

# Gender Constraints And Media Use By Rural Women

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the gender constraints that are likely to impede upon rural women's utilisation of information for sustainable environmental development. Using a study sample of 600 rural women controlled for homogeneity on the basis of some socio-economic factors, the study reveals that majority of the women had access to information dissemination through media channels within their immediate vicinity; for example, radio and television. However, where access and exposure to media messages necessitated their movement outside their homes (as is the case with mobile cinema vans, annual tree growing campaigns, etc.), they were severely restricted by some socio-cultural and religious factors. Given these unique peculiarities of rural women in a predominantly Islamic setting, the paper concludes that if women are to be sufficiently informed and mobilised to actively participate in environmental rehabilitation efforts, attempts must be made to ensure that communication strategies adopted are not 'gender blind'. To achieve this, the paper calls for urgent need to identify and reduce or eliminate altogether these barriers to and constraints on women's media use.

## Introduction

Communication based on people's background, culture and basic knowledge is a crucial component of any development project. Consequently, it must be systematically planned and budgeted for and vigorously pursued and sustained. But as with development planning in general, there is a tendency to assume that development communication and information directed at a general audience will equally reach women. In other words, it seems to suggest that women have equal access to information as their male counterparts.

For one thing, inadequate data on and perceptions about women's contributions exist and currently hinder planning and decision-making. Thus, it is inconceivable that communication, which is as important as other components of development, will be designed to accommodate their unique situations. As Vajrathon (1990: 1) notes while citing studies during the United Nations Decade of Women (1976-1985);

Until now, men in all cultures have had both access to and control of the printing press, broadcast technology, computer-based technologies and production resources that determine the design and content of programmes. Traditionally, men have communicated through the media on behalf of all humankind, influencing public opinion, and bringing about political, economic and social change from their point of view. They fail to realise that women experience life quite differently; and so bring a uniquely female perspective to many issues of local as well as global importance.

This male dominance is enhanced by the assumption that the "male-defined reality" is the only reality; that political and economic systems created by men are superior, and that women must merely be drafted or conscripted into these systems as passive receivers of the benefits they offer. In this paper, we hope to identify some of these gender constraints that are likely to impede upon rural women's utilisation of information for sustainable environmental development. To achieve this, we shall attempt to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. How does gender affect the utilisation of mass-mediated afforestation information by the selected rural women?
2. What social-economic and religious factors determine gender-related media use?

3. To what extent have the women benefited from forestry extension services?

## Why focus on women?

A person does not walk very far or very fast on one leg; how can we expect half the people to be able to develop a nation? Yet the reality is that women are usually left aside when development needs are discussed and also when the methods of implementation are being decided upon.

-Julius Nyerere (1985).

In many developing nations including Nigeria, women constitute the majority of the population.

Though current aggregate of women in rural settings is not readily available, it may not be incorrect to conclude that with the accelerating rate of male migration to urban areas, women constitute the majority of rural population.

Besides their significant numerical strength, women have been seen to work at the very heart of developing nations' economies. Although estimates vary, the United Nations (1985) Report indicates that women account for 60 to 80 percent of the agricultural labour force in some parts of Africa, constitute one-half of the world's population, perform two-thirds of the world's work, but receive only one-tenth of its income and own less than one-hundredth of its property.

In Nigeria, women play a great role in economic activities. They constitute 70-80% of the labour force in the rural areas and between 20-25% of the active labour force in the urban areas. Their comparatively low percentage in urban labour force is attributable to the cultural and historical factors that have influenced and affected their development process. Until very recently, educational facilities and skill training have favoured men as women were traditionally denied equal opportunities. Consequently, women are often left behind as vertical mobility requires some paper qualifications.

Besides their active involvement in economic activities as producers, women have remained the reproducers and perpetuators of family tree. These double roles mark women as a very important sector of the Nigerian Society. Despite these immense contributions, women's central inputs to their communities are over looked by the designers of economic and social development programmes; and their production is often under-counted and

undervalued. The widespread deprivation of the rights of women, often as a result of the out-moded cultural practices and beliefs, has been largely responsible for this sordid state of their affairs.

Until very recently, Nigerian women have had to suffer various kinds of deprivations including landlessness, de-inheritance and outright denial of their fundamental rights to education. Although available data indicate that they contribute more to rural production than their male counterpart, yet women suffer worse disadvantages. They cannot inherit interests in land, they employ the same primitive technology as the men, and at the death of their husbands, they are denied access to property accumulated with their deceased spouses. Their abilities as useful members of the society are further stymied by the violation of their fundamental rights to the means of population which, as Nirebo (1988) notes are maintained by:

Legal, cultural and religious structures, all of which have a material base and through which the oppression of women has become socialized and institutionalised.

Women's inability to engage in more productive ventures is done to the exploitation and unremunerated of their labour which is often seen and equated to domestic labour which, traditionally, does not deserve to be remunerated.

As already noted, since inadequate data and misperceptions about women's contributions currently distant planning and impede decision-making, it is unlikely that the acquisition of and exposure to the means and resources of communication would accommodate their unique situations. In addition to the restrictions imposed by their high level of illiteracy, ignorance and poverty, women's position in the media use equation is further worsened by the pattern of location or centralisation of the means of production as well as communication in the urban areas. The results is that the "media systems have been found to be geared to the interest and tastes of the higher-status segments" (Ugboajah, 1980) and have been patterned to reflect wealth or the possession of the means of production which is essentially in the hands of the Nigerian male.

It is the light of this obvious denial of the fundamental rights of the women to information on matters that affects their lives that this paper seeks to

determine the role of gender and explore gender constraints on their media use. This is largely informed by the fact that in a patrilineal society, information on development may not "trickle down" from men to women, and thus, if women are to be influenced to participate in the development process, attempts must be made to reach them with relevant information.

#### Method

Women constituted the primary target group for this study. The study sample of 600 rural women was delimited to only areas where the Afforestation Programme is operated and respondents were controlled for homogeneity on the basis of occupation, marital status, religions, language, proximity to infrastructural inputs, change agency and to modern facilities. The secondary target group comprised the officials of the afforestation Projects who are directly involved in planning, implementing and evaluating the programme.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to evaluate the information dissemination processes utilized in the programme and to solicit information through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Questionnaires were also administered for the purpose of critically assessing the work plans and /or official documents and policies of the projects.

#### Data Presentation and Analysis

##### Research Question 1:

How does gender affect the utilisation of mass-mediated afforestation information by the selected rural women?

To answer this question, respondents were asked to identify the communication channels they had access to and/or were exposed to. This was necessary to determine whether they have equal access and exposure to communication channels as their male counterparts.

As shown on Table 1 below, even though only 192 (32%) respondents owned radio, about 500 (83.3%) actually listened to radio. On women's ownership of and access to television, only 59 (9.8%) owned television sets, while a significant number of 230 (38.3%) actually watched television.

**Table 1: Women's Access and Exposure to Mass Media Channels**

Responses	Ownership of radio	Do you listen to radio?	Ownership of television	Do you watch television?	Access to newspaper	Do people read to you?	Access to mobile cinema	Do you attend such shows?
<b>YES</b>	192 32.0%	500 83.3%	59 9.8%	230 38.3%	80 13.3%	96 16.0%	222 37.0%	121 20.2%
<b>NO</b>	408 68.0%	100 16.7%	541 90.2%	370 61.7%	520 86.7%	504 84.0%	378 63.0%	479 79.8%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100 %</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100 %</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100%</b>

**Source:** Author's Compilation

Asked whether they had access to newspapers in their community/village, 80 (13.3%) responded in the affirmative, while the rest did not have access. On whether they read or asked people to read newspapers to them, 96 (16.0%) responded positively, while a large number of 504 (84.0%) indicated that they do not. Their inability to read newspapers did not come as a surprise, since available data indicated that majority of the respondents lack formal education (Ogboodu-Tosanwumi, 1994).

Available data also showed that mobile cinema vans as communication channel featured prominently with 222 (37.0%) indicating that they had access to them, but only 121 (20.2%) actually attended such shows. Asked why they did not, 322 (53.6%) attributed this to restrictions imposed by their social-cultural milieu. Also, while 220 (36.7%) stated that they had no special reasons for non-participation, 37 (6.2%) attributed it to lack of time on their part, even as (3.5%) did not see the need to participate.

One deduction that may be made here is that access to some mass media channels has not been significantly related to exposure to messages disseminated through such channels. While it was

possible for the women to have access and exposure to mass media channels within their immediate environment, they lacked sufficient exposure to mass media channels that took them away from their homes and their relatives/neighbours' homes. This is the case with information disseminated through mobile cinema vans, where social-cultural factors such as restricted mobility outside the home have hindered exposure.

#### Research Question 2

#### What social-economic and religious factors determine gender-related media use?

To answer this question, respondents were asked to identify the interpersonal channels accessible to them in addition to the mass media channels already discussed. For example, they were asked to indicate whether they go to mosque/church for meetings, to the markets to buy and / or sell, and whether they attend annual tree growing campaigns and social-economic group meetings. These channels were selected because of their particular significance as veritable sources of information and social interactions (Ugboajah, 1982; Abubakar, 1987).

**Table 2: Women's Access and Exposure to interpersonal channels**

Responses	Do you go mosque/ church?	Do you go to the market?	Are you a member of any socio-economic or religious groups?	Do you attend Tree Growing Campaigns?
<b>YES</b>	144 24.0%	282 47.0%	450 75.0%	68 11.3%
<b>NO</b>	456 76.0%	318 53.0%	150 25.0%	532 88.7%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100 %</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100 %</b>	<b>600</b> <b>100 %</b>

**Source:** Author's Compilation

The women's responses include 144 (24.0%) and 282 (47.0%) for those, who go to mosque /church and markets respectively, and 68 (11.3%) for those who actually attend annual tree growing campaigns.

The reasons provided for their low participation at these interpersonal encounters included restrictions imposed on them by the Islamic religion. For example, on why they did not attend tree growing campaigns, 312 (53%) stated that they were not allowed to, while 180 (30%) explained that they hardly knew when it took place. Also, 50 (8.3%) had no special reasons for not attending, 37 (6.2%) indicated that they did not have to, while 21 (3.5%) attributed it to lack of time. However, unlike the situation with these preceding interpersonal channels, where low level of involvement was noticed, a significant number of 450 (75%) respondents were seen to belong to at least one social-economic or religious group that is essentially female in composition. The implication of this for information dissemination is that attempts need to be made to reach the women through the groups to which they belong.

### Research Question 3

To what extent have the women benefited from forestry extension services?

As already stated, the work-plans of the Afforestation Programme implementors were studied to determine, among other things the availability and adequacy of the forestry extension services provided and the extent to which women have benefited from them.

Available data indicated that forestry extension field-workers benefited from courses on Agroforestry extension. They were also exposed to general ways of creating awareness and publicising the projects' activities, but they lack relevant training and exposure on how best to persuade prospective adoptors to adopt an innovation. Also, no significant provision has been made for them to acquire relevant communication skills for designing appropriate and effective media support for reaching rural people in general and the rural women in particular. The general assumption, typified by the extensive use of mass media channels, has been that communication directed at a general audience would invariably "trickle-down" to the rural women. The result is that important socio-cultural inhibitions, which have serious implications for women's access to communication channels, have been over looked. On the adequacy of extension

services provided, available data showed that various factors have impeded rural women's access. These include limited number of field workers (an average of 25 in each of the three (3) states visited), the almost non-availability of female extension field-workers (one in each of the three (3) states), bad roads as well as inadequate transport systems.

### Discussion

As expected, gender has played a vital role in the utilisation of media messages by rural women. The general trend in traditional Nigerian Society, where women are, of necessity, subjugated in terms of their rights and privileges, has had noticeable effects on their pattern of media use.

From the study, it was found that majority of the women had access to information disseminated through media channels within their immediate vicinity; for example, radio and television. However, where access and exposure to media messages necessitated their movement outside their homes, they were severely restricted by their social-cultural as well as religious factors. This was the case with the mobile cinema vans and the annual tree growing campaigns that were extensively used by the Afforestation Project implementors. Also, because of the religious restrictions imposed on the women, only the divorced and aged women had access to information disseminated through the mosques as the others were restricted from attending regular meetings. Their inability to benefit from the markets as a veritable source of information is also a product of their socio-cultural milieu that confines women to the "purdah" and empowers their husbands to provide all they require for their family up-keep. The result of all these is that the women have had to rely on information that rarely "trickle-down" from their husbands and to wait endlessly for extension services that are almost non-existent.

Given this unique peculiarities of rural women in a predominantly Islamic setting, it is the thesis of this paper that if women are to be sufficiently informed and mobilised to actively participate in the development process, attempts must be made to identify and reduce or eliminate altogether these barriers to and constraints on their media use. This means that people involved in collecting and circulating data must design categories specifically to accommodate rural women's circumstances with all their value-laden and culture-bound practices. This is necessary to ensure that their communication strategies and policies are not "gender blind".

### Recommendations

As this study has attempted to show, rural women are highly disadvantaged in the use of media because of certain socio-cultural beliefs and practices that have been essentially anachronistic and inimical to their progress and contribution to national development. In order to redress this problem:

Ø It has become imperative that rural women be reached through the channels (for example, the interpersonal ones) that are readily and easily accessible to them as information has not been seen to “trickle-down” to them;

Ø Since unmotorable roads and inadequate extension field-workers, among other factors, also function to constrain women's participation in the rural areas, attempts need to be made to involve teachers, market women as well as other women organisations as volunteer workers in the mobilisation of women for development in general and environmental rehabilitation programmes in particular.

Ø This study also revealed that the impact of messages is greater when a multi-media and multi-channel approach is combined with the provision of and access to certain enabling services as roads, schools and socio-economic organisations in the community. This supports the theoretical assumptions that mass media messages unaccompanied by interpersonal reinforcement do not lead to attitude change and to effective development behaviour necessary to facilitate adoption of innovations. In the rural areas, where services and media receivers are few, interpersonal efforts by volunteer extension workers as recommended above could be used to arouse and sustain women's interest in development.

Ø It is also important for women to be actively involved in the designing as well as implementation and evaluation of innovation in order to forestall inconsistency and discrepancy that are likely to arise between women's felt needs and perceptions and the projects' priorities. Where this discrepancy is allowed to persist, women may be quite unprepared and unwilling to adopt the innovation. This clearly illustrates the dangers in ignoring or delaying a baseline survey and formative research.

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