

## Addressing the Needs of Rural Women Farmers to Achieve Food Security in Rivers State, Nigeria.

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**Abstract:** The concept of household food security (HFS) refers to the ability of a household to assure all its members sustained access to sufficient quantity and quality of food to live active healthy lives. Such access is likely to be most threatened in times of economic deterioration. The reasons for linking women and household food security are by now well known, but it is worth quickly looking at some regional/cultural dimensions to the links before moving on to discuss the relevance of current debates on structural adjustment policies. There appears to be a general consensus that the persisting food crisis in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is the consequence of a long-run neglect of women's food farming roles in a sub continent where women perform 70% of labour in food production. Badly informed agricultural policies have undermined women's ability to fulfill their food obligations to their families and have also undermined the achievement of national food security objectives. This study examined the roles and problems of women farmers in the study area and proffered solutions to the problems identified. It was observed that women participate actively in almost all agricultural activities to give their families food and biological hindrance also make most households food insecure. To empower women farmers, balanced and well-thought-out programmes/policies should be put in place.

[Chikaire, J., Nnadi, F.N., Nnadi C.D. and Anyoha, N.O. **Addressing the Needs of Rural Women Farmers to Achieve Food Security in Rivers State, Nigeria.** Researcher, 2011;3(10):19-25]. (ISSN: 1553-9865).

<http://www.sciencepub.net/researcher>.

**Keyword:** Rural women, food security, land tenure, hunger, Nigeria.

### 1. Introduction

Agriculture is central to the livelihoods of the rural poor and in the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Agriculture can be the engine of growth and is necessary for reducing poverty and food insecurity, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (IFAD 2001; World Bank 2007a). Understanding the dynamic processes of change is crucial to better position the sector for faster growth and sustained development, which is vital for food and livelihoods security for millions of men and women worldwide.

The rapid changes occurring in the agriculture sector present opportunities and challenges for the sector's central role in poverty reduction and food security. Markets and the demand for agricultural commodities are changing rapidly, especially for higher-value products. 'These changes may create opportunities for greater market participation for both women and men; however, for women in particular, to date, equal access to these markets is still limited. Advances in agricultural knowledge and technology that accompany the changes in the sector are creating an array of new choices for producers, altering what is produced, where it is produced, and how it is produced.. Factors outside of the sector, such as widespread environmental change, are also altering agricultural potential throughout the world. In

particular, climate change is now affecting water supply and weather conditions and consequently is impacting agricultural production (FAO, World Bank, 2009).

The composition of rural households is changing considerably as a consequence of HIV and AIDS, with deaths of young adults and farm households left in the hands of children and grandparents with subsequent impacts on agriculture. Migration, arising mainly from poverty or prompted by natural disasters or violent conflict, now forms a dynamic force, changing the landscape of the rural population. Remittances sent back home by migrants form substantial sources of funds supporting household consumption and productive investments in rural areas. Migration shows stark gendered differences. In some regions, men more than women are likely to abandon agricultural work at home and migrate first to seek income in other sectors. Women are being left to carry the full burdens of agricultural production, but often with no legal protection or rights to property ownership (Kabeer, 1995; World Bank, 2002c).

Although the changes in agriculture create new sources of opportunities for livelihoods and food security, they also pose significant uncertainties. Equity concerns are being raised. Poor and small producers, often women, may be

excluded from the lucrative high-value markets because they may not be able to compete in terms of costs and prices with larger producers. Globalization and trade liberalization have opened more market opportunities internationally and have induced greater innovations and efficiencies in many cases. But, at the same time, globalization has led to painful transition periods for some economies and has favored the producers who have more resources and the information, education, and capacity to cope with increasingly stringent market demands. Thus, these changes may increase the vulnerability of individuals with few resources, especially poor women, who have traditionally had limited access to crucial services and opportunities because of persistent cultural, social and political biases (World Bank, 2005a).

Today the world has enough food to feed every, yet an estimated 854 million people worldwide are still undernourished (FAO 2006). Poverty not food availability-is the major driver of food insecurity. Improvements in agricultural productivity are necessary to increase rural household incomes and access to available food but are insufficient to ensure food security. Evidence indicates that poverty reduction and food security do not necessarily move in tandem. The main problem is lack of economic (social and physical) access to food at national and household levels and inadequate nutrition (or hidden hunger). Food security not only requires an adequate supply of food but also entails availability and utilization by all men and women of all ages, ethnicities, religions, and socioeconomic levels.

Gender-based inequalities all along the food production chain from farm to plate' impede the attainment of food and nutritional security. Maximizing the impact of agricultural development on food security entails enhancing women's roles as agricultural producers as well as the primary caretakers of their families. Food security is a primary goal of sustainable agricultural development and a cornerstone for economic and social development (World Bank, 2001).

## 2. Women's Role In Food And Nutritional Security

Agricultural interventions are most likely to affect nutrition outcomes when they involve diverse and complementary processes and strategies that redirect the focus beyond agriculture for food production and to want broader consideration of livelihoods, women's empowerment, and optimal intrahousehold uses of resources. Successful projects are those that invest broadly in improving human capital sustain and

increase the livelihood assets of the poor, and focus on gender equality (World Bank (2007b)).

Women are crucial in the translation of the products of a vibrant agriculture sector into food and nutritional security for their households. They are often the farmers who cultivate food crops and produce commercial crops alongside the men in their households as a source of income. When women have an income, substantial evidence indicates that the income is more likely to be spent on food and children's needs. Women are generally responsible for food selection and preparation and for the care and feeding of children. Women are the key to food security for their households (Quisumbing *et al.*, 1995; Roberts, 2001).

In rural areas the availability and use of time by women is also a key factor in the availability of water for good hygiene, firewood collection, and frequent feeding of small children. In sub-Saharan Africa transportation of supplies for domestic use-fetching fuelwood and water-is largely done by women and girls on foot. In Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia women expend most of their energy on load-carrying activities involving transport of fuelwood, water, and grain for grinding. Fields dedicated to food crops are often farther from home than those related to cash crops. Because women must also perform domestic tasks, they must spend a considerable amount of time traveling between their home and the fields. This burden, together with other domestic and reproductive activities, severely constrains the amount of time available to women. Concerted efforts are required to use fully the strengths and diversity among the rural people and their institutions, to manage innovatively the risks and challenges associated with rapid changes in the sector, and to ensure that growth reaches poor women and men. For instance, women play a major role in agriculture, but these roles are often unrecognized. The design of many development policies and projects continues to assume wrongly that farmers and rural workers are mainly men (World Bank, 2007b). Failure to recognize the roles, differences and inequalities pose a serious threat to the effectiveness of the agricultural development agenda.

Based on these, this study becomes imperative. The paper describes the socio-economic characteristics of women farmers in the study area; identifies their various roles in food security attainment; determine their food security status as well as the areas of impediments and proffers solutions to the problems.

### 3. Methodology

The study was carried out in Omuma Local Government Area of Rivers State which is in the South-south geo-physical zone of Nigeria. The Local Government Area was carried out of Etche Local Government Area in the year 1996. It has a total population of about 127, 606 persons in 2011 projected from the 2006 National Census Figure. The area has women who are farmers and is called the food basket of the state. crops grown include yam, cassava, maize, melon, okra, cocoyam and others. It has a large market where people within

and outside transact business. A simple random sampling technique was used to select respondents for the study. Using the lists from women groups, eleven (11) rural women farmers were chosen from each community, whose main occupation is farming. This gives a total of one hundred and ten (110) women farmers. Descriptive tools of statistics present in tabular forms, frequency counts and mean were used to analyze data gathered using questionnaire and interview schedule. Information was also gathered using secondary data to provide the background information.

### Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
31 – 40	12	10.9
41 – 50	58	52.7
51 – 60	30	27.3
60 and above	10	9.1
Family		
1 – 4	20	18.2
5 – 8	25	22.7
8 – 12	52	47.3
12 and above	13	11.8
Educational level		
Adult education	21	19.1
Primary school	54	49.1
Secondary school	20	18.2
Tertiary education	15	13.6
Marital status		
Single	8	7.3
Married	42	38.2
Widow	60	54.5
Extension visit		
No visitation	95	86.4
1 – 2 times	10	9.1
2 times above	5	4.5
Membership of Association		
Yes	100	90.9
No	10	9.1
Occupation		
Farming	90	8.18
Trading	6	5.5
Civil servant	4	3.6
Farming/civil servant	10	9.1
Total	110	100

Table 1 shows the socio-economic characteristics of the women farmers. The table reveals that 10.9% of the women are between the age bracket of 31 – 40, this group is followed by 9.1% that are above 60 years. The number here dwindled due to the fact that age is no more on their side, yet as old women, they farm as well. Again, 52.7% and 27.3% are within 41 – 50 and 51 – 60 years of age, meaning that they are within the productive age. The women under these two brackets are healthy and energetic to farm. One family size, 18.2% have 1-4 dependents, 22.7% have 5 – 8 dependents while 47.3% and 11.8% have between 8 – 12 dependents and more than twelve dependents. The implication here is that families with more dependents do more farm work to provide for all members since they depend on farm produce for their livelihoods. Then 19.1% received adult education, while 49.1% attended

primary school. Only 18.2% and 13.6% went to the secondary and tertiary schools. From the table also, 38.2% and 54.5% are married and widows respectively, while only 7.3% are single women. It could be deduced that in Africa and the study are, women and especially widows are discriminated against more than other groups of women since they have no body to speak for them. Majority of the women farmers visited, 90.9% have not been visited by extension agents, only 9.1% and 4.5% agreed being visited by agents 1 – 2 times and more than twice. About 90.9% belong to various associations, with 9.1% not belonging. Lastly, 81.8% have farming as their primary occupation, while 9.15 farm and do government work together. They are followed by 5.5% and 3.6% who trade and who are civil servants.

### Roles of women in achieving food security

Table 2: Roles of women in Achieving food security

Roles	Frequency	Percentage
Land clearing	50	45.4
Planting crops	100	90.9
Weeding	110	100
Harvesting	80	72.7
Threshing	90	81.8
Winnowing	100	90.9
Kneading of food	87	79.1
Storage	70	63.6
Marketing of produce	100	90.9
Processing	110	100
Storage	60	54.5
Milking of animals	87	79.1
Feeding animals	90	81.8
Tendering/caring for animal	70	63.6
Treat disease of animals	60	54.5
Control diseases/pests of crops	73	66.3

Multiple response N=110

The numerous activities of the respondents for food security are shown on table 2. Women farmers in the study are undertake a wide range of activities for food to be available safe and secure. They are in land clearing, planting of crops, weeding, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, grinding/kneading food for their families, processing, marketing and storage. all these activities by women have very high percentage responses, not below 50%. Women also milk animals, feed animals, care for animal, treat disease of animals and crops and have valuable in managing natural resources. The above findings are in line with Karl (2009) who said that women

produce a large part of the world's food. They are responsible for about 50 percent of the world's food production, producing between 60 – 80 percent of household food consumption in sub-Saharan Africa. They sow seeds, weed, apply fertilizers and pesticides, harvest, thresh, process, store transport and even market. They also play an important role in raising poultry and small livestock such as goats, rabbits and pigs. They also feed and milk larger livestock. Oko (2005) said in Nigeria, women perform 70% or more of all agricultural production activities, 100% of food processing and utilization activities, and over 50% of storage and marketing operations. On average,

women put in more hours in agricultural and non-agricultural activities than men, all in an effort to

ensure household food security.

### Food Security Status of Surveyed Household

Table 3: Food Security Status of Respondent (n=100)

Statement	Often true		Sometimes true	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Worried food will run out	100	90.9	70	63.6
Food bought did not last	53	48.1	103	93.6
Could not afford to eat balanced meals	83	75.4	109	99.1
Few kinds of low-cost food for all	40	36.3	97	88.1
Could not feed children balanced meals	80	72.7	100	90.9
Children were not eating enough	70	63.6	105	95.4
Adults cut or skipped meals	108	98.1	65	59.0
You ate less than you should have	70	63.6	954	86.3
You were hungry but did not eat well	68	61.8	98	89.0
You lost weight because not enough food	50	45.4	96	87.2
Cut size of children's meals	53	48.1	103	93.6

Using the eleven statements on table 3 as measure of food availability, it can be seen that respondent are food insecure. The two item response of often true and sometimes true have high responses. This is line with Bickel *et al.*, (2000) who posited that food insecurity means limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially

acceptable ways. He sees food insecurity as anxiety that the household food budget or food supply may be insufficient to meet basic needs, the experience of running out of food, without money to obtain more, perception by the respondents that the food eaten by household members was inadequate in quality or quantity. adjustment to normal food use, substituting fewer and cheaper foods than usual and reduced food intake by adults are made.

### Areas of Needs of Women Farmers

Table 4: Area of Needs/Attention

Areas	Frequency	Percentage
Land tenure/rights	110	100
New varieties and technologies	75	68.2
Extension services	94	85.4
Credit and financial service	100	90.9
Market access	66	60.6
Water right	50	45.5
Animal ownership	97	88.2
Health and nutrition	87	79.1
Training and education	68	61.8
Social capital	70	63.6
Roles, responsibility and decision making		

Multiple response: N=110

The table shows the constraints to rural women's achievement of food security. The vital areas of needs are land tenure and credit/financial services needs 100% and 90.9% respectively. Access to extension services is another area of need

with 85.4%, ownership of livestock/animal with 88.2% and health and nutrition needs with 79.1% are all areas that women have needs. other important are lack of decision-making power women, 86.3% social capital with 63.6%, training

and education with 61.8%, water rights with 45.5% and market access with 60%, new varieties and technology with 68.2%. These findings are in line with Akpabio (2005) who said the ability of women to contribute to the development or process depends on the extent to which they participate in the decision-making processes at all levels. They are constrained by systemic gender biases in form of customs, beliefs and attitudes that confine them to the domestic sphere. In the same vein, Cotula *et al.*, (2006) posited that through women constitute a large portion of the economically active population engage in agriculture, both as farmers and as farm workers, and play in crucial role in ensuring

household food security, despite enjoying very limited rights to land. Women have little or no access to resources such as land, credit and extension services. In the same vein, Quan (2006) revealed that in both Asia and Africa, women face obstacles to land access in both formal and informal systems of property rights. Whereas men generally gain access to land through inheritance or through formal systems, of land registration, as a general rule women gain access to land through male relatives and exercise only secondary or subordinate rights, which are vulnerable to breakdown in relationships, divorce and to the changing priorities of male land owners.

### Addressing the Needs of Rural Women Farmers

Table 5: Measures to Address Women Farmers Needs. N=110

Measures	Frequency	Percentage
Compulsory allocation of land to women farmers	110	100
Increase tenure security by free land registration	100	90.9
Increase women farmers ability to generate income	80	72.7
Increase access of women farmers to farm inputs	100	90.9
Design water supplies to favour women	50	45.4
Recruit and train female extension workers	93	84.5
Encourage women participation in all spheres	88	80.0
Extent unlimited credit opportunity to women	98	89.0
Increase human and social capital	60	54.5
Compulsory education and training of women	110	100
Protect women's health and nutritional status	80	72.7
Design safety net programmes for women farmers	70	63.6

Multiple response.

To address the needs of rural women farmers, table 5 presents satisfactory measures to be taken. Compulsory allocation of land to women farmers with 100%, compulsory education and training for women with another 100% suggests the power and need for empowerment of women. Other measures are increasing tenure security, increasing women ability to generate income, access to farm inputs/technologies, access to credit, training of female extension workers, protecting women's health and nutrition status, designing social safety net programmes, and others. The above measures could be summarized under three broad actions.

- a) Change statutory laws to strengthen women's entitlements and increase the enforceability of their claims over natural and physical assets. Gender disparities in natural and physical capital persist partly because the legal framework supports

property right systems that are biased against women. Social and cultural institutions also needs to be changed to create and environment where women can realize their fully potential.

- b) Design and implement creative programmes enabling women to use and benefits from their own resources and capabilities. Such programmes could include groups that provide women the opportunity to build social capital or substitute for their lack of physical and financial assets.
- c) Increase women's ability to actively participate in the development process by changing perceptions and increasing awareness of both men and women themselves. Women need to be empowered to make their own choices and to respond to increasing opportunities. Investing in women's human capital through education

and training and removing barriers to the productive use of women's time and energy are key to sustainable and gender-sensitive food policy.

### Conclusion

Women play important roles in food security as food producers, keepers of traditional knowledge and preservers of biodiversity, food processors and preparers and food providers for their families. Because of their multiple roles, women are key players in overcoming food insecurity. Despite these roles, women lack full access to land, credit, inputs, water for irrigation, extension and participation and decision-making on matters concerning them. To solve the above problems, legal and institutional framework be put in place such as designing gender-sensitive programmes, making laws to empower them and others.

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11/09/2011.