

RURAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: *The study looked at the relationship and impact of rural women empowerment and rural development in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone. A cross-sectional research design was used, and data was gathered through a survey of 750 people using a non-probability sampling technique. 476 of the 750 questionnaires distributed were retrieved and analyzed. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 23 was used to analyze data collected using percentages, Pearson product moment correlation, and linear regression analysis. The study's findings revealed a significant relationship between rural women empowerment and rural development in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone. The study also found that rural women empowerment has a positive and statistically significant impact on rural development in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone. Based on these findings, the study suggests, among other things, that government empowerment policies should always take the female gender into account for necessary upliftment, as this will help to improve their status and rural development in Nigeria.*

Keywords: *Women empowerment, rural development, participation, education*

Introduction

Rural women's empowerment and rural development are two important concepts for developing countries. A strong appreciation for women's empowerment will contribute significantly to Nigeria's rural development. Political and socioeconomic challenges in developing countries have encouraged rural communities to develop strategies to improve their status, social functions, and standard of living. According to Ojukwu (2013), as cited in Akpomuvie (2018, p. 185), women in particular engage in activities that facilitate the process of community development in an attempt to address their community problems. Obeta (2019, p. 346) pointed out that if women folk are properly empowered, adequate management of rural development projects will be ensured. Rural change cannot be effective unless rural women's activities and contributions to rural development, community project management, food availability, and household well-being are recognized. Women's empowerment entails improving the political, economic, and social conditions of rural women. Thus, rural women's empowerment entails the transformation of patriarchal society through a process of collective organization, conscientization, and enlightenment, and thus requires rural women to take collective action to reject patriarchal

attitudes and beliefs. However, rural women in Nigeria have been a distinct victim of culture, religion, class, and sex oppression/suppression by customs and traditions that promote and uphold male chauvinism since the colonial era. The term "rural women" is associated with poverty, connoting peasants, depicting and downtrodden masses living in villages and engaged in subsistence agriculture and petty trading (Ohwofasa, Olueh & Okoh, 2013). In recent decades, much has been written about women's empowerment and its impact on rural development (Ajaegbu, 1976, Ebong, 1991; Ijere, 1991; Okeke, 1995; Nina, 1997; Okpoko, 2002; Ekong, 2003; Obetta, 2009, Okoli, 2012, Ohwofasa et al., 2013; Ering, Otu & Achibong, 2014; Akpomuvie, 2018). Despite these studies, no empirical research on rural women empowerment and its impact on rural development in Nigeria exist. To close this gap, this study investigates the relationship and impact of rural women empowerment and rural development in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

examine the relationship between rural women empowerment and rural development in south-south zone of Nigeria.

investigate the impact of rural women empowerment on rural development in south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

Hypothesis of the Study

The following null hypotheses were formulated for testing:

H₁: There is no significant relationship between rural women empowerment and rural development in south-south geo-political zone of Nigeria.

H₂: Rural women empowerment does not have a significant impact on rural development in south-south geo-political zone of Nigeria.

Methodology

The study area is rural Nigeria, the most populous country on the African continent. Nigeria is divided into six geopolitical zones: the North-West, the North-Central, the North-East, the South-West, the South-East, and the South-South. Nigeria has the largest population in Africa, with over 190 million people (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). This study used a cross-sectional design and non-probability sampling to collect data from 750 respondents in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone, which included traditional rulers, rural women, women self-help groups, rural men, and youths. The South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria was chosen because it contains one of the most extreme cases of poverty and underdevelopment despite the region's tremendous natural resource endowment, particularly the Niger Delta region, from which the Nigerian government has extracted oil for more than three decades. The structured questionnaire was used as the research instrument in this study. The measurement items were rated on a 5-point likert scale, which ranks responses from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. The questionnaire was validated by experts from the University of Calabar's Department of Sociology. A pilot study was conducted on 50 rural women in Cross-Rivers and Delta States who participated in the study over a three-week period to determine the level of

reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used to determine the instrument's internal consistency.

Review of Related Literature

Rural Development

Some believe that the concept of development originated in Nigeria during the colonial era. Others believe it began in traditional societies, when people engaged in self-help projects to provide social amenities such as roads, village halls and squares, build bridges across streams, and build markets (Obianigwe, 1999; Onyishi, 2000; Ugwu, 2003). Development issues occupy an important position in the minds of policymakers, development experts, and scholars, particularly as they affect Third World countries, Ering et al (2014) write. It's no surprise that the concept of development has been given numerous meanings and interpretations. Regardless of the various definitions, the meaning of development has evolved from a narrow conceptualization with economic growth expressed in aggregate economic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or per capita income to a more broad-based conceptualization as a multi-dimensional process involving changes in structures, attitudes, and institutions as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality, and the eradication of absolute poverty.

According to Ugwu (2003, p. 133), the concept of development includes not only economic, social, and political changes, but a broad and all-encompassing social transformation." It denotes the entirety of societal advancement, which, of course, begins with man himself. Development entails structuring society in such a way that the quality of life and psychological needs of members of any given rural area are improved. The term rural has been technically defined as an area of underdevelopment, poverty, and a small population in all transitional economies around the world, including Nigeria. Given the extent of policies, attention, care management, and general development inconsistencies in the rural area, rural Nigeria should have its own enclopedum (Obianigwe, 1999; Ugwu, 2003, and Mukoro, 2019). Rural development in Nigeria received a greater impetus during the colonial era due to the flowing ways:

Since the implementation of indirect rule, district offices have made extensive use of Warrant Chiefs, Obas, and Emirs to mobilize the people for self-help projects.

In the 1930s, taxation was introduced, which led to rural communities refusing to provide communal labor for public works. People expected the government to provide all social amenities because they paid taxes to the government.

The 1955 Local Government Law, on the other hand, empowered the local government to assume full responsibility for rural development within their area of authority. This legislative provision empowered District Officers to champion rural development efforts in their districts. As a result, the government provides matching grants and technical assistance to communities that have begun self-help projects. Rural development has since become a shared responsibility of the people and the government (Okeke, 1998). The definition of rural development has evolved over time to reflect current realities. Rural development, according to Roger and Whiting (1976), entails not only providing jobs and increased incomes for rural people, but also improving the quality of rural living through increased and improved community services. Rural development, to Olayinde (1979) is a process in which concerted efforts are made in order to facilitate significant increases in

rural resource productivity with the overall goals of enhancing rural incomes and increasing employment opportunities in rural communities. According to Ering et al. (2014), rural development is defined as strategies and policies aimed at improving the economic and social lives of a specific group of people – rural poor. Rural development is defined in this study as strategic policies aimed at improving the economic well-being and quality of life of people living in relatively isolated and separately populated areas.

In a nutshell, rural development is the overall development of the rural or village community through the efforts of the people themselves." It is the active inspiration, participation, and involvement of rural people in the development planning and implementation processes and programs (Basu, 2012). Efforts to develop rural areas have been pursued in Nigeria since colonial times." The concern has been to transform the predominantly agrarian society in order to achieve a common set of development goals based on the people's capacities and needs. Policies aimed at improving rural areas have been implemented and pursued by various governments (Federal, State, and Local) since the 1960s. Today's rural areas in Nigeria are characterized by depression, poverty, degradation, chronic disease, deprivation, and hunger. In most rural areas of Nigeria, as in other rural settings in developing countries, basic infrastructure, if it exists at all, is insufficient for meaningful development.

Governments at various levels in Nigeria implemented numerous policies and programs to improve the living standards of rural dwellers, such as Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) in 1967; River Basins and Rural Development Authorities (RBRDA) in 1978; Green Revolution (GR) in 1980; the Directorate for Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) in 1985; Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW) in 1986; The Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) in 1999 and 2011; N- The primary goals of these development policies and programs were to increase rural productivity and income. They all failed, however, because they were largely inherent and uncoordinated, as a result of a lack of a culture of continuity in government policies and programs, a lack of political will, and a high level of corruption (Ering et al., 2014; Mukoro, 2020).

Women Empowerment

Throughout human history, rural women's empowerment has been a central concern and endeavor in countries all over the world. This issue has recently become more pressing than ever. Empowerment is described as a multifaceted, multidimensional, and multilayered concept (Vaid & Kumar, 2015). Mandal (2015), on the other hand, defined empowerment as a multidimensional concept and approach that encompasses the construction of social relations in a specific cultural context. Each dimension of empowerment is described in terms of psychological, cultural, social, economic, organizational, political, and institutional aspects. The concept of women's empowerment was first introduced at the International Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985. Thus, empowerment is more than a concept that can be defined using some universally accepted parameter. It is not something that could be given to those who we believe is in need in the form of a capsule. Empowerment is a process that includes the following components: equal access to opportunities for utilizing society's resources, prohibition of gender discrimination in thought and practice, freedom from violence, economic independence, participation in all decision-making bodies, and freedom of choice in personal matters. As a result, empowerment is defined as the result of a person's financially, socially, and

emotionally strong status; it leads to happiness and satisfaction among a group of people" (Goel & Sah, 2015). This backs up Okpoko's (2000) assertion, cited in Obetta (2009), that "empowerment implies that the person or group of people being empowered has hitherto lacked power or authority due to circumstances, either by denial or fault. Moving from a position of powerlessness to one of power or authority is thus defined as empowerment.

Women's empowerment is defined as a process in which women gain a greater share of control over resources – material, human, and intellectual resources such as knowledge, information, and ideas, as well as financial resources such as money, access to money, and control over decision-making in the home, community, society, and nation (Vaid & Kumar, 2015). Mandal (2015) defines women empowerment as the distribution of social power and control of resources in favor of women, particularly rural women. Women's empowerment is defined as creating an environment in which women can make independent decisions about their personal development while also shining as equals in society (Khatai 2015). According to Enenuo, 2001, as cited in Obett, (2009), women empowerment entails the improvement of women's political, economic, and social conditions. According to Maitra (2015), women empowerment entails certain basic factors such as women's sense of worth; their right to control their own lives, both within and outside the family premises; and their ability to influence the direction of social change in order to create a just social and economic order at regional, national, and international levels." In the context of this study, we define women's empowerment as a process by which women take ownership and control of their lives through the articulation of their own aspirations and change strategies, as well as the expansion of choice as women's are closely linked to their socially defined gender roles, responsibilities, and social structure.

Rural Women in Nigeria

Rural women in Nigeria are extremely poor, with the majority of them living below the poverty line. They rely primarily on agriculture, which is frequently shifting cultivation, which is both unscientific and uneconomic. Also, because of floods and other natural disasters, others who live in the plains do not get as many crops. This places them in deep debt with the money lenders. The majority of rural women in Nigeria are illiterate and unaware of global development. They live in dense forests, hilly regions, deep villages, and even mountains with limited access to transportation. As a result, they are cut off from urban areas, hampering their material development. Female infanticide, child marriage, and polyandry are all common problems in rural Nigeria. They are still far from modern concepts of sanitation and health care; they rely on magicians to cure them and use indigenous medicine. As a result, many of them become victims of diseases such as malaria, small pox, chicken pox, forest fever, skin diseases, typhoid, Lassa fever, and others. Furthermore, some rural women in Nigeria spent a large portion of their income on alcoholic beverages, which are harmful to their health. Furthermore, the majority of them does not have safe drinking water and rarely take baths, making them susceptible to disease and health hazards.

Over the years, complex issues for debate about women have included the contradictions inherent in African patriarchal social structures and the context in which these are detrimental to women gaining social status and prestige (Akpomuvie, 2018). The second issue is the impact of exogenous cultures on African social structures, particularly gender relations. This backs up Modo's (2016) assertion, cited in Akpomuvie (2018), that Africans

have their cultures which women are constantly expected to uphold in order for the established social structure to continue undisturbed, and that a woman is believed to be very close to nature and is thus expected to uphold the norms and values of her group in order that natural forces and ancestral spirits may always look kindly to the group's request. This is one of the impediments to women's empowerment and development in most parts of Africa, particularly in rural Nigeria. According to Chizea and Njoku (1991), women are the building blocks upon which the foundations of happy homes and families are built." Without a doubt, the family is the foundation upon which rural and urban communities are built. Communities, in turn, build the nation. As a result, if the building block, women, are poor, ignorant, and unmotivated, the nation is likely to be poor, ignorant, and unmotivated as well. For, how can any nation rise above its mothers' collective ignorance? It cannot because women, particularly rural women, are the first teachers of societal ethics in their natural role as mothers and through the enormous influence they have on their children's formative years. As a result, a society is as ethical or unethical as its motherhood.

The relative roles of men and women in Nigerian culture are determined, and it is novel to break through this artificial barrier. Women and men are thus cultural and environmental creatures. In many societies, men are accepted as the seeker and breadwinner, full of activity, whereas women are seen as passive, homebound, and always yielding to men's advances and opportunities, always willing to accept men's dictates. Women are traditionally docile, subservient, and powerless as a result of this. Many cultural settings in Nigeria regulate and restrict the activities of women, particularly rural women, during their menstruation periods (Modo, 2016), as cited in Akpomuvie (2018), narrative had it that in some homes, women are confined to their rooms and are forbidden to cook food throughout the period because they were considered impure and polluted. According to Aisuebeogun, as cited in Ohwofasa et al. (2013), women are poorer than men in Nigeria because they face unequal economic opportunities due to a lack of access to investible finance, technology, and their deliberate removal from decision-making positions. Women are discriminated against in the labor market, according to research. Cultural norms are cited as one of the major drivers of the gender labor gap in developing countries, particularly Nigeria. As a result, cultural norms limit not only women's time available for productive activities, but also the types of economic activities that women can engage in.

Women Discrimination and Underdevelopment

It is pertinent to consider some aspects of the global marginalization of women's status based on United Nations (UN) 2008 documentation cited in Agrawal (2015). Among the findings are:

Agriculture: Women produce roughly half of the world's food, but they have little land, have difficulty obtaining credit, the agricultural activities generally expected of women are labor-intensive, and rural women generally do not benefit from new technologies. Their wages are generally lower because it is assumed that women's labor is less efficient than men's. Women do not have equal rights to land ownership, particularly in developing countries where women do the majority of the food production, processing, storage, and preparation. Women perform three-quarters of all agricultural work in Africa. They play vital roles in the production of food for the household, in post-harvest activities, in livestock husbandry and in marketing of farm produce (Ohwofasa *et al.*, 2013).

Domestic Work: In addition to assisting the men in many farm operations, rural women are responsible for all household chores. Unpaid domestic work is considered to be women's work. Despite its importance, it is unpaid, undervalued, and unrecognized work. Nonetheless, women make enormous contributions to society in this regard.

Inequality in Pay: Women earn only two-thirds of what men earn and less than three-quarters of what men do in similar jobs around the world. Humans constitute one-third of the world's official labor force, but they are concentrated in low-wage jobs and are more susceptible to unemployment than men.

Women in the Informal Sector: Without legal protection or security, women rely on the informal sector for a living. Women made up a large proportion of food vendors in third-world countries: 94 percent in Nigeria, 80 percent in Thailand, and 63 percent in the Philippines.

Health: Women provide more health care than all other health care services combined, and they have benefited greatly from a new global shift in priorities toward disease prevention and health promotion.

Political Affairs: Women continue to be under-represented in their countries' decision-making bodies due to a lack of education, lack of confidence, and increased workload.

Education: Women continue to outnumber men among the world's illiterates by 3:2 ratios, but an increase in school enrollment is closing the gender education gap.

Dimensions of Empowerment for Rural Women

Education Empowerment

Educate a man, and you educate one person; educate a woman, and you educate the entire nation, wrote Mahatma Gandhi. This thought is more relevant today than ever before. Women today receive the best education possible; gone are the days when even going to school was a struggle. Although urban women have many advantages, their rural counterparts continue to struggle. Her main issues are still a lack of education and a lack of support (Bhonde, 2015). According to Singh (2015), women's empowerment must begin with their participation in various spheres of life. In this regard, education is a significant impediment. Rural women must be educated about their rights and privileges in a modern society in order to be empowered. It is education which can bring about awareness in them related to their social status, injustice and differentiation meted out to them.

Education will provide rural women with a sense of belonging in society. According to Mandal (2015), empowerment of rural women through education will result in: (1) self-esteem and self-confidence of women, (2) a positive image of women by recognizing their contribution to society, polity, and economy, (3) ability to think critically, (4) decision-making abilities and action through collective process, (5) choices in areas such as education, employment, and health, (6) equal participation in development process, and (7) knowledge and skill for economic independence and (8) access to legal literary and information relating to their rights. Furthermore, Adebukola, 2001, as cited in Obeta (2009), stated that when a woman is professionally empowered, she will use her empowerment in a positive way, and being a mistress in her profession, she will not be deprived of the right to practice in order to benefit the nation. To Obeta (2009), a mother's level of education has a positive effect not only on the development of her children, but also on their health, education, mortality, and pre-school cognitive ability.

Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment, as a layperson understands it, is the process of making an individual economically self-sufficient by providing him or her with some type of vocational training. It also entails instilling in them the ability to make economic decisions affecting the family and the community as a whole. Economic empowerment of rural women, according to Agarwalla (2015), means making rural women capable of participating in various economic activities so that they can earn money and become economically strong." Women cannot participate in decision-making in the family, community, or nation without economic empowerment. Women's status in society is inextricably linked to their socioeconomic circumstances.

According to Okojie (1999), as cited by Obeta (2009), the most effective way to reduce poverty is to expand the opportunities through which the poor can do more for themselves – economically, the task is to help the poor (rural women) gain their rightful access to productive resources and appropriate knowledge for their use. It necessitates addressing inequalities in the distribution of productive assets directly, namely by redistributing land and consciously relocating finance to meet the needs of poor borrowers, particularly rural women. Economic empowerment is essential for breaking the cycle of gender inequality. In order to economically empower rural women, it is necessary to address women's limited access to economic resources as well as their inability to make economic decisions that will improve their well-being and that of their families. It should be noted that when rural women participate in production activities, poverty decreases and economic growth increases, both of which benefit society as a whole. On the other hand, if rural women are not economically empowered, it has a significant negative impact on their children's education and health.

Socio-Cultural Empowerment

Obeta (2009) quotes the United Nations as saying; socio-cultural empowerment requires that equality be built into all forms of human resource development from birth onwards. It is a direct challenge to patriarchy, which is prevalent in most societies." Rural women are educated on social benefits such as awareness of existing social problems in society, good recognition and image in the family and community, role in making important family decisions, plan and promote better education for their children, and care for the health of the elderly and children, to name a few. Rural women's social empowerment allows them to serve the community by fighting for basic social amenities and welfare needs such as safe drinking water, street light, public sanitation and chance to help the weaker people like disable and the aged. As a result, "social and cultural empowerment of rural women through the removal of oppressive social structures will restore the dignity of womanhood and enhance self-image; such a situation will undoubtedly breed mutual respect and love between the sexes and result in happier families" (Okeke, 1995 cited in Obeta, 2009).

Political Empowerment

Superiority and dominance are reinforced by political and legal structures. Men typically hold the majority of political power. Village councils have traditionally been made up entirely of men. Men and women rarely sit together in most rural communities to discuss village issues. Women leaders are only invited when women's issues are being discussed. This has progressed to the present day, when few women hold elective or appointive

positions in most countries' governments. Obeta (2009) cites Okojie (1999). Therefore, the empowerment of women as political and community leaders at the grassroots, national, and international levels is an essential foundation for advancing all women's issues. Political empowerment is essential for rural women seeking a voice in global economic affairs; even at the household level, women should be involved in family decision-making (Sadda, 1995 cited in Obeta, 2009).

Rural Women Empowerment and Rural Development

The development of a country is a choice made by its people, who live in either urban or rural areas. Individuals shape society and determine its progress and performance. In terms of economic, political, and social development, urban and rural areas are two sides of the same coin. While the urban sector has seen phenomenal growth and development as a result of Nigeria's post-independence industrialization, the rural sector has seen little corporate growth. Any country's economic and sociopolitical development is heavily reliant on the development of rural areas and the standard of living of its rural population. Rural women are an important part of society (Agwarwalla, 2015). No society can develop and prosper unless its women are economically and socially empowered. According to Mandal (2015), empowering women is a prerequisite for creating a good nation. Women's empowerment ensures the stability of society. Rural women's empowerment is critical because their ideas and value systems will lead to the development of a good family, community, society, and, ultimately, a good nation. She went on to say that women's empowerment and equal participation in all spheres of society are fundamental for achieving equality, peace, and development (Mandal, 2015).

Women's empowerment is now more than ever linked to rural development. In Nigeria, institutions and individuals promoting rural development see women's empowerment as a strategic development that can hasten the rural development process (Obianigwe, 1999; Ugwu, 2003; Obeta, 2009; Ering et al., 2014; Ayevbomwan, Popoola & Adeoti, 2016). In accordance with the contention that women constitute more than half of the world's human resources and are critical to a society's economic and social well-being, development cannot be fully realized without their participation; Mrs. Mariam Babangida introduced the Better Life for Rural Women program in 1986. The goal was to change the fortunes of rural poor women and improve their well-being, while also sustaining the economy through their activities. During Mariam Abacha's administration, the Better Life for Rural Women program was renamed Family Support Programme, but the aims and concerns remained the same. Despite good intentions and resources invested in the program, it proved to be a colossal failure. This situation created an urgent need to integrate the country's rural areas into the mainstream of national development. The program served the needs of wealthy urban women rather than the rural women for whom it was intended. It evolved into "Better Life for Urban Women. Recognizing the importance of fully participating in community development, rural women have formed self-help groups (SHFs). It is a role they have chosen to help shape their future. In 1988, the Ezinne Women Self-Help Association of Ohom-Orba in Enugu state provided portable drinking water for the entire Ohom community," for example (Obeta, 2009).

It is important to note at this point that the formation of self-help groups and active participation of rural families in the process of planning and implementing community projects would aid in the development of harmony and unity among community members

regardless of caste or economic diversity. In such cases, communities provide voluntary services for rural development using various innovative approaches and manage development programs more economically. As a result, motivating and training target groups to develop local or rural leadership will be critical to poverty alleviation and sustainable development in Nigeria. Obetta (2009) concludes that once the empowerment of community members (particularly women) is enhanced, the government and donor agencies will cease to see themselves as providers and will instead act as facilitators. Agrawal (2015) posits that rural development symbolizes rural industrialization. Rural industrialization is the most effective way to address the twin problems of rural women's unemployment and poverty. The development of rural industrialization is hampered by major challenges such as a lack of credit, the use of obsolete technology, machinery, and equipment, and insufficient infrastructural facilities. Solving these issues is critical for developing rural industries in any country, particularly Nigeria.

The socioeconomic challenges in third-world countries have encouraged various rural communities to develop strategies to improve their socioeconomic conditions. According to Ojukwu (2013), as cited in Akpomuvie (2018), women in particular engage in activities that facilitate the process of rural development in an attempt to address their community problems. He stated that traditionally, there was a perception that rural development was a male activity, but the history of development efforts in most developing countries has shown that rural development has always existed with women leading the way. Furthermore, according to Akpomuvie (2018), prior to the development of formal social welfare systems in West Africa, women voluntary organizations played extensive roles in caring for the sick, poor, and disabled in Nigeria. They went on to describe how women's organizations such as Umuade and the married wife associations of various village groups in Nigeria's eastern region organized various activities for the welfare of members of their natal and marital homes, in addition to raising funds for rural development. Ojukwu (2013), as cited in Akpomuvie (2018; Ekele, Zubiaru, Ayorinde, & Abdulwaheed, 2018), explained that the reason why women in Igboland in Nigeria hold 'August Meetings' every year was to enhance women's contribution to rural community development. In fact, the gatherings provide women with opportunities to become stakeholders in their rural community projects, ensuring their trust in the community and its activities.

Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Reliability Statistics of Variable

Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Rural women empowerment	9	0.734
Rural development	11	0.718

Source: Researchers' computation, 2021

The results showed that the coefficients of 0.734 and 0.718 met the general recommended level of 0.70 for the research indicators (Cronbach, 1951). As a result, the findings demonstrated that the study's instrument was trustworthy.

Model specification: The model for this study has the following mathematical functions:

$$RD = F(RWE)$$

Econometrically, the model was specified as:

$$RD = \beta_0 + \beta_1 RWE + et$$

Where: RD = Rural Development

RWE = Rural Women empowerment

β_0 = Intercept

β_1 = Coefficient and appriori signs of the independent variable

et = Error term

From the above the appropri expectation of the model was $\beta_0 < 0$

Data collected were analyzed using simple percentage, Spearman's moment correlation coefficient and liner regression analysis with the aid of statistical package for social science (SPSS) version 23.

Research Results

To achieve the study's objectives, 750 questionnaires are distributed across Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone to traditional rulers, rural women, women self-help groups, rural men, and youths. As shown in the table below, 476 of the 750 copies of questionnaires distributed were retrieved and analyzed, yielding a response rate of 63.5 percent.

Table 2: Distribution of Questionnaire and Response Rate

S/N	South-South States	Questionnaire	Questionnaire retrieved	Percentage (%)
1	Cross-Rivers	125	97	12.9
2	Delta	125	93	12.4
3	Akwa-Ibom	125	81	10.8
4	Rivers	125	51	6.8
5	Edo	125	74	9.9
6	Bayelsa	125	80	10.7
	Total	750	476	63.5

Source: Researchers' Field work, 2021

The distribution of questionnaires and response rates is shown in Table 2. According to the table 97(12.9 percent) of all responses came from Cross-Rivers State; this implies that the majority of respondents are from Cross-Rivers, followed by Delta.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variables	Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	171	35.9
	Female	305	64.1
	Total	476	100.0
Age	15-24years	128	26.9
	25-34 years	169	35.5
	35-49 years	103	21.6
	50 years and above	76	16.0
	Total	476	100
Marital Status	Single	113	23.7
	Married	207	43.5
	Divorced	63	13.2
	Widowed	93	19.5
	Total	476	100.0
Education	No Education	117	24.6

	Complete primary	95	20.0
	Incomplete secondary	66	13.9
	Complete secondary	98	20.5
	Higher	100	21.0
	Total	470	100.0
Employment status	Unemployed	188	39.5
	Skilled & unskilled	90	18.9
	Agric & Allied	145	30.5
	Service	53	11.1
	Total		100.0
Literacy	Cannot read at all	223	46.8
	Able to read only parts of a sentence	81	17.0
	Able to read a whole sentence	172	36.2
	Total	476	100.0

Source: Researchers' fieldwork, 2021

The frequency distribution of respondents by gender, age, marital status, level of education, employment status, and literacy is shown in Table 3. According to the table, 305 (or 64.1 percent) of the total respondents are men. This implies that female respondents outnumber male respondents. Furthermore, the table shows that the majority (35.5 percent) are between the ages of 25 and 34. The frequency distribution of respondents by marital status revealed that the majority of respondents are married. According to the table, 207 (43.5 percent) of all respondents are married, while only 63 (13.2 percent) are divorced. The table also shows that the vast majority of respondents (24.6 percent) have no formal education. The vast majority of those polled are unemployed. This represented 39.5 percent of all respondents; higher proportion of respondents. A higher proportion of respondents are illiterate because they cannot read at all, while 36.2 percent can read a full sentence. These findings are consistent with previous research (Akinwade, 2013, Ayebuomwan et al., 2016).

Table 4: Relationship between Rural Women Empowerment and Rural Development in South-South Geo-political zone of Nigeria

Correlation Coefficient			
		Rural women empowerment	Rural development
Rural women empowerment	Pearson Correlation	1	0.754
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	476	476
Rural development	Pearson correlation	0.754	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	476	476

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 levels (2-tailed)

Source: SPSS version 23, 2021

Table 4 depicts the relationship between rural women empowerment and rural development in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone. Rural women empowerment and rural development have a significant positive high correlation ($r=0.754$, $n = 476$, $p = 0.01$). This implies that rural women's empowerment is strongly linked to rural development in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone. The null hypothesis is thus rejected.

*Linear Regression Analysis***Table 5: Model Summary^b**

Model	R	R ²	R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.67 ^a	.709	.686	21.640

Dependent variable: Rural development

Predictors: (constant): Rural women empowerment

Source: SPSS version 23, 2021

Table ANOVA^a

Model	Sum of square	Df	Mean	F.Sat.	Sig.	Remark
Regression	8.472	3	3.651	17.803	0.005 ^b	Sig.
Residual	3.556	470	0.223			
Total	12.028	473				

Predictors: (constant): Rural women empowerment Dependent variable: Rural development

Source: SPSS version 23, 2021

According to the linear regression results, rural women empowerment accounts for 70.9 percent of the variability in rural development in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone. The F statistic of 17.803 indicates that the model is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. The null hypothesis is thus rejected. It is possible to conclude that rural women empowerment has a significant impact on rural development in rural Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings revealed that rural women's empowerment has a positive and strong relationship with rural development in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone. This finding is consistent with previous research (Obetta, 2009; Ering et al., 2014; Ayebuomwan et al., 2014). This finding is also consistent with the views of Goel and Soh (2015) and Akpomuvie (2018), who believe that rural women empowerment facilitates the rural development process. Furthermore, according to the findings of a linear regression analysis, rural women empowerment explains 70.9 percent of the variable in rural development in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone. Thus, the study found that empowering rural women has a positive and statistically significant impact on rural development. Previous findings by Ijere (1991), Okeke (1995), Obetta (2009), Ojukwu (2013), Ayebuomwan et al. (2006), and Akpomuvie (2006) all support this (2018). This finding is also consistent with Okojie's (1999) views, as cited in Obetta (2009), that "rural women's empowerment is a means of strengthening women's participation in all aspects of a nation's economic, social, and political life, which facilitates rural and national development.

As a result, during the empowerment process, women assume their own identity, value themselves, increase their self-confidence and self-esteem, and cross the threshold of fear of feeling powerless (independent Commission on population and quality of life, 1996 cited in Obetta, 2009). The core of rural women empowerment framework is the argument that women's development can be viewed through five levels of equity: welfare, access, conscientization, participation and control. Overall, control is the highest level of equality

and empowerment because it involves equal control and management of the community's systems by women" (UNICEF, 1993 cited in Obetta, 2009).

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is clear from the preceding discussion that rural women empowerment has a strong and positive relationship with rural development, and that rural women empowerment has a positive impact on rural development in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone, implying that rural women empowerment is a precursor to rural development globally. We conclude that rural women empowerment has a significant positive influence on rural development based on the findings of this study. We make the following policy recommendations based on the study's findings and conclusions:

Nigerian government policy should always consider the female gender for necessary upliftment, as this will help to improve their status and rural development in rural Nigeria. Across the country, there is an urgent need for rural development and self-employment training institutes.

The Nigerian government should support and encourage adult education for women, particularly rural women, at all levels.

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