

Research notes

Rural Women and Poverty in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the nature and extent of absolute poverty among Nigerian women. The author presents data drawn from two studies carried out in rural Nigeria, and on the basis of these studies, suggests some possible approaches to alleviate women's poverty.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit la nature et l'ampleur de la pauvreté absolue chez les Nigériennes. L'auteure présente des données tirées de deux études menées dans les régions rurales du Nigéria, et en se basant sur ces études, suggère quelques approches possibles pour réduire la pauvreté des femmes.

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, poverty is massive, pervasive and chronic. It is largely a rural phenomenon with 8.4 million of the 10 million extremely poor people living in rural areas (World Bank 1995). This rural sector is made up of small-scale poor farmers, food processors, petty traders and other micro-entrepreneurs who account for two thirds of the population living in poverty (World Bank 1996). Women constitute 50.74 percent of the population of Akwa Ibom State. As they do not migrate, either in search of work or for education, they are virtually confined to the rural environment with little or no access to, and hardly any control over, income, credit, land, education or training. They live in dilapidated shelters, with scanty clothing and suffer from malnutrition and disease. These are the absolute poor of Nigeria. Their horrifying misery has forced them to exploit accessible natural resources to devastating levels, thus rendering themselves both the agents and the victims of resource depletion.

Awareness of poverty has shaped development plans in Nigeria. It has also prompted the numerous rural development schemes in the country. However, all these seem to have aggravated the problem of poverty, particularly among rural women. We must provide more effective help to these impoverished rural women.

On the basis of the research I have carried out in two rural areas, I would argue that such help should be focussed on land rights, agricultural productivity (including agroforestry), rural industries and above all, the participatory organisation of women.

In this brief paper, I will focus on the status of women in my research areas, and try to analyse the nature, causes and consequences of their poverty. I will also discuss existing poverty reduction strategies and their effectiveness. Finally, I will suggest some proposals to alleviate poverty among rural women.

STUDY AREA AND METHOD

The area studied comprises six local government areas (LGA) in Annang land in Western Akwa Ibom State (AIS) and three others in Ibibio land in the north east of the state, namely, Ini, Ibiono and Uruan (Fig.1). Ibiono and Uruan are hilly and drained principally by the Ikpa River while Ini, characterised by an east-west upland range, is drained by Enyong Creek which has wide flood plains that are annually planted with rice and dry season crops. Ikpa River plains, on the other hand, are densely forested with cultivated raffia palms from which palm wine is obtained and distilled into the local gin *kaikai*. Annang land is drained by the Qua Iboe River, the valley of which is covered with self-sown raffia palms. Soils in the entire area are

largely ferrallitic except in the wetlands where they are sandy clay loam or silky clay with high organic matter ranging from 0.53- 5.84 percent and the clay 5.40-88.8 percent in the upper 50cm (Okoji 1996).

Much of the vegetation is degraded moist lowland tropical forest with islands of pure forest around shrines, stream sources and on sacred land. Settlements are traditionally nucleated although population growth has caused projections of dispersed nucleated areas around most villages. Although the rural road net work improved during the oil boom, road conditions are generally poor. Ini LGA, for example, has 9 km of tarred road, 56.8km of earth road and a road density of 0.91 (Okoji 1994a). Under these conditions, wheeled transport is scarce and transport costs are incredibly high.

Agriculture and the production of craft items dominate the people's economy. However, in Ini and Uruan, fishing is also an important economic activity. In Uruan *kaikai* distilling also contributes to the economy. But both fishing and distilling are gender specific activities - that is, they are carried out by men, and women do not benefit. Throughout the area community land ownership has been displaced by family and individual ownership. Such privately owned land is subject to inheritance, although the inheritance practices severely disadvantage women. Thus women are losing access to the land, even though they produce more than 80 percent of the food (Dankelman and Davidson 1988) and do 70-80 percent of all farm work (USAID 1982).

The data presented in this paper was collected during two studies. The first was carried out during the Northern Akwa Ibom Swamp Resources Development Programme in 1994-95, when the poverty of rural women caught my attention. The second was carried out when I investigated the importance of trees for the survival of the rural poor in Annang land in 1996-97.

The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) technique was used in both investigations. PRA is a research method developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by researchers in international development as an alternative to conventional sample surveys. It is a way of learning from, and with, community members, to investigate, analyse and evaluate constraints and opportunities (Theis and Grady 1991).

During the first study in Uruan, Ibiono and

Ini, the multidisciplinary PRA team lived with community members for about a month, and with the community's active participation, the team investigated the problem of poverty among women. For the second study, five university students from Annangland were trained by the author in the use of PRA tools. Fifteen households were interviewed per village and six villages were chosen per LGA (Fig 1), giving a total of 540 households, using a semi-structured questionnaire.

RECENT CONCERN ABOUT POVERTY IN NIGERIA

Awareness of widespread poverty in Nigeria came to the fore in 1975, at the Annual Conference of the Nigerian Economic Society which focused on poverty. At this conference Ogunpola and Ojo, Abubakar and others presented papers that defined poverty as a situation where income is inadequate to support a minimum standard of living. Amplifying the definition of the minimum standard of living, Dudley (1975) identified it as the basic needs of families or individuals, which include food, clothing, shelter, education, health, work and mobility. Additional basic needs have been identified, including the inability to meet social and economic obligations or lack of gainful employment, physical security, lack of skills and inadequate assets (Egware 1997).

The World Summit on Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995 had the explicit objective of eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national action and international co-operation. In September that year, the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, highlighted the particular aspects of women's poverty throughout the world (World Bank 1996).

Themes stressed at these international conferences were explored in the Nigerian context at the 1997 Nigerian Economic Society Conference, held at Kaduna, which had "Poverty alleviation in Nigeria" as its main theme. The Conference stressed the increasing level of poverty in Nigeria and recognised the importance of directing more attention to the rural sector in formulating poverty reduction policies. It re-iterated that the effects of poverty have always been borne and felt by the rural poor and it also acknowledged "the heavier

weight of poverty borne by women, especially in the rural areas" (Obaseki 1997).

STATUS OF RURAL WOMEN IN AKWA IBOM STATE

In Akwa Ibom State in 1991, 50.74 percent of the 2,359,736 population were women, many of whom lived in a state of destitution amid a sprinkling of rich people. Throughout the nine LGAs women were found to have little or no land to grow food for family consumption.

Landless women worked as seasonal wage labourers whenever there is a need for their hands to work or heads to carry loads. As casual labourers, they have no security and receive low wages which are almost always lower than what men receive for doing the same work. For example, in the villages of Afaha Esang, Ikot Ebok, Oban Ukwai and Ikot Ibritam (Fig. 1) men were paid ₦80 a day for land clearing as against ₦30 paid to women. At the end of such energy-exhausting task, women still have to fetch water, firewood and all that is necessary for the family evening meal. Landless women not only face discriminatory wage rates, but when agricultural activities are slack between November and January they often have no income at all.

Rural women cannot get access to credit. Short of collateral for institutional credit advance, they frequently have no choice but to resort to local money lenders who charge exorbitant interest rates. Such rates were found to vary from ₦100 - ₦200 per ₦1000 per month or 120 - 240 percent per annum. In Ediene and Ikwek in Abak LGA, some women reported chronic indebtedness owing to the usurious rate of interest charged by moneylenders. These resource poor, landless women still shoulder the burden of caring for many children.

We documented the low level of education of rural women when only 83 in the 540 households in Annangland were found to have basic literacy standards. Education is luxury long denied them and their families. Consequently, over 80 percent of these poor women are illiterate.

In light of such poverty and deprivation, one would expect that women in AIS would be to be the prime target of development. Yet despite four decades of development effort, rural women are not only untouched, but seem to be not much better off than their grandmothers. State development

programmes are designed and executed by men for men. The needs of women are, accordingly, ignored or seen as separate and marginal, although the United Nations Women's Decade (1975-85) is supposed to have significantly increased the understanding of women's problems.

NATURE AND CAUSES OF WOMEN'S POVERTY

Our participatory studies of the poverty of rural women showed that they are interwoven not only with economic and measurable variables, but also with non-quantifiable socio-psychological considerations. Their poverty involves additional severe deprivations and adverse conditions that are closely associated with inadequate economic resources. In short, these poor women experience a level of income far below what they require to provide a desirable minimum living level.

What has given rise to this situation? With farming as the main economic activity in the rural areas, one of the primary causes of the impoverishment of women is the tradition surrounding land ownership and inheritance. In this tradition women have usufructuary rights but no legal rights over land. In other words, the only rights they have depend on their cultivation of land, which provides them with some assurance that they will be able to continue cultivating the land. They do not own the land. Widows may not inherit any rights at all. They are not allowed to cultivate their late husband's land unless they are bringing up male children who, at the age of fifteen, will inherit their father's land. This "privilege" is denied to widows without male children, which means that they remain perpetually landless.

In their report on social organization in AIS, DHV Consultants and Halcrow Rural Management (1995) stated:

Ibibio society is traditionally patrilineal, land and property is passed down and shared between legitimate male children. Widows who have male children may use and take care of their sons' land until they are old enough to take over this responsibility themselves. However, if the deceased had no male children, ownership of the land passes directly to the

immediate brothers and it is common for a deceased husband's brothers to seize all the land and property and to share it out among themselves immediately after his death.

Social restrictions of this kind limit the activities and aspirations of widows because even when they hold the land in trust, their central position in the agrarian economy is usually ignored.

We have already touched on the handicap of rural women in terms of education, a handicap that fuels their poverty. As aptly observed by Agee (1996), education is a liberating force; it ensures the development of one's potentials. But in AIS, most rural women do not have even the minimum level of formal education and for this reason there exists dominance/dependence relationship with powerful local elites and businessmen which exacerbates their poverty.

Illiteracy prevents women from competing successfully for their fair share of resources and stops them from effectively utilising the few resources they should control. At Ikot Ebok (Fig. 1), for instance, the women contributed a little at a time for two years to rehabilitate the village water supply. After water became available, men took over its distribution and were selling it - even to the women who had made it available, thereby rendering the women even poorer.

Some communities in the study area, such as Ikpanya in Ini and Usaka in Ikot Ekpene are virtually isolated because of road conditions. On this account, it is difficult for them to market their small agricultural surpluses. There are no health centres. As a result, there is increasing reliance on alternative health care systems like traditional birth attendants, herbal medicines and occasional itinerant drug sellers. This had led to health problems, including high maternal mortality and morbidity, and infant mortality rates.

CONSEQUENCE OF POVERTY

The consequences of the poverty of rural women are many and diverse. They affect the family, the environment and the community. Our focus is on the first two.

Our field experience has shown that poor families tend to be very large, with six to ten

children and a remarkably high proportion of very young children - 40-50 percent. In many homes it is not unusual to find a baby on the mother's back and two unclothed ones under three years on the earth floor, owing to the burden of frequent pregnancies. We found that the inability of parents to properly feed and care for the children tends to erode parental authority which paves the way for delinquency and immorality. In Use Ikot Amama, for instance, girls engaged themselves in street hawking and under this pretext exposed themselves to sexual exploitation, a practice that resulted in a number of single young mothers and teenage pregnancies in the village.

Poverty results in hunger, undernourishment and associated health problems. Diseases associated with nutrition reduce the working capacity of poor families and their resistance to such endemic scourges as malaria, typhoid and intestinal worm diseases.

Education is at a very low level. Information from the eleven primary schools visited indicates that over 20 percent of the children between six and eleven were not enrolled and of those enrolled, only about 40 percent were likely to complete primary school. In four of the schools, children were found sleeping in class in the morning because they had had no breakfast while some were outside vomiting from eating stale leftover food. The food situation was of special interest in Ini where children from poor families scooped rice husk at the mills and winnowed it to obtain the broken pieces for the family meal.

The pathetic state of poor families and their inevitable exploitation of natural resources for purposes of survival seen more widespread, even though Chikepo (1988) claims that all over the world women are taking action against the destruction of natural resources on which their lives depend. Poor rural women who are fortunate enough to have land cannot afford to fallow it for long, and since they cannot raise loans, they have no alternative but to exploit accessible natural resources like forests, fallow land and rivers in order to survive. The continuous exploitation of these resources has led to environmental stress, making the women both the agents and the victims of environmental degradation. To illustrate, in several parts of the area studied, the plots of poor women appeared scrubby and erosion-ridden and

the women complained of soil infertility. This confirms WCED's (1987) point that frequent stripping of the vegetation exposes soils to the eroding impact of rain, a process which is turning millions of hectares of crop land into desert every year.

Frequent clearing of their land implies that poor women are short of fuel wood. To obtain this vital household energy source, the women fell trees, split and spread them in the sun to dry. This practice has endangered some tree species and encouraged vegetation degradation. Near urban centres, sun-dried firewood has become an economic commodity for women. This trade, together with the collection of fodder from fallow land, has seriously retarded vegetation regeneration.

Poverty also affects fish abundance in local rivers. Many of these rivers have different types of fish, which migrate here to spawn and return to deep water. At certain times of the year, therefore, the rivers become fishing grounds for boys, especially those from poor homes. But their methods of fishing select neither size nor type and so reduce fish abundance and sometimes destroy the natural nurseries.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION MEASURES

Since poverty is a rural phenomenon, policies designed to reduce it must be directed, to a large extent, towards rural development. A clear understanding of this guided the Nigerian government to adopt a variety of strategies to develop the rural areas in an attempt to reduce poverty. Efforts in this direction have centered on the provision of "basic needs," including health services, education sanitation, safe water and adequate nutrition. The rationale for the basic needs approach is that direct provision of these goods and services is likely to reduce absolute poverty faster than alternative means. For example, growth strategies usually fail to benefit the intended target (Aku et al, 1997).

Recent policies relate to:

- (a) Food and nutrition. This caused the establishment of the Agricultural Development Project, River Basin and Rural Development Authority, Operation Feed the Nation, etc, that aimed at

stimulating increased food production and enhancing the income of rural dwellers.

- (b) Social Services, as witnessed by the National Policy on Education which declares primary education as universal, free and compulsory, and the National Health Policy which promises achievement of better health for all Nigerians.

- (c) Rural banking, which necessitated the institution of the People's Bank and Community Bank.

- (d) Employment, that gave rise to the creation of the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) in order to help provide self employment for unemployed youths in rural and urban areas. NDE does this by training young people in craft work and providing them with soft loans and equipment after training.

Added to these are multi-purpose measures like the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure, and Community Action Programme for Poverty Alleviation which, among other things, seek to provide access roads, rural electrification and potable water to ease the living conditions of rural dwellers, and raise their nutritional status (Ekong, 1997).

Taken at their face value, such measures appear sound and well thought out, but many things hostile to the achievement of these objectives prevent them from happening. For example, tons of fertilizer allocated to the rural poor disappear in transit, farm produce meant to be sold at low price to the poor is sent in bulk to urban traders, free equipment for trainees is sold, health centres are not only far apart but poorly staffed and ill-equipped; transformers donated for rural electrification do not all reach intended communities. The list is endless. How then can poverty alleviation be achieved?

RECOMMENDATIONS

To check the frequent capture of "benefits" meant to mitigate women's poverty, the women need to be empowered through organizing themselves and through their participation in rural

development projects. When they organize themselves, a new institutional agent is created with growing resources of its own, able to defend the interests of its members and to act as a pressure group for social and economic changes (Maldonado 1993). But on their own, the poor are seldom aware that they can change their situation. For the change to emerge, an external motivator is required to stimulate self-reflected critical awareness in the women, of their social reality and of their ability to transform that reality by their own conscious collective action, a process Burkey (1993) terms conscientization. Once aware of their situation and the root causes of their problems, the women are likely to seek solutions. It must be stressed that the motivator must not organize them, but wait for them to decide to organize themselves and then assist them in the process.

Women's organizations may enhance their bargaining power with farmers for farm jobs, foster self-confidence in dealing with other groups in the society and enable them to identify their own needs and priorities. Ultimately, they may set up their own development schemes or projects, for example, a savings and credits scheme similar to the one being experimented by men in Mbiabet, Ini.

Development studies affirm that participatory development is a reliable means of

sustaining poverty alleviation. This implies that for all forms of rural development, the women must participate in plan formulation, implementation and all decision-making processes, so that every operation is sensitive to the values, views, attitudes and knowledge of the women. This approach has additional advantages: stimulation of fresh ideas, women perception, utilization of local resources, and above all, success will be claimed by the women as theirs, a claim which will strengthen their self-confidence, initiative and group action.

CONCLUSION

The drudgery and suffering faced by rural women in their struggle to survive and care for their families have not been sufficiently portrayed in this paper. I have not been able to present fully their social, economic and political deprivation, which has led to such severe suffering for the women and their families, and to the degradation of natural resources. Nor do they have the option of migrating to find a better life. Nonetheless, I am optimistic that purposeful organization of the women and participation in their own development are the key factors for their new lease of life.

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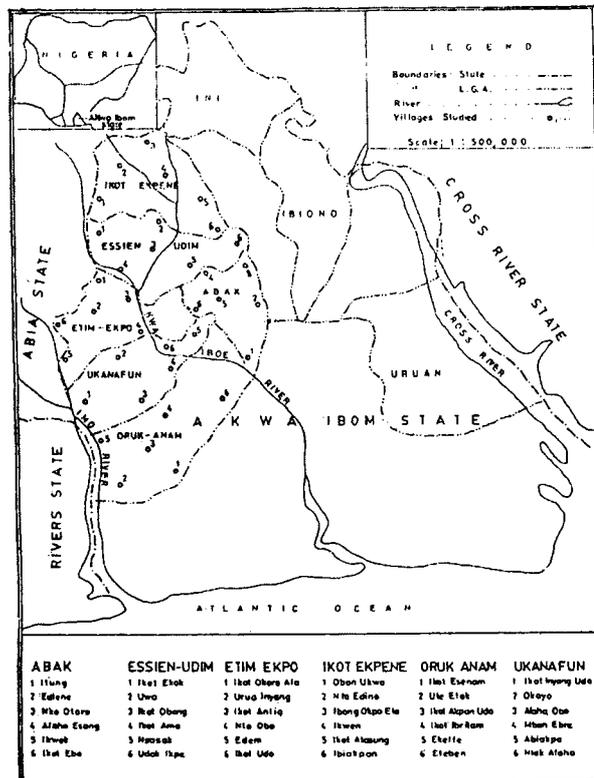


Fig.1: AREA STUDIED IN AKWA IBOM STATE