

Family Sustainability: Evaluating Strategies for Women Empowerment in Obio/Akpor, Rivers State

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Abstract

Urbanization is characterized by the alteration of the traditional setting of a particular geographical cum socio-economic arrangement of a people. Apart from the physical and, in most cases, permanent structural disruption to the people's socio-cultural lives, the economy is also usually depleted. The implication is when families' traditional means of survival/livelihood are uprooted due the demands of rapid urbanization, the lives and overall wellbeing of members of the family and even younger generations are subjected to danger; hence the need for strategies to address the salient issues associated with urbanization. This paper is a survey that examined the viability of women empowerment for family sustainability in the midst of the rapid urbanization process in Obio-Akpor local government area of Rivers state which has disrupted the socio-economic progress of the people and placed families on the path of social and economic malaise. It evaluates strategies to empower family members for sustainability. It shall address issues as role of women, education and family moral values in the socio-economic sustainability of the family in the midst of this urbanization which is a reality in the society.

Keywords: *empowerment, family sustainability, socio-economic, urbanization, women*

Introduction

There have been levels of implications of rapid urbanization and population growth for the future impact of global health, food security, environmental change and family sustainability especially in developing societies. No doubt in Africa and other developing parts of the world, more attention has often been devoted to analysis of the impact of the rural poor on the environment and climate change rather than the effects of certain social changes and policies on family sustainability. Recently, it is becoming clear that rapid urbanization threatens to turn the hope for a better future into an economic nightmare and human insecurity for millions of pseudo-urban inhabitants in most of Africa. In many cases, environmental degradation, food insecurity, poverty and socio-cultural disruption are crosscutting issues that result from rapid urbanization and urban population growth. While urbanization comes with some positives, it has also caused some social and economic destabilizations.

According to Nsiah-Gyabaah (2003), rapid urbanization finds expression principally in outward expansion of the built-up area, converting prime agricultural land into residential and industrial uses thereby denying the inhabitants access to their original means of livelihood. In the 20th century, urban growth has reached unprecedented levels in many parts of the world, especially the developing countries. More than half of the world's population, approximately 3.3 billion people, was estimated to be living in urban areas in 2000 and it was estimated that the population inhabiting urban areas would rise to 65 per cent by the year 2020 (WB, 2012). As rural areas are turned into urban centers, demand for land for housing,

agriculture and urban infrastructure increases leading to increased pressure on farmlands, forests and water resources. Secondly, rapid urbanization accelerates desertification and environmental change, leading to water scarcity, soil erosion, and climate change – these put pressures on the family sustainability, especially for the original owners of the societies that were not used to urban settings. For instance, the economic depletion/disruption to traditional means of family livelihood, especially by women has been a major characteristic of rapid urbanization in parts of Africa. Akinlo (2001) observed that a prosperous urban system provides a number of benefits and contributes to poverty alleviation through the provision of strategies for economic empowerment for the dwellers.

Women empowerment has been identified as a major family sustainability strategy in poverty alleviation. It has been noted that family strategies and the informal economy have been depicted as the basis of economic survival during rapid urbanization (Portes and Schauffler, 1993). The concept of family strategy simply implies that individuals are after all in the position to make crucial economic choices in the face of adverse adjustments in their economic endeavours that tend to make such choice impossible.

No doubt, women bear almost all responsibility for meeting basic needs of the family, and are undisputable agents for societal transformation and development, yet they are systematically denied access to the resources, information and freedom of action they need to fulfill these responsibilities. They also lack required entrepreneurial skills to enable them achieve some levels of economic self-reliance/independence to give them the psychosocial support to face these challenges. Studies show that when women are supported and empowered with all of society benefits; their families are healthier, more children are well fed and go to school; agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase. In short, communities become more resilient; more peaceful and positioned for sustainable development; also, only then can they boldly oppose any acts by husbands or other family members that will be injurious to the overall good of the family society.

In the absence of state provided welfare assistance, family members look up to strategies in times of adversity for support and sustenance; dealing with or coping with emergencies, employing or sponsoring dependants among them. This paper draws attention to the socio-economic and environmental implications of rapid urbanization and population growth in the developing countries with particular reference to Nigeria. It examines the urbanization process in Nigeria in the context of the environment, food supply and human security. It also focuses on the implications of rapid urbanization for sustainable development, human security and family sustainability in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification and Framework

The task of international development efforts for decades has been; how to eradicate poverty, empower people economically, improve health care, provide educational opportunities and sustain local communities around the world. The purpose of local economic development is to build up economic capacity of a local area to improve its economic future and the quality of life of all (Boekel, Geart, Logtestijn and Marjon, 2002). It is a process by which public, business and non-governmental sector partners work collectively to create better conditions for economic growth and employment generation. Economic development focuses on increasing sustainable growth and ensuring that growth is inclusive and characterized by the ability of families to sustain their wellbeing. Local economic development is seen as one of the most important ways of decreasing poverty among economically underprivileged populations and rural transformation. For local economic development strategies to be effective in the alleviation of poverty and transformation, and to achieve a world vision of family sustainability, certain strategies must be painstakingly addressed, and one most significant of them is women empowerment.

According to Ako-Nai, Ologunde and Adekola (2010) sustainable human development (SHD), implies that development is only meaningful if it eliminates poverty, provides people with jobs, options and opportunities that empowers citizens, especially women, the poor and the disadvantaged, and ensures their mobilization, is a development that is supposed to empower people rather than marginalize them. It is important to underscore that family survival strategies are generally localized and it is women who are mostly responsible for adopting them. Family strategies are those devices resorted to by household heads to promote the welfare of the family; whether of survival or social mobility (Roberts, 1994). This does not imply that families are cohesive units whose strategies always concur. Women often represent the majority of people in the informal sector. They work for low wages and the jobs are unstable. As the economy worsens, even women in paid employment often resort to private commercial activities to supplement their income.

Women and Poverty

According to Aigbokhan (1999), poverty is defined today as a state of long-term deprivation of well-being, a situation considered inadequate for a decent life. Poverty is then associated with lack and low living standards. Poverty exists when a person falls below a level of economic well-being considered to constitute a reasonable minimum. The World Bank (2012) noted that poverty alleviation is what economic development is all about. Poverty involves malnutrition, illiteracy, social exclusion, and vulnerability, all of which are central to the feminization of poverty.

Women shoulder more than 90% of the domestic production task. Indeed, they have the biological and social tasks of bearing, nurturing, and providing initial education for children and ensuring the well-being of the family and that of the entire society. Recent findings indicate that Nigerian women constitute 49.6 per cent of the total population and are found to be responsible for 60 – 80 per cent of the food produced in the country in addition to the traditional reproductive and community management roles. Nigerian women have also been found to contribute 60 percent of the labour force, produce 80 per cent of food, earn 10 per cent of the money income but own 1 per cent of the farm assets (Orikpe and Amadi, 2001). Women do not receive equitable opportunities or decision – making privileges as men. They equally encounter more difficulty than men in gaining access to land, credit, technical services and commercial market outlets (Adisa and Okunade, 2005).

Need for women empowerment

The concept of empowerment implies encouraging people to play a more active role in their affairs and that of the environment. This could be through involvement in taking active roles and responsibility, to enabling them to make more and bigger decisions without having to refer to someone more senior (Ako Nai, 2005). Empowerment involves making people realize why and how they can avoid certain socio-economic malaises. The World Bank portrays empowerment as an expansion of freedom of choice and action which means an increase in one's authority and control over the resources and decisions that affect one's life (World Bank, 2003). It is obvious from the above definitions that empowerment involves individuals and that the overall goal of women's empowerment should be seen not only as a goal in itself but also as a means towards women's increased welfare, self-reliance, efficiency, equality and better roles in their homes.

In order to create more gender equality and alleviate poverty among women and families, in both urban and rural settings; and ensure family sustainability, scholars and field practitioners, have recognized the importance of empowering women. Makinde and Ologunde (2005) notes that empowerment is a process of change in power relations that is both multidimensional and interlinked. Improvements in health care, nutrition and

education can only be sustained with an increase in household income and greater control by women over financial resources (Mayoux, 2000). Women need to be empowered for them to be able to cope with the day-to-day problems associated with household welfare. Report indicates that women head one – third of the world’s household, and 50 percent or more households in urban areas. In some parts of Africa and most especially in rural areas, where men usually migrate to urban areas for greener pastures, the figure has always been quite high (Akinlo, 2001).

Women continue to bear the brunt of local, national and international economic policies that failed to lift the nation out of poverty and in some cases many women are being forced to seek for alternative-cum-additional income generating activities for sustenance through multiple modes of livelihood. In a study by (Orikpe and Amadi (2001), improving women’s access and control over resources can potentially alleviate their health problems and enhance their decision making within the household. Ako-Nai (2005) also recognized the importance of group saving programme which not only allow impoverished women to interact with one another; they also create an exchange of ideas and information, increasing women’s ability to learn a greater income and allowing for a more flexible work environment where they can rely on other women for support on matters such as child care.

Economic empowerment provides incentives to change the patterns of traditional behaviour to which a woman is bound as a dependant member of the household. It enables a woman to seek medical care sooner for self and children; provide better care and nutrition for self and children; increase probability of children’s survival and also improve children’s learning and education. It is a combination of activities in various sphere of a woman’s life that address the dynamic and relational nature of poverty. Hut (2001) has shown that an increase in a woman’s income has a positive impact on the educational and nutritional status of her children, among other things.

Economic empowerment models

A lot of diverse strategies of economic empowerment exist. An important aspect of the initiative is to understand the socio-economic history of a people or group in order to not to defeat the utmost purpose of the empowerment programme. But for the scope of this study, a few are analyzed for relevance. Financial self – sustainability is the most popular model and used by donor agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank and the United Nations. It provides microfinance services to a large number of poor women, specially targeting small entrepreneurs by setting interest rates to cover costs, enabling separate accounting from other economies of scale and decreasing cost delivery through the use of groups. Iwala (2014) contend that the current state of micro-finance programming has abandoned innovation, and is leading to a growing uniformity in financial interventions.

Many scholars have also argued that these programmes are not effective in truly empowering women (Iwala, 2014). Akinlo (2001) believes that there is lack of substantial training and support services and that there is utmost need to provide women with greater ownership and control in the programmes. There is also recognition that employment and education are necessary but insufficient conditions for women’s empowerment (Iwala, 2014). Most women who undergo certain technical skills acquisition programmes such as bakery, hair dressing, fashion and designing lack the knowledge to make their trades unique. Some also lack financial knowledge or simply have no significant marketing knowledge. Financial education is another model which involves the skills and technicalities required for creating wealth on a sustainable basis (Maxwell, 2011). It is required to enable the families understand how money works and to prepare them to learn how to make money work for them instead of working for money.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid transformation of the Obio-Akpor communities into urban centers has had unbearable disruptions on the socio-economic well-being of the people and women in particular. A once influential agro-based economy now has been taken over by the rising demands of urbanization. Women continue to witness dwindling fortunes as the absence of micro-credit support and relegation to ordinary dependants have combined to subject the women and families to economic and social denials that could liberate them from abject poverty and position them for societal transformation. Since the last three decades – as study reveals – women’s participation in family sustainability as well as economic and social development of the society has dropped drastically thereby increasing the rate of unemployment and social ills in the communities – increasing prostitution, over population, lack of education for the children, crimes and woman trafficking. This trend has subjected over 75% of the women to avoidable hunger and poverty and portends greater danger for the families and larger society in the nearest future hence, the need for a shift in the paradigm (Maxwell, 2011).

Objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate the role rapid urbanization has played on impoverishing the Obio-Akpor families and examine appropriate strategies of empowering the Obio-Akpor women for family sustainability. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To assess the socio-economic history of the Obio-Akpor women.
- To examine influences of rapid urbanization on the social economic wellbeing of family members.
- To evaluate best strategies of empowerment for the women.

Research Questions

- What were the sources of income and sustainability of the Obio-Akpor women prior to urbanization?
- How has urbanization affected the standard of living and wellbeing of family members in Obio-Akpor?
- What strategies best suite the economic revival of women in Obio-Akpor?

Methodology

Design – The study adopted a survey research design.

Area of Study – The area of the study was Obio-Akpor, one of the two largest local government areas of Rivers State; and located in the center of one of Nigeria’s economic hub – Port Harcourt – south-south Nigeria. Obio-Akpor is made up of 32 communities with a population of 500,000 (NPC, 2006).

Population of the Study – The population of the study was 1800 adult family members (from 600 households) selected from four communities – Rumuola, Rumuepirikom, Rumuokwuta and Rumueme.

Sample/Technique – The sample consisted of 600 adult family members, representing 33% of the total population of study who were randomly selected.

Instruments for Data collection – The instruments for data collection were a self-structured questionnaire designed by the researchers and titled – “Strategies for Empowering Obio-Akpor women” and focus group discussions (FGD) in which the respondents were allowed to express their individual opinions and data were transcribed. The questionnaire was divided into two sections – A (Demographic data) and B (data covering the research questions). A four rating scale of ‘Agree’, ‘Strongly Agree’, ‘Disagree’ and ‘Strongly Disagree’ was used.

Instrument for Data Analysis – Data collected for this study were analyzed using mean; 2.50 was adopted as the level of acceptance; the implication is that any item with mean rating of 2.50 and above was regarded as accepted while items below 2.50 were regarded as rejected.

Results

Results of the study are presented in the tables below:

Table 1: Demographic Data

Age	Number of Respondents	%
20-25	120	20
26-35	250	42
35 above	230	38
Total	600	100
Sex		
Male	280	47
Female	320	53
Total	600	100
Marital Status		
Single	75	12.5
Married	435	72.5
Divorced/Widowed	90	15
Total	600	100
Occupation		
Employed	235	39
Unemployed	295	49
Apprentice	70	12
Total	600	100

Source: Compiled from the questionnaire

The table (1) above shows 20 years as the minimum age of the respondents and this depicts the nature of the sample population (adults) while there was no maximum age limit. In Nigeria, 18 years is the age of the child. 47% of the respondents (280) were males while 53% (320) were females. Also, 12.5% of the respondents were single; 72.5% married, while 15% were either divorced or widowed. Finally, 39% were employed; 49% unemployed and Apprentices scored 12%.

Table 2: Women's sources of income/sustenance prior to Urbanization

s/n	Item	X	Decision
1.	Land cultivation	2.61	Accepted
2.	Fish farming	2.58	Accepted
3.	White collar jobs	1.22	Rejected
4.	Trading in agricultural products	3.03	Accepted
5.	Trading in textiles	2.01	Rejected
6.	Cloth making, hair dressing etc.	2.46	Rejected

Source: Compiled from the questionnaire

The above table 2 shows that the respondents accepted items 1 (land cultivation), 2 (fishing) and 4 (trading in agricultural products) respectively dwelling on the sources of

income and means of family sustainability in Obio-Akpor; but item 3 (white collar jobs), 5 (trading on textiles and 6 (cloth making, hair dressing, etc) were rejected.

Table 3: Influence of Urbanization on family wellbeing

s/n	Item	X	Decision
1.	Sources of income for women depleted	2.94	Accepted
2.	Agricultural activities collapsed due to unavailability of land	2.97	Accepted
3.	Very few women contribute to family sustainability/pressure on family survival	3.39	Accepted
4.	Women become vulnerable to certain social ills e.g. prostitution, trafficking	3.68	Accepted
5.	Overdependence on rents has made women lazy	2.72	Accepted
6.	Children's wellbeing are endangered	3.66	Accepted

Source: Compiled from the questionnaire

The table 3 above shows that all six items dwelling on the influence of rapid urbanization on family wellbeing were accepted. Sources of income were affected by urbanization (2.94); agricultural activities were affected (2.97). Women also became vulnerable to social ills like prostitution (3.68). The contribution of women to family sustainability dropped (3.39). Children's wellbeing also shows to be in danger (3.66).

Table 4: Appropriate strategies for economic revival of women in Obio-Akpor

s/n	Item	X	Decision
1.	Financial education	3.02	Accepted
2.	Sensitization and enlightenment	2.98	Accepted
3.	Special skills acquisition programmes	2.83	Accepted
4.	Need for credit facilities	3.63	Accepted
5.	The informal trading networks	3.57	Accepted
6.	Self-help groups	2.56	Accepted

Source: Compiled from the questionnaire

The above table 4 shows that all items on strategies to for economic empowerment were accepted by the respondents because none was below 2.50. From the qualitative data, it was reported that the respondents in addition to these, suggested an understanding of the areas of interests by the beneficiaries before any programme is embarked on.

Discussion of the Findings

In table 2, the result indicates that the respondents accepted items 1 (land cultivation), 2 (fishing) and 4 (trading in agricultural products) respectively dwelling on the sources of income and means of family sustainability in Obio/Akpor; but item 3 (white collar jobs), 5 (trading on textiles and 6 (cloth making, hair dressing, etc) were rejected. The reason for this is simply because items 1, 2 and 4 possessed mean ratings of above 2.50 except item. This result is in consonance with the report of Ogbonda (2001) which identified agriculture as the major occupation of the Ikwerre before the people were forced to accept urbanization. Maxwell (2011) has also observed that while the economy of the Ikwerre was agrarian, a few of the women participated in trading in fishes. Ogbonda (2001) opined that the Obio/Akpor women were not only industrious but complemented the efforts of their husbands in managing the family needs.

Also, in table 3, the result shows that all six items dwelling on the influence of rapid urbanization on family wellbeing were accepted. The implication of this result is that the rapid urbanization in Obio/Akpor has altered the social and economic lives of the people, as

women's source of income were affected by the unavailability of land for agricultural products and the constant oil exploration and spillage which have resulted in environmental degradation. Agricultural activities therefore have been disrupted. Ogbonda (2001) gives credence to this result by noting that with the rise in oil boom, and the consequent attention on Port Harcourt for greener pastures, the people began to witness an upsurge in the take-over of their lands by government and foreigners. The result also showed acceptance of the vulnerability of women to social ills such as prostitution, trafficking due to inability to secure a decent means of livelihood. Maxwell (2011) argued that without the intrusion into the socio-cultural cum economic life of the Ikwerre, there would be no such high rate of laziness and moral decadence on the part of the women as witnessed in the present time. Since the last three decades – as study reveals – women participation in economic and social development of the society has dropped drastically thereby increasing the rate of unemployment and social ills in the communities – increasing prostitution, over population, lack of education for the children, crimes and woman trafficking. This trend has subjected over 75% of the women to avoidable hunger and poverty and portends greater danger for the families and larger society in the nearest future (Maxwell, 2011).

The inability of women to secure means of livelihood has also affected their contribution to family sustainability. Since a long time ago, research has demonstrated that the socio-economic characteristics of families influence children's outcomes (Patterson, 2002; Uche, 2009), and the combined efforts of both continue to play a prominent role in determining life chance. Family income is a good predictor of children's educational outcomes. Low cognitive stimulation provided in poor households is a major pathway linking childhood poverty to childhood intellectual development. As revealed in the study, the wellbeing of children is endangered with the inability of a mother to secure a means of livelihood which according to Uche (2009) acts as complement for family sustainability. Family poverty limits women's access to quality health-care services, housing, education nutrition, portable water, employment and other social facilities in the community (Oluyole and Lawal 2001). Today in Nigeria more than ever than before, women's quality of life is extremely low due to socio-cultural and economic inequities (Molokwu, 2000). Many women do not have say in their reproductive health matters; it is always determined by their husbands' decisions on the number of children to have and perceived vulnerability to low quality of life.

Finally, table 4 shows that all items on strategies to for economic empowerment were accepted by the respondents because none was below 2.50. From the qualitative data, it was reported that the respondents in addition to these, suggested an understanding of the areas of interests by the beneficiaries before any programme is embarked on. The strategies include the need for financial education, sensitization and enlightenment on the significance of such programmes. Njoku (2005) agrees with this and states that it involves the skills and technicalities required for creating wealth on a sustainable basis. The concept of family strategy simply implies that individuals are after all in the position to make crucial economic choices in the face of adverse adjustments in the formal economy that tend to make such choice impossible. Roberts (2006) states lucidly that household strategies suggest that people can choose, and their choices make a difference, despite the economic or social constraints they face, but requires efforts to make people see the essence of this choice.

The result also reveals the significance of the informal trading networks. Molokwu (2000) argued that several families could no longer thrive on earnings from the formal economy; they either had to abandon the employment for the informal sector or supplement it with non standard form of employment, which are part-time jobs, private practice (PP), casual or menial jobs. By pooling resources, by working in both formal and informal economies, by the self-construction of shelter, by self-provisioning, and by the skilful use of

social networks, families, it is argued, avoid entrapment in a self-perpetuating culture of poverty. The informal economy makes use of non-contractual but binding relationships, and kinship is the basis of many of these (Orikpe and Amadi, 2001), and embedded in localized sets of understandings, practices, and relationships (Furstenberg 2002). Women took to informal trading in order to argument livelihood and survival chances of their families. In other words, they consider informal economic activities as a family strategy towards survival. This group of women is of the argument that the entire macro-economic environment has positively altered the economic equation of household in their favour. According to Glauber (2005), it was originally difficult for women to bear, but in the long run, it has led to a favourable source of socio-economic empowerment. Bala (2003) added that provision of credit facilities for women groups has also helped to empower women and has greatly and positively enhanced household welfare and survival.

Conclusion

Families are essentially care institutions that vary across cultures and change over time. Their essential function, historically, has been to contribute to the basic economic survival of family members; thus, the structure of families often adapts to the economy, and cultural ideologies and laws are created to reinforce that adaptation. In this paper, the authors have been able to examine the influence of rapid urbanization on family sustainability and strategies for economic empowerment of women as a family sustainability strategy. The paper therefore, concludes that women represent significant partners for family sustainability thus, should be economically empowered to be properly positioned to perform their noble duties in the home and society general. Family sustainability includes an improved standard of living which connotes the processes by which people (members of the family) satisfy their needs and improve their quality of life in the present while safeguarding the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Empowering the Obio/Akpor women to be economically independent will strategically re-position them for self-reliance and be able to stave off several challenges confronting them; and also afford them the psychological ability to confront families' many problems. These strengths promote well-being and resilience. Research has shown that when women are supported and empowered with all of society benefits; their families are healthier, more children are well fed and go to school, agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been put forward from this study.

- There is need for an understanding of specific strategy that suits a particular group or individuals;
- Women economic empowerment should also involve training on the importance of the programmes and not only the programme proper;
- Empowerment can only be complete when a training exercise is complemented with credit facilities and monitoring which ensures the beneficiaries don't abandon the exercise due to either apathy or lack of motivation;
- The efforts of civil the society (NGOs, CBOs) involved in women empowerment programmes should be complemented with support for its programmes;
- The government should encourage women empowerment by establishing special funds for the empowerment economically underprivileged women, especially those affected by certain government policies.

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