

INFLUENCE OF GOVERNMENT SPONSORED WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES ON SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study evaluated government-sponsored women empowerment programmes on sustainable community development in Rivers State, Nigeria. A summative evaluative design was employed, with a total population of 385 women. The researchers utilised a total population sampling technique to select 385 female participants from eighteen communities in six Local Government Areas across the three senatorial districts of Rivers State. These participants had previously taken part in empowerment programmes organised by the wives of former governors of Rivers State from 1999-2015. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled "Government-Sponsored Women Empowerment Programmes on Sustainable Community Development Questionnaire." The reliability of the questionnaire was established through the test-retest method with a reliability coefficient of 0.85 index. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyse data on the research questions. The findings of the study revealed that women who participated in the Family Support Programme and Empowerment Support initiative, conducted by the wives of past governors of Rivers State between 1999 and 2015 were empowered to start up small-scale businesses that sustained their family and the community. The study, therefore, recommends regular implementation of women empowerment programmes in the state to improve the living conditions of women in both rural and urban areas of Rivers State.

Keywords: Government, Sponsored, Women, Empowerment, Programmes, Community, Development

Introduction

Many contemporary thinkers acknowledge the individuality of women and recognise them as unique individuals. They are often viewed as caretakers of the home, mothers, wives, and active members of their communities who require empowerment. In Rivers State, it is important to focus on

empowering women as part of economic empowerment efforts. Empowerment plays a crucial role in reducing vulnerability and dependence in all aspects of life, and it is imperative to empower women accordingly. The women's empowerment programme was initiated in the 1970s by Third World

feminists to advance the fight for social justice and gender equality (Bisnath & Elson, as cited in Onyishi, 2017). Promoting women empowerment has led to positive changes in many communities, leading to the establishment of women affairs departments within the country (Nigeria).

The Nigerian Ministry of Women Affairs was initially established as a commission by the Military Government under decree No. 30 of December 7, 1989. It was known as the National Commission for Women, and each of the 36 states in the Federation had a similar State Commission for Women. On March 8, 1997, during International Women's Day celebrations, Dr. Mrs. Maryam Abacha, the then-First Lady, announced the commission's upgrade to the Ministry of Women Affairs. This upgrade was directed by the late Head of State, General Sani Abacha, through a letter from the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs on March 11, 1997, stating that all state commissions should be upgraded to the status of Ministry of Women Affairs. In Rivers State, the ministry has had six female Honorable Commissioners and Dr. Pat Wudhiga Ogbonnaya as the Permanent Secretary.

The importance of empowering women has been highlighted by the United Nations Population Fund Azunwo (2021). When a woman is empowered, she values herself and recognizes her worth. She is determined to make positive changes through her own choices and has access to various opportunities. She possesses agency in shaping her own life, both within the confines of her household and in the broader societal context, and can effectuate social transformation aimed at establishing a fairer social and economic framework, spanning local, national, and global spheres.

According to Srivastava in Azunwo (2021), empowering women is crucial for promoting sustainable community development. Therefore, it is necessary to implement women empowerment programmes. Onah (2011) emphasized that these programmes are essential as they enable women to enhance their mental and physical capabilities, power, and skills. Empowerment allows women to actively participate in their communities.

Justice (Mrs.) Mary Odili, wife of one-time governor of Rivers State from 1999-2007 established a pet empowerment project for women both in rural and urban areas. The programme was of great help to women as it addressed adolescent problems in the state. The programme was tagged "Family Support Programme" (FSP) and it was one of the democratic dividends as it was a grassroots programme in Rivers State since the return of civil rule in 1999 and it was a skill acquisition programme. Women had the opportunity to learn the skills of their choice which ranged from driving, hairdressing, sewing, bead-making, tie and dye, modern agricultural practices, and many more. At the end of the training, Justice (Mrs.) Mary Odili empowered the rural and urban women who participated financially; some were empowered with small cars, hair dryers, sewing machines, agricultural seedlings, and so on, as it was the sole aim of the programme. The programme reduced women's vulnerability, improved their well-being, and self-esteem and in turn, made them employers of labour (This Day Newspaper, in Azunwo, 2021).

Similarly, Dame Judith Amaechi, wife of the one-time governor of Rivers State from 2008-2015, initiated another empowerment programme tagged "Empowerment Support Initiative" (ESI). This initiative campaigned

against HIV/AIDS, advocated the rights of women and children, promoted gender equity and girl child education. The initiative was established on the 16th October, 2008, and provided practical support and advice for women, particularly the most disadvantaged, (Azunwo, 2021). The aim of the initiative eventually stirred up women to learn something new act independently, work in groups and enable them to develop their talents and solve immediate problems. Through the initiative, women partook in various skill acquisitions which ranged from driving, hairdressing, sewing, bead making, tie and dye, modern agricultural practices, etc. At the end of the training, Dame Judith Amaechi empowered the women who participated materially, some with Hummer buses, hair dryers, sewing machines, agricultural seedlings, and so on. The sole aim of the programme was to empower women materially, and with agricultural seedlings making them self-employed, self-reliant and bringing a positive change in their community.

Women from various communities who took part in an empowerment programme made noteworthy contributions to the agricultural sector, particularly in rural areas. They engaged in activities such as crop production, food processing, working for pay in agricultural or other rural businesses, participating in trade and marketing of goods, taking care of their families, and maintaining their homes. According to Gupta (2009), women who received materials from the empowerment programme found them to be useful and long-lasting. The materials helped alleviate poverty and enabled some women to become self-employed or employers of labour. The empowerment materials included cars, sewing machines, grinding machines,

knitting machines, hair dryers, cellophane machines, ovens, shoe-making machines, and motorcycles, among others. The women also received various training opportunities that helped them develop themselves and their communities. According to Gabriel, Pamela, and Loveth (2019), the implementation of the empowerment programme yielded favourable outcomes for the women who actively engaged in the programme.

According to Itanyi (2002), a community can be defined as a group of individuals residing in a particular location, who share a common understanding and work collectively towards achieving shared goals and programmes. In the context of community development in Rivers State, it is important to ensure that programmes do not discriminate against women. These programmes should encompass a range of activities, including addressing specific tasks related to community welfare, as well as implementing multipurpose initiatives aimed at transforming social organizations and values for women within the community.

Community development, according to Obi in Dokubo (2015), refers to a process of socio-economic transformation that seeks to achieve common development goals by addressing the capabilities and needs of individuals in an agrarian society. According to Dokubo (2015), the World Bank believes that community development is a methodical approach to reducing rural poverty by consistently improving the productivity and incomes of low-income rural workers and households. Njoku and Dokubo (2015) argue that community development is a process in which rural residents are motivated to rationally exploit and utilize the resources of their environment for the social and economic well-being of society. According

to Batten, as referenced by Kobani and Alozie (2015), community development underscores the importance of community engagement and the identification of needs as essential components for successful community development. By engaging in comprehensive discussions and collectively defining their needs, community members can subsequently collaborate in planning strategies to address those needs. In line with this perspective, the empowerment programme implemented in Rivers State seeks to enhance the overall welfare of women residing in both rural and urban regions.

The well-being of women improved during the regimes of Dr. Peter Odili from May 1999 to May 2007 and Rt. Hon. Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi served as the governor of the state from January 2008 to May 2015. During their tenure, they and their wives observed the state of women, particularly the indigenous population who were vulnerable due to cultural practices and their reliance on traditional farming methods, resulting in low harvests. These women solely depended on their husbands in every aspect of life, as most of them were not allowed to do things by themselves. This observation prompted the establishment of various women empowerment programmes, such as the Family Support Programme (FSP) and the Empowerment Support Initiative (ESI). Through these programmes, women were taught various skills, including basic hairdressing, fashion design, catering, bead-making, tie-dyeing, driving, agriculture, etc. At the end of these programmes, the participating women were empowered and equipped to start their businesses. To the best knowledge of the researchers, no research has been carried out to evaluate the impact of these empowerment initiatives.

Hence, this study seeks to evaluate the impact of government-funded women's empowerment programmes on sustainable community development in Rivers State.

Purpose of the study

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the impact of government-sponsored women empowerment programmes on the sustainable development of communities in Rivers State. More specifically, the study aimed to accomplish the following objectives:

1. evaluate the influence of Family Support Programmes (FSP) on sustainable community development in Rivers State.
2. examine the influence of Empowerment Support Initiatives (ESI) on sustainable community development in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated in line with the objectives of the study:

1. To what extent did family support programmes (FSP) influence sustainable community development in Rivers State?
2. To what extent did empowerment support initiatives (ESI) influence sustainable community development in Rivers State?

Methodology

The study adopted summative evaluation design to investigate the extent to which FSP and ESI from 1999 – 2015 influenced community development in 18 communities across six Local Government Areas in Rivers State. The population of this study is 385 respondents comprising 72 facilitators and 313 participants of the Family Support

Programme (FSP) and the Empowerment Sustainability Initiative (ESI) in Rivers State. The study adopted total population sampling technique to select the entire 385 respondents since the population size was manageable.

Table 1: Selected Communities and Local Government Areas

S/N	Communities in Rivers East Senatorial District	LGA	Sample (Facilitators)	Sample (Participants)
1	Rumueme	Obio/Akpor	4	22
2	Rumuepirikom	Obio/Akpor	4	26
3	Rumuolumeni	Obio/Akpor	4	16
4	Rumuworji	Port Harcourt	4	16
5	Oroworukwo	Port Harcourt	4	19
6	Orogbum	Port Harcourt	4	15
Communities in Rivers South East Senatorial District				
7	Asarama	Andoni	4	23
8	Ataba	Andoni	4	18
9	Egendem	Andoni	4	18
10	Alesa	Eleme	4	11
11	Aleto	Eleme	4	15
12	Akpajo	Eleme	4	12
Communities in Rivers West Senatorial District				
13	Akinima	Ahoada West	4	18
14	Okarki	Ahoada West	4	18
15	Mbiama	Ahoada West	4	23
16	Omoku	Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni	4	21
17	Mgbede	Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni	4	12
18	Utuochi	Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni	4	10
	Total		72	313

The instrument used to collect data in this study was a structured questionnaire, specifically developed by the researchers. The researchers adopted a modified four-point Likert scale, ranging from Very High Extent (VHE-4Points) to Very Low Extent (VLE-1Point). To ensure the validity of the instrument, it underwent a validation process involving two experts in the fields of Adult

Education, Community Development, and one in Measurement and Evaluation. Additionally, a reliability test was conducted using a test-retest method on a separate group of 50 respondents from Akwa in Etche Local Government Area of Rivers State, who were not part of the original sample with a reliability index of 0.85.

The validated questionnaire was then

administered to the respondents through group leaders of the women empowerment programmes. After two weeks, the completed questionnaires were retrieved and analysed using mean and standard deviation statistical tools. A mean value of 2.49 or

below on any item on the instrument was considered to indicate a low extent, while a mean value of 2.50 or higher on any item indicated a high extent. It is important to note that the criterion mean for this study was set at 2.50.

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent did family support programmes (FSP) influence sustainable community development in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean Response of Facilitators and Participants on the Influence of Family Support Programmes on Sustainable Community Development

S/N	Items	Facilitators n=72			Participants n=313		
		Mean	SD	Remark	Mean	SD	Remark
1	The past administration, brought personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture to educate women in my local government about the modern way of farming	3.21	1.15	High Extent	2.90	1.14	High Extent
2	The past administration brought personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture to teach women of my local government various ways of crop preservation	2.97	1.19	High Extent	2.99	1.17	High Extent
3	The past administration brought personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture that taught women in my local government how to use fertilizer to improve their crops	1.93	1.09	Low Extent	1.92	0.99	Low Extent
4	The seedling given to me by the past administration was of no use as the seed did not germinate	2.99	0.87	High Extent	3.10	1.00	High Extent
5	The past administration, brought personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture with different seedlings to my local government, resulting in better harvest in my community	2.10	1.25	Low Extent	1.83	1.20	Low Extent
6	The cassava seedlings given to us by the personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture did not germinate in our soil	2.90	0.96	High Extent	3.21	0.99	High Extent
7	I am known as the best farmer in my community thanks to the modern way of learning I was taught by the past administration	2.83	1.00	High Extent	3.18	1.02	High Extent
8	The past administration, brought personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture to teach women participants in my local government a new method of snail farming	1.93	1.16	Low Extent	1.83	1.19	Low Extent
9	The seedlings given to us by the personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture did not germinate in our soil	2.75	0.94	High Extent	3.14	0.99	High Extent

10	The past administration, brought personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture with different seedlings to my community, resulting in a better harvest	2.86	1.12	High Extent	3.04	1.15	High Extent
	Grand Mean	2.65	1.07	High Extent	2.71	0.89	High Extent

Data in Table 2 revealed the mean and standard deviation of facilitators and participants from 18 selected communities in three senatorial districts in Rivers State on the influence of family support programmes (FSP) on sustainable community development from 1999 to 2015. Based on the mean and standard deviation of items 3, 5, and 8, facilitators had a mean and standard deviation ranging from 1.93 to 1.09, 2.10 to 1.25, and 1.93 to 1.16 respectively, indicating a low extent. Participants had a mean and standard deviation of 1.92 - 0.99, 1.83 - 1.20, and 1.83 - 1.19, which indicated a low extent.

The mean and standard deviation mentioned above indicate that the influence of modern agricultural practices, specifically for Family Support Programmes, on the respondents was rated low extent. This is evident from item 3 in research question 1, which indicates that most women in the selected

communities were never taught by personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture about the use of fertilizers for improving crop yields. According to item 5 of the research question, some participants did not have a better harvest even when they received different seedlings from personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture. Item 8 on the same research question indicated that only a few participants were taught new methods of snail farming by personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture.

The same table revealed responses from respondents indicating high extent on items 1,2,4,6,7,9 and 10 with mean scores ranging between (2.73 and 3.21) indicating high extent, with a grand mean of 2.65 and 2.71 for the facilitators and participants. The answer to research question 1 therefore is that FSP from 1999 to 2015 influenced participants in the three senatorial districts in Rivers State.

Research Question 2: To what extent did empowerment support initiatives (ESI) influence sustainable community development in Rivers State?

Table 3: Mean Response of Facilitators and Participants on the Influence of Empowerment Support Initiatives on Sustainable Community Development

S/No	Items	Facilitators n=72			Participants n=313		
		Mean	SD	Remark	Mean	SD	Remark
1	The mini car I received at the end of the training is of great help to me as it gives me daily money	1.93	1.00	Low Extent	1.63	1.01	Low Extent
2	With the little money I received at the end of the training, I was able to pay my shop rent	3.10	0.87	High Extent	2.92	0.99	High Extent
3	I received a certificate of participation but was not given the	3.04	1.17	High Extent	3.10	1.06	High Extent

	capital (money) as promised for me to start up my business						
4	The skill acquisition was a waste of time and resources (money) as I was not given any money to start up my business	2.18	1.08	Low Extent	2.10	1.02	Low Extent
5	I received a mini oven as I was the overall best among all in the catering angle	2.04	0.90	Low Extent	2.00	0.87	Low Extent
6	I received a hair dryer and other hair accessories after completing a hairdressing training. My goal is to open a hairdressing salon in my community and use it to train others in the art of hairdressing.	2.86	1.08	High Extent	2.84	1.15	High Extent
7	I am so glad to have received a sewing machine on the last day of the fashion and design skill acquisition training in my local government area	2.92	0.92	High Extent	2.80	0.88	High Extent
8	After the skill acquisition training in my local government, I was awarded a certain amount to start up my fish farm business	2.10	0.99	Low Extent	2.10	1.06	Low Extent
9	I organize a workshop training on what I learnt yearly for free and also teach members of my community what I learnt during the skill acquisition training in my community	2.10	1.05	Low Extent	2.16	1.02	Low Extent
10	The cellophane-making machine I received on the last day of the skill acquisition training done in my local government area has made me the only cellophane producer in my community	2.19	1.09	Low Extent	1.92	1.01	Low Extent
	Grand Mean	2.45	1.02	Low Extent	2.36	1.07	Low Extent

Data in Table 3 revealed the mean and standard deviation of facilitators and participants from 18 selected communities in three senatorial districts in Rivers State on the influence of empowerment support initiatives (ESI) on sustainable community development from 1999 to 2015. The mean and standard deviation in items 2, 3, 6, and 7 for facilitators had mean and standard deviation of (3.10-0.87, (3.04-1.17), (2.86-1.08), and (2.92-0.92) which is rated high

extent, while participants in rural areas in the same items had a mean and standard deviation of (2.92- 0.99), (3.10-1.06), (2.84-1.15) and (2.80-1.15) which was also rated high extent.

It was indicated that respondents with regards to item 2 in research question 2 agreed that the little money they received at the end of their training was enough for them to rent a shop. The majority of participants agreed to have received certificates of

participation but were not given capital (money) as promised on the very first day of the programme. Facilitators and participants agreed to item 6 in research question 2 that most of them received hair driers and other accessories as they attended training on hairdressing and they were equally able to set up a hairdressing saloons in their communities that enabled them to train their community members. Item 7 in research question 2 also had a high extent as women participants were glad, they received sewing machines on the last day of the fashion and design skill acquisition training in their Local Government Areas.

Also, the same table revealed that responses of facilitators and participants in the selected communities rated low extent on items 1,4,5,9, and 10 with mean scores ranging between 2.36 and 2.45. This implies that the impact of material empowerment on facilitators and participants in the selected communities was of Low Extent, with a grand mean of 2.20 each for facilitators and participants. The answer to research question 2, therefore, is that ESI from 1999 to 2015 did not influence participants in the three senatorial districts in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

The study's discussion focused solely on the two research questions. The women participants' responses regarding the impact of modern agricultural practices on women in urban and rural areas between 1999 and 2015 received high ratings in the three senatorial districts. This was because the previous administration brought in personnel from the Ministry of Agriculture to educate women in the local government about modern farming methods and taught women in rural areas various techniques for crop preservation and more. However, the analysis of the impact of modern agricultural

practices on women participants in urban and rural areas of Rivers State showed an average rating of 2.55 and 2.54, respectively. The finding also revealed no significant difference in the impact of modern agricultural practices on female participants. The findings of the FAO/GSO/MoP (2010) highlight the significant contribution of women to the agricultural labour force and activities. However, the extent of their contribution is challenging to quantify accurately. Despite claims that women produce between 60-80% of the world's food, it is difficult to determine the exact extent of their contributions to agricultural and food production. Empowerment of women has increased their role in agricultural production in both rural and urban areas, yet their roles and responsibilities vary greatly within and between regions due to economic and social factors. Rural women face numerous challenges in managing households and pursuing different livelihood strategies. These activities range from crop production, animal care, food processing and preparation, to employment in agricultural or other rural businesses, fuel and water collection, participation in trade and marketing, family caregiving and household maintenance. The results of the study align with the findings of the World Bank (2012), which highlight how women contribute significantly to the agricultural and rural economies in developing countries.

The analysis of the result of the impact of material empowerment on women participants in urban and rural areas of Rivers State showed the grand mean rating of 2.20 and 2.20 respectively. Also, the finding indicated no significant difference in the impact of material empowerment on women participants. To a large extent, the

finding contradicts the view of Gabriel, Pamela and Loveth (2019) on material empowerment as they are of the view that material empowerment is a durable substance that is given to a person, people or community for effective and positive development. However, these materials become a means of elevating poverty in one's life and making someone self-employed and an employer of labour. This material empowerment could be in the form of a sewing machine, grinding machine, knitting machine, hair dryer, cellophane machine, oven, shoe-making machine, motorcycle etc.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it was concluded that Family Support Programmes (FSP) influenced participants in the three senatorial districts in Rivers State between 1999 and 2015 to a large extent while Empowerment Support Initiatives (ESI) did not influence participants in the same senatorial districts and the same year.

Recommendations

Based on the results, it is recommended that:

1. Women empowerment programmes should be regularly organized by the wives of the Governor of Rivers State for the living conditions of women to be improved, especially, those in the rural areas.
2. Seminars and workshops on modern agricultural practice should equally be organized in the state from time to time to enable women to participate as it will be of great help to them and also improve their ways of farming, crop preservation, seedlings and fertilizing for a better harvest.
3. Women organisations and relevant stakeholders should organise skill

acquisition programmes in collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from time to time

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