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Role of Adult Education Programmes in Promoting Skills Acquisition and Women Empowerment in Rural Communities in Rivers state

Hailsham, Sax Fubara Lolo^{1*}

Department of Adult Education and Community Development
Faculty of Education, Rivers State University

Dr. Nyeche Gloria Joyce²

Department of Adult Education and Community Development
Faculty of Education, Rivers State University

Abstract

This study examines the role of adult education programmes in promoting skills acquisition and women empowerment in rural communities of Rivers State. Adult education has become a critical instrument for addressing challenges such as illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, and gender inequality, particularly among rural women who often have limited access to formal education and economic opportunities. The study highlights how adult education programmes provide women with functional literacy, vocational training, entrepreneurial skills, and health education necessary for improving their socio-economic well-being. The paper conceptualizes adult education as a lifelong learning process that equips adults with knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes for personal and community development, while skills acquisition is seen as a means of developing practical and income-generating competencies for self-reliance. Findings from the study reveal that adult education programmes significantly contribute to economic self-reliance, poverty reduction, improved literacy levels, enhanced employment opportunities, entrepreneurial development, social inclusion, and improved family welfare among rural women. The study concludes that strengthening adult education programmes through improved funding, capacity building, partnerships, and policy support is essential for achieving sustainable women empowerment and rural development. It recommends that government and stakeholders intensify efforts to expand access to adult education and skills acquisition programmes as a strategy for promoting inclusive growth and socio-economic transformation.

Keywords: Adult education, skills acquisition, women empowerment, rural development, Rivers State.

***Corresponding Author:**

Hailsham, Sax Fubara Lolo

Email: lolo.hailsham@rsu.edu.ng

Introduction

Adult education has become one of the most significant instruments for promoting socio-economic transformation, poverty reduction, and sustainable development across developing nations. In many African countries, particularly Nigeria, adult education serves as a major strategy for addressing the persistent challenges of illiteracy, unemployment, gender inequality, social exclusion, and economic dependency among rural populations (Akinpelu, 2002; Nzeneri, 2010). The importance of adult education has increased in recent years due to the growing recognition that formal education alone cannot adequately meet the educational and developmental needs of adults, especially women living in underserved rural communities (UNESCO, 2016). Consequently, governments, non-governmental organizations, and international development agencies have continued to promote adult education programmes as viable tools for empowering disadvantaged groups and improving their living conditions.

In Rivers State, many rural communities still experience high levels of poverty, unemployment, low literacy, and inadequate access to socio-economic opportunities. Women in these communities are often the most affected because of cultural barriers, poor educational backgrounds, limited access to productive resources, and restricted participation in decision-making processes (Okorie, 2015). Traditional societal practices in some communities also limit women's access to formal education and economic opportunities, thereby reinforcing dependency and marginalization (Eya, 2018). As a result, many rural women engage in low-income economic activities that do not provide

sufficient income for sustainable livelihood and family development.

Adult education programmes have therefore emerged as essential mechanisms for improving the conditions of women in rural communities. Adult education refers to all organized educational activities and learning experiences designed for adults outside the formal school system with the aim of developing their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies for personal and societal advancement (UNESCO, 2016). According to Akinpelu (2002), adult education is a lifelong process through which adults acquire functional knowledge and practical skills necessary for effective participation in social, political, and economic activities. Similarly, Nzeneri (2010) describes adult education as an educational process aimed at helping adults improve themselves intellectually, vocationally, socially, and economically.

Adult education programmes in Nigeria include literacy education, continuing education, vocational and technical training, entrepreneurship education, health education, agricultural extension programmes, civic education, digital literacy, and community development initiatives (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). These programmes are specifically designed to address the educational deficiencies of adults while equipping them with practical skills that can improve their productivity and quality of life. Through such programmes, rural women gain access to employable skills, entrepreneurial knowledge, and income-generating opportunities that enable them to become economically self-reliant and socially empowered.

Skills acquisition is one of the major objectives of adult education programmes in

rural communities. Skills acquisition involves the process of training individuals to obtain practical and technical competencies required for employment, self-reliance, and productivity (Olaitan, 2005). In many rural communities of Rivers State, women participate in adult education programmes to acquire vocational skills such as tailoring, catering, fish farming, poultry farming, crop production, hairdressing, bead making, soap production, fashion designing, weaving, baking, ICT operations, and small-scale business management (Okafor, 2014). These skills enable women to establish micro-enterprises, generate income, support their families, and contribute to local economic development.

Women empowerment is another critical outcome of adult education programmes. Women empowerment refers to the process of enabling women to gain access to education, economic resources, social opportunities, and decision-making powers that improve their status and participation in society (Kabeer, 1999). Empowerment enhances women's confidence, self-esteem, leadership capacity, and economic independence. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020), empowering women contributes significantly to poverty reduction, child welfare, food security, and community development. Adult education programmes therefore provide women with opportunities to overcome illiteracy, dependency, and social exclusion while promoting active participation in development activities.

In rural communities of Rivers State, adult education programmes have increasingly contributed to women empowerment through practical skills training and entrepreneurship development. Many women who previously depended solely on subsistence farming or

family support now engage in productive ventures after participating in adult education initiatives. Through vocational and entrepreneurial training, women acquire competencies that enable them to establish businesses, manage finances, improve family income, and contribute meaningfully to community development (Egunyomi, 2018). In addition, literacy education programmes help women develop communication skills, improve record keeping, and increase awareness of health, civic responsibilities, and environmental sanitation.

Adult education programmes also contribute to social transformation in rural communities by promoting gender equality, reducing unemployment, and enhancing community participation. Educated and economically empowered women are more likely to participate in local governance, community associations, cooperative societies, and leadership activities (Nwosu, 2017). They also tend to support the education of their children and promote positive social values within their families and communities. Furthermore, women who acquire vocational and entrepreneurial skills become less vulnerable to exploitation, domestic violence, and extreme poverty.

Despite the enormous contributions of adult education programmes to women empowerment and skills acquisition, several challenges continue to hinder their effectiveness in rural communities of Rivers State. These challenges include inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, shortage of trained facilitators, insufficient instructional materials, low awareness, cultural barriers, and lack of access to credit facilities for trained women (Obidiegwu, 2016). In many cases, women who successfully acquire vocational skills lack financial support to

establish businesses or expand their economic activities. Similarly, inadequate government commitment and weak implementation of adult education policies often limit programme sustainability and effectiveness.

Nevertheless, adult education remains a critical tool for promoting inclusive development and improving the socio-economic conditions of rural women in Rivers State. Through literacy programmes, vocational training, entrepreneurship education, and community development initiatives, adult education continues to empower women with relevant skills and knowledge necessary for self-reliance and sustainable livelihood. Therefore, strengthening adult education programmes through improved funding, policy implementation, infrastructural development, and stakeholder collaboration is essential for achieving women empowerment and sustainable rural development in Rivers State and Nigeria at large.

Concept of Adult Education

Adult education is a vital component of lifelong learning that focuses on providing educational opportunities for adults outside the formal school system. It is concerned with the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and competencies that enable adults to improve themselves socially, economically, politically, and culturally. Adult education is designed to meet the educational needs of mature individuals who may not have had the opportunity to complete formal education or who require additional knowledge and skills for personal and community development. It plays a significant role in enhancing human capacity, reducing poverty, promoting social inclusion, and fostering sustainable development in society.

According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2016), adult education refers to all forms of organized learning activities undertaken by adults for the purpose of improving their technical, vocational, professional, academic, and social competencies. UNESCO further emphasizes that adult education is an integral part of lifelong learning because it enables adults to continuously adapt to changing social, economic, and technological conditions. Similarly, Knowles (1980) defines adult education as a process through which adults engage in systematic and sustained learning activities in order to gain new forms of knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills necessary for effective functioning in society.

In the Nigerian context, adult education is regarded as an important instrument for national development and social transformation. The Nigeria National Policy on Education recognizes adult and non-formal education as an essential aspect of the educational system aimed at eradicating illiteracy, improving vocational competence, and promoting functional citizenship (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Adult education programmes in Nigeria are designed to help individuals who are outside the formal school system acquire functional education and practical skills for self-reliance and societal participation.

Adult education encompasses various forms of learning activities intended to improve the quality of life of adults. These programmes are usually flexible, learner-centered, and community-oriented. They address the immediate needs of learners and focus on practical knowledge and skills acquisition rather than purely theoretical instruction. According to Akinpelu (2002), adult education is not limited to classroom teaching

but includes all educational processes that help adults develop their potentials and contribute meaningfully to society. Nzeneri (2010) further explains that adult education is concerned with empowering adults intellectually, economically, socially, and politically.

One major aspect of adult education in Nigeria is functional literacy education. Functional literacy programmes are designed to help adults acquire basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills that can improve their daily living and occupational activities. Literacy enables adults to communicate effectively, keep business records, read health information, and participate actively in community affairs (Omolewa, 1981). Functional literacy education is particularly important in rural communities where illiteracy levels are relatively high among women and economically disadvantaged groups.

Another important component of adult education is vocational and technical education. This aspect focuses on equipping adults with practical and technical skills required for employment and self-reliance. Vocational training programmes include tailoring, hairdressing, catering, carpentry, welding, fish farming, soap making, fashion designing, ICT training, and agricultural production (Olaitan, 2005). Through vocational education, adults acquire employable skills that improve their income-generating capacities and reduce unemployment and poverty.

Continuing education is also an essential area of adult education. Continuing education provides opportunities for adults to continue learning after completing formal education or while engaged in employment. It includes

professional development programmes, remedial education, distance learning, correspondence studies, and in-service training programmes. Continuing education enables individuals to update their knowledge and skills in response to societal and technological changes (Fasokun, 2006).

Community development education is another significant aspect of adult education in Nigeria. This form of education is aimed at mobilizing community members for active participation in social, economic, and political development activities. It promotes collective action, self-help projects, leadership development, environmental sanitation, health awareness, and rural transformation (Nwosu, 2017). Community development education encourages people to identify their problems and work together toward achieving sustainable solutions.

Entrepreneurial education has also become a major component of adult education due to increasing unemployment and economic challenges in Nigeria. Entrepreneurship education equips adults with managerial, financial, and business skills necessary for establishing and sustaining small-scale enterprises. It promotes innovation, creativity, and self-employment among adult learners (Ekpenyong, 2011). Entrepreneurship education is particularly relevant for women empowerment and poverty reduction in rural communities.

Women empowerment programmes form another important dimension of adult education. These programmes are designed to improve the social, economic, educational, and political status of women. Through adult education, women acquire literacy skills, vocational competencies, leadership abilities, and entrepreneurial knowledge that enhance

their participation in community development and decision-making processes (Okorie, 2015). Women empowerment programmes also promote gender equality, self-confidence, and economic independence among rural women.

Agricultural extension education is equally important within the framework of adult education in Nigeria. Agricultural extension programmes provide farmers with modern farming techniques, improved crop management practices, animal husbandry skills, storage methods, and access to agricultural innovations. These programmes help rural farmers improve productivity, food security, and income generation (Oduaran, 2000). In many rural communities, adult education centres collaborate with agricultural agencies to train women and farmers on improved agricultural practices.

The major objective of adult education is to improve the quality of life of adults and enable them to contribute meaningfully to national development. Adult education seeks to eradicate illiteracy, reduce poverty, promote economic self-reliance, enhance civic participation, and foster social integration. It also aims at developing human resources, promoting lifelong learning, and preparing adults to cope with societal changes and challenges (UNESCO, 2016). Through adult education programmes, adults become more productive, self-confident, informed, and capable of participating actively in social, economic, and political activities.

Adult education also contributes significantly to sustainable development by empowering individuals with relevant knowledge and practical skills. Educated adults are more likely to participate in democratic processes, improve family welfare, support children's

education, adopt healthy lifestyles, and contribute to peaceful coexistence within their communities (World Bank, 2019). In rural communities especially, adult education serves as a powerful tool for community transformation and socio-economic advancement.

Despite its enormous importance, adult education in Nigeria continues to face several challenges, including inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, shortage of trained facilitators, low public awareness, and weak policy implementation. Nevertheless, the growing recognition of the importance of lifelong learning has continued to increase support for adult education programmes by government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and international development partners.

Concept of Skills Acquisition

Skills acquisition is an important aspect of human capital development and socio-economic empowerment in modern society. It refers to the process through which individuals learn and develop practical abilities, technical competencies, vocational expertise, and entrepreneurial capacities needed for productive engagement, employment, and self-reliance. Skills acquisition involves systematic training aimed at equipping individuals with knowledge and hands-on experience necessary for performing specific tasks effectively and efficiently. It is considered a major strategy for reducing unemployment, poverty, and economic dependency, especially among rural populations and disadvantaged groups.

According to Olaitan (2005), skills acquisition is the process of developing practical and manipulative abilities through organized training and experience for productive work

and sustainable livelihood. Similarly, Ekpenyong (2011) describes skills acquisition as the process of obtaining vocational and technical competencies that enable individuals to become self-employed and economically productive. Skills acquisition emphasizes practical learning, innovation, creativity, and problem-solving abilities that can improve individual productivity and societal development.

In developing countries such as Nigeria, skills acquisition has become increasingly important due to rising unemployment, poverty, economic instability, and limited access to formal employment opportunities. The inability of the formal educational sector to provide adequate jobs for graduates has made vocational and entrepreneurial skills essential for survival and economic independence (Akinpelu, 2002). Consequently, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions have continued to promote skills acquisition programmes as tools for poverty alleviation, youth empowerment, women empowerment, and national development.

Skills acquisition programmes are commonly integrated into adult education and non-formal education initiatives because they provide adults with opportunities to learn practical skills outside the formal school system. Adult education centres in rural communities organize vocational training programmes that help individuals acquire employable and income-generating skills relevant to their local environment and economic needs (Nzeneri, 2010). These programmes are often learner-centered and community-based, focusing on practical competencies that can improve the living standards of participants.

One of the major objectives of skills acquisition is to promote self-reliance and entrepreneurship. Individuals who acquire vocational and technical skills are better equipped to establish small-scale businesses, create employment opportunities, and contribute to economic development. According to the International Labour Organization (2019), vocational skills training enhances employability, increases productivity, and improves income generation among marginalized populations. Skills acquisition therefore serves as an important mechanism for empowering individuals economically and reducing dependence on white-collar jobs.

In rural communities, skills acquisition programmes have become essential tools for women empowerment and poverty reduction. Many women in rural areas participate in vocational training programmes to acquire practical skills that enable them to support their families financially and improve their socio-economic conditions. Through adult education programmes, women gain access to vocational and entrepreneurial skills that increase their participation in productive activities and community development initiatives (Okorie, 2015).

Examples of skills commonly acquired through adult education programmes in rural communities include fashion designing and tailoring, hairdressing and cosmetology, fish farming, poultry farming, soap and detergent production, catering and baking, ICT and computer operations, bead making, craft production, palm oil processing, and agricultural processing and packaging. These skills are selected based on the economic activities and developmental needs of the local communities.

Fashion designing and tailoring remain among the most popular vocational skills acquired by women in rural communities. Tailoring provides opportunities for self-employment through sewing, clothing production, embroidery, and fabric design. Women who acquire tailoring skills often establish fashion businesses that generate income and support household welfare (Eya, 2018).

Hairdressing and cosmetology are also important skills acquisition areas. These skills involve hair styling, makeup artistry, skincare, and beauty therapy. Hairdressing businesses require relatively low startup capital and provide sustainable income opportunities for women and youths in rural and urban communities alike.

Fish farming and poultry farming are agricultural skills that contribute significantly to food production, employment generation, and income creation. Through agricultural extension and adult education programmes, rural women learn modern fish farming techniques, poultry management practices, feeding methods, and disease control measures that improve productivity and profitability (Oduaran, 2000).

Soap and detergent production is another important vocational skill that promotes small-scale entrepreneurship. Participants are trained on the production of bathing soap, liquid soap, detergents, disinfectants, and other household cleaning products. These products are often sold within local communities for income generation and business development.

Catering and baking skills provide opportunities for individuals to engage in food processing, event catering, cake production, pastry making, and hospitality services. These skills are highly marketable and contribute to self-employment and financial independence.

In recent years, ICT and computer operations have become increasingly important components of skills acquisition programmes. Digital literacy skills such as computer appreciation, internet usage, graphic design, online marketing, and data processing enable participants to compete effectively in the modern digital economy (World Bank, 2019). ICT skills also improve access to information, communication, and business opportunities.

Bead making and craft production represent creative vocational skills that promote indigenous entrepreneurship and cultural preservation. Rural women use locally available materials to produce beads, handbags, decorative items, and crafts for commercial purposes. These activities contribute to income generation and local economic development.

Palm oil processing and agricultural product packaging are equally important skills acquisition areas in rural communities. Participants are trained on modern processing techniques, storage methods, branding, and packaging strategies that increase the market value of agricultural products. Such skills improve productivity and encourage agribusiness development.

Skills acquisition contributes significantly to reducing unemployment, dependency, and poverty in society. Individuals who acquire vocational competencies become economically active and capable of generating sustainable income for themselves and their families. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2020), skills development enhances economic participation, promotes social inclusion, and improves human development outcomes. Skills acquisition also reduces rural-urban

migration by creating employment opportunities within local communities.

Furthermore, skills acquisition promotes self-confidence, creativity, and innovation among learners. Individuals who possess practical skills are more likely to become independent, productive, and socially responsible. Skills training also encourages problem-solving abilities and adaptability in a rapidly changing economic environment (Fasokun, 2006).

Despite its importance, skills acquisition programmes in Nigeria face several challenges, including inadequate funding, poor training facilities, shortage of qualified instructors, insufficient equipment, and lack of startup capital for trainees. In many rural communities, participants who successfully complete vocational training programmes are unable to establish businesses due to financial constraints and limited government support (Obidiegwu, 2016). Nevertheless, skills acquisition remains an indispensable strategy for empowering individuals and promoting sustainable development in Nigeria.

Concept of Women Empowerment

Women empowerment is a multidimensional process aimed at improving the social, economic, political, educational, and psychological status of women in society. It involves enabling women to gain access to opportunities, resources, education, information, and decision-making powers necessary for improving their standard of living and participating actively in societal development. Women empowerment focuses on removing barriers that limit women's potential and creating an environment where women can exercise their rights, make independent choices, and contribute

meaningfully to family and community development.

According to Kabeer (1999), women empowerment refers to the process through which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices in situations where such ability was previously denied to them. Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (2020) defines women empowerment as the expansion of women's capacities and opportunities to participate fully in economic activities, political processes, and social decision-making. Empowerment therefore enhances women's confidence, independence, self-worth, and ability to influence societal change.

In many developing countries, including Nigeria, women often face discrimination, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, cultural restrictions, and limited access to productive resources. These challenges reduce their participation in economic and political activities and hinder sustainable development. Women empowerment seeks to address these inequalities by promoting equal opportunities, social justice, and gender inclusion in all aspects of life (Okorie, 2015). Empowered women are better positioned to improve their livelihoods, support their families, and contribute positively to community development.

Women empowerment is closely linked to education and skills acquisition. Education provides women with knowledge, awareness, and competencies necessary for self-development and economic independence. Through adult education and vocational training programmes, women acquire literacy skills, entrepreneurial abilities, and technical competencies that enhance their participation in productive ventures and community affairs

(Nzeneri, 2010). Educated women are more likely to make informed decisions, participate in governance, and advocate for their rights and those of their families.

One important dimension of women empowerment is economic empowerment. Economic empowerment involves providing women with access to income-generating opportunities, employment, vocational training, financial resources, and ownership of productive assets. Economically empowered women can establish businesses, generate income, contribute to household finances, and reduce dependency on others (World Bank, 2019). Economic empowerment also improves women's bargaining power within the family and society. Through entrepreneurship and skills acquisition programmes, many rural women become self-reliant and capable of supporting community development initiatives.

Educational empowerment is another critical aspect of women empowerment. Educational empowerment involves providing women with access to formal, non-formal, and adult education opportunities that improve literacy, knowledge, and vocational competencies. Education enables women to acquire information on health, nutrition, child care, civic responsibilities, and entrepreneurship (Akinpelu, 2002). It also promotes self-confidence, critical thinking, and leadership abilities among women. In many rural communities, adult education programmes have significantly improved women's literacy levels and social awareness.

Political participation is equally essential in the empowerment process. Political empowerment enables women to participate actively in governance, policy formulation, leadership positions, and decision-making

processes at local, national, and international levels. Women who are politically empowered contribute to democratic governance, peacebuilding, and community mobilization (Nwosu, 2017). However, in many societies, women continue to face barriers such as cultural discrimination, inadequate education, and lack of political support that limit their participation in politics and leadership.

Social inclusion is another important component of women empowerment. Social inclusion refers to ensuring that women are fully integrated into social activities, community associations, cooperative societies, and development programmes without discrimination or exclusion. Socially empowered women participate in community decision-making, social organizations, and cultural activities that promote collective development and peaceful coexistence (Eya, 2018). Social inclusion also strengthens women's sense of belonging and societal recognition.

Access to health information and healthcare services forms a major aspect of women empowerment. Women who have access to health education and medical services are better informed about maternal health, reproductive health, nutrition, hygiene, disease prevention, and family planning. Health empowerment improves women's physical well-being, reduces maternal mortality, and enhances family welfare (UNESCO, 2016). Adult education programmes often provide health education that helps women make informed health decisions for themselves and their children.

Leadership development is another important dimension of women empowerment. Leadership empowerment equips women with managerial, communication, organizational,

and leadership skills needed for effective participation in community and institutional leadership roles. Women leaders often serve as advocates for education, health, peace, environmental sustainability, and community development. Through leadership training and civic education programmes, women gain the confidence to participate actively in governance and social transformation initiatives.

Ownership of productive resources is also essential for meaningful women empowerment. Productive resources include land, capital, credit facilities, agricultural inputs, technology, and business assets. In many rural communities, women have limited access to these resources due to cultural practices and economic inequalities. Empowerment programmes therefore aim at increasing women's access to land ownership, financial services, cooperative societies, and entrepreneurial support systems (Oduaran, 2000). Access to productive resources enhances women's productivity, income generation, and economic independence.

Empowered women contribute significantly to family welfare and national development. Women who are educated and economically independent are more likely to invest in their children's education, healthcare, nutrition, and overall well-being. Studies have shown that women's income often contributes directly to household welfare and poverty reduction (World Bank, 2019). Empowered women also promote positive social values, peaceful coexistence, and community participation.

Women empowerment contributes immensely to poverty reduction and sustainable development. When women are empowered through education and skills acquisition, they become active participants in economic

production and social development. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2016), empowering women enhances productivity, promotes gender equality, and accelerates national development. Women empowerment also helps reduce social problems such as child labor, illiteracy, unemployment, and gender-based violence.

In rural communities especially, women empowerment promotes community development and social transformation. Empowered women often participate in community sanitation programmes, cooperative societies, agricultural production, peacebuilding activities, and local development projects. They also contribute to environmental sustainability and grassroots mobilization for development initiatives (Imhabekhai, 2009). Through active participation in community affairs, women become agents of change and development within society.

Despite the importance of women empowerment, several challenges continue to hinder its realization in Nigeria. These challenges include poverty, illiteracy, cultural discrimination, early marriage, unemployment, inadequate access to credit facilities, poor educational opportunities, and gender inequality. Many rural women still face societal restrictions that limit their participation in economic and political activities. Inadequate government support and weak implementation of women development policies also affect empowerment efforts.

Nevertheless, women empowerment remains a critical strategy for achieving sustainable development and social justice. Governments, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, and development agencies must

continue to promote policies and programmes that support women education, vocational training, entrepreneurship, health awareness, and leadership development. Through adequate empowerment initiatives, women can contribute more effectively to family welfare, poverty reduction, community development, and national transformation.

Adult Education Programmes Available in Rural Communities in Rivers State

Several adult education programmes exist in rural areas of Rivers State to promote women development and skills acquisition. These include:

1. Literacy Education Programmes: These programmes help women learn reading, writing, and arithmetic skills necessary for communication, record keeping, and business management.

2. Vocational Training Programmes: Women are trained in practical trades such as tailoring, hairdressing, catering, soap making, and interior decoration.

3. Agricultural Extension Programmes: Women farmers receive training on modern farming techniques, fish farming, poultry production, cassava processing, and storage methods.

4. Entrepreneurship Education: These programmes teach women business management, marketing strategies, financial management, and small-scale enterprise development.

5. ICT and Digital Literacy Programmes: Women are trained in computer appreciation, internet usage, online marketing, and digital communication.

6. Health and Family Education Programmes: Adult education also provides information on maternal health, nutrition, family planning, hygiene, and disease prevention.

7. Cooperative Education Programmes: Women learn the importance of cooperative societies, savings culture, and collective economic activities.

Role of Adult Education Programmes in Promoting Skills Acquisition and Women Empowerment

Adult education programmes play a significant role in promoting skills acquisition and women empowerment, particularly in rural communities where poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and social exclusion remain major developmental challenges. In Rivers State, many women have benefited from adult education initiatives designed to improve their literacy levels, vocational competencies, entrepreneurial abilities, and social participation. Through adult education programmes, women acquire practical skills and knowledge that enhance their economic independence, social status, and contribution to community development.

Adult education programmes are important tools for human resource development because they provide opportunities for adults who may not have had access to formal education to acquire relevant knowledge and productive skills. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2016), adult education promotes lifelong learning and equips individuals with competencies needed for personal development, employment, and active citizenship. In rural communities, women

often participate in adult education programmes to gain vocational training, literacy education, entrepreneurial knowledge, and health awareness that improve their quality of life.

1. Promotion of Economic Self-Reliance:

One of the major roles of adult education programmes is the promotion of economic self-reliance among women. Adult education equips women with vocational and entrepreneurial skills that enable them to establish small businesses and generate income independently. Skills such as tailoring, catering, fish farming, soap making, hairdressing, and bead production provide women with opportunities for self-employment and financial independence (Olaitan, 2005). Through these programmes, women become less dependent on spouses, relatives, or external support for survival.

Economic self-reliance empowers women to contribute meaningfully to household income and community development. Women who acquire vocational skills through adult education often establish micro-enterprises that improve family welfare and create employment opportunities for others within their communities (Ekpenyong, 2011). Economic empowerment also enhances women's decision-making power and social recognition within the family and society.

2. Reduction of Poverty: Adult education programmes contribute significantly to poverty reduction in rural communities. Poverty is one of the major challenges affecting women in many parts of Nigeria, especially in rural areas where access to education and employment opportunities is limited. Through income-generating activities acquired from vocational and entrepreneurial training, women improve their financial

conditions and support their households economically (Oduaran, 2000).

Skills acquisition programmes enable women to establish businesses that provide sustainable income and improve living standards. According to the World Bank (2019), empowering women economically contributes directly to poverty alleviation and national economic growth. Women who participate in adult education programmes are more likely to invest in productive activities, children's education, nutrition, and healthcare, thereby reducing poverty within their families and communities.

3. Improvement in Literacy Level: Adult education programmes also improve literacy levels among rural women. Literacy education helps women acquire reading, writing, and numeracy skills necessary for communication, business management, and participation in social activities. Functional literacy enables women to read instructions, keep financial records, understand health information, and engage effectively in community development initiatives (Omolewa, 1981).

Improved literacy enhances women's confidence and ability to participate actively in societal affairs. Literate women are better informed about their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for socio-economic advancement. Literacy education also promotes critical thinking and informed decision-making among women in rural communities (Aderinoye, 2015).

4. Enhancement of Employment Opportunities: Skills acquisition programmes organized through adult education create employment opportunities for rural women. Vocational training equips women with practical competencies needed for self-

employment and wage employment in various sectors of the economy. Women trained in tailoring, ICT, catering, cosmetology, agriculture, and craft production can establish businesses or secure employment in related industries (Eya, 2018).

In many rural communities, unemployment contributes significantly to poverty and dependency among women. Adult education programmes therefore provide alternative pathways for employment and income generation. According to the International Labour Organization (2019), vocational skills development enhances employability and increases economic productivity among marginalized populations.

5. Development of Entrepreneurial Abilities: Adult education programmes promote entrepreneurship development among women by teaching business management, financial literacy, marketing strategies, and enterprise sustainability. Entrepreneurship education equips women with the ability to identify business opportunities, manage resources effectively, and sustain profitable ventures (Ekpenyong, 2011).

Entrepreneurial training encourages innovation, creativity, and self-confidence among women. Through entrepreneurship education, women learn how to prepare business plans, manage finances, attract customers, and expand their businesses. These competencies contribute significantly to economic empowerment and sustainable livelihood development.

6. Promotion of Social Inclusion: Adult education programmes promote social inclusion by encouraging women's participation in community affairs, leadership activities, and local development initiatives. In many traditional societies, women are often

excluded from decision-making processes and leadership positions due to cultural and social barriers. Adult education helps reduce such exclusion by improving women's awareness, confidence, and communication skills (Nwosu, 2017).

Women who participate in adult education programmes often become active members of cooperative societies, women associations, community development committees, and social organizations. Social inclusion strengthens women's sense of belonging and enhances their contribution to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and community transformation.

7. Increased Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem: Adult education programmes contribute to the psychological empowerment of women by increasing their self-confidence and self-esteem. Women who acquire literacy and vocational skills become more confident in expressing themselves, making decisions, and participating in public discussions (Kabeer, 1999). Education helps women recognize their potentials and abilities, thereby reducing feelings of inferiority and dependency.

Confidence gained through adult education also encourages women to participate in leadership roles, economic activities, and advocacy programmes. Women who are empowered psychologically are more likely to challenge discriminatory practices and pursue opportunities for personal and professional growth.

8. Improvement in Family Welfare: Empowered women contribute significantly to family welfare and household development. Women who acquire vocational skills and entrepreneurial knowledge through adult education programmes often use their income

to support family nutrition, children's education, healthcare, and housing needs (UNDP, 2020). Studies have shown that women tend to invest a substantial portion of their earnings in family welfare and child development.

Adult education also improves women's awareness of parenting, family planning, nutrition, and hygiene practices. As a result, empowered women contribute positively to the physical, educational, and emotional well-being of their families.

9. Promotion of Health Awareness: Health education is another important role of adult education programmes. Adult education centres often provide women with information on maternal healthcare, nutrition, environmental sanitation, reproductive health, disease prevention, and personal hygiene. Health awareness programmes help women make informed decisions concerning their health and that of their children (UNESCO, 2016).

Improved health knowledge contributes to reduced maternal mortality, child mortality, and the spread of communicable diseases within rural communities. Women who receive health education are more likely to adopt healthy lifestyles and promote sanitation practices within their households and communities.

10. Encouragement of Community Development: Adult education programmes encourage active participation in community development activities. Women who acquire education and vocational skills often engage in community sanitation exercises, environmental protection programmes, peacebuilding activities, cooperative movements, and social welfare initiatives

(Imhabekhai, 2009). Through community participation, women contribute to social cohesion and grassroots development.

Adult education also promotes collective action and community mobilization for sustainable development projects. Empowered women frequently serve as agents of change who advocate for education, healthcare, environmental sustainability, and social justice within their communities.

Strategies for Improving Adult Education Programmes for Women Empowerment

Adult education programmes remain a vital instrument for promoting skills acquisition, poverty reduction, and women empowerment, particularly in rural communities of Rivers State. However, for these programmes to achieve their intended objectives effectively, strategic improvements are required in policy formulation, funding, infrastructure, staffing, community participation, and programme implementation. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2016), the effectiveness of adult learning systems depends largely on adequate investment, inclusive planning, quality instruction, and strong institutional support. Similarly, adult education scholars emphasize that sustainable women empowerment can only be achieved when adult learning programmes are properly funded, well-managed, and responsive to learners' needs (Nzeneri, 2010; Akinpelu, 2002).

1. Increased Government Funding: One of the most important strategies for improving adult education programmes is increased government funding. Adequate financial allocation is necessary for the establishment and maintenance of adult learning centres, procurement of teaching materials, payment of

facilitators, and implementation of skills acquisition programmes. In many developing contexts, insufficient funding has remained a major constraint to the effectiveness of adult education initiatives (Imhabekhai, 2009). Government at federal, state, and local levels should prioritize adult education in their budgets, especially programmes targeting women empowerment and rural development.

Increased funding will also support the expansion of vocational training centres, provision of starter packs for trainees, and organization of outreach programmes for rural women who are unable to attend formal training centres regularly (World Bank, 2019). Without adequate funding, adult education programmes cannot achieve meaningful impact on women empowerment and poverty reduction.

2. Provision of Modern Training Facilities:

The provision of modern training facilities is essential for effective skills acquisition and capacity building. Adult education centres should be equipped with up-to-date vocational tools, ICT facilities, workshops, laboratories, and demonstration materials that reflect current industry standards. According to the International Labour Organization (2019), skills development programmes must be supported with modern equipment to enhance employability and productivity.

In rural communities, outdated or insufficient facilities reduce the quality of training and limit participants' ability to compete in the labour market. Therefore, government and development partners should invest in ICT centres, sewing machines, catering equipment, fish farming tools, and agricultural processing facilities to enhance practical learning outcomes (Egunyomi, 2018).

3. Employment of Qualified Facilitators:

The success of adult education programmes depends largely on the availability of competent and well-trained facilitators. Qualified adult educators and vocational instructors are needed to deliver effective teaching, mentorship, and practical demonstrations. According to Fasokun (2006), adult learners require facilitators who understand adult learning principles, including andragogy, participatory learning, and experiential instruction.

Government should ensure continuous recruitment, training, and retraining of adult education facilitators to improve programme quality. Professional development workshops, capacity-building seminars, and certification programmes should be organized regularly to enhance instructional competence (Nzeneri, 2010). Without qualified facilitators, adult education programmes may fail to achieve meaningful empowerment outcomes.

4. Public Awareness Campaigns:

Public awareness campaigns are necessary to encourage participation in adult education programmes, especially among rural women. Many women remain unaware of available training opportunities or underestimate the value of adult education for personal development. According to Aderinoye (2015), lack of awareness is one of the major barriers to adult literacy and vocational programme participation in Nigeria.

Government agencies, NGOs, religious institutions, and community leaders should engage in sensitization programmes using radio, television, town hall meetings, community gatherings, and social media platforms. These campaigns will help change negative perceptions about women education

and encourage greater participation in skills acquisition programmes.

5. Partnership with NGOs and Private Organizations: Collaboration between government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private sector institutions is essential for strengthening adult education programmes. NGOs often provide technical support, funding, training materials, and advocacy for women empowerment initiatives. According to Oduaran (2000), partnership approaches enhance resource mobilization and programme sustainability in adult education.

Private organizations can also contribute through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, such as funding vocational training centres, providing equipment, and offering internship opportunities for trainees. Such partnerships improve programme reach and effectiveness, particularly in rural communities.

6. Provision of Soft Loans and Grants: Access to financial support is critical for translating skills acquisition into meaningful economic empowerment. Many women who complete vocational training programmes lack the capital required to establish businesses. Therefore, the provision of soft loans, microcredit schemes, and grants is essential for supporting women entrepreneurs.

According to the World Bank (2019), access to finance significantly enhances women's economic participation and reduces poverty levels. Government agencies, microfinance banks, and development organizations should establish empowerment funds specifically targeted at women who have completed adult education and vocational training programmes.

7. Flexible Learning Schedules: Flexible learning schedules are important for ensuring that women with household responsibilities can participate effectively in adult education programmes. Many rural women are burdened with domestic chores, childcare responsibilities, and agricultural activities, which limit their availability for training sessions.

Adult education programmes should therefore be organized during convenient hours, such as evenings, weekends, or seasonal breaks, to accommodate women's schedules. According to Nzeneri (2010), flexibility is a key principle of adult learning because adult learners require adaptable programmes that consider their social and economic realities. Mobile training units and community-based learning centres can also improve accessibility.

8. Monitoring and Evaluation: Effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems are essential for assessing the impact and quality of adult education programmes. Regular supervision ensures that training objectives are being achieved and that resources are being effectively utilized. According to Imhabekhai (2009), programme evaluation helps identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in adult education delivery.

Monitoring and evaluation should include tracking of participants' progress, assessment of skills acquisition outcomes, and evaluation of post-training empowerment levels. Feedback from participants should also be used to improve programme design and implementation. Strong M&E systems enhance accountability, transparency, and sustainability of adult education initiatives.

Conclusion

Adult education programmes have proven to be a powerful instrument for promoting skills acquisition and women empowerment in rural communities of Rivers State. Through literacy education, vocational training, entrepreneurial development, and health awareness initiatives, women are equipped with practical competencies that enable them to become economically self-reliant, socially active, and personally confident. These programmes not only enhance individual capabilities but also contribute significantly to poverty reduction, improved family welfare, and sustainable community development.

The study further establishes that when women are empowered through adult education, they are better positioned to participate in income-generating activities, support their families, and contribute meaningfully to decision-making processes within their communities. Skills acquisition programmes such as tailoring, fish farming, catering, ICT, and agro-processing have especially played a crucial role in transforming the socio-economic status of rural women.

However, the effectiveness of these programmes depends largely on adequate funding, availability of trained facilitators, provision of modern training facilities, strong government commitment, and active collaboration with stakeholders. Addressing these challenges will significantly enhance the impact of adult education on women empowerment and rural development.

In conclusion, adult education remains a strategic tool for achieving gender equality, reducing poverty, and promoting inclusive development. Strengthening adult education programmes will not only empower women in rural communities but also accelerate

sustainable socio-economic growth in Rivers State and Nigeria at large.

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