

PRACTICAL ISSUES OF WOMEN INVOLVEMENT IN AGRICULTURE IN IGBOLAND: FROM LAND DEGRADATION TO LAND REHABILITATION.

Introduction:

The Igbo, one of the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria are predominantly located in the South Eastern states of Imo, Anambra, Abia, Enugu and Ebonyi. Igbo can also be located in small pockets of some other states such as Rivers and Delta. Wherever the Igbo find themselves, they still maintain similar cultural identity with only some minor variations.

Agriculture is embedded in the culture of the Igbo. The population of the Igbo grew by leaps and bounds because their culture encourages large family size. Polygamy is therefore an accepted norm. It is their view that the more the number of wives an Igbo man marries, the greater number of children he produces, and thus the more hands he can ultimately mobilize as family labour force for his agricultural activities. Equally implicit is the belief that the size of the labour force has a correlation with the volume of farm output.

In this way, majority of the agricultural activities gradually became the responsibility of women. Igbo women and their children in most cases do the clearing, burning, hoeing, weeding of the farms, transporting, processing, storing and marketing of agricultural products.

Green (1964) stated that Agbaja women in Owerri Province, now Imo State which is regarded as the heart of Igboland, grow 19 out of 20 cultivatable crops in the area. Igbo men have the traditional role of cultivating yams but the rest of the farm crops such as cassava, maize, cocoyam, beans, melon, assorted kinds of spices and vegetables are specifically assigned to women for cultivation.

Unfortunately, despite the overwhelming indispensability of women in agricultural venture, their efforts have not received adequate recognition. Women are hardly included in the policy-making bodies and their interest is rarely considered in major agricultural policies. This has kept them behind in the race towards improved agricultural practice. They have continued in their traditional methods of farming. They have not been taught modern techniques. They are in every respect, peasant farmers and this has continually kept them on subsistence level as poverty stricken people.

In addition to this culturally imposed setback, women in agriculture in Igboland, also experience the following constraints among others:

- (i) widespread illiteracy
- (ii) denial of title to farm land,
- (iii) lack of access to credit, including farm inputs,
- (iv) shrinking cropland as a consequence of rapidly increasing population and expansion of human settlements.
- (v) agricultural land fragmentation and land overuse, due to population explosion;
- (vi) rapid loss of soil fertility and attendant low yields per unit of space,

Gradually, there has been a substantial rise in the number of poverty stricken women heads of households resulting from the growing number of widows and single mothers who have no right to land ownership. Many of this category of women are found in the agricultural sector in Igboland. People who are poor will surely deplete the environment in order to survive. Poor people devastate the environment out of need not out of greed. Therefore in such a state of poverty and deprivation, consideration for judicious

management of their immediate environment for sustainable development is out of the question. Thus the resultant effect is that the system of agriculture adopted by the women are and will continue to be unfriendly to the environment, but for a number of innovative practical community initiatives sweeping over many parts of Igboland. Women are in the fore front of these initiatives which are designed to address the ills of the past.

Conclusion: The need to recognize the role of women as Natural Resource Managers would go a long way to improve and ensure sound environmental management at local (community) national and international levels. The paper articulates practical achievements which women in organized groups are currently making in some parts of Igboland under community initiative for environmental management and rehabilitation. Critical to the success of this initiative has been the use of gender specific staff- Block Extension Agents (BEAs) for extending agricultural and sustainable land management information to the local women.

Mrs. C. N. Okpara

Nigerian Concerned Group for Environment,
Population and Development. (**N-COGEП-D**)

57 Njiribeako street ,P O. Box 3122, Owerri,
Nigeria.

Email: n-cogep-d@usa.net
Fax: 234-01 -2610310

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