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Influence of Empowerment Initiatives on Socio-economic Status of Women in Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State

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ABSTRACT
The study sought to determine the influence of empowerment initiatives on socio-economic status of women in Obio-Akpor LGA of Rivers State. Three research questions and three hypotheses guided the study. It was a survey research design. The population consisted of 315 Obio-Akpor women and the samples were the same since the population was manageable. Instrument was a 4-point rating scale of Very High Extent, High Extent, Low Extent and Very Low Extent. It was validated by experts and its reliability was determined using Pearson product moment correlation which yielded 0.81. Research questions were analysed using mean and standard deviation while the hypotheses were tested using the Z-test statistics. The findings among others indicated that empowerment initiatives like skills acquisition, micro-credit facility and agric extension services enhanced socio-economic status of Obio-Akpor women to a high extent. They therefore have proved effective means for the enhancement of the socio-economic status of women.
Keywords: Empowerment, Initiatives, Influence, Status, Women, Socio-economic, Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is currently undergoing some of the greatest challenges in its history. These challenges are in the areas of insecurity of life and property which takes the forms of: the Boko Haram terrorism, kidnapping, banditry, ethnic militia, herdsmen attacks etc. Unprecedented unemployment level, especially among the youth and the unmitigated high cost of living in many parts of the country has not helped matters. Businesses are being stifled, as many of them operate below installed capacity as a result of high cost of operation and low patronage due to low purchasing power of the citizens. Foreign investors are scared to do business in the country. Recession that was once said to have gone is still believed to be hanging around in the economy to the extent that it is stated that Nigeria has become the home to the poorest people in the world.

In all these situations, a disproportionate number of Nigerians are groaning under the weight of this economy. But women are particularly very vulnerable. This is as a consequence of their being victims of discrimination in many aspects of our socio-economic and political life. There are also socio-cultural inhabitations that limit their involvement in certain things and thus limiting their God-given potentials in many respects (Mosedale, 2005). For them to try to overcome or reduce this quagmire, concerted efforts should be made by government and agencies through compensatory measures which may take the form of empowerment initiatives.

Wikipedia (2018) defines empowerment as a measure designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in people and in communities in order to enable them represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way, acting on their own authority. Empowerment also is seen as a process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in

the control of one's life and claiming one's right (Oxford, 2018). An empowered person is one who experiences a sense of self-confidence and self-worth, a person who critically analyses his/her social and political environment, a person who is able to exercise control over decisions that affect him or her. According to Makamba (2015), women empowerment has six components: cognitive, psychological, economic, political, social and legal.

The cognitive aspect is about the women's understanding of their conditions of subordination and causes of such conditions at both micro and macro levels of the society. It involves acquisition of new knowledge to create a different understanding of gender relations as well as destroying old beliefs that structure persistent gender ideologies. The psychological component includes development of feelings that women can act upon to improve their condition. It includes formation of the belief that women can succeed in the change efforts. The economic dimension requires that women can engage in productive activities that can allow them some degrees of autonomy, no matter how small and difficult at the beginning. Education is seen as one of the most important means of empowering women with knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary for full participation in the development process. The political component encompasses the ability to organize and mobilize for change. Consequently, an empowerment process must involve both collective awareness and collective action. The social empowerment is a process to change the distribution of power in the interpersonal relations among different people, cultures and activities. This encourages active participation of women in all social activities. Legal empowerment is about protecting women in terms of health, harassments, superstitions, cultural barriers etc. It is aimed at making them aware of their rights and their exercise of the same.

The need to empower women centers on the fact that women have the potentials to contribute to the development process but are constrained by certain factors that render them powerless in a male dominated society such as ours. Women empowerment is very essential in the development of the society since without it, given their stage of deprivation and despondency in the society, their contributions would be a loss to the human race. Since women contribute at least 50 percent of the world population, it is unimaginable to conceive that the world would afford to allow such to go unrecognized and simply go down the drain. Empowerment enables them to acquire power to think and act freely, exercising their choices and realizing the potentials as full and equal members of the society. Empowerment is a multi-level construct which can be carried out of individual's organisations and communities. Its operation involves mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access and control (Kabeer, 2013).

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria is currently passing through unprecedented incidence of socio-economic challenges especially in towns and villages. This is evidenced by the wave of kidnapping, armed robbery, cult-related activities, herdsmen – farmer clashes, banditry etc. This state of affairs is largely attributed to lack of employment and lack of meaningful engagement of the teeming population of our youths in worthwhile activities. Compounding this, is a situation where these youths do not have skills to engage in any employment or be on their own as self-employed individuals. There is thus generally a state of insecurity and stagnation in the socio-economic life of Nigerians. In this circumstance, women are particularly vulnerable due to discrimination in terms of employment, access to resources, access to education and subjugation to socio-cultural traditional practices which perpetually tend to hold them down. They need to be helped to mitigate their situation. Empowerment is one of the strategies that can provide a soothing mechanism to their dilemma. Empowerment is a situation where an individual acquires power to think and act freely, exercise, choice and fulfill his/her potentials as full and equal member of the society. It comes in various forms including provision of skill acquisition, agricultural extension services, micro-credit programme, political education, adult literacy programme etc. By employing some of these initiatives, women can make strides towards development and become more integrated into the development process through measures aimed at increasing their social, economic and political

equity and social mainstreaming. In Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, some of these measures are in place and have existed for some time, but their effectiveness is yet to be determined. It is therefore the purpose of this study to determine the influence of these empowerment initiatives on the socio-economic status of women in Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study is to determine the influence of empowerment initiatives on the socio-economic status of women in Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

(1) To what extent has skills acquisition enhanced women socio-economic status in Obio-Akpor LGA?

(2) To what extent has micro-credit facility enhanced women socio-economic status in Obio-Akpor LGA?

(3) To what extent have agric extension services enhanced women socio-economic status in Obio-Akpor LGA?

Hypotheses

Ho_1: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of single and married women of Obio-Akpor LGA in respect of influence of skills acquisition on their socio-economic status.

Ho_2: There is significant difference in the mean responses of literate women and semi-literate women of Obio-Akpor LGA in respect of the influence of Agric Extension services on their socio-economic status.

Ho_3: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of self-employed and unemployed women of Obio-Akpor LGA in respect of influence of micro-credit finance programme on their socio-economic status.

METHODS

Design of the Study

The study employed survey design in carrying out the study. This is because it involved going to gather information about people's opinions and views.

Population and Sample of the Study

The population of the study consisted of all registered women organisations in Obio-Akpor Local Government Area which was obtained from Corporate Affairs Commission Annual Report of 2017. There were 315 of them. Since the population is small and manageable in size, the entire population was used for the study. Therefore, there was no sampling.

Instrumentation, Administration and Data Analysis

Instrument for the study was a questionnaire designed by the researchers in line with the research questions and validated by experts and its reliability coefficient was determined to be 0.91 using Person product moment correlation (PPMC). The instrument was administered by the researchers and their trained research assistants. Copies of the instrument were retrieved immediately on completion to reduce losses due to retrieval problems. All the 315 copies were retrieved and found useful for the study. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while Z-test was employed for testing the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance

RESULTS

Research Question 1: *To what extent has skills acquisition enhanced women socio-economic status in Obio-Akpor LGA of Rivers State?*

Table 1: Mean Responses of Enhancement of Women Socio-economic Status by Skills Acquisition in Obio-Akpor LGA

S/N	Statement	$\bar{X}$	SD	Remarks
1.	Enabled me develop relevant skills to earn employment.	2.71	1.10	HE
2.	Acquired skills to improve my present job performance.	2.40	0.90	LE
3.	Preparing me to go into a business I never thought of.	2.89	0.74	HE
4.	Preparing me to be on my own.	3.14	0.81	HE
5.	Helped to discover new talent in me.	2.51	0.63	HE
	Grand mean	**2.73**	**0.84**	**HE**

The result arising from the Table 1 shows that four items show high extent and only one shows low extent. These are items 1,3,4,5, and 2 respectively. This means that these items (1,3,4,5) show criterion mean above 2.50 while item 2 shows less than 2.50 criterion mean.

Research Question 2: *To what extent has micro-credit facility enhanced women socio-economic status in Obio-Akpor LGA of Rivers State?*

Table 2: Mean Responses of Micro-credit Facility Enhancement of Women Socio-Economic Status in Obio-Akpor LGA

S/N	Statement	$\bar{X}$	SD	Remarks
6.	Made me more conscious in handling money for business purposes.	3.68	0.70	HE
7.	Increased my business leading to increased profit.	3.86	0.52	HE
8.	Increased my profit margin by not depending on shylock money lenders.	3.14	0.61	HE
9.	Convenient and flexible in business application.	25.2	0.73	HE
	Grand mean	**3.30**	**0.64**	**HE**

In table 2, the respondents yielded the following results. All the items indicated to high extent. These are items 6-9. The grand mean is 3.30 which is also of the high extent category: It means that the overall effect of the items (6-9) is that micro-credit facility in enhancement of the socio-economic status of Obio-Akpor women is to a high extent.

Research Question 3: *To what extent have* agricultural *extension services enhanced women socio-economic status in Obio-Akpor LGA of Rivers State?*

Table 3: Agric Extension Services Enhancement of Women Socio-economic Status in Obio-Akpor LGA

S/N	Statement	$\bar{X}$	SD	Remarks
10.	Increased my knowledge of farming technique increasing my crop yield.	3.07	0.81	HE
11.	Has helped me employ appropriate technology and practices in farming.	3.03	0.70	HE
11.	Has helped me to go away from subsistence agriculture into agro-business.	2.83	0.69	HE
12.	Has made me look at agriculture not as a means of attraction, hardship on myself.	2.49	0.58	HE
	Grand mean	**2.85**	**0.69**	**HE**

It can be seen from the table that all the items recorded above the criterion mean of 2.50 and designated High Extent. The grand mean is 2.85 which indicates that agricultural extension services improved the status of women in Obio-Akpor LGA of Rivers State to a high extent.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of single and married women in respect of the influence of skills acquisition on socio-economic enhancement in Obio-Akpor LGA.

Table 4: Z-test Analysis of Single and Married Women on the Significant Difference between them in Respect of Influence of Skills Acquisition on their Socio-economic Status

Subjects	N	Mean	SD	df	Sig. Level	Z-test cal.	Z-test crit.	Decision
Single women	176	3.79	0.10	293	0.05	0.25	1.960	
Married women	119	3.68	0.12					Accept

From Table 4, since the c-calculated (0.25) is test than c-critical (1.960), it means that the hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the mean response of single and married women in respect of the influence of skills acquisition on their socio-economic enhancement is accepted.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of literate and semi-literate women in respect of the influence of Agric Extension services on their socio-economic enhancement in Obio-Akpor LGA.

Table 5: Z-test Analysis of Literate and Semi-literate Women on the Significant Difference between them in Respect of Influence of Agric Extension Services on their Socio-economic Status

Subjects	N	Mean	SD	df	Sig. Level	Z-test cal.	Z-test crit.	Decision
Literate women	144	3.71	0.12	293	0.05	1.75	1.960	
Semi-literate women	151	2.55	0.18					Accept

Table 5 indicates that Z-test calculated is 1.75 while Z-test critical is 1.960. Since Z-test calculated is less than Z-test critical, it means that the null hypothesis is accepted.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of self-employed and unemployed women in Obio-Akpor LGA in respect of influence of Micro-Credit Finance Programme on their socio-economic status.

Table 6: Z-test Analysis of Self-employed and Unemployed Women on the Significant Difference between them in Respect of the Influence of Micro-Credit Finance Programme on their Socio-economic Status

Subjects	N	Mean	SD	df	Sig. Level	Z-test cal.	Z-test crit.	Decision
Self-employed	120	3.51	0.25	293	0.05	1.87	1.960	
Unemployed	175	2.80	0.18					Accept

In Table 6, the Z-test calculated is 1.87 while Z-test critical is 1.960. Since 1.87 is less than 1.960, the null hypothesis is hereby accepted. It therefore means that there is no significant difference between self-employed and unemployed women in respect of the influence of Micro-Credit Finance Programme on their socio-economic status.

DISCUSSION

From the results of the study, the research questions show that all the empowerment initiatives employed for the enhancement of socio-economic status of Obio-Akpor women influenced them to a high extent. These are in the areas of Skills Acquisition, Micro-Credit Facility and Agricultural Extension Services. In Skills Acquisition, all the items on the scale experienced the influence to a high extent except item 2. The grand mean of 2.73 also showed that the overall effect was positive to a high extent. In Micro-Credit Facility, without exception, all the items showed their influence to a high extent. Since the grand mean is 3.30, it means the entire influence under the research question two is to a high extent. Research question three concerning effect of Agricultural Extension Services, all the items showed the responses to a high extent. Consequently, the grand mean of 2.85 is also indicative of high extent standing. Overall, the effect of all the empowerment initiatives suggests that they were positive to a high extent. These findings may give rise to greater emphasis being placed on using these measures for effective empowerment of other vulnerable groups in the society. It may also lead to exploration of other measures aimed at attainment of similar goal. Anything that has to deal with skills either in the form of acquisition or enhancement is particularly relevant in addressing socio-economic problems and poverty alleviation. When women are empowered through skills acquisition, they are able to improve their household productivity, be employable, engage in income-earning opportunities, enhance food security and promote environmentally sustainable development and livelihood (Tauffiqu, 2015).

Empowerment is thus an important vehicle for integrating women into development efforts. Agricultural extension services provide them opportunities to establish linkages with rural women groups leading to co-operative associations (Berger in Williams & Susan, 2000). Such activities tend to foster gender equity and poverty alleviation. It is often asserted that sustainable growth is impossible to implement without the full participation of women as vital economic links between agriculture, industry and trade (Johnson, 2013). Micro-Credit facility for women advances this position. In this study, all the items had responses in the direction of 'high extent' to express their influence on women. The grand mean of 3.30 is situated in the same direction. It enabled them to engage in micro-business operations leading to increased economic participation in the economy. The overall effect of the empowerment initiative was that it influenced the socio-economic status of women in Obio-Akpor LGA to a high extent and this finding can be a lead to other measures expected to alleviate the socio-economic status of women.

CONCLUSION

Empowerment initiatives are needed as some of the measures to improve the socio-economic status of women. In this study, it was found that skills acquisition, micro-credit facility and Agric extension services were able to enhance Obio-Akpor women's socio-economic status to a high extent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is therefore recommended that:

(1) Women need to be empowered to improve their socio-economic status.

(2) Empowerment initiatives such as Skills Acquisition, Micro-Credit Facility and Agric Extension Services are effective measures for enhancement of socio-economic status of women and should be used.

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