

# **Tiv Rural Women Farmers and the Development of Primary Agriculture in Benue State, 1976-2020**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**T**his study assessed the dynamic roles of rural Tiv women farmers in the development of primary agriculture for food security and socio-economic growth in Benue State. It has been observed that existing literatures and past discussions on agricultural development in Benue State have focused more on projecting and promoting agriculture as a patriarchal enterprise. Such studies for instance project largely the role of male farmers in food and cash crop production that has earned the state the status of “food basket of the nation”. It examines the challenges women farmers

encounter. This has denied women their position in the scheme of things as major contributors to the nation's food and value chain. The idea for this study therefore originates from the need to fill a historic knowledge gap from this continued neglect of the productive efforts of Tiv rural women farmers who constitutes the brain box of primary form of agriculture in Benue State. The study highlights the impact and changing roles of Tiv rural women farmers in Benue State. One major challenge that emerged from the study is the fact that most agricultural extension services and programs targets largely male farmers as heads of families, a situation that does not encourage the development of rural women farmers. Due to the fact that rural women also involved competitively with their men counterpart in primary farming. The women make their mark in history as serving as an anti-poverty tool for women .The inability of African economy to eradicate poverty and underdevelopment has propelled role of women farmers in development process. Tiv women have contributed immensely to the development of Benue State. There is however need to project the role of women in economic growth and development in the state. The study relies on the use of primary and secondary sources of data collection and collation in the reconstruction of this history.

***Key words:*** *Primary Agriculture, Development and Rural Women*

## **Introduction**

The importance of rural agriculture is felt in the supply of food needs for human existence and by extension the availability of raw materials for industrial activities which of course is referred to as the secondary form of agricultural production. Primary form of agriculture is however the basis of human existence as the fulcrum that provides food upon which human life is anchored. It is also a source of job creation and national wealth through exports of raw materials. Records have shown that in the colonial and immediate post-colonial eras in Nigeria, agriculture was Nigeria's pride of wealth due to its position in the export sector and wealth generation.

Agricultural potentials in Nigeria are spread across all states of the federation. However, due to the location of Benue State and availability of high quality and quantum of food and raw material resources generated in the state, it has been tagged the "food Basket of the nation"<sup>1</sup>. This by implication highlights the inescapable reality that nature has bestowed on the state the potential and capacity to providing not only the food need of the whole nation but a source of revenue through its agricultural output. In fact, Fansua posited that Benue has the capacity to be world food hub due to the dynamics of quality and quantum of food it produces on yearly basis.

The performance of agriculture is however dependent on the interactions between relations of production particularly labour. It is crucial to note that the state is endowed not only with good natural environment suitable for agriculture; it is also peopled with the most hardworking category of human species both male and female such as the Tiv, Idoma Igede etc. The state therefore earns its status of food basket of the nation from

the dexterity and commitment of its human endowment in bringing out the natural potentials into valuable ends.

Women in this sense, constitutes a significant part of the primary and mostly the crude and tedious form of farming processes that results to the generation of both food and cash crops that move across Nigeria. Regrettably extant literatures and past discussions relative to agricultural value chain in Benue State have projected and promoted men while little or nothing is said about rural women farmers. This study is focused on investigating the contributions of Tiv rural women farmers to the development of primary agriculture in Benue State. The study interrogates the role of rural women farmers in food and cash crop production in Benue State and highlights their challenges in agricultural enterprise.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

Since we will be dealing with the concepts, primary agriculture, development and rural women it is imperative to clarify their usage in the paper. Primary Agriculture means production and keeping of primary agricultural produce including harvesting and fruit collection, milking, animal rearing, fishing, hunting and collecting forest fruit and herbs, also the handling, transport and storage of primary products at the production site. It is the basic interaction between the farmer and his/her farm site and crops which normally leads to the cultivation and harvesting of crops, primary livestock production, primary forestry production and primary fishing production in their raw form. Primary production is the basis of achieving food security and wealth creation<sup>2</sup>. In Nigeria, 98 percent of farming is done in rural areas with the use of crude and traditional implements through manual labour.

Development means different things to different people at different times. Rodney<sup>3</sup>, viewed development at the individual level as something that implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-

discipline, responsibility and material wellbeing. Rogers in the same vein as cited in Uji<sup>4</sup>, describes development from the sociological perspective as a type of social change in which new ideas introduced within a social system produce higher per capita income and levels of living through more productive methods and improved social organization. This is the kind of development that applies to this scenario of Tiv rural women's participation in primary agriculture. Through the participation of women farmers, there has been a sustained increase in food productivity and revenue generation in Benue State.

Rural women: This refers to a group of women who live and operate in the remote areas or villages. According to the United Nations Development Programme, rural women account for one in four people on earth and on average for nearly half the agricultural labour force in developing countries<sup>5</sup>. Rural women are active agents of economic and social change and environmental protection who are, in many ways and to various degrees, constrained in their roles as farmers, producers, investors, caregivers and consumers. Due to the centrality of rural women in development, the United Nations had in 1996 set aside 15<sup>th</sup> of October every year as the International Day of Rural Women. This day is dedicated to the millions of women living in remote or rural places and celebrates the achievements and contributions of these women towards rural development and agriculture<sup>6</sup>

### **Tiv Rural Women Farmers and Food Production in Benue State**

In recent times, a major global focus has been on food security and poverty eradication. In the 1996 World Food Summit, the targets of the first Millennium Goal amongst others were to reduce between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffered from extreme hunger and people whose income was less than US\$1 a day. However, according to 2012 – 2014 study, the goal

was not appreciably achieved. To improve upon the goal and others, the United Nations Development Programme had in 2015 admonished for global improved farming strategies such as mainstreaming gender roles in agriculture, security of lives and the farming ecosystem, supply of farming inputs and the deployment of agricultural technology to locations with agricultural advantage. Gender Mainstreaming in agriculture entails complete removal of barriers against every human sex to enhance full access to farming inputs such as land rights and a support-based environment for both men and women farmers<sup>7</sup>. In most parts of the world, the contributions of the women farmers have not been adequately looked into. Women are still being relegated to the background concerning the issues of food production.

Since the creation of Benue State in 1976, contribution of Tiv rural women to Nigeria's food hub has remained significant in addressing the challenge of hunger and poverty. The agricultural performance that results to quantum of food production in Benue State has been the complex network of rural women participation in farming systems. Ityavyar<sup>8</sup> reports in 2010 that 70% of food that is produced in Benue State is done through the primary efforts of rural women farmers. Priscilla had in 2018 disputed this estimation that it does not reflect the current reality relative to the role of rural women farmers in food production which she stated was 85%. This argument corroborates the United Nation Development Programme statistics on the studies of agricultural performance in Nigeria which has shown that a lot of men leave their villages which are farming centres to work in the urban areas. The implication of this development is that farms, children and any other household function is left in the management capacity of rural women. According to this report the most affected geographical zones with this development in Nigeria are the South West, South-east and North-central regions<sup>9</sup>.

The participant observation of the researcher confirms this position in the case of Benue State and specifically in Tivland. Out of the 35 households visited for oral data in the course of this study, 23 have women as house heads who go to farm on daily basis as farmers. Out of this number, 16 have their husbands working in township areas of Lagos, Enugu, Calabar, Makurdi and Gboko while 6 lost their husbands and one was sick and could no longer go to farm. These families depend firmly on agriculture as the main sources of staple food and wealth creation. In this sense, women have taken over the management of farms in such families with tedious farm work showing visibly in their faces. With this development, women are in better position to supply more labor to do farm work and influence decision-making by providing the resources needed to acquire food to meet the food need of their families and the larger Benue society. The responsibility for getting food for the family shifts to women. This implies that a substantial food output and availability with a positive impact on the household income and food security in Benue State is controlled by rural women farmers.

According to Mrs Mwuese Igbetar<sup>10</sup>, a woman farmer at Tse-Mker, women apart from been major stake holders in food production, they are also transporters or carriers of farm produce on the head from the farm usually far away from the homestead. She has equally enumerated some of the farm activities performed by Tiv rural women in order of priority to includes, site identification and clearing, cultivation/tilling of the land, planting of seeds, weeding and fertilizer application. Other functions are harvesting, processing into usable form, transportation, storage of these food materials and distribution/marketing remains one of the primary agricultural duties of rural women farmers. The researcher found that the role of rural women farmers in Tivland has changed over time. Currently there is no

distinction of farming duties between men and women. In most cases, rural women have taken over agricultural duties that were initially considered male functions. These includes bush clearing, heaps and ridge construction. Farming roles are no longer gendered through the robust involvement of women over time<sup>11</sup>.

In this sense, Tiv rural women farmers are key workers in the Benue food chain; they produce process and store food. Tiv rural women are increasingly significant with regard to food security, even when they are not the primary breadwinners. The common food crops these women farmers produce are yam, cassava, corn, potatoes and pepper. These crops serve the demands of immediate family household for food and remnants are given out for sales. According to Nyityo<sup>12</sup>, due to the integration of the Tiv economy into a capitalist system, most food crops now serve both as cash crops and food needs. Though the mode of production remains at a subsistence level, remnants are normally accrued and marketed to care for family needs.

Land ownership; the portion of land given to a woman by the husband through marriage by her husband becomes her farm land by ownership and automatically inherited by her children therefore women in Tivland play a major role leading to land ownership. It can be referred to as 'Tsa u gom' in Tiv language meaning 'my mother's farm land'.

The farming techniques and skills of rural Tiv women farmers have undergone steady transformations for improved productivity over the years. They have sustained the strength and agility in farming for food production and processing since 1976. The researcher observes however that most of the foods produced by these women are lost to wastage due to a number of factors. This is in line with the United Nations Development Programme findings in sub-Saharan Africa which estimated that about 49% of perishable farm products are lost to wastage, due to lack of proper

markets, storage, and processors, and 26-33% of non-perishables, especially grains are lost during harvest, storage and transportation processes<sup>13</sup>. This means that despite the contributive efforts of Tiv rural women farmers in food production the food security status of Benue State is threatened if this trend is not address urgently.

### **Tiv Rural Women Farmers and Cash Crop Production**

Cash crop production is expanding per annum in Benue state due to a boost in its demand. The state is widely known as one of the major cultivators of cash crops mostly soybeans, rice, groundnut pepper and tomatoes and bambara nuts. The rural women farmers constitute a major production engine of these cash crops though on small-holder farms basis and not mechanized.

### **Women and Soyabeans Production**

Soyabeans is widely known to be cheap, easily available and a good source of protein compared with expensive animal protein. Soyabeans is now widely consumed and readily used in the production of crude vegetable oil, soya milk, soya yoghurt.

Benue state is widely known as one of the major cultivators of soyabeans. The rural farmers which are mostly women produce on small-holder farm basis averaging not many hectares, and as a result, not mechanized. The Technical Centre of Agriculture and Rural Cooperation stated in 2013 that out of ten soyabeans producers in Benue State, six are women. The role rural women play in the farming and processing of this crop is fundamental in the ranking profile of Benue State as the chief supply of soyabeans in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa. Tiv rural women are said to make up more than one-third of its entire workforce<sup>14</sup>.

Major areas with high percentage of women involvement in soyabeans production in Tivland are

particularly Mbatierev, Mbativ and Mbayion both in Gboko local government areas, Mbakor in Tarka, Masev in Gwer east, Tombo in Buruku and Shangev-Tiev in Konshisha local government area. Within these areas mentioned, Mbatierev district in Gboko Local Government Area and Mbakor of Tarka top the list of areas with high percentage of soyabeans production and marketing in Benue State. Women constitute 85% of the labour force for soyabeans production in these areas. Every woman either married or not within these areas is engaged in soyabean farming. Some have over 30 years' experience of farming this important cash crop<sup>15</sup>.

The techniques for farming this crop are changing with time and technology as, Movihinze Tsejime<sup>16</sup> explained in Ikpa-Mbatierev. In the past, farming process of soyabeans starts with site identification, pre-ridge making (*ushalen*) that would pave the way for the farmer to construct normal ridges. This process was tedious and more energy sapping. Today, with the introduction of bush clearing chemicals, soyabeans production starts with site identification and bush spraying with the required chemical and making of ridges then planting, weeding, fertilizer application and harvesting for onward processing. Women have effectively feature in all the farming processes nowadays beginning with bush spraying as earlier mentioned. Mrs Dzeremo<sup>17</sup> told the researcher that she has since mastered the art of mounting the jack spray. Generally, soyabeans cultivation starts in May/June with land clearing and harvesting which normally commences in late October through November every year<sup>18</sup>.

### **Women and Rice Production**

For years, women farmers have been the pillars of rice production among rice farming communities in Benue State, producing over 80% of total rice output. Women involvement in rice farming in Benue State varies according to local government areas. Food And

Agricultural Organisation estimated in 2015 that in almost all rice growing areas in Nigeria, men traditionally undertake such activities as land preparation, ploughing, irrigation and field-levelling. Women on the other hand are responsible for sowing, transplanting, weeding and crop processing. In Tivland however, oral information in corroboration with the researcher's participatory observation have revealed that rural women rice farmers participate in every form of the rice farming process. The percentage of labour supplied by women for rice cultivation varies depending on the position of the product in their local economies.

The Northern part of Tivland is the most dominant area with high number of women farmers consistently engaged in rice farming. These farms are usually small-sized, fragmented and scattered and not continuous land holdings and possess a great challenge to mechanization and commercialization<sup>19</sup>.85% of rural women farmers contacted for oral information in Northern Tiv areas of Guma, Makurdi and Gwer have at least 15 years of farming experience in rice production. This indicates that majority of the rural women farmers in this part of Benue State are well experienced rice farmers and according to Rachael Iorkile<sup>20</sup> this has some positive implications for increased production in Benue State. The high number of women engaged in rice farming is based on the choice of women who saw and embraced the potentials and economic value of rice production. The choice is also a reflection of the economic theory of cost advantage. The presence of river Benue and availability of fertile loamy soils are the driven forces for high level of rice production in Benue State.

Tiv rural women rice farmers are of various age groups of both young, old, energetic and enterprising with large household sizes, married, with much experience in rice production. This indicates that rice production is profitable for women farmers. Rice processing is another aspect of rice farming system that engages the attention of

rural women farmers. Production starts in May/June and last through August and September for late cultivation<sup>21</sup>.

### **Women and Groundnuts Production**

Groundnut (*Archis hypogaea* L.) is an important annual legume in Nigeria; it is mainly grown for oil seed, food, and animal feed. It is the chief crop rotation component in many Sub Saharan countries. Although current data revealed that groundnut production in Benue State is dropping due to a number of factors related to climate change and decades of poor yields, women have a recorded history of groundnut produced in commercial quantity in Benue State about a decade ago. In the early 2000s, groundnut was a major cash crop traded in major Tiv markets. Prominent groundnuts markets where Hausa and Igbo merchants bought the product in Tivland were Igbor, Aliade in Gwer, Akpagher, Yila-Luga, and Ikyunbur, Tse-Kucha, Tar-Ukpe in Gboko, Vandeikya, Ihugh, Tsar and Agbo in Vandeikya, Gbinde, Amaafu in Katsina-Ala, Biam, Tine-nune, Kyado in Ukum, Wannune in Tarka, Birji, Abua, Mbagen in Bururku, Adikpo in Kwande local government. Women contributed to over 80% of groundnut production<sup>22</sup>.

Today, the story is however no longer same as groundnut production is now centred in Southern and Eastern Tivland. Major producing areas with high women influence are Kunav in Vandeikya, Gaav in Konshisha, Ukum, Ushongo, Logo, Buruku and Katsina-Ala. Few women farmers still exists in Gwer west and east. The production of groundnut however declined significantly in Gboko, Tarka, Guma and Makurdi local government areas.<sup>23</sup>.

Gbue<sup>24</sup>, the state's chairman of the National Groundnut Producers, Processors and Marketing Association (NGPPMA), blames this decline on poor yielding seed variety, lack of modern equipment and inability to control diseases affecting the crop. Esther Apine<sup>25</sup> laments on the same vein that there are hardly

any incentives to groundnut farmers including women in the state to boost their production. According to Esther Apine, even when we were using local implements to farm groundnut, at least fertiliser was readily available for us to apply to get moderate harvest. But now, we have no implements or fertiliser". The biggest problem hindering the successful production of the crop is non-availability of good seedlings." Another woman farmer in Akapgher-Mbatiav Mwuese Gbateman<sup>26</sup> stated that the challenges affecting the production of groundnuts are enormous, listing also the inability of the farmers to access good seedlings and control of groundnut disease as crucial problems.

### **Women and Tomatoes/Pepper Production**

Tomatoes and pepper represent major grown vegetables in Benue State and they grow well and sell well. Tomatoes production is in stages beginning with primary bed rising. Seeds are pre-nursed for one or two months depending on the variety. In Tivland, women normally commenced this process between February and March. The major source of water at this stage is through manual irrigation. Due to the amount of water required for irrigation, nursery beds are normally sets along streams and river banks. Transplanting starts as soon as rainfall returns between April and May. Tomatoes and pepper are planted largely on ridges in the case of Benue State. The ridges are later raised again during fertilizer application. Tomatoes and pepper are planted sometimes twice in raining season within the interval of 3- 4months<sup>27</sup>.

Due to the dominance of women in the production of these crops, they are primarily look upon as women crops and as such 95% of tomatoes and pepper produced in Benue State is done by rural women farmers. In Tivland, these crops are farmed in large quantities in Central and Southern Tivland. Ipav, Yandev, Mbayion, Mbakor and Tombo in Gboko and Buruku local government areas

constitutes the major hub for pepper and tomatoes production in Tivland. Few quantities are produced in Ushongo and Vandeikya local government areas. A visit to Wannune, Tio-tu, Abua, Buruku, Tyowanye, Adogo, Tar-Ukpe, Tse-Kucha, Akpa-Agudo, Tyeku market, (July-september) huge tonne of pepper and tomatoes are thrown away for lack of buyers. The waste is as a result of lack of processing industries in the area. Women farmers suffer loses on yearly basis for this product in Benue State. This wastage however does not deter their pepper and tomatoes production which is on a yearly rise in Benue State<sup>28</sup>.

### **Women and Sesame (Benniseed)/ Melon Production**

Sesame seeds (or benniseed) are the seeds of the tropical annual *Sesamum indicum*. The species has a long history of cultivation, mostly for its yield of oil. The original area of domestication of sesame is obscure but it seems likely to have first been brought into cultivation in Asia or India. It is believed however that sesame and melon production in Nigeria probably began in the middle belt region of the country and later spread out.

Tivland was one of the earliest centres of sesame production with high yields during the colonial era. colonial records have shown that northern, eastern and southern Tiv areas were the major suppliers of sesame. Katsina-Ala, Zaki-Biam, Ihugh, Lessel, Daudu, Abinsi and Gbajimba dominated the areas with high production levels. Despite the drop in demand for the products in the post-colonial period, Northern Tivland still produces a reasonable tonnage of sesame and melon. Women constitute about 90% of the labour force in these farming process. Particular areas like Gbajimba, Naka and Tsue Dakar and other village markets in MINDA (Masev, Iharev and Nongov Development Association made up of Makurdi, Gwer-East, Gwer-West and Guma LGAs) axis are today major markets that supply sesame to the Benue economy. Women constitute a major labour force in the production

of sesame. Production starts from June/July while harvesting commences by Nov/December<sup>29</sup>.

### **Sources of Labour Mobilization for Tiv Rural Women Farmers**

Labour as a relation of production is a fundamental determinant of agricultural output. The availability of labour is the primary condition of agricultural production. Rural Tiv women farmers depends on a variety of labour sources for their farm work. The first source is the women farmer themselves. Other sources includes family labour; friends labour; hired labour; cooperative labour; rotational labour; and mechanized labour. Out of these, women farmers in Tivland prefer family labour to the other sources of labour because it is easily available, accessible and affordable. There is a significant relationship between the type of labour used and the size of one's farm cultivated; the bigger the size of the farm, the more the need for labour and thus the choice of hired labour sets in immediately. On the other hand, the smaller the size, the less need for labour and thus the use of family labour<sup>29</sup>.

Another major source of labour mobilization for Tiv rural women farmers according to oral view is rotational labour system where a group of two women and above normally organise themselves to work among members on rotational basis. Elizabeth Ordam<sup>30</sup> also a farmer who produces cassava and yam in Gwer east area reiterated this point during oral interview adding further that "with your money, one can also hire the labour services of energetic young men who would provide your required farm labour. This is in support of the submission of Yecho<sup>31</sup> who posited that following the introduction of money in the Nigerian economy by the British, source of labour for women depended majorly on hired labour. Yecho described hired labour as an act of given money for a group of people or a person to do farm work on your

farmland. The amount varies depending on the nature and size of the land to be worked on. This according to Yecho has made things favourable for Benue women farmers who hitherto had to suffer much for source of labour. This has now improved the production capacity of women greatly.

Changes observed were that traditional organization of labour system in the study area which were exchange system (ihumbe), communal cooperation (tom-lohon) and family labour were gradually been replaced by a combination of hired and family labour. The fact that this traditional organization of labour system was replaced could be attributed to the commercialization of labour for money (cash) due to the effect of the policy of taxation, marriage by cash dowry and other social endeavours which were hitherto achieved through other systems but now could only be achieved through the payment of the money (cash) as the only means of exchange<sup>32</sup>.

### **Challenges of Tiv Rural Women Farmers**

Rural women play important roles in agriculture and the rural society which is fundamental to agricultural and rural development in Benue State. Rural women are however disadvantaged in access to all factors of production and processing in spite of their involvement in farming generally. Yet as more men migrate to urban areas from rural areas, more women are left as household heads carrying out agricultural activities that provide basic needs for their families.

Major constraints to rural Tiv women in family farming as indicated by the women farmers include gendered land ownership, poor road network, poor extension agent farmer contact, high incidence of pests and disease infestation, inadequate transport facilities, unavailability of labour-saving technologies, low prices of farm product, lack of processing facilities especially in the case of pepper and tomatoes.

The factors which loaded high under institutional constraints include lack of collateral for securing loan, high cost of farm inputs such as fertilizer, etc. Lack of collateral for securing loans as well as high cost of farm inputs limits productivity due to the fact that rural women are resource poor and cannot afford the cost of improved varieties of crops and farm inputs such as fertilizer, etc. This confirms Saito<sup>33</sup> who stated that while both men and women smallholders lack sufficient access to agricultural resources, rural women generally have less access to resources than men. All these must change to improve the productive capacity of Tiv rural women farmers.

### **Conclusion**

We have shown in this study that the complex network of Tiv rural women farmers interaction with other productive relations like land results to substantial gains Benue State has recorded in food and value chain. The study examined dynamic roles of Tiv rural women farmers in the development of primary agriculture for food security and socio-economic growth in Benue State. The study found that existing studies have extrapolated largely the role of male farmers in food and cash crop production and relegated to the kitchen productive roles of women that have combined with men to earn the state the status of “food basket of the nation”. This has denied women their position in the scheme of things as major contributors to the nation’s food and value chain. The involvement of Tiv rural women farmers is significant in addressing common challenges of hunger and poverty in Benue State. The participation of these women is however characterised with gender issues, lack of credit facilities and wastage due to non-industrialization.

This study suggests therefore for an egalitarian society and removal of gender land ownership practices that favours the male against their female counterparts. It is also important that agricultural extension services and

programs of government and non-governmental organisations should target both male and female farmers in the rural areas to support and enhance their productivity. Government should earmark soft credit schemes for rural women farmers as support system. Women farmers should also form farmers cooperatives through which they can have a bigger voice to negotiate for better deals in their favour as farmers.

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