COUNSELLING THE RURAL WOMEN FARMERS FOR POVERTY REDUCTION IN NKWOT IN IKONO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Poverty has been found as a limiting factor to gender equity. Women make up greater number of the population and they are the most hit by poverty especially those in the rural areas. This has hindered economic development. Hence, it becomes necessary to determine the effects on the rural women farmers as to ascertain the strategies to adopt in reducing poverty. A reduction strategy targeting women as the war horse of the fight against poverty is a move in the right direction for achieving economic growth and development. The study was carried out in Nkwot in Ikono Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State to determine the effects of poverty on the rural women farmers. A well structured questionnaire tagged Rural Women Farmers and the Effect of Poverty (RWFEP) was administered to 80 randomly selected rural women farmers. Mean, percentage and standard deviation were used to analyze the data. The results obtained showed that majority of the women farmers had little or no formal education, large family sizes, small farm sizes and low income level, low level of literacy, rises in the cost of living, lack of social amenities and non inheritance of land were the factors that contributed to their state of poverty. The effects included hunger, diseases, malnutrition, low self-esteem and poor hygiene, among others. To overcome some of these effects and alleviate poverty among the rural women farmers in the area. It was recommended that the government should provide adult literacy centres, social amenities and skill acquisition centres for the women to learn other skills, apart from farming. Credit facilities and improved farm inputs should also be provided for them.

Poverty is one of the most notorious problems in developing nations, whether viewed in terms of ambiguity or ubiquity (Denga & Denga, 2007). The global economic recession, sporadic political unrest and the attendant economic hardship with its social devastations and psychosomatic trauma for workers and non workers have increasingly stimulated stress. (Denga, 2008) Women are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God their Creator, a bit different from men. We are made under normal circumstances to loose blood in a cyclical form at puberty till menopause. Every normal woman at puberty goes through this experience of menstruation which can be strength-reducing, distressing and stressful. In some women, the menstrual period comes with headaches, acute menstrual pains and a lot of discomfort. This process wear women out, and coupled with poverty, it can accelerate aging (Denga, 2005).

Poverty refers to the condition of not having the means to afford basic human needs such as clean water, nutrition, healthcare, clothing and shelter. This condition could be referred to as absolute poverty. There is also relative poverty which is the condition of having fewer resources or less income than others in society when compared with averages (Adeleke, 2005). Poverty is usually measured as either absolute or relative poverty, the latter being actually an index of income inequality. Absolute poverty refers to a set standard which is consistent over time and between countries. The World Bank defined extreme poverty as living on less than U$1.25 per day and moderate poverty is less than $2 per day. In 2001, 1.1 billion people had consumption level below $1 a day and 2.7 billion lived on less than $2 a day. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) report in 2006, six million children die of hunger every year i.e. seventeen thousand everyday. In sub-Saharan Africa, extreme economic poverty went up from 41% in 1981 to 46% in 2001. When combined with the growing population, it increased the number of people living in poverty from 231 million to 318 million (Ekpenyong, 2008).

World Bank (2006) identified spirall inflation as one of the major factors because it stood at about 73% in 2005. Rise in the cost of living makes poor people less able to afford items. The spend a greater portion of their budgets on food than richer people. As a result they are vulnerable to increase in food prices. According to United Nations Ghana based Institute of Natural Resources in Africa (cited by Nnaka, 2000), intensive farming often leads to a vicious cycle of exhaustion of social fertility and decline of agricultural yield. If current trends of soil degradation continues, the continent might be able to feed just 25% of its population by the year 2025. Adeleke (2005), noted that another factor responsible for poverty is over population. However, the reverse is also true that poverty causes over population as it gives women little power to plan childhood, enhance educational attainment or a career. He further stated other factors which include poor health and

education which severely affect productivity; alcoholism and drug abuse can also confine people to vicious poverty cycles; excessive workload is a serious constraint on development of the Nigerian woman (Ekpenyong, 2008). Women are overburdened with excessive workload, especially women in the rural areas. They toil on the land and under a long work day, the reason being that their productive and income generating activities are combined with multiple household task (Udom, 2009).

In Nigeria, poverty issues are wide spread just as in any other nation of the world. Poverty is experienced in every human community, although in varying degrees. Nigeria is the most hit because poverty has continued to constitute no small hindrance to development of her people. According to John (2007), the average living standard now is lower than they were in the 1950s and inequalities in average rate are higher than they were then. Both suggest that poverty has increased in the country, despite Nigeria's sixth position as the world's largest oil exporter. The Human Development Report pointed out that the population of the poor, which was 36.1 million in 1992 and 34.1 million in 1999 increased by a shocking 61% to 55.8 million by 2006. This shows that Nigeria has become one of the poorest nations in the world, with one in every two Nigerian being poor. United Nation Information Centre (UNIC) puts the poverty line at $3.4 per month. A Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) report (2005) on poverty profile (cited by John, 2007) shows that majority of Nigerians live below poverty line and lack of infrastructure is already affecting the health of Nigerians. Average life expectancy is put at 51 years, infant mortality is 84 per 1000 births, child malnutrition rate is 35% for children under 5 years, less than 45% of the population have access to safe water and 57% of adult population are illiterate. These can be traced to a number of factors.

Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria, women make up greater percentage of the population and they are the most hit by poverty. Poverty intertwines with the ability to generate income, have access to shelter, education and medicare. In fact, it affects longevity negatively. According to ILO (2006), poverty is more than a problem of income and consumption shortfalls. It entails powerlessness, lack of access to and control over resources necessary for one's livelihood and development. It also encompasses lack of economic and political strength to compete with other interest groups for a better share of scarce resources and inability to influence decision making process affecting one's life. Unfortunately, the powerlessness seem to create a vicious cycle of poverty especially for women in Nkwot in Ikono Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, some of who have no inheritance right and cannot personally negotiate credit or acquire properties. These women depend on subsistence farming of their respective small family plots. They earn less than ₦400 a day. With this low income, they are powerless and voiceless

when it comes to decision-making in the family or community. This creates inequality between the men and the women.

Consequent upon the women's low poverty level women believe they are inferior, objects for male gratification and are subjected to many harmful practices such as domestic violence, mental rape, pronounced sex at birth selectively and harmful widowhood rights. As a result, they have been seeing themselves through the eyes of men and this resulted to their low self-esteem, lack of career, education, planning and under-utilization of their potential talents. It therefore becomes necessary to determine the influence of poverty of these rural women farmers as this will create a clearer understanding of the extent of poverty among them. This will also help to determine the best strategy to adopt in order to reduce poverty among these women.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to determine the influence of poverty on rural women farmers in Nkwot in Ikono Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Specifically, the study sought to:

I. Identify the socio-economic characteristics of the rural women farmers.
II. Identify the factors that contributed to their state of poverty.
III. Identify the strategies that could be employed to alleviate poverty among rural women farmers in the study area.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

I. What are the socio-economic characteristics of the rural women farmers?
II. What are the factors that contributed to the rural women's poverty?
III. What are the influences of poverty on these rural women farmers?
IV. What strategies can be employed to reduce poverty among these rural women farmers?

Methodology

The research design adopted for the study was a descriptive survey. This was because it provided the researchers the opportunity of sampling the opinion of large representative sample of the female farmers. According to Isangedighi, Joshua, Asim & Ekuri (2004), survey approach enables a researcher to study large and small populations by selecting and studying samples from the population in order to discover the relative incidence, distribution, interrelation of sociological and psychological variables.

The study was carried out in Nkwot in Ikono Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Nkwot is made up of twenty-two communities. Out of the twenty-two communities, eight (8) were purposely selected for the study because of the high level of poverty in those areas. Ten (10) female farmers were randomly selected from each of the communities. However, a total of 80 respondents were selected to constitute the sample size.

The instrument used for data collection in the study was a 65-item questionnaire constructed by the researcher, and tagged "Rural Women Farmers and the Effect of Poverty (RWFEP). The instrument was divided into 2 sections (A and B). Section A identified the socio-economic characteristics of these women farmers. Section B was subdivided in to 3 parts. Part 1 sought information on the factors that contributed to their state of poverty. Part 2 comprised 12 items on the influence of poverty on them. Part 3 comprised 10 items on strategies to adopt in order to reduce poverty among the rural women which were placed on 4 point scale of Strongly Agree (SA); Agree (A); Disagree (D); and Strongly Disagree (SD).

The instrument was validated by three experts. There after, it was trial-tested on 20 women farmers who were not part of the study sample. Cronbach Alpha Analysis was used to ascertain the internal consistency of the items. The result gave a reliability Coefficient value of .84, .86 and .87 for parts 1, 2 and 3 respectively and overall Reliability Coefficient value of .87. The instrument was administered to the 80 respondents by the researcher herself on each community women's meeting days and were collected on the spot to curb much attrition.

Data Analysis and Results

The data analysis results are presented in tables. Means, and standard deviation were used to analysed the data. The acceptance point for the item was 2.50 in all cases.

Research Question One

What are the socio-economic characteristics of the rural women farmers?

Table 1: Socio-economic Characteristics of the Respondents

S/N	Items	Frequency	Percentage	Mode
1	**Age range**			
a	Less than 20	8	10	
b	21 – 40	30	37.5	41-60
c	41 – 59	35	43.75	
d	>60	7	8.75	
2	**Marital Status**			
a	Married	50	62.5	
b	Single	15	18.75	Married
c	Divorced	5	6.25	
d	Widowed	10	12.5	
3	**Family Size**			
a	1-4	15	18.75	
b	5-8	50	62.50	5-8
c	9-12	12	15.00	
d	More than 12	3	3.75	
4	**Educational Status**			
a	None	35	43.75	
b	Primary	30	37.50	No
c	Secondary	15	18.75	formal
d	Tertiary	-	-	education
5	**Major occupation**			
a	Farming	60	75	
b	Trading	15		Farming
c	Civil Service	-		
d	Food Processing	5		
6	**Farm Size**			
a	1-5 plots	50	62.5	
b	6-10 plots	18	22.5	1-5 plots
c	11-15 plots	10	12.5	
d	16-20 plots	2	2.5	
7	**Income level/month**			
a	Less than N2000	5	6.25	
b	₦2001- ₦5000	38	47.5	₦2001-
c	₦5001 – ₦8000	27	33.75	₦5000
d	>₦8001	10	12.5	

Table1 showed that 43.75 per cent of the respondents were between the ages of 41-59 years, this formed the highest frequency and is followed by age class of 21-40 given the total as 37.5. This indicates that majority of the respondents fall within the working class. Only 18.75 per cent of the total respondents did not marry, though some married women were divorced and widowed. The family sizes were large with 62.50% of the respondents having family sizes between 5-8 to have the highest frequencies.

Table 1 further revealed that 43.75 per cent of the respondents had no formal education while 37.50 per cent had only primary education. This indicates low literacy level in the study area. The major occupation was farming with mean score of 60 and 75 per cent. Majority (62.5%) had small farm sizes between 1-5 plots showing that they were small scale farmers. Also, 47.5 per cent of the respondents had income of between ₦2001 - ₦5000 per month indicating low income level.

Research Question 2

What are the factors that contributed to these rural women farmers poverty?

Table 2: Factors that Contributed to Poverty

S/N	Items	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	Decision
1.	Scarcity of basic need e.g. food	3.80	0.63	Agreed
2.	Rises in the cost of living	4.00	0.66	Agreed
3.	Unavailable health care	1.50	0.25	Disagreed
4.	Overpopulation	2.80	0.47	Agreed
5.	Lack of access to birth control	1.00	0.17	Disagreed
6.	Low literacy level	3.85	0.64	Agreed
7.	Lack of social amenities	3.90	0.65	Agreed
8.	Lack of other jobs apart from farming	3.50	0.58	Agreed
9.	Poor family background	2.85	0.48	Agreed
10.	Early marriage	1.85	0.31	Disagreed
11.	Non heritance of land for farming	3.95	0.66	Agreed
12.	Marital status	2.20	0.37	Disagreed
13.	Sex stereotyping	3.85	0.48	Agreed
14.	Laziness	0.50	0.08	Disagreed
15.	Lack of farm inputs like fertilizers, improved seedlings etc.	2.85	0.48	Agreed
16.	Excessive work load	3.88	0.64	Agreed
	Grand Mean	2.89	0.47	Agreed

Table 2 shows that respondents agreed that 11 out of the 16 items were factors that contributed to their state of poverty. It also revealed that rises in cost of living, non inheritance of land for farming, lack of social amenities, excessive work load, low literacy level and sex stereotyping had the highest mean score of 4.00, 3.95, 3.90, 3.88, 3.85 and 3.85 respectively. With the grand mean score of 2.89 shows that the 11 agreed items mentioned above actually contributed to the women farmers state of poverty.

Research Question Three

What are the effects of poverty on these rural women farmers?

Table 3: Effect of Poverty

S/N	Items	Mean (x)	SD	Decision
1.	Hunger	3.36	0.86	Agreed
2.	Diseases	2.50	0.42	Agreed
3.	Malnutrition	3.20	0.53	Agreed
4.	Drug abuse	1.00	0.20	Disagreed
5.	Homelessness	1.58	0.26	Disagreed
6.	Low literacy	2.50	0.42	Agreed
7.	Low income	3.40	0.57	Agreed
8.	Low self esteem	3.50	0.58	Agreed
9.	Lack of decisionmaking power	3.35	0.50	Agreed
10.	Poor hygiene	3.00	0.43	Agreed
11.	Increased family size	2.65	0.44	Agreed
	Grand Mean	2.73	0.47	Agreed

The result in Table 3 shows that respondents agree that 9 out of the 11 items were the negative effects of poverty on them. It also revealed that the women suffered from low self esteem (Mean = 3.50), low income (Mean = 3.40), hunger (Mean = 3.36), and malnutrition with mean score of 3.20. The total grand mean of 2.73 shows that the women are actually facing the effects of poverty.

Research Question Four

What strategies can be employed to alleviate poverty among the rural women farmers?

Table 4: Poverty Alleviation Strategies

S/N	Items	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	SD	Decision
1.	Well equipped health care centres	2.93	0.49	Agreed
2.	Provision of Adult Literacy Centres	3.80	0.63	Agreed
3.	Provision of skill acquisition training centres	3.83	0.64	Agreed
4.	Building of industries	3.00	0.50	Agreed
5.	Provision of social amenities	3.85	0.64	Agreed
6.	Gender equity	3.60	0.48	Agreed
7.	Access to land and credit facilities	3.90	0.65	Agreed
8.	Provision of farm inputs	2.80	0.47	Agreed
9.	Granting of soft loans	3.70	0.62	Agreed
10.	Provision of birth control methods	2.50	0.42	Agreed
	Grand Mean	3.39	0.55	Agreed

Table 4 shows strategies that could be employed to reduce poverty with access to land and credit facilities having the highest mean score of 3.90, followed by provision of social amenities (3.85), provision of skill acquisition training centres (3.83), provision of adult literacy centres (3.80) and the least being provision of birth control methods (2.50). In summary, all the respondents agreed that the 10 listed strategies were ways of alleviating poverty in the study area which is shown in the grand mean of 3.39.

Discussion

Table 1 revealed that the respondents fall within working class age. Majority of them are married with large family sizes. Majority had no formal education indicating low literacy and their farm sizes are small. This agreed with the statement of Adeleke (2005) that women's food production potential was being mitigated because it is carried out on small and scattered pieces of land which might be unsuitable for the crops planted. This also agreed with Iheduru (2006) that

women were usually the poorest in the society, less educated than men, disease ridden and with very low social, economic and political status. With their low literacy, large family sizes and small farm size, they were in abject poverty. As the saying goes, illiteracy is a crime against humanity and ignorance is a killer, knowledge therefore is power and this type of knowledge is derived from education and it leads to individual and collective freedom (Ezeibe & Ezek, 2011).

Table 2 showed that rises in cost of living, non inheritance of land for farming, lack of social amenities, low literacy, and sex stereotyping are factors that contribute to their state of poverty. Ekpenyong (2008) supported that sex stereotype was one of the constraints to women productive activities. He stated that culture and tradition create inequality between men and women and this culture was being transmitted from one generation to other thereby perpetuating the superiority of the male over the female. Kantor (2005) noted that women constituted more than half of the total agricultural labour force, yet there was inequality in their access to land when compared to the men. They did not own land or property, these hindered their economic development since the property would normally serve as collateral in the banking institution. Osakwe (2006) was also in support of the fact that uneducated women breed ignorance and poverty and the two formed a vicious cycle resulting to vulnerability and voicelessness. Saito & David (2004), agreed that excessive work load was one of the factors that contribute to women's poverty because in their study of the role of women in agriculture, they found that women in Nigeria spent an average of 9 hours per day relative to 7 hours put in by men. In addition the women spent an average of 5 hours per day on non-agricultural task compared to 1.5 hours for men. A summation of the time spent on agricultural task and other responsibility showed that women's average working hour was 14 hours while that of men was 8.5 hours.

Table 3 revealed the effects of poverty on the rural women. It included low self esteem, low income, hunger and malnutrition. This agreed with Ekpenyong (2008) that poverty made women to believe that they were inferior to men. They saw themselves through the eyes of men and this resulted to low self esteem. Denga (2008) also noted that low income or lack of finance was a major constraint to women economic development. Majority of the female workers were in low cadre occupation and were informal sector workers with little or no access to credit, technological support and other facilities to build up a business.

Table 4 revealed the strategies that could be employed to alleviate poverty. Most of the respondents agreed that access to land and credit facilities, provision of social amenities, provision of adult literacy centres and skill acquisition training centres were the major strategies to adopt in order to alleviate poverty. This agreed with Iheduru (2006) that ordinarily women were endowed with entrepreneurial

qualities which could be latent and could not be fostered without basic skills. In view of this, skill development along the line of raising the women's ability to do specific activities like crafts, tailoring, painting and baking through formal or informal teaching method helped for the overall development of the women.

The findings also agreed with (Denga, 2005 and Durojaye, 2005) that adult literacy centres was a way of educating the rural women. To them education was the best instrument of social control, change and development. When a woman is educated, she can take care of the mental, physical, moral and health development of herself and the entire family. It also agreed with Udom (2009) that women were the backbone of African agriculture, that agricultural productivity changes dramatically when women do not get the same access to land and credit facilities as men.

Conclusion

It is important to note that the rural women farmers in Nkwot in Ikono Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria are poor and this has made them to lose their decision making power and self esteem. They can not compete with others and this is a limiting factor in attaining the new millennium goal of gender equity. The study observed that excessive work load, low literacy level is a major problem and the women income is very low to take care of their large family sizes. This has resulted to hunger, malnutrition and diseases.

Recommendation/Counselling Implications

In view of the research findings the following recommendations/counselling implications are made:

1. Efforts should be made to shift orientation from cultural beliefs, which emanated from traditional gender theories.
2. Government should provide adult literacy centres for these women to be educated.
3. Government, NGOs and Women Ministries should also establish skill acquisition training centres to enable the women learn other skills other than farming in order to be entrepreneurial. No doubt, this will improve their income level.
4. Government should provide social amenities like safe water, and electricity and good roads for them to transport their goods to the urban cities where they can sell at a higher price and improve their income.
5. There should be well equipped health centres by the government, where the women will be better informed about birth control methods in order to reduce the population in the area.
6. Government should help to revise the law on property inheritance, including land to favour women. When they inherit land they can practice their farming on a higher scale without much disturbance.
7. Government should provide improved farm inputs like seedlings and fertilizers.

8. Government should establish industries and companies in the rural areas for educated people to work in the village. This will bring community development.
9. The men should assist the women in their farm work in order to reduce the excessive workload on them. This will enhance agricultural production and increase their farm input.
10. Government and rural leaders should review established procedure for the allocation of factors of production to guarantee equal opportunity for both males and females.
11. Funds should be made available for effective poverty alleviation. Machinery should be put in place to avoid any diversion of available funds to private purse/use.
12. Women education should be given priority attention.
13. There should be awareness campaign from the federal, state and local government on the need for women to make themselves available for poverty alleviation programmes in order to ensure gender equity.
14. There should be effective regular monitoring team for poverty alleviation to avoid the gulf between the goals and practical results.
15. Government should enforce laws against corruption more stringently so that poverty alleviation will be effectively implemented. This implies that some of the programmes should be handled by people who are professionals and could be held accountable.

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