

Women As Pillars Of National Economy In Nigeria: A Study Of Economic Activities Of Rural Women In Six Local Government Areas Of Ondo State

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ABSTRACT

The economy of any nation is as important as the lives of individuals within the nation. In most cases it serves as the index marker of the prevalent quality of life, and the standard of living in that nation. To ensure this quality therefore, there is a need to keep the economy buoyant at all times. This to say the least is the responsibility of all citizens male and female, young and old.

This paper focuses on the activities of rural women in Ondo State. A careful and analytical study of their agricultural activities reveals that they are very strong pillars of the economy in both Ondo State and by extension, the nation as a whole. Our research reveals that while the men virtually abandoned certain aspects of the economy which appear not too lucrative (food crops) for high yielding areas (the cash crops, the women have taken up the challenges of supplying these very essential life-sustaining, though ulcerative services, for the sustenance of the economy.

To highlight this emergent role of the modern-day women, the paper examines some of their economic activities in six selected local government areas in Ondo State. In evaluating same, the gargantuan contributions of these women to national economy is directly or indirectly x-rayed. Also highlighted are the major problems encountered by the women in their pursuit of these economic activities. The paper ended by offering suggestions on how to improve both the quality and quantity of the output of the women's labour.

INTRODUCTION

From Biblical and Islamic conceptions, and from classical period, women have been conceived as helpers and subordinates to men. Women are usually known from their humble contributions in the maintenance of homes, and not as major contributors to any economy. This is more so in African societies. However, a cursory look around will reveal the fact that the modern day Nigerian woman takes part in important economic activities to the benefit of the entire nation. They thus manage the home-front and at the same time participate with their male counterparts in developing the economy of the nation.

Nigeria had in the last two and half decades witnessed a gradual decline in her economy (see table 1). A high degree of hyper-inflation occasioned by the International Monetary Fund's Structural Adjustment Programme which the Nigeria Government imbibed in July 1986 had resulted in a gross decline in the individual's ability to feed his family. Inflation rate in the Nigerian economy increased from 13.8 in 1970 to 54.7 in 1994 (see table 2). Various governments have evolved one agricultural programme or the other in an attempt to feed the nation's population. The Operation Feed the Nations was launched in 1976 by the government of General Olusegun Obasanjo as a check against the embarrassingly large-scale importation of food into Nigeria and its attendant balance of trade problems. A major highlight of the programme is the use of Youth Corpers and students of tertiary institutions on vacation on government-established farms. This programme was succeeded in 1980 by the Green Revolution of Alhaji Shehu Shagari's regime. The programme sought to arouse the interest of the entire nation in agriculture and a lot of money was pumped into different agricultural sectors of the economy. The Directorate of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure that was established by the Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida administration in 1986 also had the same motive.

TABLE 1

**OUTPUT OF MAJOR AGRICULTURAL COMMODITIES IN NIGERIA, 1970-1994
SHOWING DIMINISHING MARGINAL OUTPUT (IN '000 TONES)**

YEAR	GROUNDNUT		COCOYAM		YAM
1970	1581	1381	12033	358	305
1971	1381	880	9766	426	257
1972	1350	1357	6900	105	241
1973	373	1106	6936	85	215
1974	1946	480	7160	481	214
1975	449	504	8620	313	216
1976	459	532	6470	294	181
1977	567	346	6376	269	193
1978	801	182	5866	211	157
1979	507	132	5256	125	151
1980	674	208	5248	77	153
1981	530	270	5212	48	174
1982	458	280	5385	38	156
1983	396	224	4047	12	140
1984	591	205	4600	108	140
1985	621	223	4738	114	160
1986	896	373	5209	100	148
1987	687	354	4886	195	100
1988	1016	693	9132	194	253
1989	1017	649	9609	187	256
1990	1166	731	13624	276	244
1991	1361	829	16956	309	268

1992	1297	940	19305	346	292
1993	1416	1066	21633	192	306
1994	1448	1204	23025	205	320

Sources: Federal Office of Statistics; Food and Agriculture Organisation Year Book; Central Bank of Nigeria Statistical Bulletin Vol. 5, No. 2, December, 1994.

TABLE II

INFLATION RATE IN THE NIGERIAN ECONOMY 1970-1994

YEAR	INFLATION RATE
1970	13.8
1971	15.6
1972	3.2
1973	5.4
1974	13.4
1975	33.9
1976	21.2
1977	15.4
1978	16.6
1979	11.8
1980	9.9
1981	20.9
1982	7.7
1983	23.2
1984	39.6
1985	5.5
1986	5.4
1987	10.2
1988	38.3
1989	40.9
1990	7.5
1991	13.0
1992	44.5
1993	54.2
1994	54.7

Source: Federal Office of Statistics, Lagos.

It needs to be pointed out that until the establishment of Mrs. Mariam Babangida “Better Life for Rural Women” there was never a time when women farmers were made targets of assistance by government programmes. All these projects were established basically to improve food production and avoid hunger. One of the most important

consequences of the declining economy in Nigeria is the inability to provide enough food for the people. This factor is responsible for much waste of foreign exchange in importation of food items which could be locally produced.

The alarming rate of unemployment in the country also made the same Federal Government to establish the National Directorate of Employment in 1986. (Ajiboye and Akintunde, 1990). In most of these programmes, the Nigerian woman was seen in the traditional role of domestic assistant at home, as manifested in the saying that “Men produce the food and women prepare it to the table.” (Chike Akabogu et al, 1991).

When however, one views the economic activities of women outside the home, especially in agricultural production then their immense contribution will be seen. According to researches conducted, it has been established that rural inhabitants produce food for the urban population (Hudson, F. S., 1970). From the agricultural activities of rural women in some states of the federation, it is becoming increasingly clear that women are very important in the economy of Nigeria. The economy of any nation is as important as the life of individuals within that nation. An ailing economy would reflect desperation in the lives of the population. In most cases, the economy serves as an index marker of the prevalent quality of life and the standard of living of that nation.

Most normal countries try to beef up their nation’s economy by engaging all levels of the nation’s population in the attempt to check economic decline. Thus both men and women make their contributions to sustain and improve the nation’s economy.

NEED/SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This paper focuses on some economic activities of women in Ondo State. The attempt here is to show the contribution of the women to development. Development is here seen in terms of economic improvement. Here we are concerned with the reduction in poverty, elimination of hunger, increased income and also in particular, an improvement in the

employment situation. As we will show, the major report on which this paper dwells is the effort of women to improve food production and reduce unemployment. It is our intention to bring their activities and worthy contributions to limelight. In the process, the problems encountered by them, the need to encourage them and their potentialities for serious development (if encouraged) are x-rayed too. The focus is mainly on the economic/agricultural activities of women living in the rural areas.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted mainly through visitation to locations in six local government areas of Ondo State in Nigeria. These include Oka Akoko and Irun Akoko South Local Government Area, Ajebamidele and Oke-Ogun in Ondo Local Government Area, Emure-Ile and Amurin in Owo Local Government Area, Ilasa-Ekiti in Ikole Local Government Area, Ile-Oluji in Ile-Oluji/Okeigbo Local Government and Oloto village in Ikale Local Government Area.

At the location, farm sites were inspected before extensive interviews were conducted with the owners of the farms. The visitations and interviews were conducted between the months of February and April, 1995.

Ondo State was created by the Federal Military Government of Nigeria in 1976. She has a total population of about 3.9 million people spread over a total land area of 20,498sq kms. (1991 census figure). Its major towns are Akure – the State Capital, Ado-Ekiti, Ikere-Ekiti, Ondo, Owo, Ikare, Okitipupa and many others. In spite of the high degree of literacy in the state the bulk of Ondo people are agriculturists who engage in cocoa production, kolanut and palm produce – some of the crops that provide the main economic base of this nation in her early years before the discovery of petroleum. However, food production is the most wide-spread activity. Ondo State is a major producer of food crops such as gari, cassava, yam

and palm oil. This is a necessary background to the economic focus of Ondo State women. The questions were specific as to the economic activities of women in the Local Government.

FINDINGS

Research shows that the women in the state are organized in groups, the groups are often engaged in more than one economic activity. However, the most prominent is the production of food items from communal farms. Most of the men are engaged in the production of the cash crops (cocoa especially) that appear most lucrative. It is the women that now took over food production and processing for consumption. Response from respondents shows that each village in almost all parts of the state had women organizations which engage in these farming activities even before the Better Life Project.

Recent findings reveal that about 80% of the staple food items being consumed in Ondo State are being produced and processed locally by rural women in Ondo State. Apart from the planting, harvesting and processing of foodstuffs, rural women in Ondo State are the sole processors of palm oil from palm kernels. They, however, usually engage men in harvesting of the palm kernels due to the indecency of women climbing palm trees. Women are the major producers of palm oil in Ondo State. Palm oil is a very important food item in every home in Nigeria. These women's efforts are being complemented by the activities of the government – established Okitipupa Oil Palm Industry in Ondo State. We should also note that although it seems to be a near-monopoly of the men many women in Ondo State are also engaged in cocoa business – purchasing of cocoa farms, buying and selling/grading of cocoa, etc.

We shall now examine cursorily, in tabular forms, some of the agricultural activities of rural women in the selected local government areas of rural Ondo State. This is to show their contribution to the economy of this nation.

TABLE III

AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES BY WOMEN IN SIX LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREAS IN ONDO STATE

1994 PLANTING SEASON

S/N	LOCAL GOVERNMENT	NAME OF LCOATION	MAJOR PRODUCT	TOTAL LAND AREA	INVESTMENT P.A.	EST. VALUE REAL P.A.	PROETT P.A.
1.	Akoko South Local Government	Ago flower Oka-Akoko Irun Akoko	Cassava, Maize, Coco-yam, Beans, Banana, Plantain	40 Acres	#41,000.00	#100,000.00	#59,000.00 Data not available for most of the crops at time of research
2.	Ikale Local Government	Oloto Village	Cassava, Palm trees	30 Acres	#70,000.00 #21,800.00	#120,000.00 # 125,000.00	#50,000.00 #103,200.00
3.	Ikole Local Government	Ilasa-Ekiti	Cassava, Soya beans	25 Acres			
4.	Ile-Oluji/Okeigbo Local	Ile-Oluji	Maize, Cassava Vegetable	25 Acres	#40,000.00	#110,000.00	#70,000.00
5.	Ondo Local	Ajebamidele	Cassava	14 Acres	#20,000.00	#58,000.00	#38,000.00
6.	Owo Local Government	Emure-Ile Amurin	Cassava	20 Acres	#35,000.00	#72,000	#37,000.00

Sources of this table: Field Work

DATA ANALYSIS

The activities of rural women who are engaged actively in agriculture in six local government areas of Ondo State during the 1994 planting season have been represented in the above table. In Akoko South Local Government, the rural women cultivated successfully 40 acres of cassava, investing a sum of ₦41,000.00 in the project and realizing a profit of ₦59,000.00 at end of the planting season. In the same local government, rural women in Irun Akoko cultivated 35 acres of food crops which include cassava, maize, cocoyam, beans, banana and plantain. Although data was not available for most of the crops as at the time of conducting this research, there is every indication that the project was very successful.

In Oloto Village in Ikale Local Government, rural women cultivated 30 acres of cassava making a profit of ₦50,000.00 above an initial investment of ₦70,000.00. They also cultivated 10 acres of palm trees, realizing a huge return profit of ₦103,200.00 in the 1994 planting season above the ₦21,800 invested that year on the already existing plantation.

In Ikole Local Government, rural women in Ilesa-Ekiti cultivated 25 acres of cassava. They invested ₦30,000.00 in the project and realized a profit of ₦25,000.00. They also cultivated 10 acres of soya beans, realizing a profit of 23,500 above the ₦18,000.00 invested.

In Ile-Oluji (Ile-Oluji/Okeigbo Local Government) rural women cultivated 25 acres of food crops which include cassava, maize and vegetable. They invested ₦40,000.00 in the project and realized a profit of ₦70,000.00 at the end of the planting season.

In Ondo Local Government, some rural women in Ajebamidele invested ₦20,000.00 on 14 acres of cassava farm. They were able to realize a profit of ₦38,000.00.

In Owo Local Government Areas, rural women cultivated 20 acres of cassava farm land. They invested ₦35,000.00 and realized a profit of ₦37,000.00.

LIMITATION OF STUDY

A number of factors militated against the effectiveness of this study. In all the local governments visited, there are no facilities for measuring the quantity of the total output of the food crops produced, in terms of tonnage. Had there been facility for this, one would have been able to determine the percentage of the output from these local governments to the total output from the state and to the national gross domestic product.

Another major problem is that in most of the locations visited the rural women were not used to keeping essential record of their activities.

From the above record of the activities of rural women, a number of salient facts stand out.

- (a) Rural women in Ondo State re major contributors to food production in the state.
- (b) These rural women have successfully managed human and economic resources to achieve optimum results. They have shown themselves to be effective entrepreneurs.
- (c) The rural women in the process of their activities became effective employers of Labour, thereby reducing the unemployment situation in they country. For example, the rural women in Oloto Village in Ikale Local Government Area employed 35 labourers on their farms.
- (d) The output from the farms of these rural women has contributed immensely to the reduction in the crisis of food shortage and inflation of food prices that is prevalent in the country.

OUR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES BY ONDO STATE WOMEN

Ondo State rural women who are engaged in this co-operative association did not stop at agricultural activities alone. For example, in Owo, Ilasa, Oloto and Ondo, female secondary school dropouts are encouraged to learn typing, shorthand, sewing, weaving,

catering, mat-making and the weaving of baskets. Besides this, the women organizations encourage community service and organize training for young school leavers. Rural and urban women often come together to develop local industries by creating Weaving Looms, Tie and dye factories as in Idanre, Gari processing factory as in Ondo, Ifira and Igbo-Oja.

MEANS OF FINANCING PROJECTS

Rural and urban women often come together for developing local industries. Women formed themselves into co-operatives, in some cases contributing initial investment but subsequently obtaining loans from the local governments or other finance institutions. Sometimes they receive assistance from the state Ministry of Agriculture or rural development agencies who often sell or rent out their tractors and other farm equipment to the women organizations.

PROBLEMS OF RURAL AGRICULTURE

There are some problems militating against agriculture in the rural areas. Some of these were encountered or seen at work during the course of this research. The first problem is the problem of poor social infrastructure. In most of the locations the roads are very bad. It is very difficult to transport farm products from the farms to the urban centres where such products would be sold.

The second major problem is that of poor agricultural mechanization. In most cases, rural women find it difficult to obtain tractors to work on their farms. Closely related to this is the problem of lack of agricultural implements, such as pesticides, hoes and cutlasses and other agricultural tools.

There is also a problem of lack of modern storage and processing facilities. In many of the locations visited, the processing of cassava into gari still undergo the traditional cumbersome methods, as there are not enough gari processing machines.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

In order to ameliorate some of the problems facing these rural farmers, we would want to offer the following suggestions:

- (a) There should be an improvement of extension services by Ministries of Agriculture and Agric Development Agencies. Rural farmers require constant services of extension workers.
- (b) Agricultural research institutes should focus attention on food crops in the nation.
- (c) Governments should endeavour to provide social infrastructure in the rural areas, especially in agricultural communities.
- (d) Agro-based industries should be made to support rural farmers and farming projects in rural areas. They should also be made to play key roles in promoting research and development in food production.
- (e) Governments should devise ways to protect farmers from price fluctuations and agricultural risks like drought, flood and erosion.
- (f) Government should make available to farmers improved seedlings, agricultural inputs like fertilizers, pesticides, etc.
- (g) Government should mobilize and generate interest in effective participation in agriculture by all the citizens. The poor, the idle – and able-bodied people should be mobilized and gainfully employed in agriculture.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have shown Ondo State rural women as an example of women in the Nigerian economic scene who had the opportunity of vigorous participation in food production, employment opportunity and the socio-economic emancipation of their sex. This coming together of women often encourages a vigorous political awareness and participation by women in Ondo State. That awareness may reduce if there is decreasing opportunity for

women participation in the struggle for economic development. Women should be encouraged to make their contribution to all phases of economic growth at all times.

With the gargantuan amount of efforts put into the production, distribution and processing into food of agricultural products by rural women in Ondo State, and the amount of success of these women's projects (providing food in abundance for both the state and exporting to other states, providing jobs, making school drop-outs useful, etc) women could be regarded as very strong pillars of our national economy.

Since women also provide the physical, psychological and social comfort of families and homes (popularly called the managers of Home-front, or rear guards) and because the management and the economy of a nation depends on the managers coming from settled, comfortable homes – (provided by women) there is no gain saying the fact that women are major pillars of the Nigerian economy.

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