

EFFECTS OF COVID-19 AND INSECURITY ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN IKWUANO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, ABIA STATE, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

In Nigeria, the philosophy of women participation in community development is increasingly gaining traction as an important instrument for mobilizing resources and organizing women to pick adequate interest in providing social and economic dividends to their community at large. This study therefore examines the effect of COVID-19 on Women August Congregation's (WAC) participation in community development in Ikwuano Local Government Area, Abia State, Nigeria. Descriptive research survey was adopted. A sample of 384 eligible households participated in the study. The questionnaire and in-depth interview methods were employed to collect data from the respondents. Quantitative data was presented in tables, frequencies, and percentages, while qualitative data were analyzed via the manual content method. The study adopted the structural functionalist theory as theoretical framework for its analysis. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Hypotheses were tested using the Pearson Moment Correlation tool at 0.05 significant level. The study revealed that Covid-19 pandemic and its protocols cum insecurity prevented women in Ikwuano from holding their annual gathering, which adversely affected their participation and contribution to community development. It is therefore very important that women should look beyond physical gathering, which may break Covid-19 protocol and utilize technologies such as virtual-communication and telephone conversations in place of physical congregation for effective participation in community development.

Keywords: Community development; Covid-19; Covid-19 Protocol; Insecurity; Women August Congregation;

Introduction

The concept of community development can be traced to about two hundred years ago and since then, numerous organizations and movements have devoted time to improving rural life which emerged in the post-civil war era (Phifer, 1990). According to Farooq (2012), the democratic political revolutions in France, Britain as well as the Second World War played a vital role in the emergence of community development. After the heavy destructions occasioned by the political revolutions and the war, many communities were filled with social problems for which rehabilitation and reconstruction were needed. From that point, sociologists, anthropologists, social workers and technocrats were inspired to develop community development programmes for the benefit of the community people. The development of a community is not possible without the participation of the people, especially the women folk. Community development entails the process by which community members come together to take collective actions and generate solutions to a commonly identified problem (Ifeanyi, 2006). The notion of community development in Nigeria owes a great deal to the efforts of colonial administrators (Ogechukwu, 2016).

In Nigeria, every successive administration has focused on how best to eradicate poverty and maintain better standards of living. This is because every government desires for an advanced nation (Amakye, 2017; Bonye, Aasoglenang & Owusu-Sekyere, 2013). Development is a vital tool for the growth and sustenance of any nation (Lawal, 2011). Community development seeks to improve the quality of life of individuals. It helps a community to strengthen itself in order to improve people's lives and address issues that have been identified by the community as well as build upon existing skills and strengths within the community (Inkoom, 2011).

Women in rural communities constitute more than half of Nigeria's population (Suen, 2013). They play the role of home keepers, farmers, petty traders and fisherwomen. They contribute to community development activities such as being involved in leadership and decision making in south eastern Nigeria (Gbosi, 2003). The participation and contribution of women to community development includes agriculture and food production, children upbringing, politics and governance, education, commerce, health, civic education and information. Women are equally involved in the provision of Medicare as traditional midwives and birth attendants who help to deliver many women of their babies. The vital roles women play in their various communities are not only complementary to those played by their male counterparts but also very significant to community development (Blessing & Obiageri, 2015)

According to Ojike (2013), it is appropriate to note that women are at the heart of development in various nations, states, local governments and even communities, as they control most of the non-monetary economy (subsistence agriculture, bearing children, domestic labour etc.) and play critical role in enhancing the growth of the economic sector (trading, wage labor, employment etc.).

In Ikwuano Local Government Area of Abia State, women through different platforms such as the 'Women August Meeting' (WAM), have contributed to community development. These women use the WAM's annual gathering between August and September, to discuss developmental issues that affect communities in the study area. However, to the persistent insecurity in South East Nigeria, coupled with the 2019/2020 COVID-19 global pandemic, the women were unable to hold the annual WAM event. While

the Covid-19 restriction has been lifted, insecurity in the region has remained a great hindrance to the hosting of the Women August Meeting with a deleterious effect on community development in the study area. This paper examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and insecurity on women participation in community development in Ikwuano Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria.

Literature

Nigeria faces unprecedented levels of insecurity, which threaten her unity and common wealth. This has prompted the deployment of huge percentage of the national budget to security instead of using same to develop other sectors of the Nigerian society (Obed & Abubakar, 2021). Chapter 2, section 14 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria specifically states that “The security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government”. Unfortunately, government has failed to provide a secure and safe environment for lives and property and the conduct of business and economic activities. The alarming level of insecurity in Nigeria has resulted in high crime rate even as terrorist attacks in different parts of the country, leave unimaginable consequences for the nation’s economy (Okonkwo, Ndubuisi-Okolo, & Threasa, 2015).

Insecurity as a concept has different connotations such as: absence of safety; danger; hazard; uncertainty; lack of protection and lack of safety. According to Beland (2005), insecurity is the state of fear or anxiety stemming from a concrete or alleged lack of protection. It refers to lack or inadequate freedom from danger. Achumba, Ighomereho, and Akpan-Robaro (2013), define insecurity from two perspectives. Firstly, insecurity is the state of being open or subject to danger or threat of danger, where danger is the condition of being susceptible to harm or injury. Furthermore, insecurity is the state of being exposed to risk or anxiety, where anxiety is an equivocal unpleasant emotion that is experienced in anticipation of some misfortune. These definitions of insecurity underscore a major point that those affected by insecurity are not only uncertain or unaware of what would happen next, but they are also vulnerable to the threats and dangers when they occur. Insecurity has affected women the most; these women are vulnerable to insecurities which have affected their economic and community participation in development either directly or indirectly.

Women are exposed to the hostile and unfriendly security environment which make them vulnerable to dangers such as stray bullets, rape and cult activities. Many women are scared of traveling from one location to another due to the fear of either being kidnapped or killed. Nwankwo (2012), noted that in the south-east, kidnapping has become a tool for settling personal and political scores. Besides, the pecuniary gains accruing from the ransom collected from family members of victims, usually in millions of naira, has become a tool deployed by many desperate criminals in Igbo land to enrich themselves. Kidnapping has made women to live in perpetual fear of returning to their ancestral homes to participate in community development programmes. Living has continually slipped to the Hobbesian state of nature where life is brutish, nasty and short.

The whole of Southeast and parts of South-south geo-political zones have come under severe attacks in recent times by some faceless people popularly referred to as “unknown gunmen”. Public infrastructure, especially facilities of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and others have become prime targets of this group just as several security

personnel have died in the line of duty. While the government blamed the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB), Eastern Security Network (ESN) and their security arm for the atrocities, the group has continued to distance itself from any complicity. Innocent people including women have fallen victims in the hands of the so-called unknown gunmen, but the more worrisome issue is the military occupation of many towns and roads in the Southeast, including inter-state roads. The current clampdown on pro-Biafra groups and suspected 'unknown gunmen' has practically crippled economic activities and movements in these areas (George et al., 2021). The Sit-at home directive by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has adversely affected the participation of women in community development.

Since December 2019, when COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, the capital of China's Hubei province, the corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has spread globally (Hui et al., 2020). The year 2020, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, was intended to be ground-breaking for gender equality. Instead, with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic even the limited gains made in the past decades are at risk of being rolled back. The pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn, amplifying the impacts of the pandemic (UN, 2020). The result of the COVID-19 pandemic was the social movement restrictions that vary from full lockdown to social distance regulations on six of the seven continents. It is an unprecedented turn of events that was described by some as the first major pandemic that struck the world since the Spanish Flu epidemic between 1918 and 1919 (Trouillard, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted both global and local supply chains as the workforce was restricted to virtual remote working at best, tight restrictions on the movement of people and goods with transport and logistics severely curtailed, at the same time as demand for many goods and services mushroomed. Over the space of a few months, COVID-19 triggered an economic contraction, leaving large populations without jobs. Unlike what we used to have before the pandemic where women gather in groups and carry out massive developmental activities in their communities, the protocol of COVID-19 directly affected community development activities by women, thereby leaving many communities in severe want.

Researches like those of Borkowski *et al.* (2021) and HLPE (2020) examined both the impact of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition as well as on children education respectively. However, none of the researchers investigated the effect of COVID-19 and insecurity on women participation in community development. It is against this background that this study investigated the effect of COVID-19 and insecurity on women participation in community development in Ikwuano Local Government Area, Abia State.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted structural functionalism as its theoretical framework of analysis. Structural Functionalism developed slowly over time with the help of many sociologists in different parts of the world. The most significant contributors to the initial development of the theory were Emile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer. Structural functionalism, is a theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability (Maconis, 2011). It asserts that our lives are guided by social structures; each social structure has social functions, or consequences for the operation of society as a whole.

Functionalism also states that society is like an organism, made up of different parts that work together. Thus, one of the key ideas in structural functionalism is that society is made-up of groups or institutions, which are cohesive, share common norms, values and have a definitive culture (Hak, 2007).

Security, for example, has several important functions in a society, such as securing lives and property, as well as health care system. Therefore, both security and health are important social structures in society and any disruption, affects the whole society. Insecurity and COVID-19 have altered the normal functioning of the society, which in turn, affected all other social structures including women participation in community development efforts. In the 1960s, functionalism was criticized for being unable to account for rapid social change or for structural contradictions and conflict. Also, structural functionalists look at institutions individually as though they are divorced from other institutions. This is a mistake, as institutions are interlinked in society and those employing a structural functionalist approach should take the network of relationships that exist between and among these institutions into consideration.

Methodology

The study was carried out in Ikwuano Local Government Area, Abia State, Nigeria. The local government was created from the old Imo State on 27th August, 1991 by the General Ibrahim Babangida administration. It is one of the five local government areas that make up today's Abia central senatorial district. It has an area of 281 km² and an estimated population of 180,600 with the female population estimated at 93,150 (National Population Commission, 2016). This formed the sample frame for this study. It is estimated to grow at 3% annually. Ikwuano local Government Area is made up of about 58 communities and is bounded by Ini LGA of Akwa Ibom State by the west and Umuahia South to the north. Ikwuano houses the Michael Okpara University of Agriculture Umudike, the National Crop Research Institute (NCRI) as well as the prestigious Government College Umuahia (GCU). It is known for her agricultural activities (farming) with much concentration on palm oil/kernel, cocoa cassava, yam, broom, basket, etc. Ikwuano means four relatives (*ikwu* stands for relatives and *ano* means four) and is derived from the coming together of four brothers namely, Oboro, Ibere, Ariam-Ushaka and Oloko. Each of this clan has many communities (Chidiebere, 2018). The Local Government has 10 political wards: Ariam, Ibere I, Ibere II, Oboro I, Oboro II, Oboro III, Oboro IV, Oloko I, Oloko II, Usaka.

The study adopted the Taro Yamane formula for its sample size determination. A sample of 400 respondents was selected from a sample frame of 93,150 through simple random sampling. A total of 400 questionnaire copies were administered out of which 384 (96%) were validly completed and returned. Data were elicited from respondents via structured questionnaire and in-depth interview. Section one of the question focused on the socio-demographic attributes of respondents, while section two dealt with the study objectives. The questionnaire was made up of 14 items which focused on the nexus between insecurity and women participation in community development, including how COVID-19 affected women's participation in community development. Other components of the 14-item questionnaire centered on possible solutions to the combined effect of insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic on women participation in community development in the study area.

Results

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents.

Table 1: Distribution of Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	123	23.0
Female	261	68.0
Total	384	100
Marital Status		
Married	217	56.5
Single	90	23.4
Total	384	100
Separated	33	8.9
Widowed	44	11.5
Total	384	100
Age		
18-27	20	5.2
28-37	44	11.5
38-47	89	23.2
48-57	160	41.7
58 and above	71	18.5
Total	384	100
Educational Status		
Tertiary	63	16.4
Secondary	80	20.8
Primary	150	39.1
No formal education	91	23.7
Total	384	100
Occupation		
Civil Servant	48	12.5
Farmer	106	27.6
Trader	186	48.4
Self-employed	44	11.5
Total	384	100.0
Religion		
Christian	327	85.2
African traditional religion	57	14.8
Islam	0	0.0
Total	384	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Compared to men, women participated more in the study. Majority of the respondents were married (56.5%). More so, respondents between ages 48 and 57 years participated most

in the study. The occupation of the respondents shows that majority, 48.4% of the study participants were traders, farmers accounted for 27.6%, and civil servants involved in this study were 12.5%, while the self-employed accounted for 11.5%. This implies that majority of the participants were traders. This is because majority of the women resident in the rural areas are mostly petty traders. The religious affiliations revealed that majority 85.2% of the participants were Christians, while ATR participants accounted for 14.8%.

Effects of insecurity on women’s participation in community development

This section synthesizes the knowledge of respondents on the effects of insecurity on women’s participation in community development. The effects are traceable to attacks by kidnappers, armed robbers' activities, as well as the destruction of community projects by hoodlums, and unknown gunmen including attacks on police stations and the sit-at-home order by Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). All of the aforementioned, combined to frustrate efforts at community development by women, especially the Women August Meeting in the study area.

Table 2: Effects of insecurity on women participation in community development

Variables	% Rating					Mean	STD
	SA	A	UN	D	SD		
Kidnapping affects women participation.	60.4	21.1	3.9	11.5	3.1	4.22	1.18
An armed robbery activity affects women participation.	29.7	52.3	3.6	8.6	5.7	3.95	1.01
Hoodlums destroy many women development project.	37.8	14.3	7.3	25.5	14.3	3.27	1.20
Unknown gunmen activities affect women participation.	44.0	39.3	5.2	4.7	6.8	4.12	1.07
Attacks on police stations, affects women annual August Meeting.	37.8	16.9	12.2	16.9	16.1	3.08	1.22
Sit at home order by IPOB has affected women participation in community development.	29.7	24.2	12.5	19.5	14.1	3.03	1.29

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

The study revealed that majority (81.5%) of the respondents agreed that kidnapping affected women participation in community development, while 14.6% disagreed and 3.9% were undecided. The study revealed that majority (82%) of the respondents agreed that armed robbery activities affected women participation, while 14.3% disagreed and 3.6% were undecided. Majority, 83.3% of the respondents agreed that hoodlums destroyed many women development projects, which further discouraged women participation in community development while 39.8% disagreed and 5.2% were undecided. Also, the study revealed that majority, 54.7% of the respondents agreed that attacks on police stations, affected the Women Annual August gathering, 33% disagreed and 12.2% were undecided. The sit-at-home order by the IPOB affected women participation in community development, majority 53.9% of the respondents agreed, 33.6% disagreed and 12.5% were undecided. The quantitative data was complimented by the qualitative data generated via in-depth interview. One of the participants said that:

The activity of kidnappers coupled with the recent attacks by unknown gunmen, whose target is on security operatives, has really discouraged most women from participating in community development, especially those coming from abroad to the villages during the annual august meeting (IDI, Female, 56 years).

The respondent was of the view that due to kidnapping activities and criminality perpetuated by the unknown gunmen; women are scared of gathering to participate in community development. Another respondent asserted that:

Many police station are under lock and key for a longer time now, this has increased the insecurity situation in many community in Ikwuano LGA, and has discouraged investors and mostly women from hosting their annual August meeting (IDI, Male, 36 years).

The respondent believed that attacks on security operatives in Ikwuano worsened the security situation in the area, and drove away potential investors, as nobody would risk their lives in an unsecure environment.

Effects of COVID-19 on women’s participation in community development

This section analyzes the effects of COVID-19 on women’s participation in community development. The focus here is on: social distancing, nationwide lockdown, and fear of contacting COVID-19, restriction on travelling, disruption of physical gathering, and increased unemployment and poverty among women.

Table 3: Effects of Covid-19 on women participation in community development

Variables	% Rating					Mean	STD
	SA	A	UN	D	SD		
Social distancing	29.2	52.9	3.6	8.6	5.7	3.95	1.01
Nationwide lock down	16.4	42.7	8.1	13.5	19.3	3.45	1.15

Fear of contacting Covid-19.	25.5	27.6	14.1	20.3	12.5	3.30	1.40
Restriction on travelling.	25.0	29.9	7.8	26.6	10.7	3.37	1.31
Disruption of physical gathering.	25.0	47.4	5.5	13.3	8.9	3.73	1.13
Increased unemployment and poverty among women.	15.6	39.3	16.4	20.8	7.8	3.16	1.36

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

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The respondents were asked to rank the effects of COVID-19 on women’s participation in community development in Ikwuano LGA, Abia State. The summary of the findings is shown in table 3. Given the 5-point Likert scale, none of the ranking was below average (2.50), thus suggesting a strong effect of COVID-19 pandemic on women’s participation in community development in Ikwuano LGA, Abia state. Majority of the respondents (82.1%) agreed that social distancing as a result of the pandemic altered the normal gathering of women and prevented them from coming together in a group to participate in the annual august meeting. Majority (59.1%) respondents agreed that the nation-wide lockdown affected the participation of women in community development, as most women could not travel. Majority (53.1%) respondents agreed that due to the fear of contacting COVID-19, many women were scared of participating in community development in Ikwuano LGA. Majority agreed that the COVID-19, pandemic disrupted physical gathering, and increased unemployment and poverty among women.

Corroborating this was the response from an IDI participant, who stated that:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the annual women August meeting didn’t hold, because of the lockdown, movement restrictions, social distancing and fear of contacting Covid-19 made a lot of women not to participate in community development in Ikwuano LGA (IDI, Female, 44 years).

How to curb insecurity and COVID-19 to enable women participate in community development

This section analyzes how to curb insecurity and mitigate the effect of COVID-19 to enable women participate in community development. The variables are that: Government should intensify effort in providing adequate security and COVID-19 vaccines, all COVID-19 protocols and security warning should be adhered to during any gathering, IPOB should lift the “sit at home” order to enable women participate meaningfully in community development, while Vigilante groups should be encouraged to control the criminal activities of the ‘unknown gunmen’.

Table 4: How to curb insecurity and COVID-19 to enable women’s participation in community development.

Variables	% Rating					Mean	STD
	SA	A	UN	D	SD		
Government should intensify effort in providing adequate security and Covid-19 vaccines.	12.2	43.8	8.1	15.6	20.3	3.36	1.12
All Covid-19 protocol and security warning, should be adhered to during any gathering.	44.3	25.5	2.6	10.4	17.2	2.95	1.15
IPOB should lift the “sit at home” order to enable the women participate meaningfully to community development.	23.4	44.5	10.4	11.5	10.2	3.59	1.25
Vigilante groups should be encouraged to control the criminal activities of unknown gunmen.	44.8	22.7	7.8	13.3	11.5	3.85	1.31

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

In order to have the opinion of the respondents on solutions to women participation in community development in the face of insecurity and COVID-19 pandemic, they were asked to rank the solutions based on the variables provided. The quantitative data presented in table 4 shows that majority of the respondents 56% agreed that government and stakeholders should intensify effort in providing adequate security and COVID-19 vaccines, 35.9% disagreed and 8.1% were undecided. Majority 69.8% agreed that all COVID-19 protocol and security warning should be adhered to during any gathering to curtail the spread of COVID-19 and risk associated with insecurities 27.6% disagreed, while 2.6% were undecided. The Indigenous People of Biafra should lift the “sit at home” order to enable the women participate meaningfully in community development. This was agreed by 67.9% of the respondents, 21.7% disagreed, and 10.4% were undecided. Majority 67.5% agreed that vigilante groups should be encouraged to control the criminal activities of ‘unknown gunmen’, 24.8% disagreed and 7.8% were undecided. In a similar manner, from the qualitative data generated via in-depth interview, one of the participants revealed that:

Sensitization and vaccination programs will go a long way in controlling the spread of COVID-19 and enable women to host and participate in community development in Ikwuano LGA” (IDI, Female, 37 years).

Similarly, another participant said:

One of the reasons why women participation in community development is poor is as a result of insecurity, I urge the government and stakeholders to intensify effort in providing security here in Ikwuano, to enable our women participate in various activities aimed at community development (IDI, Male, 49 years).

Discussion

The issue of insecurity and COVID-19 have become major concerns to women participation in community development. It was revealed by the participants in this study that kidnapping, armed robbery, hoodlums, unknown gunmen activities, attack on police stations and security personnel and the IPOB sit-at-home order were some major security issues that affect women gathering in Ikwuano LGA. This finding is in consonance with the observation of Eme and Onyishi, (2011) that ethnic militia, vigilantes, secret cults and political thugs contribute significantly to security challenges in Nigeria in different dimension and forms. This finding also corroborates those of Akindiyo (2014); Otto and Ukpere (2012), who found that since the beginning of the present democratic dispensation, violence in the form of militancy, kidnapping, bombing, armed robbery has contributed to insecurity and affected sustainable socio-economic development.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to surprising and unexpected experiences globally and also affected all other activities. The study revealed that the COVID-19 affected women participation in community development in Ikwuano LGA as manifested by: social distancing, national lockdown, restriction on travelling and disruption of physical gathering. This finding is in consonance with the study of Henry (2020) who found that COVID-19 pandemic is a big problem for our environment. This implies that our social life has been affected in diverse ways. Because of the virus those who want to do weddings - traditional or civil marriages could not do it because of social distancing; if people cluster in weddings the virus is alleged to spread fast due to human contact. This has become a very big problem for our environment. Churches have been shut down because of social distancing law. People such as Muslims, Christians, African traditional practitioners are not free to worship. This revelation buttresses the observation of Mehtar, Preiser, and Lakhe (2020) that the pandemic responses, especially lockdowns and associated measures (e.g., movement restrictions), made it difficult for women to participate in community development, particularly in low-income and middle-income countries. Such disruptions have led to negative impacts on other areas of health and gender-based violence.

Conclusion

Security of lives and property as well as health care services are determining factors which accelerate women's participation in community development. The activities of kidnappers, armed robbers, destruction of community properties by hoodlums, criminality of unknown gunmen and attacks on police stations and security personnel have fueled the insecurity situation in Ikwuano LGA and greatly discouraged women there from participating in community development efforts. Another issue that has contributed to the low participation of women in community development is COVID-19 pandemic, which came with a lot of restrictions such as: fear of contacting the virus to social distancing, national lockdown, ban on travelling, and physical gathering. Women's attempt in the study area, to actively participate

in community development was hampered by a combination of insecurity and corona virus (COVID-19).

Recommendations

There is need for members of women groups to look beyond the insecurity issues and devise alternative ways to continue their participation and contribution towards enhanced community development in Ikwuano LGA, Abia State.

Adequate security measures should be provided, while vaccination programs should be intensified to facilitate the hosting and participation by women in the August Meeting to discuss and carry out community development.

The federal government should re-organize the country's intelligence architecture with focus on intelligence-driven approach to nip the current wave of insecurity in Nigeria in the bud.

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