

Breaking Barriers: Investigating Constraints to Women's Active Involvement in Community Development Initiatives in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated the constraints hindering women's active involvement in community development initiatives in Rivers State, Nigeria. Despite constituting a significant majority of the population, women face multifaceted challenges, including cultural norms, inadequate access to resources, a top-down approach, and exclusion in decision-making. The study, conducted in Rivers State, Nigeria, employed a multi-stage sampling technique to select 270 respondents. The socio-economic characteristics of respondents reveal a predominantly middle-aged (30.4% being 26-33, and 37.0% being 34-41) and educated population, with 89.3% having one form of education or the other. The majority (57.4%) had household size of 4-6 persons, while most of them (43.3%) were members of age grade association. The nature of community development projects highlights women's willingness to contribute, emphasizing self-help projects ($\bar{x} = 3.00$, Rank=1st). However, certain projects pose challenges influenced by physical demands and cultural norms. Critical constraints include inadequate access to resources ($\bar{x} = 3.10$), top-down approach ($\bar{x} = 3.06$), cultural restraints ($\bar{x} = 2.84$), inferior status ($\bar{x} = 2.97$), low literacy levels ($\bar{x} = 2.61$), and exclusion in decision-making ($\bar{x} = 2.93$). The study underscores the need for targeted interventions to dismantle cultural norms, ensure equitable resource access, and adopt inclusive decision-making processes, fostering sustainable and impactful development for women in Rivers State.

Keywords: Women, Community Development, Constraints, Socio-economic Characteristics.

Introduction: Women constitute a significant majority in both the global and developing country populations. In Nigeria, for instance, the 1991 and 2006 censuses reported 49.7% and 48.78% women, respectively (National Population Census, 2006). Numerous studies highlight the crucial role women play in community development, emphasizing their substantial contributions. Despite this, women remain notably underrepresented in positions of authority, particularly evident in the political arena where men dominate. The issue of women's low inclusion in development efforts is a global concern. This is exemplified by initiatives such as the 'Women for Change initiative' led by Dame Patience Goodluck Jonathan, the former Nigerian First Lady. Her

project aimed to mobilize Nigerian women to advocate for a 35% representation in both public and private sectors, aligning with the Beijing 1995 conference declaration. Despite such initiatives, the participation of women in development activities continues to be disproportionately low.

Past military governments in Nigeria recognized the challenges faced by women and implemented programs like 'Better Life for Rural Women' and 'Family Support Program,' spearheaded by First Ladies Maryam Babangida and Mariam Abacha, respectively. While these efforts increased awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by women, they did not lead to a significant improvement in women's active participation in

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community development projects (Odey, 2021). Addressing the constraints hindering women's involvement in such initiatives is crucial for achieving more equitable and effective community development in Rivers State, Nigeria.

In the realm of community development initiatives in Rivers State, Nigeria, a pervasive patriarchal structure casts a formidable shadow, relegating women to the sidelines of decision-making processes. Within the traditional fabric of Nigerian society, men wield unquestionable dominance, dictating the course of community and family affairs. This overarching influence, as highlighted by Baker (2018), ingrains a deeply rooted belief that women are inherently inferior, shaping not only their self-perception but also influencing the perspectives of development stakeholders. The confines of this societal outlook label women as mere housewives, confined to domestic spheres and deemed incapable of autonomous decision-making. A glaring example is the infamous international declaration by a former Nigerian president, categorizing women as belonging to "the other room," a statement emblematic of their systemic exclusion from pivotal community decisions.

Moreover, the temporal constraints on women further compound their limited involvement in community development endeavors. Sultanpur et al. (2021) underscores this issue by revealing the perpetual demands placed on women's time—juggling responsibilities ranging from farming and household management to childcare and civil service employment. Astonishingly, Palacios-Lopez et al. (2017) reported that women constitute a substantial 60-70% of Nigeria's agricultural labor force, yet this significant contribution does little to augment their financial standing. Consequently, a disproportionate number of women find themselves ensnared in a cycle of poverty, illiteracy, inadequate healthcare, and various forms of violence and discrimination, painting a stark contrast to the relatively privileged position of their male counterparts.

This stark disparity perpetuates a narrative of inequality, where women's status is unjustly deemed inferior, and their plight eclipses that of men in multiple dimensions.

Traditionally in many Nigerian communities, authority is usually vested in men as decision-makers at home. This is also backed by religious injunctions that require a woman to 'submit' to her husband. During her early life, a girl is socially conditioned to accept a subordinate position as she watches her father assert authority and as her mother submits to his authority (Teixeira et al., 2021). A study by Osamor and Grady (2017) reported that in two-thirds of Nigerian households, husbands alone make decisions about children's healthcare, education and marriage (especially of girls). This lack of women's agency and voice is reflective of the patriarchal structure of the society as well as women's economic dependence on men.

According to Mensah (2023), the family institution and women's mothering function within the community are cultural phenomena that reflect and support the male dominance structure. According to Bidisha and Raihan (2018), one of the three ways in which dominance over women is articulated is through familial interactions, such as unpaid labor and control of the wife's labor wages by the husband. Men have always held the recognized role of home representatives in communities, a notion that routinely excludes women from critical decision-making sessions. This exclusionary behavior manifests as a growing gap between men and women in community politics, confirming Etumnu et al.'s (2023) findings of a global imbalance in leadership and development engagement between the genders. The deeply rooted cultural and historic biases that contribute to women's disproportionate presence in politics offer a difficult hurdle, inhibiting their active participation in policy development and decision-making, even on issues directly affecting them. Extensive data, facts, and observations, as described by Okafor and Akokuwebe (2015) and Magutsa (2018),

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demonstrate the persistent problems that women experience when participating in community development projects.

The essence of community development, according to Ugwu and Aruma (2019), is the collective participation of all community members in decisions and activities directly connected to them. The demand for a balanced and complementary involvement of both men and women is implicit in this assertion, which recognizes them as vital drivers of progress at all project levels. However, a lingering question persists: Can the effective participation of women in community development projects be achieved when they face constraints? This paper delves into the exploration of constraints to women's active involvement in community development initiatives in Rivers State, Nigeria. Specifically, the research concentrates on the following objectives: to describe the socioeconomic characteristics of women in the study area; investigate the nature of community development projects in the study area and how women participate in them; and **identify and analyze the key constraints that hinder women's effective participation in community development projects in the state.** **Methodology:** **Study area:** The study was carried out in Rivers State, Nigeria. The state was created in 1967 out of the then eastern region. It is one of the 36 states in Nigeria and a state in the South-South geographical zone. The state is bordered to the South by the Atlantic Ocean, to the North by Imo, Abia and Anambra states, to the East by Akwa Ibom and to the West by Bayelsa and Delta States (Adewumi et al., 2018). The State has a population of 5,198,716 people, spread across its 23 local government areas, thus, making it the sixth most populous state in Nigeria (NPC, 2006). Rivers State is the 26th

Results and discussion

Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents

largest state in Nigeria, with a land mass of 11,077km (4,276.9 sqm). It is a multi-cultural and multi-religious state, with a rich cultural heritage. The island areas of the state consist of tropical rainforest while the Riverine regions have Mangrove swamps as a unique feature (Oyegun et al., 2023). The state accounts for more than 40% of the crude oil production in Nigeria but before the oil boom, it was a major oil palm-producing state, alongside other crops such as yam, potatoes, cocoyam, cassava and many other crops in large quantities. Other economic activities include apiculture, forestry management, fish farming, poultry, oil palm production and milling. **Sample and Sampling Technique:** The study was carried out in the three (3) senatorial districts of Rivers State; East, West and South-East. Multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select two local government areas from each senatorial district. In the second stage, five communities were selected from each selected local government area. And in the third stage, nine women were randomly selected from each selected community thereby making a sample size of 270 respondents for the study.

Data Collection and Analysis: Primary data were acquired from sampled respondents using a structured questionnaire designed to elicit relevant information based on the study's key objectives. The questionnaire was validated and evaluated to ensure that it consistently measured the constructs. The data was coded, sorted, and cleaned before being entered into SPSS version 23, which was used for the study. For data analysis, descriptive statistics such as means, frequency, percentages, and mean rankings were used.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents based on the Socio-economic characteristics

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
18-25	43	15.9
26 -33	82	30.4
34 – 41	100	37.0
42 and above	45	16.7
Total	270	100
Level of educational		
No formal education	29	10.7
Primary/basic	58	21.5
Secondary	65	24.1
Tertiary	118	43.7
Total	270	100
Household size		
1-3	73	27.0
4-6	155	57.4
7-9	41	15.2
10 and above	01	04
Total	270	100
Major occupation		
Civil servant	79	29.3
Trader	51	18.9
Business	62	23.0
Farmer	78	28.9
Total	270	100
Years of experience in community development		
Below 5 years	15	5.6
6-8 years	72	26.7
9-11 years	96	35.6
12-14 years	59	21.9
15-17 years	20	7.4
18 years and above	08	3.0
Total	270	100
Membership of community-based organisation (C.B.O)		
Women social club	49	18.1
Religious group	40	14.8
Age grade	117	43.3
Co-operative society	31	11.5
Community development committee	17	6.3
Others	16	5.9
Total	270	100

Source: Field data, 2023

Table 1 outlines the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. Regarding age distribution, most of the respondents (37.0%) were in the 34-41 years age range with a mean age of 34 years, indicating a predominantly middle-aged population. While

middle-aged women possess strength for participation, older women hold influence in decision-making within community development committees, aligning with Ajogwu and Odeyemi's (2021) observations on the significance of age in African communities.

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Additionally, Table 1 indicates that the majority of the women had one form of education or the other. Of these, 43.7% of them had tertiary education, 21.5% had primary/basic education, and 24.1% had secondary education. Only 10.7% had no formal education. Even though highly educated, the active participation in community development projects in the study area is still constrained (see Table 3). This is in agreement with the findings of King (2013), who found that education alone is insufficient to overcome such constraints. However, Somani (2017) and Elakkiya and Asokhan (2018) assert that not having an education greatly limits girls from participating in many activities. Furthermore, Table 1 shows that the majority (57.4%) of the respondents had household members of 4-6 persons, suggesting smaller families possibly influenced by

education, contraceptive use, and family planning.

In terms of occupation, most (29.3%) of the women are civil servants. Only 28.9% were farmers. their predominance in civil service could be due to their high level of education. However, employment's time demands may hinder participation in community projects. Results in Table 1 revealed that participants had an average of 10 years of experience in community development projects. Regarding group affiliations, 18.1% are members of women's social clubs, 14.8% in age grades, 43.3% in religious groups, 11.5% in cooperative societies, 6.3% in community development committees, and 5.9% in other community-based organizations.

Nature of community development projects and how women participate in them

Table 2: Community development projects and how women engage in them in the study area

S/N	Items	\bar{x}	Rank
1	Carry and pass materials during the construction of school buildings	2.72	5 th
2	Execute education and health support projects for continued education	2.64	7 th
3	Training of community action committee to create awareness on HIV/AIDS	2.47	10 th
4	Initiate business support projects	2.58	8 th
5	Contribute money and cook for site workers	2.84	3 rd
6	Maintenance of community link-roads	2.52	9 th
7	Organize training to equip young girls with life-skills	2.65	6 th
8	Directly work as site labourers	2.31	11 th
9	Engage in self-help projects targeted at community development	3.00	1 st
10	Contribute money for electricity projects	2.95	2 nd
11	Periodic community sanitation	2.75	4 th

Source: Field Survey, 2023. \bar{x} = mean Mid-point = 2.50

Results in Table 2 reveal that respondents participated most in self-help projects targeted at community development (\bar{x} =3.0, rank =1st), contributing money for electricity projects (\bar{x} =2.95, rank=2nd), Contributing money and cooking for site workers (\bar{x} =2.84, rank=3rd), periodic community sanitation (\bar{x} =2.75, rank=4th), and carrying and pass materials during the construction of school buildings (\bar{x} =2.72, rank=5th). This is in line with the findings of Owolabi et al. (2019), who found that respondents had a high level of

participation in community development projects.

The fact that self-help projects are at the top of the list suggests that the respondents are interested in taking ownership of their own development. This is a positive sign, as it means that they are more likely to be successful in implementing and sustaining community development projects. The other projects on the list are also important for community development. Electricity projects can improve the quality of life for residents and make it

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easier for businesses to operate. Providing food for site workers can help to reduce the cost of projects and make them more attractive to potential donors. Periodic community sanitation can help to improve public health and reduce the spread of disease. Constructing school buildings can help to improve the education of children in the community (Paci-Green et al., 2020). The results of Table 2 suggest that the respondents are active and engaged members of their community. They are willing to contribute their time, money, and labor to improve the lives of others. This is a valuable asset to any community. This aligns with the findings of Allen et al. (2018), who found that women are actively engaged in community development activities, such as solving water-related issues. This also corroborates with the findings of Zunaidi and Maghfiroh (2021), that women are always

ready to add value to those they regard as “their own”.

Results in Table 2 reveal that the nature of community development projects that women participated the least include working as site labourers (\bar{x} =2.31, rank=11th), and training of community action committees to create awareness on HIV/AIDS (\bar{x} =2.47, rank=10th). This could be due to some factors, such as physical demands: Working as a site laborer can be a physically demanding job, requiring heavy lifting and manual labor. This may be a barrier for some women, especially those who are older or have health conditions. Also, in some cultures, there may be gender roles that discourage women from participating in certain types of work, such as manual labor. This may be due to the belief that women are physically weaker than men, or that manual labor is not appropriate for women.

Constraints to Women's Active Involvement in Community Development Initiatives

Table 3: Constraints to effective women’s participation in community development projects

S/N	Constraints	\bar{x}	Remark
1	Inadequate access to resources	3.10	Critical
2	Top-down approach	3.06	Critical
3.	Cultural restraints	2.84	Critical
4.	Poverty and financial dependency on men	2.52	Critical
5	Limited time to participate	2.65	Critical
6	Low literacy level	2.61	Critical
7	No material benefits	2.35	Not Critical
8	Exclusion in decision-making	2.93	Critical
9	Depends on men’s approval	2.96	Critical
10	Efforts and contributions are not acknowledged	2.87	Critical
11	Govt. don’t create awareness	2.83	Critical
12	Inferior status	2.97	Critical

Source: Field Survey, 2023. \bar{x} = Mean

Table 3 shows the critical challenges that constrain women from actively participating in community development initiatives. These constraints include inadequate access to resources” (\bar{x} =3.10), top-down approach of government and development partners (\bar{x} =3.06), Inferior status (\bar{x} =2.97), Depends on men’s approval (\bar{x} =2.96), Exclusion in decision-making (\bar{x} =2.93), Cultural restraints (\bar{x} =2.84), among others. This is in agreement

with the study of Etuk et al. (2019), who found that the domineering attitude of men and social exclusion were the major socio-cultural factors affecting women's participation in community development. Etuk et al, (2019) also found that less access to socioeconomic resources and a reduction in programme involvement advocacy further affected women's participation in community development.

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These challenges are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. For example, women's inadequate access to resources can make it difficult for them to participate in community development projects that require financial contributions. Additionally, the top-down approach of government and development partners can exclude women from the decision-making process, leading to projects that do not meet their needs. The inferior status of women in many societies is another major barrier to their participation in community development. Women are often seen as caregivers and homemakers, and their contributions to community development are often undervalued and ignored. Additionally, many women depend on men for financial support, which can make it difficult for them to challenge the status quo and participate in community development projects.

Exclusion in decision-making and leadership positions in community development organizations limits women's voices and can result in marginalization. This can also lead to projects that do not meet the needs of women and girls. Finally, cultural restraints can also prevent women from participating in community development. In some cultures, there are taboos against women participating in certain types of work or holding positions of leadership. These taboos can make it difficult for women to participate fully in community development.

Conclusion: Despite constituting a significant majority in the population, women encounter a myriad of constraints that hinder their participation in community development initiatives. The nature of community development projects showcases women's willingness to contribute to their communities, with a strong inclination towards self-help projects. However, certain projects, such as working as site laborers, pose challenges, possibly influenced by physical demands and cultural norms. Crucially, this study identifies critical constraints to women's active

involvement, including inadequate access to resources, a top-down approach, cultural restraints, poverty, limited time, low literacy levels, and exclusion in decision-making. These challenges are interconnected and reinforce each other, creating a complex web that impedes women's empowerment and participation.

The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to address these constraints systematically. Efforts should focus on dismantling ingrained cultural norms, ensuring equitable access to resources, and adopting inclusive decision-making processes. Recognizing and valuing women's contributions, both within households and community development projects, is paramount for fostering sustainable and impactful development. In essence, this study calls for a comprehensive and collaborative approach to breaking down barriers, allowing women in Rivers State, Nigeria, to actively contribute to and benefit from community development initiatives. By addressing the challenges, we can help to create a more inclusive and equitable society where all people, regardless of gender, have the opportunity to participate in community development.

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