THE CHALLENGES FACED BY NIGERIAN WOMEN IN AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES: STUDY OF FORON WOMEN, 2010- 2023

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to appreciate the contribution of women in agricultural activities in Foron, thereby unleashing the full potential of women in agriculture which is not only a matter of gender equality but also a critical step towards achieving sustainable development goals, by recognizing and amplifying their roles in the agricultural sector. The paper also discusses challenges faced by women in agriculture and suggests ways through which these can be resolved in order to foster food security and self reliance. The appraisal of these challenges constitutes the main thrust.

Introduction

Agriculture is the main stay of many African economies especially in sub-saharan Africa. It provides a relatively large portion of the gross domestic product (GDP) in Africa and also the main source of foreign currency. [1] Agriculture is important to the economic growth of every nation. It is also the principal source of food and livelihood in rural areas. In Nigeria, agriculture was the main sector of the economy from the standpoint of rural employment, sufficiency in food and fiber, and export earning prior to the discovery of oil. Agricultural sector is still leading in Nigeria's economy. It contributes in various ways; provision of food for the growing population, supply of raw materials, supply of raw materials, source of employment, generation of foreign exchange earnings, provision of market for the products from the industrial sector, it provides direct employment to about 75% of Nigeria's population.[2]

The Nigerian woman has over the years proved to be more than a mere" bench-warming" spectator, even in the midst of the male-dominated profession. According to the UN survey report on the role of women in development, it can be deduced that if given opportunity, women can effectively participate in policy-making and governance. The role of women in Nigerian economic sector cannot be overemphasizes, they are making great contribution to Nigeria's economic development; hence they are crucial to the sustainable development of the country. Women, who form majority of the population of rural dwellers, play a significant role in the agricultural sector. [3]Rural women contribute

significantly to the agricultural labour force in many African countries, Foron women inclusive.

The General Outlook of Foron Women in Agriculture

In Foron district of Plateau state, Nigeria, local farmers engage in various activities that are mostly influenced by the region "agro-ecological condition- cultural condition and available land". The crops cultivated in Foron district are numerous, however the women who are active participants in the farming activities cultivating crops such as; cabbage, green pepper, hungry rice, guinea corn, millet, maize, green beans, groundnuts, cocoyam, soya beans, tomatoes, potatoes and yam amongst others. Other forms of agricultural activities being practiced by some of the women in Foron include poultry farming (birds) and pig farming (piggery). This does not mean that most households do not keep chicken and pigs, most especially for family consumption, although some have turned it into a means of business for their family. [4]The role of women in small-scale livestock production is well recognized and not much has been documented about women's engagement in an intensive production and the market chain associated with large commercial enterprises. An informant said she started her poultry farm in the year 2002 with about a hundred birds, but with the demand for pigs, she expanded her farm to include not just chicken but also pigs. Therefore, by the year 2011, she had over 50 pigs in her piggery. [5]Another informant also disclosed further that most Foron women are livestock farmers of different categories especially goats and chicken. While some are in the cattle, some of the cows were inherited while some of them were bought especially by those who come from rich families. In the course of the research, it was discovered that women in Foron district play equal role as men when it comes to farming. In fact, some women attest to being major farmers because their men are often involved in other jobs other than farming. [6]Mary stated that when she married her husband 25 years ago, they farmed together, but after 5 years he left for the city. Since then, she has been the only person farming. [7] For Many of these women their daily activities revolves around the farm and this is only natural since agriculture is the first culture that man learnt to practice as a means of living and way of life. It is also the backbone of any rural economy whether developed or developing and has become a means of surviving and employment for rural women as it is the case of Foron women.

Findings from United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 2005 revealed that women make up to 60-80 percent of agricultural labour force in Nigeria. [8]This finding is not far from that of Foron women in agriculture. These women utilize both raining and dry season to cultivate their crops to ensure optimal food production all year round. Fortunately, agricultural activities thrive in Plateau state no matter the season of the year. The farmers have to plant different crops at different season of the year and still manage to have a good harvest. Rifkatu postulated that "when dry season begins, they do not stop farming because that season is when they plant crops like; green beans, tomatoes, and green pepper. They usually get water for their farms from wells belonging to neighbors". [9]These women have found a way to adapt no matter the season of the year. They buy water hose, watering cans and other farm implements which they use to irrigate their crops during the dry season. According to them farming in dry season is also important just as farming during the raining season. In an interview with Kaneng, she stated that "during raining season, they plant maize, cocoyam, millet, groundnut e.t.c to sustain their families. But in the dry season, they plant tomatoes, cabbage, green beans and other vegetables which they sale to make money. [10]Although it was gathered that planting during dry season is more difficult than during raining season, the profit margin varies from season to season. Sarah was of the view that she could harvest 15 bags of potatoes in dry season compared to the raining season when she could harvest about 25 to 30 bags.[11]

Challenges Faced by Foron Women in Agriculture

Challenges of life they say is part of humanphenomenon, and that of Foron women is not an exception. Agricultural production continues to play a leading role in the structure of their economy. The women I Foron, have proven through their agricultural activities that they can also help boost agricultural production in their community and beyond. Farming for them is no longer a means of ensuring food stability but also a means of making money to sustain the family and other necessities of life, while also impacting positively on their community. This paper examines some of the

challenges the Foron women encounter in their farming activities such as; poor access to funds, high cost of fertilizer, high cost of transportation, lack of man power and so on.

Poor Access to Funds

Access to funds is a major set-back to most farmers in Nigeria. In the course of this research it was gathered that even though some of the women have tried to access funding for their framing activities but so difficult to. In an interview with a business woman, she narrated her experience that since in 2010 she has been trying to access loan to expand her piggery and poultry farm but it has not been possible. She added that sometimes in 2018 they attended a 3 day training of a Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), with the assurance of getting loan and certificate that will be given, yet they could not still get the loan.[12] This was a similar case that was shared by most women in Foron who when asked about, source of funding to expand their farm, they out rightly showed their bitterness about it, that no matter how hard they try it they couldn't get lucky.[13] Most of them said they have resigned to managing their poultry, piggery and other small farming activities. The struggles some of these women had to endure just to secure loan is evident in their productivity as access to funds would have grown their farming activities and therefore increase food production in their community.

High Cost of Fertilizer

Most agricultural products need fertilizer in order to yield properly. The use of fertilizer and manure can help farmers achieve high yield. This is the same case with women in Foron whose crops depends largely on fertilizer to grow well. A farmer shared her experience that she spent a lot for fertilizer and the prices kept increasing, for the past10 years the prices were better. But currently, the prices of fertilizer are very high. For example, Dangote brand of fertilizer is as high as ₦28, 000 while NPK 201010 is also as high as ₦15,000.[14]Even though, some of the women's opinion are right on point, it is also important to emphasize that the prices of fertilizer depend on the market and brand which shows the variation from ₦28,000 to ₦35,000 and ₦15,000 to ₦20,000 respectively, that makes it difficult and expensive for women to buy. [15]A business man shared his experience on the high cost of fertilizer over the years, that in the year 2010, fertilizer was sold at ₦800 to ₦900 but by the year 2016 to 2018 it cost ₦5,000 while supplies can go up to ₦6,500. By 2019, it was between ₦17,000 to ₦20,000 and by 2023 farming season, the price was between ₦25,000 to ₦35,000. It is also important to know that the prices of fertilizer always fluctuate depending on the place of purchase and the brand. [16]

Pests Destruction of Crops

Pests and animals damage agricultural products by feeding on them. Damages caused by pests can be enormous and distressful for a farmer. The women also experience pests destroying their crops and so, have taken steps to control it, though very expensive. A woman attest to this that "there are pests that are attracted by the rains and would always come out as soon as it starts raining, so we have to apply pesticides every week to the crops which cost about ₦12,000 and the price kept increasing year in year out". 17Apparently, when it rains there are insects flying around farms eating crops, and if nothing is done to control or manage this, the damages caused may be irreparable.

Access to Water

Water is very important to farmers for their crops, lack of it, especially during dry season can lead to their crops being damaged. Similar problems are faced by the farmers in Foron who had to go through some rigorous length to water their crops during dry season farming. [18]Fortunately, for some of these women in Foron, their farms are located near water and one of such was abandoned government project that was supposed to make water available to the community, but now has become an artificial river where some of these women have access to, or other sources of water. The buy watering cans, water hose and so on to water their crops. But for bigger farms like that of Margret who says she used to hire a water tank in most cases to water her crops, which is very expensive. [19] For crops like potatoes, watering is done twice a week as it grows, the watering drops to once a week thereby making it much easier compared to other crops such as; green beans, green pepper, cabbage e.t.c.

High Cost of Transportation

Farmers all over the world, always require some forms of transportation from their

farms to the market which in most cases proves to be a difficult one for them. Foron women experience same problem when it comes to moving their farm produce to the market. It is either the road is bad or the cost of transportation is usually very high thereby, depleting their profit margin. [20]Rifkatu express her dissatisfaction over the high cost, she spends a lot to move her farm produce stating that "she is not always happy paying the amount she pays to take her crops to the market because it affects the price she sells in the market. That she hardly market enough profit".

In the same vein, before the year 2010, transportation from Foron to Mararaban Jama'a market was ₦50 per passenger together with her goods she pays ₦150 to ₦200 only. But it has gone high, transportation from same Foron to Mararaban Jama'a is ₦200 to ₦300 when added with her goods, she pays as high as ₦1,500 to ₦2,000 only to get to the market. [21]Due to the high cost of transportation, for some of the women their farm products end up getting spoilt before reaching the market, because they are sometimes hesitant to pay this huge sum for their far produce.

Inadequate Manpower

Before the invention of farm machines, the power provided by human beings was the most common source of power in farm operation. Rural areas like Foron depend heavily on manpower in their agricultural activities like; clearing, ploughing, ridging, planting, and harvesting e.t.c. Another informant said that "she is old to do farming activities by herself but left with the option of hiring other younger women to work for her, paying for their services can be expensive. Sometimes even with the money, it is difficult to get farm workers because lots of young men these days do not want to farm".[22]Another woman attest to this, that she has being working in different farms since the age of 13 years, so that she can be able to support her mother after the death of her father. Some of her friends always ask her why not look for other jobs apart from farming. [23]In most cases, even when these women have the resources to pay workers, they are not easy to come by and hiring a tractor is expensive. In the year 2012, a woman said she recorded a major set-back in her farm due to the inability to get enough manpower, she maintained that almost half hectare of her land was not cultivated because she could not get farm workers to help her. [24]Rifkatu equally shared her experience that usually she plants soya beans, guinea corn and potatoes, but she ended up planting only potatoes because of the challenges they undergo in getting manpower. [25]In such case, income that could have been generated from planting same or different cops on the remaining farmland is lost due to inadequate manpower.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were raised in order to reduce the challenges faced by Foron women in agricultural activities as follows:

1. Agricultural extension officers should encourage women to use more of cow dung and other forms of manure, because this would assist in lowering cost as well as improving soil fertility.

2. In terms of water supply, government should reach out to Foron community to put in place various water systems that can aid the women to achieve more productivity.

3. Adequate and free training on modern farming methods and techniques should be given to the women for effective production.

4. Government should seek ways of lowering the cost of ploughing services by providing tractors to the women at affordable rates.

5. Easy access to loans would help them to even do better thereby leading to high crop production.

6. Women in agriculture should be given marketing skills to identifying which kind of market need their farm produce before making decisions as to the type of crops to grow.

Conclusion

The paper has discussed the challenges faced by Nigerian women in agricultural activities with particular reference to Foron women. An attempt was made to identify some of the challenges faced by the women from 2010 to 2023. The paper examines the following as the major set-backs for the women in agriculture as; poor access to funds, high cost of fertilizer, pests

destruction of crops, access to source of water, high cost of transportation and inadequate manpower. It there concludes that with the support of government, NGO's, spirited individuals and donor agencies these challenges can be reduced thereby boosting food production and sufficiency.

ENDNOTES

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