mobility, including access to microcredit, education, and training, has had a positive impact on the participation of women, their cultural beliefs that bind them discourage their position as leaders and decision-makers. The implications of the findings are that holistic study which includes economic empowerment of women together with culture and institutional changes should be adopted in order to promote sustainable women empowerment. Overcoming such barriers needs to be prioritized not only to support women in exercise of their agency, but also because this aspect is critical to the achievement of more comprehensive development objectives, such as the SDGs.

Recommendations

- Awareness creation needs to be organized by leaders of the community and the traditional institutions to shatter and reshape these gender constrictive values to create a more conducive atmosphere to allow women to participate in the developmental practices.
- Financial institutions and government agencies must work together in increasing access to microcredit, affordable training programmes, and land rights of women in order to strengthen their economic empowerment and their inclusion in rural development projects.
- The policy makers and the development partners should enhance and effectively enact policies, which promote women participation in governance and decision-making units at the community level with sustainability and scalability levels.

- The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women groups ought to conduct capacity-building sessions, mentorship and training to raise the number of women in representation and active participation in development programmes at community level.
- Technology providers and educational institutions need to create and popularize digital platforms and ICT training among women to help them to gain access to information and resources as well as networks that support their involvement into rural development activities.

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