



Nutritional Deficiency and Women Empowerment in Agriculture: Evidence from Nigeria

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The context

Equitable allocation of resources to both men and women can increase smallholder productivity and reduce poverty incidences (FAO, 2010 in IFPRI and ILRI, 2015). In Nigeria, only 10% of women are agricultural landholders. They are often disadvantaged as customary practices and cultural barriers prevent them from inheriting or owning land (AfDB, 2015).

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The Nigerian tenure system as instituted in the Land Use Act of 1978 does not explicitly state that women have equal rights to land as men. Therefore, women are disenfranchised in the allocation of land. The country's "National Strategic Plan of Action for Nutrition (2014-2019)" acknowledged malnutrition and other nutrition-related diseases as lingering challenges of public health in the country and plans to reduce women anaemia by half in 2018. This goal and others were not achieved, as Nigeria still ranks among the top five countries with the largest anaemic women (Development Initiatives, 2017). The minimal ownership of agricultural land by women may be primarily responsible for their poor nutrition.

Greater efforts are required if Nigeria is to achieve Goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition by 2030.

The problem

The planned interventions in the Nigerian National Strategic Plan of Action for Nutrition (2014-2019) were not premised on empirical evidence, leaving their true impact on desired outcomes limited.

It has been shown that nutrition responds differently to varying dimensions of women empowerment. It is therefore important that policy interventions meant to empower women and improve their nutrition should be based on understanding of which specific domains of empowerment are relevant for nutritional outcomes (Malapit and Quisumbing, 2015).

There is scanty empirical evidence on the women empowerment-nutrition nexus in Nigeria; a country where nutritional challenges among women and children are enormous. Existing studies in this area are outdated, lack relevance for current policy guidance (e.g. Smith et al., 2003), not nationally representative and adopted a different empowerment measure from what our study adopted. This therefore calls for more studies in this area to ensure that policies aimed at improving women and child nutrition are well-targeted and are founded on credible and current empirical evidence.

The rationale

In Nigeria, women access to agricultural land is poor. Only 10% of women are agricultural landholders. Since women largely dominate the agricultural sector in Nigeria, accounting for more than 60% of the work force², it suggests that their dis-

2 See SOFA Team and Doss (2011) on "The Role of Women in Agriculture". ESA Working Paper No. 11-02

empowerment through lack of access to agricultural land may negatively affect their income generation, poverty status and nutrition. It is therefore worthwhile examining this link.

Although nutritional outcomes of women and children are improving in Nigeria, they still fall below acceptable international standards. In 2016, Nigeria had the fourth largest number of anaemic women (age 15-49 years), accounting for 50% of the women population (Development Initiatives, 2017). In addition, prevalence of overweight (i.e. Body Mass Index ≥ 25) for women was 40% in 2014.³

Method of analysis

The study from which this policy brief is based on adopted the 2010/2011, 2012/2013 and 2015/16 Living Standards Measurement Study-Integrated Survey on Agriculture (LSMS-ISA) for Nigeria. The longitudinal characteristic of the data enabled us monitor changes in the nutritional pattern of households over time. Since our study focused on women empowerment in agriculture, our sample was restricted to households whose primary or secondary occupation is agriculture and has at least a woman in the household within the reproductive age 15-49 years.

Findings

The results show that women land ownership is not sufficient to increase their calorie intake and, consequently, their nutritional improvement. Access to land must be complemented with the use of farm inputs for it to have impact on women's calorie intake. Women who had access to land and complemented it with technology and herbicides were more likely to increase their calorie intake by about 8% compared to women with land, but do not have access to these inputs.

In addition, women who had access to fertile land are more likely to increase their energy calorie intake by 9.9% compared to those who do not have access to fertile land. The use of improved seeds increases women calorie availability compared to the use of local seeds. The findings show that women who held land that has secured rights will increase their calorie intake by almost 35% more than those who held insecure lands. The large magnitude of the coefficient points to the relative importance of land securitization more than any other farm inputs.

Women's access to land has positive impact on the nutritional status of their children through use of farm income to purchase nutritious diet and consumption of own-farm

3 Development Initiatives (2017).

produce. Boys are more likely to be underweight and stunted compared to girls. This shows that girls respond better to women empowerment reforms. This has positive implications for gender mainstreaming.

Implications for policy makers

Several lessons can be drawn from this study. The first is that the impact of women landholding on their calorie intake is strongly observed when land is held jointly with agricultural inputs and there exists land secure rights. Landholding by women is necessary but not sufficient to improve their nutritional calorie intake. This finding reiterates the policy argument that women access to land must be complemented by access to key agricultural inputs to fully harness the benefits of landholding. In this respect, it is important that the proposed revision of the “National Strategic Plan of Action for Nutrition (2014-2019)” models into it, women joint holding of land and other agricultural inputs. In addition, the proposed amendments to the Land Tenure Act should also consider women, not only as landowners, but also as holders of other agricultural inputs.

Another inference from our findings is that since women are not favoured in the allocation of land due to communal practices or lack of implementation of existing legal rights, it is important that they have access to secure land. This would ensure optimal investment on the quality of soil and consequently its productivity, which would increase their calorie intake. One way of doing this effectively is to promote and legislate joint spousal holding of land in Nigeria.

Thirdly, dietary diversity plays an important role in increasing the calorie intake of women. Policy interventions through food programmes aimed at women should incorporate diversity in diets, thereby ensuring that women in the reproductive ages get adequate calorie requirement.

Another notable inference from the study is that women empowerment has a differential impact on boys’ and girls’ anthropometry, in the favour of the latter. The implication is that since women empowerment is likely to have more beneficial impact on girls’ stunting and underweight, improving girls’ nutrition can be considered low hanging fruits during intervention programmes.

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