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Scholastica C. Ukwoma

University of Nigeria - Nsukka, stica2004@yahoo.com

Ezii Njoku

university of Nigeria Nsukka, nnezim@yahoo.com

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Empowering Rural Women through Information Provision: The Strategic Roles of the Library.

Scholastica C. Ukwoma

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Enugu State

scholar.ukwoma@unn.edu.ng

And

Ezii O. Njoku

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Enugu State

nnezim@yahoo.com

Abstract

Information is crucial to all human endeavors, therefore it is necessary that required information is provided to all categories of people. This has been the call by many organizations, including libraries, which have also laid more emphasis on access to information. The federal government of Nigeria announced a seven point agenda aimed at achieving the development of the nation. One of the items in the agenda centers on agriculture and food security, which should be a priority for any developing nation. Agriculture not only feeds the teeming population, but it also enhances economic growth and development.

Rural women in Nigeria are predominantly involved in agriculture; they produce the food for the citizenry. As a result, they should be well armed with the necessary information, knowledge and resources that will assist them, to achieve the goal of improved agriculture and food security. This cannot be achieved by writing alone because the overwhelming majority of them are non-literate. Based on this fact, the service of librarians becomes imperative, since they are the custodians of knowledge. They should repackage the required information in a way that it will be accessible to the rural women. This paper highlights the activities of rural women and examines how they access information. Understanding the challenges they face in doing so, will improve the services rendered by librarians to this critical segment of the society. The population of the study consists of rural women in some local government areas in Southeast Nigeria. The method of data collection was by focus group interview as most of them cannot write. The data collected from the interviews were analyzed and discussed. The study discovered that there are women cooperatives in Southeast Nigeria, involved in different types of farming like cassava and maize farm, pepper farm, poultry farm etc. They get assistance more from the FADAMAR, ADP and Agric commercial banks. They receive literacy programmes from Agric extension officers and cooperative officers. Their major

problems are inadequate personnel to assist them in some of their programmes, delay in getting Government assistance, inadequate funds to carry out their projects and difficulty in transportation and bad roads. Based on this, the paper concluded that Librarians should make more contributions to the literacy programmes of these women and the government needs to provide more assistance to these women.

Introduction

It has been argued by experts that Agriculture, has failed to feature prominently in growth and poverty reduction proposals in Nigeria. Peacock (2005) asserted that agriculture-led development is fundamental to reducing hunger and poverty (70% of which is the rural areas), generating economic growth, reducing the burden of food imports and opening the way for expansion of exports. Agriculture contributes a lot to the economy of any nation. For example, in Nigeria, it contributes 42% of Nigeria's GDP and engages over 65% of the country's work force. (Yar'Adua 2009). No wonder the late president, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, in his seven-point agenda, announced during his inauguration, included agriculture and food security among the goals to be achieved. The seven-point agenda formed the basis of his contact with voters during his campaign. He promised to rebuild our physical infrastructure and human capital in order to move our country forward. This agenda was a plan of action and not a development blueprint. In addition to that, the year to year percentage change in agricultural output grew from 2.9% in 1999-2000 to 13.7% in 2000-2004. This means that agriculture has made a lot of impact in the country and has become the dominant economic activity, though, roughly 75% of the land is arable but only about 40% is cultivated. (http://uk.oneworld.net/guides/nigeria/food_security). The target of the Federal Government Poverty Eradication Scheme is the eradication of absolute poverty among the people of Nigeria. Eradication of poverty is intended to ensure that Nigerians are provided with the essential facilities, like basic healthcare facilities, quality education, good drinking water, good roads, steady sources of real income, quality and high nutritional food. If these can be provided to all Nigerians, then the target of eradicating poverty in the country would be achieved. But this requires the effort of the three tiers of Government to pull their resources together as a team to achieve this successfully. It is also important to provide adequate and timely information to empower the citizens,

through agricultural practices, especially the rural women who produce the bulk of the food in this country.

Empowerment occurs when the target group can determine their own fates and accomplish their objectives through access and control of resources. According to Prytherch, (1995), empowerment is the raising of the awareness of individuals and groups so that they are able to make effective use of their own resources through discovering their abilities. In many cases, empowerment comes through increased political awareness of employees or through greater access to information, resulting from technological and other related developments. This is very important especially at this period when many countries are faced with economic melt down. Women contribute a lot to the economic development of any nation and as such there is need to empower them. Handy and Kassam (2004) state that women have been identified as the key agent of sustainable development and their empowerment is seen as central to a more holistic approach towards establishing new patterns and processes of development that are sustainable. In fact, Ojimba, (2000) in his analysis, has shown that women in Africa make up more than one third of the work force. According to him, they account for 70% of agricultural labour, 80% of food producers, 100% of those who process basic food stuffs and undertake 60-90% of the marketing.

Many organizations like FAO have continued to make their contributions towards women's empowerment because they have been identified as providing important roles in the nation's development. The World Bank has suggested that the empowerment of women should be a key aspect of all social development programs (World Bank, 2001). This implies that women can be empowered through provision of adequate and timely information. Consequently, many of these women are from the rural dwellings who are involved in agriculture, they produce food for the teeming population in the country.

Information is central in every human activity of whatever type- individual, cooperate, private, governmental. Without information we grope in the dark and commit errors of egregious proportions. Information is basic for rational a human decision, that is why governments, cooperate bodies, strategist, including the military and espionage specialist,

commit huge resources in sourcing information. Information helps them to make informed decisions and reduce their level of uncertainty. It also helps them in their day-to-day activities and for community development. The rural dwellers need to be provided with information on such issues as fertilizer application, weed control, credit loan scheme applicable to farmers and other information that will help them in alleviating their fears of uncertainties. Therefore, the provision of information to rural dwellers in areas such as, increased farm income, reduced risk, improved health, food security and overall economic growth (Idiegbeyan-Ose and Akpoghome 2009) enhances the prospects of their economic growth. Accordingly, the library should play a dominant role towards achieving this objective. There is need to repackage the information provided to rural dwellers (farmers) in a format that will appeal to them, since majority of them are illiterates. Therefore, the need to carry out a study on the activities of rural farmers in some local government areas involved in agriculture in southeast Nigeria, how they access information and the challenges facing them.

Objectives of the study

Four objectives were formulated to guide this study. They are as follows;

- 1 To identify the different activities of rural farmers in Southeast Nigeria.
- 2 To identify the sources of fund to finance their projects.
- 3 To find out information literacy programmes available for them.
- 4 To identify the challenges facing rural dwellers in accessing information.

Literature Review

There is no doubt that the global increase in population of the world depends on agriculture *sine qua non* rural dwellers of which women make up two thirds of the population (Ijere, 1992) and are the major work force. Von Braun, (2003) stated that out of a world population of about 6 billion people, there are approximately 1.2 billion poor, of which 75% - 900 million people- live in rural areas. Virtually all these individuals partly depend on small holder agriculture as their primary economic activity. Interestingly, women make up a greater percentage of the rural dwellers. They bear almost all the responsibility for meeting basic needs of the family, yet are systematically denied the resources, information and freedom of action they need to fulfill this responsibility.

It was observed by Quansah (1990) that in some developing countries, poverty has a gender bias. A large proportion of poor households are headed by women, especially in rural Africa and the urban slums of the Latin America. Female members of poor households are often worse off than the male members because of distorted food and other entitlements within the family. What is more, the Hunger Project (2011) has also observed that “the current world food price crisis is having a severe impact on women. The Project admitted that around the world, millions of people eat two or three times a day; but a significant percentage of women eat only once. Many women denying themselves even that one meal to ensure that their children are fed”.

Fortunately, the third MDG discusses the right of every human being to development and freedom from want. This, in relation to Gender dimension, as observed by Kastens and Okhoya (2007), expresses the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women though not clearly stated, but implies raising the living conditions of women throughout the world. This is a good omen for the women folk, especially those in the rural areas who have suffered untold hardship and humiliation silently, without complaining. In fact, women have been observed to be responsible for half of the world’s foods production—they produce between 60% and 80% of the food in rural areas in most developing countries. Ijere (1992) said that women in rural areas are the backbone of rural development, as they make up about 50% of the work force. The Human Resources Division for Africa (1974) affirms the importance of women in the family, but laments the non-acknowledgement of their economic contributions and importance to the society in the following statement:

African women whether educated and uneducated, whether rural or urban based, whether engaged in gainful employment or not, contribute to development directly or indirectly in a variety of forms. They constitute a sizeable number of the active population in agriculture, besides, they are responsible for attending to the early education of the nation’s children.

In spite of these attributes of the rural women, they have generally not been recognized by policy makers, development planners and agricultural service deliverers in

decision-making process concerning them. Rather they have been tagged or perceived as “Males” (Kastens and Okhoya 2007), “Invisible farmers” (Ijere, 1992), “Neglected Rural Majority”, (Otatunbosun, 1975). Due to these imageries and other reasons Ijere had advanced, women find it more difficult than men to gain access to valuable resources such as land, credit and agricultural inputs, technology, extension training and services that would enhance their production capacity.

But studies like Quansah, (1990) (Camman and Muellar ,2003), and hunger project, (2011) have shown that if women are supported, and empowered, or mobilized, all of the society will benefit. Camman and Muellar, (2003) explained that the idea behind mobilizing rural poor is to encourage people, especially the disadvantaged and poorest of the poor, to make better use of their own capacities and resources.

The question is how to empower women and why is it so important to do so? We argue in this paper that one of the most crucial aspects of empowering rural women is through ‘information provision’. We agree with William Arthur Lewis, (1915-1991), that the fundamental cure for poverty is not money but ‘Knowledge’. Information provides the raw material which in due course can lead to new knowledge. This new knowledge could be applied to several areas of their life endeavors such as new agricultural practices, use of agro-allied chemicals, market trends, loan facilities, formation of self-helps cooperatives. Singh (2001), Mark and Pierce (2001), Idiegben-Ose and Akpoghome (2009), all believe that information is an essential commodity for informed decision making and help to reduce uncertainty.

Rural farmers need the kind of information that will help them build confidence and take the right decisions at the right time. Awasom (2004) agrees that access to the right information at the right time enables people to make informed decisions that can lead to positive change. *The African Farming and Processing* (2005) affirms this fact, arguing that quality and timely information is a strategic input for development of agricultural markets. It adds, information offers tremendous opportunities to transform farming into a profitable enterprise by making market-related information accessible to/from remote and resource poor farmers and traders. September, (1993) also inputs that survival not only in information societies but also in societies at other levels of

development, requires the use of information at some levels to cope with life's daily demands.

The empowerment of rural women cannot be over emphasized because research has discovered an array of benefits from empowering women, not only to themselves, but to their communities and to the larger society. For instance, *The Hunger Project* (2011), firmly believes that empowering women to be change agents is an essential element to achieving the end of hunger and poverty. The aim is to support women and build their capacity. Camman and Mueller (2003), assert that social mobilization enables the rural poor to build up and strengthen local groups for collective action by pooling scarce resources together, and by solving common economic and social problems. The empowerment of rural women helps to enhance the quality of life through increased knowledge and skills.

In a recent seminar held at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, (IITA) in Ibadan, Sanchez (2008) said that:

What the rural African farmers need is empowerment. They need the right quantity and quality of fertilizer at the right time, credit support to enhance and expand their holdings, efficient crop processing capabilities to add value to farm produce and good market outlets to sell theirs. Sanchez further adds “we have discovered that once these communities are empowered, they begin to achieve the Millennium Development Goals quickly.

The challenge lies in how to bring appropriate information to people, who cannot benefit from the conventional modes of information dissemination like newspapers and magazines. This is difficult because they cannot meet the financial needs and demands involved. Taking a clue from a research carried out by Mchombu, (1992) about information needs for rural development with Malawi as a case study, he discovered that averages of 85% of rural people do not own a radio in their homes. In Nigeria where this luxury may exist, there is hardly electricity to use it or enough money to buy batteries. Aboyade (1985) had observed that in spite of efforts to communicate developmental information to rural people by various categories of change agents, something is still

missing in this process of information transfer, which makes such efforts not as fruitful as they should be.

It is against this backdrop that this paper argues that the library and documentation services can supply the missing link by unifying all information dissemination efforts, and by providing constant interaction between rural people and the providers of information and technological know-how (i.e. audio visual resources). This is the central thrust of this paper. It is in line with Aboyade's views that the library can supply the missing link in the rural information system, especially to the women, by unifying all other information media such as radio, television, posters, puppets, "story hour" and sound system to read the news in local languages, etc. The library can also function as a community cultural centre by organizing book reading and discussion groups, drama and musical evenings, ladies' forum, and by conducting surveys of readers' tastes, etc (Tugbiley, 1976). It has been correctly suggested that one does not need to be able to read or write to enjoy some facilities provided by libraries, and unless our libraries cater for such missing services, they can only constitute mere facades of modern libraries.

It has also been observed that the major audiovisual media for transmitting information, such as radio and television are one way instruments serving to stuff their customers with information and knowledge that are often of little value for their human fulfillment or practical enrichment. It is also clear that only the libraries allow learners to choose more or less freely the kind of knowledge they need. This observation brings to mind Dike's (1993) view that:

A central role for the library is inextricably tied to certain ideas of educational reform..., if learning takes place through interaction with variety of resources, with individuals or groups carrying out inquiries or projects under the guidance of the teacher, then, the role of the library will be central.

Thus, a well organized library system deliberately planned to accommodate the needs of the rural society, particularly the rural women, can go a long way to bring about such realization. This could be done in a number of ways such as bringing the library service

close to the rural people/women; just like Aboyade did in the RUDIS research project at Badeku in Ibadan. Bell, (2009) had urged that librarians should better understand what their community members need to accomplish, and then open up the gates (as librarians are known as gatekeepers) in order to deliver the resources they need for their learning, their research, their lifestyles and their well-being, and invite them to discover meaning through personalized relationships with library workers.

Secondly, by deliberate choice of library materials, they should recognize the apt need of the rural women and their stage of development. Singh (2001) is of the opinion that since no library and information centre can own everything, it is important that the document that it does add to its collection have the greatest probability of being of value to its own users. It is also important that an information centre should be able to acquire as rapidly as possible any document and communication media such as audio visual resources, video, tape recorders, cassettes, etc for which there is legitimate need in the user community.

What is more, in this era of information and communication technology, the acquisitions of multimedia systems are necessary in such rural libraries/centre. According to Denise (2004), using a variety of media like sound and video, makes multimedia materials very interesting and more illustrative than normal text presentation. In fact, Sorgwe (1979) believes that a good library system could really play the deterministic role of helping to build up the needed self-consciousness of the developing society. This can be achieved by carefully selecting materials that would boost the people's pride, and by stocking items other than books, such as visual and vocal aids which could help to preserve aspects of their history.

This view is in line with that of Irving (1985) who argues that listening could be regarded as the equivalent of reading, and speaking, the equivalent of writing in an oral society, such as seen in a rural community. In fact, an inexpensive tape recorder can record and reproduce almost instantaneously any message in any language or dialect. Such a message or information will be effectively disseminated to those for whom it is intended, by using sound system. Thus, one of the fastest ways of making information accessible to rural women is through the setting up of sound and audio-visual libraries, as

practical measures to communicate useful information effectively among the non-literate rural women in their local languages.

The library should also serve as a community centre, where information managers can organize events like ladies forum and use the medium to render functional literacy classes to the non-literate mothers, focusing on reading and other useful skill acquisition. Taherzadeh,(2006) reports that something like this was done in Roma-Hungary in a program called 'Story telling Mothers', "At a basic level, it empowers women; it affects the mothers' relationship with books and learning by creating a positive association which in turn and naturally will be passed on to their children. Women begin to see themselves as active agents of change". This can also go a long way to create a forum where rural women can feel safe, and comfortable to express their views, feelings, fears, grievances and hopes. With time, their economic and social status in the rural area will be enhanced or improved through free-flow of information. As Onohwakpor, (2006) observes, literacy education is the pivot on which other forms of education revolves. But this is synonymous with the services of library which provide open house of information and self-development for different categories of learners.

Method of data collection

The method of data collection was face to face interview and focus group discussion. The population of the study consists of three states in Southeast Nigeria, namely Abia, Enugu and Imo States. One local Government area was randomly selected from each state. They are as follows; Umuahia from Abia State; Nsukka from Enugu; and Owerri from Imo State. The women cooperatives from these local governments were visited with the assistance of extension workers and cooperative officers. In Umuahia there were eight (8) women cooperatives, in Nsukka there were fifteen (15) while in Owerri there were six (6) women cooperatives. These cooperatives deal in different areas of agriculture. The analysis was discussed based on the stated objectives.

Analysis and Discussion

Table 1: Number of cooperatives for Different areas/types of farming

		Types of Farming						
Areas visited	Total Number of cooperatives	cassava and maize	pepper farm	palm plantation	poultry	piggery	cassava processing	consumer women cooperative
Umuahia	8	6					2	
Nsukka	15	6	2	1	2	2	1	1
Owerri	6	4		1	1			
Total	29	16	2	2	3	2	3	1

From table 1, of the twenty-nine women cooperatives, sixteen are involved in cassava and maize plantations, two, in pepper farm, two in palm plantation, three in poultry farm, two in piggery, three deals in cassava processing, and one in Consumer cooperative. The attraction for cassava and maize farming is because of the availability of an improved cassava species provided by the IITA. This specie is said to be easy to manage and maintain, and has a high yield capacity. Apart from food being processed from cassava, they also produce flour for making pastries. These cooperatives concentrate in there different areas of farming and produce high yield at harvest.

Sources of fund/assistance

The information gathered from these women shows that they receive little loan from government. They also make contributions/thrift to buy the facilities they need and also pay for labour to clear and cultivate the land. Other assistance they receive comes from the National Root Crop Research Institute (NRCRI), FADAMA and IITA and Agricultural Development Programme (ADP).

The funding situation is a bit different in Nsukka. Here, the government gives them assistance in the form loan scheme. FADAMA which is a World Bank-assisted project also renders assistance; there are some banks that give soft loans to women cooperatives. There are also commercial Agric banks– which support their effort by

providing them with more than half of what they need and allow them to provide the remaining.

Table 2: Information literacy programmes

	Seminar	Radio	Cooperative officers	Extension workers	Workshops	From Higher institutions	Library	Adult Education Class
Umuahia	X	X	-	X	X	-	-	x
Owerri	X	X	-	X	X	-	-	-
Nsukka	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X

As stressed earlier, access to vital information is a very important aspect where rural farmers need assistance. From table, 2 the women in Umuahia receive information through seminars, radio, extension workers, workshops and adult education classes, this is indicated in the table by the ticking marked (X). At present, they lack personnel to continue the teaching and writing classes for these women. The seminars organized by the extension workers monthly do not provide the women with all they need. Those in Owerri receive information through seminars, radio, extension workers and workshops. But, in Nsukka, they have access to information and learning through seminars, radio, cooperative officers, extension workers, workshops, lecturers from higher institutions of learning and also attend adult education classes. The cooperative officers organize seminars for the rural women on three-monthly basis. But most times the executives are invited to be trained so that they can educate others in their local language. The cooperative and adult education programmes help them to learn how to read and write. This helps them to be better expressed and thereby reduce the inferiority complex when challenged by the literate women. Most times the extension teachers use their native language so that the learners can understand the message being put across. Pictures and posters are also used to teach them improved breeds and planting techniques. This method helps them to understand the message better and faster.

Unfortunately, these women cooperatives have not been visiting the library to receive information. Investigation shows that they do not see it as a necessary place to visit. It is therefore important that librarians should be at the forefront in providing information literacy programmes. It should not be left alone for the extension workers and cooperative officers and few individuals who have delegated themselves to assist these women. The library can package this information in a way that users can easily understand through film talks, diagrams etc. Providing only rural libraries is not enough. Some of the communities we studied have been able to provide a sort of rural library, but there should be a personalized service to accompany these. Take the case of a librarian in Anambra State in Nigeria, who took up the challenge to reach out to rural women and provide them with information and teaching on HIV. That effort is commendable and has produced good dividend. Some also reach out to their fellow women during the annual 'August return' which is a forum for all women from different locations to converge in their respective villages for development meetings. Information gathered from a librarian in the women group in Nsukka local government shows that they have been able to set up a library and employ staff to assist the community in reading and writing. These efforts have come from few librarians, the majority is yet to take a cue. It will be very interesting if it is taken up by the Nigerian Library Association, NLA so that the impact of librarians in information provision will be felt more by these rural dwellers. As was pointed by Abayode (1985), Bell, (2009) and Dike (1993), information is power.

Challenges

Despite the efforts and achievements made by women at self-empowerment, there are still a lot of challenges facing them these include the following;

- 1 Lack of personnel to operate their processing machines. Most youths are interested in fast means of making money to being involved in the business of operating processing machines for women.
- 2 Delay in delivering fertilizers and other farm inputs by government. Often women have to resort to open market which is rather expensive.
- 3 Inadequate fund to pay for labour, buy farm inputs and pay for veterinary checks in the case of those that have animal farms, because the bills for this are always expensive.

- 4 Weather fluctuation is another problem. Some crops like the yellow pepper, do not do well in dry weather. Inability to forecast the weather scares the farmers from planting such crops.
- 5 Transportation difficulties, including bad roads, make it difficult for cooperative offices to visit the cooperative women often. Also the cooperative women find it difficult to transport their farm produce to the urban centers where they can be sold.
- 6 Insufficient cooperative seminars and workshops being organized by the workers.
- 7 Lack of storage and processing facilities for the products harvested causes some of the produce to perish before they can be sold.
- 8 Failure of government to fulfill most of their promises, turns the frustration and indignation of the women at the cooperative officers.
- 9 They lack application of the acquired skills, most times after receiving the lectures from the extension works, they cannot put them into practice because the facilities are not available.

Strategies for Improvement.

- 1 There is need for government to assist the women cooperative, by providing them loan schemes and also encourage the Agric extension officers and cooperative staff so that they can discharge their duties effectively.
- 2 There should be more cooperative seminars for the women, because this helps them to improve more in their literacy level.
- 3 The Librarians should forget the building and engage in personalize services for these group of users.

Conclusion

Provision of information for all and the call for librarians to embrace is a timely theme, empowering rural women is necessary especially as a popular saying has it that 'train a woman you have trained a nation'. These women are industrious and eager to work, assistance should be provided to enable them improve in their occupation. Though

some government and NGOs are trying in providing assistance, but the government should intensify in his effort to provide assistance and encouragement to rural women so that they will have a sense of belonging. If librarians can contribute more in the literacy programmes for these women, as it is being done by few of them, more impact will be made in these women.

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