

## **Empowering Rural Women-In Agriculture (WIA) Through Extension Education.**

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### **Abstract**

Women-in-Agriculture (WIA), a group that embodies all rural women farmers in Nigeria deserve a better appreciation and recognition of their tangible contributions to agricultural development and food security. Rural women farmers more than their men counter parts take the lead in agricultural activities, making up to 60-80 percent of labour force. It is ironical that their contributions to agricultural development are seldom noticed, they have no or minimal part to play in the decision-making process regarding agricultural policy. There has not been enough women ministers of agriculture who should have a voice to contribute in the agricultural decision making of the country which should benefit the women farmers. This paper therefore explored the role of extension education as a critical tool for empowering women-in-agriculture and emancipating them into the agenda of agricultural policy making and thereby breaking the strong-hold of poverty in their lives. The paper equally suggested that both state and federal governments should appoint more women commissioners and ministers of agriculture to help in reshaping the obnoxious traditions that negate women's participation in agricultural policy making of this country. It finally concluded that if the millennium Development Goals' (MDGs) target should be met and sustained, women-in-agriculture should be empowered because good training will enhance and enable them fight marginalization and subjugation of their men folk that have negated their contributions in the agricultural development agenda of the government.

**Key words:** Empowerment, Extension Education, Women-in-agriculture,

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria which was among the 189 countries that signed the Millennium Development Goals in September 2000 is yet to achieve in full the goals after nineteen years. The Nigerian Government has not been able to provide adequate water supply, health care delivery, rural electrification and proper nutrition for the citizenry to meet up with the millennium development goals, and here comes the sustainable development goals. The goals have to be achieved before they are sustained. Despite the richness of Nigeria in human and natural resources, her citizens are still suffering from hunger and poverty. A good number of rural people in the country especially female farmers are still wallowing in ignorance and illiteracy. (MDGs, 2010)

The bedrock of agriculture and agricultural development is rural development and women empowerment without which all efforts at agricultural development will be futile. A large majority of women farmers live in the rural areas and operate at the subsistence, small holder level, with intensive agriculture being uncommon. The bulk of the poor, some three quarters according to a recent World Bank estimate live in the rural areas where they draw their livelihoods from agriculture and related activities. Evidently, development, food

security, wealth creation and poverty alleviation will not be truly achieved without agricultural growth. (World Bank, 2008). Empowering the rural women in agriculture through extension education to enhance their livelihoods, create wealth and achieve food security in a sustainable manner is therefore very essential. Broadly put, increases in agricultural productivity are central to growth, income distribution, improved food security and alleviation of poverty among these women in agriculture. In all of these, the women in agriculture play a pivotal and crucial role to the overall success of efforts directed at agricultural development in the rural areas. The roles that these women in agriculture play and their positions in meeting with the challenges in agricultural production and development are dominant and prominent. Yet, in spite of all these, widespread assumption that men, instead of women make the key farm decisions has prevailed. Sadly enough, women in agriculture today are among the voiceless especially with respect to influencing agricultural policies in Nigeria. (Ogunleta, 2009). Such policies which are aimed at increasing food security and food production tend to either under estimate and totally ignore women's roles in both production and the general decision-making process within the household. Poor education and lack of adequate voice among other factors have been variously described as factors affecting the decision making of these women in Agricultural policies. (Rahman, 2008).

### **Women-In-Agriculture (WIA) in Nigeria**

Women in Agricultural (WIA) is an umbrella name given to all the rural women farmers in Nigeria. Thus it is used in this paper. It is a programme that came about in 1998 when it became obvious that in spite of a decade of World Bank's assistance in building up Nigeria's agricultural extension services, women farmers were still receiving minimal assistance and information from extension agents (World Bank, 2008). Consequently the WIA programmes within the existing state agricultural development programmes (ADPS) were created in 1998 to address the gender-related deficiencies within the existing extension programmes. The programme was created to integrate women into development process with specific reference to agriculture, since the participation of women farmers in planning and policy-making as well as the beneficiaries is important. (Maidigali, 1992). Unfortunately these women lacked the actual education and the language to empower them into the policy making agenda. The WIA programme which was launched as a pilot, therefore needs some empowerment to improve agricultural extension services for women.

### **Important Roles of Women-In-Agriculture**

Among other contribution, WIA in Nigeria has contributed substantially to poverty alleviation notably in rural areas. They have contributed to the economic development of the nation by bringing about improved household food security, thus underscoring the fact that the productivity of women farmers must be the centre piece of agricultural strategy. (Ratharin, 1994). These women have also been identified as boosting the income earnings of their families and reducing malnutrition among children. They have helped to identify some of the constraints faced by women farmers as well as sourced and collaborated with research institutions to develop suitable technologies to meet identified constraints and needs. Also, WIA has helped to ensure timely extension support to women farmers in areas of food production, processing and utilization, (Odebode,2008). In spite of these roles, women-in-

agriculture lack the voice to challenge their subjugations to the men folk. There has not been enough women ministers of agriculture who should step up to formulate policies and strategies that will benefit women farmers.

### **Women Empowerment**

The United Nations Population Fund (UNPF, 2009) report on gender equality recorded that, despite many international agreements affirming their human rights, women are still much more likely than men to be poor and illiterate. Women are also less politically active than men and are usually victims of domestic violence. Empowering women therefore gives them equal right and opportunities with men in all spheres of life. It means giving them equal education and the opportunity to develop their personal ambition. Empowering women gives them the right to speak out in terms of decision and policy making. Ogbonna,( 2010) maintains that it is old fashioned to see and characterize women in roles that propagate biological determinism as nature does not justify inequality. It is an agreed fact that a “woman empowered is a nation built”. (Njoku, 2014). Empowerment is relevant and useful when the empowered realizes what to do with it. It is rather unfortunate that majority of women-in-agriculture are still not literate enough hence their voice is yet to be heard in agricultural policy making. They have to receive some form of education to even know their rights and to realize when they are being trampled upon and call for redress.

### **Extension Education**

It is defined as creating awareness to the rural farmers of the new agricultural techniques by extension agents and imparting knowledge into them. The National Policy on Education (1981) clearly spelt out the objectives of extension education. These objectives took care of different individuals who would benefit from the programmes such as;

- Education for the young people who prematurely dropped out of school.
- On the job training for those who were already employed but who wanted to improve their competencies, and
- Continuing education for those who wish to complete their formal education. From the foregoing it becomes clear that education is a life-long process which enables the continuous development of a person’s capabilities as an individual and as a member of the society.

### **The Roles of education in empowering Women-in-Agriculture.**

Education, be it formal, semi-formal or informal enables people to transform their own lives and the society in which they live. It enables communities to achieve the level of economic and agricultural growth needed to tackle poverty and make development a reality. Many scholars believe that emancipation of the women-in-agriculture lies in proper education. They see extension education as a basic tool for empowering rural women farmers hence (Ezigbo, 1994 and Mgbada, 2010) opined that rural women farmers empowerment can only be achieved through extension education since most of these women fall within those who want change in their lives style, their proper education can only be through adult education which is a product of extension education. It is only through this that women in agriculture can hope to break the strong-hold of patriarchal power and the age-old traditions which combine to slow down women’s progress. They would have a voice in the decision making even in their

homes.. Acquisition of education enables women to question issues, examine facts more critically and see the relevance of ideas with reality. This simply means that women can develop critical thinking when they are educated.

Extension education enables the rural women farmers to move about to sell their agricultural products, have high bargaining powers, generate funds and feel satisfied. They would not have to be dependent on others for daily needs. They would have to contribute financially to their families; through this the cycle of poverty in their lives would be broken. Generally, when we talk about educating these women in agriculture, we mean developing those who will contribute meaningfully to food sustainability and food security. Educating women in agriculture means ensuring the buoyancy of food in Nigeria, it means reshaping these women for self emancipation and self empowerment which will lead to poverty alleviation and eradication of illiteracy and even employment opportunity. We need the empowerment of these women so that this country will be a better place.

Communication is considered an important tool in empowering women in agriculture because it plays a very important role in teaching and learning process at all levels of education. The normal teaching and learning process thrives on effective communication between the instructor and the learner. Both are expected to command the language of instruction. The ultimate goal of extension education is change in the learner. This therefore means that no matter how expertly learning experiences are selected and organized, the major objective of teaching –learning exercise is change in behavior, and it would not occur if the communication channel is not understandable. There is always a degree of loss of information when instruction is rendered with unfamiliar language. A good command of the language of instruction enhances women's education which therefore empowers them in decision making in all spheres of life including policy making in agriculture. Competency in the use of communication channel such as verbal communication or the use of information communication technology (ICT) is a very powerful asset to women's empowerment. It will not only enhance their education but will also engender them into various professions in a male dominated society. Using the appropriate word in a given situation would always elicit co-operation and understanding. Examples of women who have been empowered in their professions abound in Nigeria, due mainly because they have acquired education. Take for example, the late Professor Dora Akunyili who achieved land marks as the NAFDAC boss, made a bold initiative to rebrand Nigeria. (Njuko, 2014) went on to say that she was able to salvage the battered image of Nigeria. What about Ngozi Okonjo Iwuala, a one time finance minister, who was instrumental to the cancellation of Nigeria external debts and as such boosted Nigeria's credit rating. Also, Oby Ezekwesili a onetime minister of education in Nigeria, who championed the Bring Back Our Girls Campaign (BBOG) in reaction to the purported Chibok school girls who were abducted by the Boko-Haram Islamic sect in Bornu state on April 14, 2014. These women have been empowered by education and strong voice. We need more of such women in the Ministry of Agriculture so that the voices of women in agriculture should be heard in regards to reshaping of agricultural policies that will enhance the Nigeria food security and breaking of strong- hold of poverty in the midst of plenty.

Extension education when properly handled can be used to correct the erroneous ideologies that negatively affect women in agriculture.

### **Objectives of the study:**

**The main objective of this paper was to explore and review the importance of education and training as a powerful tool for empowering women in agriculture (WIA) in Nigeria. It explored the roles women play in agriculture and the importance of education in empowerment of rural women farmers.**

### **Materials and Methods:**

**Area of the study: The study was carried out in the rural areas of Nigeria. The main population was the rural women farmers.**

### **Method of Data Collection:**

**The data for this study were mainly collected from journals and existing literature.**

### **Conclusion**

The contributions made by women in agricultural production in Nigeria are grossly underappreciated in spite of the dominant roles they play in the sector. That women compete more favorably with their men folks in terms of their participation in agricultural activity and food security would be an understatement. The survival and sustenance of agriculture in Nigeria rest squarely on the women in agriculture. This paper therefore opines that with adequate education and training, women in agriculture will be equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills they need to accept innovation and handle agricultural techniques for emancipation and empowerment. With competency in communication channels, women farmers' education will be enhanced and it will enable them fight the marginalization of the male folk. Extension Education as a tool and good communication channel, can be used to re-orientate women farmers on their internalized notion of being inferior to their male counterparts. They can be sensitized to reject and fight the age old traditions that have subjugated and limited their contributions to agricultural development in Nigeria. Through extension education rural women farmers can be freed from the strangle-hold and shackles of poverty and illiteracy.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Adult education should be mounted for women and teenage mothers who have dropped out of school. This will enable them acquire skills that will empower them into securing good jobs and provide them with means of survival thereby alleviating their poverty. Female extension agents will step up their activities and reach out more to the rural women farmers so as to furnish them with new agricultural technologies. Government and even donor agencies should set up skill acquisition centres that can make women self reliant. They can be taught verbally or using information communication technologies, such as radios and television on how to make things themselves. This will help improve their living standards hence alleviate poverty. Women who have been empowered in the society should act as role models to the younger ones. This will enable them have a voice in the policy and decision making of their communities. Government should appoint more female Ministers of agriculture and other areas, women who can operate from the grassroots and who should be able to speak for the rural women in agriculture, they will help and make policies that will improve the lots of women folk.

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