

Household Survival and Economic Empowerment of Women in Osun State of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT The plight of the woman is a despicable one and to this end, this paper tried to examine the various survival-livelihood strategies for coping with the burdens of household management in Nigeria. Moreover, the study considered the viability of informal economic trading associations in facilitating household survival and general economic empowerment of women in Nigeria. The consequences of shifting the burdens of responsibilities of domestic welfare in male-headed households also constituted a major focus of this study. The data for the study were derived from primary sources namely, personal interviews and questionnaire; and were complemented by secondary data extracted from appropriate books and journals. The study found out that 77% of the women surveyed have joined one informal trading network or the other as a resort to household survival and that 23% involve in multiple mode of livelihood; that is, doing one or more other informal economic activities as a supplement to government employment. It was also discovered that the women that took to the multiple mode of livelihood strategy did so as a consequence of the default of male-dominated households and as a response to insecurity of government job. The study concluded that women's economic earnings have indeed increased as a result of their involvement in informal economic trading activities. Economic and political empowerment has also been largely achieved going by practical evidence of the successes recorded by women in Osun State of Nigeria in competently bearing household responsibilities and being able to win seats in both state and federal legislative houses.

INTRODUCTION

Family Strategies are those devices resorted to by household heads to ensure the sustenance of the family good and welfare 'whether of survival or social mobility' (Moch et al., 1987; Roberts, 1994: 6). This does not however imply that families are cohesive units whose strategies always concur.

The background for the adoption of various family strategies is the 'restricting' of the world economy, which had drastically altered the old focus of economic activities and life chances. In the immediate post independence Nigeria, employment in the formal economy was fashionable and until the introduction of Austerity Measure in the late '70's, the sector was consistently absorbing a large intake of jobbers but shortly afterwards, and coupled with the sting of SAP, economic activities had become greatly decentralised. 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 either part-time jobs, private practice (PP), casual or menial jobs. (cf. Cordova, 1986).

It has been argued that "family strategies and the informal economy have been depicted as the basis of economic survival during rapid urbanisation" (Castells and Portes, 1989; 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 the formal economy that tend to make such choice impossible. Roberts (1994: 7) states lucidly that:

Household strategies suggest that people can choose, and their choices make a difference, despite the economic or social constraints they face. 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. Both the informal economy and family strategies are related in concrete ways. The informal economy makes use of non-contractual but binding relationships, and kinship is the basis of many of these. The informal

economy and family strategies are essentially territorial phenomena. Both classes of activities embedded in localised sets of understandings, practices, and relationships.

In this study, the notion of family-based household is stuck to. In the absence of state-provided welfare, the family members look up to the family network in times of adversity for support and assistance. Members assist one another in caring for their elderly ones; coming together during burial ceremonies; employing or sponsoring dependants among them etc.

It is important to underscore that household strategies are by and large localised and women mostly adopt them. However, the growing crisis and disintegration of male-headed household has led to a squeeze on the time and energy of women and this has consequently led to the decline in the quality of labour. This is the scenario of "stressed families" (McIntyre and Hillard, 1992: 20-22). In Nigeria for instance, the informal sector has remained an accessible sector for job provisioning particularly for women from stressed and impoverished families. These activities of women ultimately lead to their economic empowerment.

OUTLINE OF DISCUSSION

1. Assessment of the impact of the informal trading activities on household survival and economic empowerment.
2. Consequences of shifting the burden of responsibilities and domestic welfare in male-headed households.

Assessment of the Impact of Informal Trading Activities on Household Survival and Economic Empowerment

The informal economy has constituted a veritable source of employment for a great number of women. Its impact on household survival is also enormous. Out of the 450 women traders questioned, 345 respondents which represents 77% of the total population of study hold the view that they took to informal trading simply to support household survival. The remaining 105 representing 23% claim to be involved in informal for the intrinsic purpose of building a career (Table 1).

From the table 2, it was also discovered that 103 persons involve in multiple mode of livelihood. They gave reasons such as low income from government employment, insecurity

Table 1: Purpose for joining informal trading networks

Category	Frequency	Percentage
A Informal trading for the purpose of household survival	345	77.0
B Informal trading for building a career	105	23.0

Source: Field Survey conducted by the researchers in 2003 (The same source applies to all the tables seen in this report; otherwise, it will be stated).

Table 2: Categorisation of women's modes of livelihood

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Women involved in multiple mode of livelihood	103	23.0
Women involved solely in informal trading activities	347	77.0

of government job, restriction on development of initiatives for their adoption of multiple mode of livelihood. They further claimed that it is the consequence of economic default in male-dominated households.

From the immediate table 3, it is revealed that insecurity of government employment ranks highest among the reasons why some government officials go into informal economic activities. The issue of economic empowerment came about as a by-product of the process of long-term informal trading activities of women. Over time, some of the women have accumulated enough capital to the extent that they were able to wield substantial influence and power in their homes, trading organizations and community at large.

Some of the women traders are recognized by the kings of their towns and are subsequently made Iyalaje, Iyaloja or Iyalode as a result of their economic status. Where they are not so honoured, they serve as matrons in their organizations or as formidable pillars for networking activities. They dictate terms and

Table 3: Reasons for multiple modes of livelihood

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Low income from government employment	65	23.0
Insecurity of government job	95	33.0
The restriction on development of initiatives	50	18.0
Consequence of economic default in male dominated household	73	26.0

N.B: Multiple responses were given in this circumstance

conditions for entry and exit into the trade. These successful women traders also serve as pillars for some politicians in terms of fund assistance during electioneering period. In fact, they are cynosures in the eyes of politicians. This is because every politician strives to get connected to them in order to gain the support of their people. These women are indeed idea-movers in their organizations.

Generally, women that engage in informal trading have gained some form of economic empowerment or the other from the exercise. All the women interviewed claimed to have derived economic empowerment from their involvement in the informal economy. They claimed to have been exposed to the realm of bearing household responsibility through the exercise. Moreover, they stated that the exercise has emancipated them greatly from their hitherto servile status vis-à-vis their husbands and other male counterparts.

Consequences of the Shifting Burdens of Responsibilities on Domestic Welfare in Male Headed Household

The study as shown in Table 4 reveals that 103 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 are of the argument that the entire macro-economic environment has positively altered the economic equation of household in their favour. Originally, it was difficult for women to bear, but in the long run, it has led to a favourable source of socio-economic empowerment.

Regarding the issue of how women combine the role of childbearing and nurturing with the demand of the informal economic trade, it was argued that alternative arrangements have been made for taking care of such domestic responsibility. Such arrangements include taking your babies to day-care centres, resting and

suspending trading activities during tender stage of pregnancy, making use of apprentices, kinsmen and children to assist in the trading activities while the woman only supervises.

Another consequence of the shifting burden of responsibilities on domestic welfare relate to truncated socialisation for the children. It was observed that children from these default homes acquire bad morals because of their lack of parental supervision. On this issue, the affected women traders claimed that their children do stay with them in their respective shops contrary to the notion that they were not taken care of. Furthermore, it was also contended that the activities of women traders have exacerbated the sate of the abuse of child labour in the Nigerian society. On this issue, many of the traders claimed not to been involved in the practice. Nevertheless, a few confessed to be involved and attributed the practice to the hard economic condition that they have been through. They further argued that the government could not be serious in imputing any fault to them. After all, you can make use of what you have for what you need. The table and chart below represent clearly the responses of the people on this issue.

What the foregoing discussion implies is that the consequences of the shifting responsibilities in male-headed households are both positive and negative. First, it introduces a new economic history in the management of home affairs by elevating women to a status of responsibility over and above the traditional role of child carrying and nursing. Second, it led to the economic empowerment of women such that they now become more relevant in the social and political life of their societies. The case of empowerment can be related to the association' role or the impact of better financial standing as a result of involvement in the informal economy.

As earlier noted, the associations' members enjoy distinct identity and because of their influence on price, are economically powerful and relevant in their own way. Out of the new set of 30 market women interviewed, none of them is politically insensitive. They are all poised for action in the next political dispensation. They all promised to mobilise their members to vie, at last for councillorship and supervisory positions in the coming local government election in their respective areas. They expressed boredom with the way previous politicians have always used them as springboards.

Table 4: Responses of women on the use of child labour

<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1. Women that employ the use of child labour	72	16.0
2. The women that do not employ the use of child labour	378	84.0

Source: Field Survey, 2000

At the household front, the findings are polarised into two. It was generally acknowledged that their earnings have increased. Even though they cannot be said to be rich nevertheless, they are able to cope with the requirement of basic household needs. In other words, most of the women claimed that they have now become real help-meet for their husband.

The second side of the findings shows that the trade is too time-consuming. All the young women complained about their spouses' hatred for their long journeys and long period of stay at work. However, they claimed that overtime, their spouses have tended to adjust. On the question that – "do you observe any change in your contribution to decision making unlike when you were not into the informal trading?", the common response was that they have now been visibly relevant and involved. Important of mention here is the fact that the associations do not impact directly on household relationship between spouses. They only come in when invited and this is rare. The popular roles of association that could affect household in a direct way relates to supports during hazards and ceremonies. These supports come in terms of pecuniary or material gifts or assistance.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although, the quest for survival in the household has driven most women into joining trading associations, nevertheless, the study has equally revealed that, either by default or design, the involvement of women has greatly and positively enhanced household welfare and survival. Empirical evidence confirms that through the increased earnings of these women, they have been augmenting household upkeep vote; they have been pillars of support for husbands hit by the never-ending spate of retrenchment exercise in the country. The study also revealed that some women joined the associations out of intrinsic interest in trading. However; a good number joined out of extrinsic cum instrumental interests. This justifies why some women employ multiple mode of livelihood, whereby they are neither full time government worker nor full time trader. It is remarkable that the number of people in this category has continued to increase because; rarely it is that the earnings from formal employment will suffice to assure basic needs and minimum comfort.

The case of economic empowerment has been the consequence of the relentless and diligent effort of the Yoruba women in their various spheres of trade. Contrary to the contentious notion being held by several people in the past that women are home-keepers, baby-makers; men-helpers and so on, their involvement in informal trading networks has opened the leeway for women to actualise in the economic sphere. It is nevertheless important to ask – how have the women been able to achieve this? First, a great number of women traders an in fact women's association are now involved in local levels decision making, at both the associations and family/household level. Second, the participation of women traders at this level is a novel development. Third, the association served as the platform for mobilising and encouraging this women traders particularly in the area of political sensitisation and empowerment. Furthermore, women traders have become exposed to higher levels of authority relations with the State through their association: thus, they have the opportunity of making input into decision making at both their immediate community level as the State. Through the association also their always in constant interaction with the king of their community as well as local government officials. It is important to note also that some of these women association have byelaws and operate essentially like autonomous institutions. At the own front, they have become so courageous that they actively participate in the decision making with their husbands unlike before. Moreover, they supplement household income and serves as ready assistants to their husband.

Instead of just sitting down at home, they are now actively involved in big time trades. Through this process, several women have become economically empowered. From the foregoing therefore, it is apparent that women's involvement in informal trading network is howbeit old, nevertheless, it has received a boost in recent times (about two decades ago, and this development need be sustained

Regarding the use of child labour, particularly for hawking, the government should exercise caution in releasing legislations forbid the act/practice. What we are recommending is that hawking by children should be forbidden on major roads. This should be backed up by extensive campaign through drama sketches,

workshops, symposia, radio and television jingles.

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