

**ACCESS TO MICRO CREDIT AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT:  
PERCEPTIONS AMONGST MARKET WOMEN IN YENAGOA, BAYELSA  
STATE, NIGERIA**

**JACK, Jackson T.C.B**

Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Federal University Otuoke,  
Bayelsa State.  
jackjt@fuotuoke.edu.ng

And

**ROLAND, Vivian T.**

Vivian Roland Trust Fund, Nigeria.  
vivianroland57@gmail.com

**Abstract**

This paper examined the perceptions of market women on access to micro credit and economic empowerment in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. The study adopted the descriptive research design and a total of 180 market women were randomly selected from Swali, Opolo, and Tombia markets in Yenagoa. The study adopted the simple percentage method of data analysis especially the use of frequency tables. Findings show that market women have a low socio-economic status due to financial and cultural constraints that impede their entrepreneurial progress and by extension their economic empowerment. Also the study revealed that market women have little or no access to micro credit schemes largely due to inaccessibility to information, gender discrimination and rigid practices by available micro credit institutions. Following these findings, the study recommends the pursuit of wealth redistribution policies by the government, increased access to economic and political resources as well as eradication of all forms of gender discrimination as a sustainable approach to socio-economic empowerment of women in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State.

**Keywords:** Micro credit, Accessibility, Economic empowerment, Gender discrimination, Market women, Nigeria.

**Introduction**

Until recently, national planning and associated development programmes in Nigeria gave little or no attention to gender inequality and poverty amongst women. According to Odejide (in Garba, 1997:46) 'reform policies and programmes designed and implemented by the national government ignored the differential impacts on

women'. Given this scenario, the challenge of new development programmes is to address issues concerning women and seek ways to bridge these gaps (Nwanesi, 2006). In achieving this, provision of access to micro credit became one of such veritable tools for promoting economic empowerment amongst women. Micro credit, according to Latifee (2003) refers to programmes that are poverty focused and which provide financial and business services to very poor persons for generation of self-employment and income. The use of micro credit as an economic empowerment tool is a popular development strategy especially in developing countries, used not only by micro credit practitioners like the Grameen Bank, but governments, donors, development agencies, banks, universities, consultants, philanthropists and many others (Latifee, 2003). This approach to economic empowerment is argued to have the capacity to engender self-reliant and self-sufficient economic development especially within the micro non-formal sectors of the national economy (Nwanesi, 2006). It is a known fact that women play predominant roles in the non-formal sector of the Nigerian economy especially in areas such as petty trading of consumable goods and services, agricultural produce, artisanal activities among others. The contribution of women in the non-formal sector of the Nigerian economy cannot be over emphasized thereby providing a vista of immense benefits of promoting women's economic empowerment through micro credit scheme (Roland, 2015). It has become clear that empowering women economically does not only increase the wealth of the nation but also provide the necessary conditions for improved gender equality which enables women to have access to income as well as increased capacity for control of economic resources. In support of this, Izugbara (2004) suggests that access to savings and credit facilities potentially strengthens women's economic decision making capacity; improves their skills, knowledge, support networks and enhances their status in the society. The above assumptions is rooted in the belief that micro credit schemes enable women make economic investments and earn income with the potential to initiating series of 'virtuous spirals' of economic empowerment, increased well-being, social and political empowerment.

In pursuant of this, the Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE), an initiative of the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development in collaboration with the Nigerian Agricultural Cooperative and Rural Development Bank (NACRDB), the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) among others was set up as a funding window to help rural women in small businesses have access to business enabling grants. In addition, several other state government interventionist agencies and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) have opened windows of opportunities for rural women to access credit facilities while encouraging them to establish and join co-operatives as a means of accessing these funds easily.

Despite the intuitional attempts at galvanizing efforts to increase market women's access to micro credit financing, very little empirical researches have been done to show its linkage to the economic empowerment of women especially in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. In the light of this academic gap, this study aims to uncover the perceptions of market women in Yenagoa as it concerns access to micro credit schemes and economic empowerment.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- (i.) Determine the major sources of financial capital for market women in Yenagoa.
- (ii.) Determine if market women in Yenagoa have access to micro credit facilities.
- (iii.) Find out if there is adequate micro credit information available to market women.
- (iv.) Determine if increased access to micro credit will reduce poverty and empower market women.

### **Women in the Nigerian Economy**

In Nigeria, the contribution of women to the national economy is unquestionable as they are known to be effectively operating in several sectors including farming, trading, food production and preservation, fishing, craft and cottage industries, service provision and so on. Generally speaking, women's economic activities in Africa fall mainly into two categories: market trading and subsistence agriculture or farming. However, the inadequacy of mechanisms to transform these small scale businesses into formal economic structure and having access to existing supportive facilities becomes the major problem faced by these women. Interestingly, there are more than two hundred million women in Africa involved in different economic activities, but one group of women almost entirely peculiar to West Africa and particularly Nigeria is that of the market women (Ayittey, 2005; Nwanesi, 2006). In essence, these women immensely contribute to the general survival and sustainability of the West African region. For example, it is through market women that supplies are distributed or sold to a large percentage of the population in most metropolitan or rural areas. Market women who live in the towns as well as villages in Nigeria offer varieties of products and services: vegetables, meat, poultry, fish, spices, cooked food, baskets, cloths, shoes, cheap jewelry, tailoring and sewing and hairdressing (Roland, 2015).

However, market women in Nigeria and other developing countries are often confronted by diverse problems. Of all the challenges faced by female micro-entrepreneurs including market women, the lack of capital, especially in the start-up period, has always been identified as one of the most worrisome problems (ILO, 1997). Apart from lack of capital, market women also rate family issues, patriarchy and the general state of the nation's economy as some of the major obstacles they face (Roland, 2015). It is then obvious that insufficient capital implies that these market women lack strong purchasing and competitive power. Adapting to this precarious situation they face means relying on spouses, families, associates, and friends for initial and trading capital. This situation not only limits their capacity for self-sufficiency but their economic growth and sustainability.

### **Micro Credit Scheme and Women Empowerment**

As part of the quest to reduce poverty amongst women and reduce the gender disparity between men and women, the Nigerian government has sought to take several initiatives including the Better Life for Rural Women Programme initiated by former first lady, Maryam Babangida; Family Support Programme among others. These and

many more programmes initiated by governments and public agencies aimed at providing skills, inputs and start-up capitals geared towards linking women to the formal sectors of the economy occasionally end up becoming adhoc initiatives that are devoid of any sense of sustainability.

However, micro credit has proven to be a reliable tool to empower poor people economically. This is especially true for market woman when such micro credits are aimed at alleviating the constraints of capital and access to market. A 1995 United Nations report on Women Development alludes to the fact that there is a significant increase in interest in micro credit as a tool for promoting access to all factors of production and growth with greater equity. The report, deducing from the point of view that all economies rely upon the financial intermediary function to transfer resources from savers to investors, posit that the latent capacity of the poor (especially women) for entrepreneurship would be encouraged with the availability of small-scale loans that would introduce them to the small-enterprise sector. A review of several studies on the impact of micro credit schemes on women empowerment shows that micro credit schemes have significantly increased women's security, autonomy, self-confidence and status within the household (see: Kabeer, 1998; Iheduru, 2002; Yunus and Jolis, 2003). These studies argued that women who have gained confidence through micro credit are able to make good livelihood and household decisions, have control over resources and be able to use larger loans effectively to increase their incomes and make very good long-term clients, being capable of paying the interest rates needed. In the light of this, Yunus (2003:8) asserts: "...giving the woman control of the purse-strings was the first step in giving her rights as a human being within the family unit... A poor woman in our society is totally insecure... So given any opportunity at all, a poor woman in our society wants to build up her security... her financial security...". A similar study in Bangladesh, by Mahmud (2003 cited in Roland, 2015) re-assesses and reiterates these impacts on not only greater economic well-being of women but increasing women's choice and active agency in the attainment of greater well-being. Since the 1990s, a combination of evidence of high female repayment rates and the rising influence of gender lobbies within donor agencies and NGOs has led to increasing emphasis on targeting women in micro-credit programmes (Mayoux, 2002). In all, the beneficial use of micro credit is that increasing women's access to the schemes will in itself increase:

- i. Firstly, economic empowerment (increased income, control over income and access to resources), decreasing defaults, as women are more able to repay.
- ii. Secondly, well-being means women have more skills (e.g. literacy), time (less time lost through ill health of themselves and children, ability to afford labour-saving devices) and resources to contribute to the programme and to groups and
- iii. Thirdly, social and political empowerment which enhances economic empowerment and wellbeing and enables women to be more active in their programme involvement (because of decreased restrictions on their movements and contacts with men, greater organizational skill and network contacts).

Furthermore, Mayoux (2002) differentiated between women's 'practical needs' (economic empowerment) and 'strategic gender needs' (socio-political empowerment). While women's practical needs (for example, food, health, water, fuel, child care, education, improved technology) have to be met, they cannot be an end in themselves; mobilizing and organizing women to fulfill their long-term strategic interests is essential. In essence, women's access to savings and credit offers them a large economic role in decision-making through the choices they make concerning savings and credit. Ability to exercise control over these economic issues enhances women's well-being and the household's security. The access to saving and credit creates economic empowerment (practical gender needs) for women. In addition, a combination of women's micro-enterprise activities, increase in income generation, greater control over income will advance or increase wage employment, mobility and networking, status and ability to negotiate gender relations. Wider movements for social, political and legal change strengthen these changes. These factors will culminate into social and political empowerment (strategic gender needs). The micro credit scheme hence acts as an entry point for a wider strategy for women's economic and socio-political empowerment as it functions as a virtuous spirals and a springboard toward a holistic empowerment of powerless women.

### **Impediments to Women Empowerment in Nigeria**

Several factors act as impediments and barriers to women's economic and socio-political empowerment in Nigeria and these among many others include:

- i. Cultural factors such as patriarchy which perpetually keep women dominated by their male counterparts in the families, communities and society at large.
- ii. Discrimination along gender lines and unequal access to micro credit facilities hinder women economic empowerment
- iii. High cost of service delivery faced by the micro finance industry as a result of poor infrastructural development
- iv. Poor regulatory policies and institutional leadership within the micro finance industry contributes to its poor performance in servicing the needs of the poor especially women.
- v. Administrative corruption and diversion of loans and credit facilities to private pockets. Research evidences show that some of these loans are mostly diverted, politically motivated and sponsored; for example the case of Federal Ministry of Women Affairs 'Women Fund for Economic Empowerment' (Nwakaeze and Oguniyi, 2014) and 'National Poverty Eradication Programme' (Oluwatoyin, 2013). Most times, loans portfolio of these micro finance institutions show a large volumes of disbursement which did not really translate into the empowerment of women.
- vi. Loan repayment burdens in rare cases when credit facilities were secured.

### **Theoretical Framework**

While several theoretical perspectives have been utilized by other researchers in understanding micro credit accessibility, this study rests on the assumptions of the *Modernization Theory*. Modernization manifests in several but intertwined forms which include economic modernization, cultural modernization, political modernization and so on. The theory which utilizes a human development approach holds that adoption and diffusion of modern cultural attitudes such as gender egalitarianism and increased economic empowerment have the potentiality to increase self-reliance, improve human choices, democratic rights and self-actualization (Bell, 1999; Inkeles & Smith, 1974). This approach in relation to gender equality holds that economic development is central to increasing the pool of women eligible for positions of social power. In essence, increased economic development associates with a more broad based distribution of educational and occupational resources. Greater access to educational and occupational resources such as micro credit facilities increases women's chances of professional development, creating a larger pool of women eligible for power positions such as political office (Reynolds, 1999). At its core, the human development perspective links social modernization to emancipative values through changes in existential constraints. The theory highlights changes in modern societies particularly conducive to women's empowerment and therefore establishes a link between cultural modernity and publics that value greater equality between genders. A more recent strand of this theory emphasizes the conversion of economic development into a cultural process of human development that gives rise to an emancipative world view, reflected in self-expression values that emphasize human choice and autonomy, including the choices and autonomy of women. This rise in emancipative orientations develops mass expectations targeted at making elites responsive and inclusive. In this way, rising emancipative values lead to increases in women's empowerment throughout society and in parliament (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). Summarily, with regard to the relationship between economic modernization and cultural modernization, it implies here that the former will provide explanation to women's empowerment as it stresses the role of increasing human resources such as the utilization of micro credit in expanding the scope of social inclusion and human choice, whereas cultural modernity becomes pertinent in explaining higher stages of empowerment such as socio-political and decision making processes.

### **Materials and Methods**

The study was conducted among market women in Yenagoa located in the capital territory of Bayelsa State, with a total Area of 1'698 km<sup>2</sup> (656 sq. mi). English is the official language, but Epie/Attisa language, one of the Ijo languages, is the major languages spoken in Yenagoa. The major occupation of the people is fishing, farming and trading of which women are major participants in these economic activities. Other means of livelihood include hunting, lumbering, distillation, palm oil milling, building, and weaving.

In an attempt to investigate the phenomena under study, the descriptive research design was adopted. Three (3) markets were selected purposively for the survey and these include Swali market, Opolo market, and Tombia market. These markets were

selected on purpose due to their reputation as the largest and most lucrative markets in Yenagoa. One hundred and eighty (180) market women participated in the study. This distribution was gotten as 60 respondents were randomly selected and administered structured questionnaires in each market making a total sample size of (n=180). A descriptive analysis of the data collected were done using frequency distribution tables with the aid of the simple percentage statistics. Ethical consideration was fully adhered to during the field work as participant’s voluntary consent was fully sought and their right to anonymity respected.

**Results and Discussions**

The analyses of the results of the study was presented and discussed subsequently in two sections below; the first focused on the socio-economic status of the sampled market women and the second analyzed their perceptions on micro credit and empowerment.

**1. Socio-Economic and Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

The socio-economic and demographic status of the respondents were presented and analyzed in table 1 below. With regards to age distribution of the respondents, 13.9% of the respondents are between the ages of 15-30; 25% between the ages of 31-45; 38.9% between the ages of 46-60; whereas 22.2% of them fell within the age range of 61 years and above. An analysis of the marital status of the respondents revealed that 13.9% are single; 11.1% are either divorced or separated; 33.3% are widows whereas a larger percentage (41.7%) of the respondents is married. This implies that over 86.1% of the respondents have families. Likewise, with respect to the family or household size of the respondents, the table reveals that the largest percentage of the respondents (44.5%) are of the household size between 5 - 9 persons; followed by 25% with a household size of 10- 14 persons; whereas 22.2% of the respondents have a household size of less than 5 persons; with only 8.3% having a household size of 15 persons and above. This invariably implies that majority of the respondents (77.8%) belong to larger households.

**Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Socio-Economic and Demographic Characteristics**

Variables	Frequencies (n=180)	Percentages	Variables	Frequencies (n=180)	Percentages
<b>Age</b>			<b>Monthly Income</b>		
15-30	25	13.9	Below N10,000	60	33.3
31-45	45	25	N10,000 – 30,000	95	52.8
46-60	70	38.9	N31,000 – N50,000	15	8.3
61 and above	40	22.2	N51,000 and above	10	5.6
<b>Marital Status</b>			<b>Educational Status</b>		
Single	25	13.9	Tertiary	15	8.3
Married	75	41.7	Secondary	25	13.9
Divorced/Separated	20	11.1	Primary	85	47.2
Widowed	60	33.3	No Schooling	55	30.6
<b>Household Size</b>					
Below 5 Persons	40	22.2			
5 – 9 Persons	80	44.5			
10 – 14 Persons	45	25			
15 Persons and above	15	8.3			

Source: Field Data, 2016

Furthermore, the socio-economic status of the respondents was measured using their average monthly income. The information derived was indeed revealing. For instance, 33.3% of the respondents earn an average monthly income below N10, 000; with a huge 52.8% earning a monthly average income of N10, 000 – 30,000; whereas 8.3% earn between N31, 000 – N50, 000 and a meager 5.6% earn N50, 000 and above. This implies that a majority of the market women have a very meager monthly income from the returns they get from their trade and with a majority of them having a large family size suggesting a mismatch between income and household size which is most likely indicative of economic poverty amongst them.

Lastly, the educational status and qualifications of the respondents were analyzed and the data reveals that the largest percentage of the respondents 47.2% have primary education; 30.6% of them have no form of formal schooling; whereas 13.9% of them have secondary education; with the least 8.3% having attained tertiary education. This strongly implies that majority of the respondents do not have higher education.

From the foregoing analysis of the socio-economic data, it is deducible here that the market women of Yenagoa are largely facing huge financial capital limitations to induce growth in their businesses with meager average monthly income of about N10,000 – N30,000. This is partly due to their lack of business and financial management skills, limited fund raising capacity which is also related to their low educational qualifications and dispositions. Furthermore, poor education disposes them to having large family sizes and this further puts financial pressure on them thereby creating a circle of economic poverty and socio-political dis-empowerment.

## **2. Respondent's Perception of Micro Credit and Economic Empowerment**

The respondents' perceptions of access to micro credit schemes and economic empowerment are presented below in table 2 and analyzed subsequently. This analysis is done in four sub categories based on information drawn from and reflective of the objectives of the study.

Respondents were asked the source of finance for their businesses, the analysis showed that a majority, 47.2%, rely on their personal savings to raise capital to start and maintain their businesses; similarly 33.3% rely on borrowings from friends and relatives; however, 13.9% raise fund from thrift association contributions locally known as 'Osusu' or 'Akawo'; while only a meager 5.6% suggests to have obtained loans from micro finance agencies and market cooperatives. This finding is rather alarming that only 5.6% of the market women have benefited or raised money from micro credit loans offered by the government, financial institutions and non-governmental organizations. This implies that market women largely rely on informal sources of raising capital to start and maintain their business such as personal savings and borrowing from friends, relatives and cooperatives.

Secondly, when asked if there is adequate access to the funds set aside for market women under the several government and non- governmental micro credit schemes, the analyses showed that a massive 86.1% of the respondents disagreed to this assertion, whereas only 5.6% agreed to the assertion that there is adequate access to these funds; while the remaining 8.3% were indifferent. The finding reveals that a huge

majority of the market women have never benefited or accessed any micro finance facility to aid their business.

**Table 2: Perceptions of Access to Micro Credit Schemes and Economic Empowerment**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency (n=180)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Source of finance for business</b>		
Personal Savings	85	47.2
Thrift Contribution	25	13.9
Micro Credit Loan	10	5.6
Personal Borrowings	60	33.3
<b>Access to funds from micro finance agencies for women economic empowerment</b>		
Yes	10	5.6
No	155	86.1
Uncertain	15	8.3
<b>Micro credit schemes information for women</b>		
Yes	12	6.6
No	158	87.8
Uncertain	10	5.6
<b>Increase in access to micro credit reduce poverty and empower market women in Yenagoa</b>		
Agree	165	91.7
Disagree	0	0
Uncertain	15	8.3

**Source:** Field Data, 2016

A further inquiry raised the third question which sought to know if the respondents do have adequate access to information regarding micro credit schemes. The data analyses showed that whereas 6.6% of the respondents said yes to the assertion, a significant number 86.1% of the respondents said no, while the remaining 5.6% were uncertain. This implies that there is no adequate information dissemination by the government and the micro finance institutions to the grass-root concerning the availability of loans and grants, how to access them, repayment plans, collateral demands etc. The issue of the few who get to acquire such information is compounded by the rigidity associated with the processes and mechanisms of securing these facilities and administrative corruption as well as nepotism in the micro credit industry

Finally, respondents' perceptions were sought on whether increased access to micro credit schemes will reduce poverty and empower market women in Yenagoa. The data analyses revealed that whereas none disagreed with this assertion, over 91.7% of the respondents agreed to the assertion, while 8.3% of the respondents were uncertain.

This finding implies that an increase in the access to micro credit will necessitate an increase in economic empowerment and reduction of poverty amongst market women.

### **Conclusion**

The use of micro finance as a tool for economic empowerment and poverty reduction has been accentuated to bridge the ever widening gender disparity along the lines of socio-economic and socio-political indicators such as wages, income, health, skills, education, and poverty in Nigeria. Women's lack of access to ownership and control of resources has been the bane to their social, political and economic empowerment. However the overall aim of this study which is to uncover the perceptions of market women concerning micro credit and women empowerment schemes has shown that the schemes have not been beneficial to them. The funds allocated do not trickle down to the targeted recipients and economic empowerment can mostly be described as a sham.

### **Recommendations**

Following the findings and conclusion reached in this study, the following recommendations have been proffered:

1. Government should endeavor to promote economic policies that are devoid of gender discrimination against women. This would at least promote a gender bias-free economic atmosphere that would ensure the competitiveness of women in terms of access to credit facilities for businesses.
2. Micro finance institutions' operations should be reformed to be more inclusive, more accessible, and less rigorous with adequate supervisions and tracking.
3. Lastly the government instead of utilizing a welfarist approach of poverty reduction should adopt a wealth redistribution approach to the marginally disadvantaged groups especially women as this will increase their access to resources, economic empowerment including social and political freedoms.

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