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# IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF SOCIO-CULTURAL NORMS AND PRACTICES OF WOMEN ON THEIR PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES IN THE SOUTH-SOUTH, NIGERIA

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**Abstract**
*The study assessed impact of socio-cultural norms and practices of women on their participation in agricultural cooperatives in South-South Nigeria. Stratified sampling technique was used to select 332 respondents. Primary data were collected with the aid of a structured questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse data for this study. The major (53.31%) barrier to women's participation in agricultural cooperatives was cultural norms. Socio-cultural norms and practices had negative impact on women participation in cooperatives (69.88%), women leadership in cooperatives (74.7%) and women's access to resources (76.51%). Women's participation in agricultural cooperatives improved overall livelihood (90.96%), increased income level (61.75%) and agricultural productivity (65.96%). The Spearman's ranked correlation coefficient (-0.7977) revealed that gender disparity negatively correlated with women's participation in agricultural cooperatives. It was recommended that institutional approach should be adopted to alter the policy towards gender sensitivity.*
***Keywords:*** *Impact, Assessment, Agricultural cooperatives, socio-cultural norms*

## 1.0 Introduction

Agricultural cooperatives are crucial for the socio-economic development of rural communities, providing services such as credit facilities, market access, and technical support to farmers. In Nigeria, where agriculture is a dominant sector of the economy, these cooperatives play a critical role in facilitating access to resources, information, and markets for rural communities. In spite of this importance of cooperative, the traditional gender roles, cultural expectations, and historical inequalities continue to shape participation and influence within agricultural cooperatives. According

to FAO (2021), women make up around 40% of the agricultural workforce in Nigeria. However, they are often underrepresented in cooperative leadership roles. Ogunlela and Mukhtar (2009) emphasized that women face structural barriers that limit their access to decision-making process within cooperatives, reducing their influence on key decisions related to resource allocation and strategy. Okoro *et al.* (2021) who worked on survey of agricultural cooperatives in the South-South zone found that only 20% of cooperative leaders were women. This gender gap in leadership positions translates into disparities in the distribution of cooperative benefits, with male members often receiving priority in access to loans, farm inputs, and training opportunities.

Gender dynamics within these cooperatives significantly impact their effectiveness and inclusiveness. Historically, agricultural activities in Nigeria have been gendered, with distinct roles and responsibilities often assigned to men and women (FAO, 2017). This traditional division of labor can influence participation rates, leadership opportunities, and access to cooperative benefits. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing policies and interventions that promote gender equity and enhance the overall performance of agricultural cooperatives (Bukachi et al., 2023).

The gender gap in labor force participation persists globally. In developing countries, women spend two and a half times more hours on unpaid labor than men, and their work is most likely to be informal and unprotected (UN Women, 2015). Strengthening women's ability to participate in the labor force is seen as a means to challenge global poverty and issues of regional economic sustainability.

Almost 29 years have passed since the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, where governments adopted a global platform for action on gender

equality and women's empowerment. Ongoing discussions on advancing these targets led to the UN Assembly incorporating them as cross-cutting priorities throughout the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically in the Sustainable Development Goals to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (UN, 2015). This adoption signals the global recognition that improving the lives of women and girls is both an important development goal in itself and key to the success of all other goals for sustainable development.

Based on values such as self-help, equality, and equity, and principles of voluntary and open membership and democratic member control, cooperative enterprises are uniquely positioned to ensure and promote gender equality and women's empowerment, contributing to the achievement of the goals and targets laid out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This study is hinged on social theory. The social role theory was primarily developed by Alice Eagly and Linda Carli. It builds upon earlier sociological and psychological theories but has been significantly shaped and expanded upon by their work. The theory has evolved over time but gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly through Eagly and Carli's research. Social Role Theory posits that gender differences and inequalities arise from the social roles and expectations that societies impose on individuals based on their sex. These roles dictate the behaviors, opportunities, and responsibilities assigned to men and women within different social contexts, including organizations like agricultural cooperatives '(Babasanya et al., 2021).

The social theorists argued that traditional roles, like men as breadwinners and women as caregivers, shape the development of skills, behaviors, and characteristics

associated with each sex. For example, women may develop more nurturing traits because they are often expected to take on caregiving roles, while men may cultivate assertiveness due to roles that prioritize dominance or leadership. Social Role Theory also suggests that these expectations can limit individuals by discouraging them from pursuing roles or behaviors outside these norms, which can lead to reinforcement of gender stereotypes. However, as social roles evolve (with more women in leadership positions and men in caregiving roles), so do the expectations for gendered behavior, leading to a potential reduction in stereotypes over time.

## 2.0 Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study was to assess impact of socio-cultural norms and practices of women on their participation in Agricultural Cooperatives in the South-South Nigeria.

The Specific Objectives were to:

i. describe the socio-cultural norms and practices.
ii. determine impact of women participation in Agricultural cooperatives and
iii. identifying relationship between women

## 3.0 Methodology

The study area is the South-south region of Nigeria. The South-South geopolitical zone is one of six zones in Nigeria, located in the country's southern region. The region consists of Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers states formed the study area. The Niger Delta is the delta of the Niger River sitting directly on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean in Nigeria. The South-South geopolitical zone extends over about 70,000km$^2$ (27,000 sqm) and makes up 7.5% of Nigeria landmass. In 2000, Abia, Imo and

Ondo were added to form Niger Delta. Climatically, the region is equatorial, with mean maximum temperature ranges from 30-32$^0$c in the south and annual rainfall in the zone varies from 750mm to 2000mm all year round (Library of Congress, 2006).

The South-South is ethnically diverse, with major ethnic groups including the Ijaw, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ibibio, Efik, and Kalabari, among others. Each ethnic group has its unique language, customs, and cultural festivals. Notable cultural events include the Calabar Carnival (Cross River State) and Ekpe Festival (Efik people). The zone is central to Nigeria's oil and gas industry, contributing a significant percentage of the country's oil production. Delta, Bayelsa, and Rivers states are among Nigeria's top oil-producing regions. In addition to oil, the zone has rich agricultural resources like rubber, palm oil, timber, and fish, supporting agriculture and fishing industries.

Agriculture in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone plays a crucial role in the local economy, providing employment and supporting rural communities. While the region is widely known for its oil and gas resources, it also has a strong agricultural base due to fertile land and favorable weather conditions. Some of the major crops grown in the area include Oil Palm which supports the production of palm oil, palm kernel oil, and other by-products, rubber which support Nigeria's rubber industry. Other crops cultivated in the zone include cassava yam and cocoyam, plantain and banana. The South-South, being largely coastal, has a thriving fishing industry. Livestock farming, though less prominent than in northern Nigeria, still plays a role in the South-South, particularly in the rearing of poultry, goats, and pigs. Poultry farming is especially popular as it provides eggs and meat for local consumption.




**Figure 1**: Map of Nigeria Showing the Study Area

Source: www.nationsonline.org

**Population of the Study**

The population of the study comprises members of all the agricultural cooperatives in South-South States of Nigeria, Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta and Edo states. Available information indicated that there are 1,955 registered members of agricultural cooperatives. Further investigation revealed that the population comprised 1,113 and 842 male and female members, respectively.

**Sample size and Sampling Techniques**

Stratified random sampling technique was used to select the respondents for the study. Male and female members of agricultural cooperatives represented the two strata for the study. The application of the technique involved the adoption of Taro Yamane' formula for sample size determination.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = Total population

e = Margin of error (typically 5%, or 0.05)

Using this formula, we can calculate the sample size as follows:

$$n = \frac{1{,}955}{1 + 1{,}955(0.0025)}$$
$$n = 332$$

Therefore, a sample size of approximately 332 agricultural cooperatives members was used for this study.

The study adopted the use of questionnaire and schedule method to generate relevant information from respondents.

The method of data analysis for this study combined descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were utilized to describe the characteristics of the sample, including Spearman's ranked correlation coefficient was used to test the hypothesis. The model for Spearman's ranked correlation analysis was specified as fellows:

$$rho = 1 - \frac{6\Sigma d^2}{N(N^2 - 1)}$$

Where,

$rho = Spearman's\ correlation\ coefficient$

d = difference in rank between scores

N = Total/sample

## 4.0 Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Socio-cultural Norms and Practices that Influence Gender Dynamics in Agricultural Cooperatives

Table 1 highlights the negative impact of socio-cultural norms and practices on women's participation in agricultural cooperatives. The findings show that 69.88% of respondents believe socio-cultural norms hinder women's involvement in cooperative activities. Traditional gender roles in many societies, including Nigeria, place women primarily in domestic spheres, where their "relevance" is perceived to lie. As a result, women are often burdened with household responsibilities, including cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and farm tasks such as production, weeding, harvesting, transportation, processing, and marketing. These responsibilities significantly limit their time and energy for cooperative activities, especially leadership roles or engaging in decision-making processes.

Further analysis reveals that socio-cultural norms negatively impact women's participation in cooperative leadership positions (74.70%), confirming that long-standing discrimination against women in leadership roles remains entrenched. This finding is consistent with the broader socio-cultural landscape, where leadership in both public and private spheres is often seen as a male-dominated domain. The study also shows that socio-cultural norms restrict women's access to critical resources such as credit, training, and technical support (76.51%). In many cultures, including Nigerian society, men typically hold control over most economic resources, even those that are nominally owned by women, which creates significant barriers to women's economic empowerment.

The negative impact of socio-cultural norms on women's participation in cooperatives aligns with existing literature on gender dynamics in agricultural settings. As "(Asamu et

al., 2020) observed, women's roles in agriculture are often confined to labor-intensive tasks such as weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest activities, while men dominate strategic roles such as decision-making and financial management. This division of labor is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs that view men as the primary breadwinners and leaders, while women are expected to manage domestic duties. As a result, women's participation in formal agricultural cooperatives is limited by the dual burden of domestic responsibilities and farming work, which can constrain their ability to engage in leadership or resource allocation.

The findings of this study are consistent with the work of (Bukachi et al., 2023), who highlighted that the overwhelming cultural expectation of women's domestic roles in rural areas often hinders their full participation in cooperative activities. Women in many rural societies spend a significant portion of their time on household tasks, leaving them with little opportunity to engage in cooperative leadership, attend meetings, or take advantage of economic resources offered by cooperatives. This time scarcity is compounded by societal expectations that prioritize men's involvement in public economic activities, particularly in leadership or financial decision-making processes.

The study further reveals that socio-cultural practices impede women's access to leadership positions in cooperatives (74.70%), confirming a deeply ingrained gender bias that prevents women from assuming roles of authority. This finding aligns with broader patterns observed in cooperative governance worldwide, particularly in developing countries. '(Regassa, 2022) discussed how gendered cultural norms often place women in subservient roles, not only within households but also in organizational structures such as cooperatives. These norms lead to the exclusion of women from leadership roles, even in areas where they contribute significantly to the cooperative's activities.

In many agricultural cooperatives, leadership positions such as chairperson, president, or decision-maker are still predominantly occupied by men, often due to the perception that men possess the necessary authority and capability to lead. Women's contributions are often relegated to secondary roles such as treasurer or secretary, which, while important, do not carry the same level of influence. (Amugo & Odinwa, 2022) similarly report that women, despite their high participation in cooperative activities, often face obstacles in ascending to leadership positions due to patriarchal cultural beliefs that deem men more suitable for leadership.

The study also highlights the negative effect of socio-cultural norms on women's access to key resources within cooperatives, with 76.51% of respondents citing this barrier. In many rural communities, men typically control economic resources such as land, capital, and credit, which are vital for successful farming and cooperative activities. Women, despite their critical role in agricultural production, are often excluded from decisions about resource allocation, and in some cases, they may have to rely on male family members to access loans or agricultural support services (Sallawu et al., 2022).

(Osabohien et al., 2021) provided similar evidence, noting that gendered control over resources severely limits women's ability to improve their agricultural output or invest in productive assets. In many African countries, women's access to land is restricted by both customary law and cultural practices that favor male ownership. This lack of control over resources directly affects women's economic autonomy, as they are unable to invest in agricultural improvements or expand their businesses independently.

The study identifies religious beliefs (34.94%) as one of the most significant socio-cultural factors influencing gender dynamics in agricultural cooperatives. This finding reflects the deep intersection between religion and gender roles in many African societies,

where the three major religions—Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions—tend to promote a hierarchical view of gender, with men positioned as the primary decision-makers and leaders. Njoku (2016) notes that in many communities, religious beliefs perpetuate the idea that men have a divine or moral mandate to lead, while women are expected to be supportive or subservient. This cultural pattern is evident in the leadership structures of many cooperatives, where men are overwhelmingly represented in top positions, despite women's active participation in lower-level roles.

These religious norms often reinforce societal attitudes that place women in subordinate roles in both the home and the public sphere. For example, Islamic and Christian teachings in some communities emphasize the traditional family structure, which views women's primary roles as mothers and caregivers, rather than leaders or decision-makers. Similarly, traditional African religions in many regions place women in auxiliary roles, particularly in the context of community and agricultural activities (Onuk et al., 2016).

**Table 1: Socio -cultural Norms and Practices that Influence Gender Dynamics in Agricultural Cooperatives (n=332)**

| Influence of socio-cultural norms and practices | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Effect of socio-cultural norms and practices on women participation in cooperatives** | | |
| Negatively | 232 | 69.88 |
| No impact | 11 | 3.31 |
| Positively | 89 | 26.81 |
| **Effect of socio-cultural norms and practices on women leadership in cooperatives** | | |
| Negatively | 248 | 74.7 |
| No impact | 11 | 3.31 |
| Positively | 73 | 21.99 |
| **Effect of socio-cultural norms and practices on women's access to resources** | | |
| Negatively | 254 | 76.51 |
| No impact | 5 | 1.51 |
| Positively | 73 | 21.99 |
| **Socio-cultural norms or practices with the most significant impact on gender dynamics** | | |
| Community Expectations | 90 | 27.11 |
| Family Responsibilities | 26 | 7.83 |
| Religious Beliefs | 116 | 34.94 |
| Traditional Gender Roles | 100 | 30.12 |

**Source: Field Survey (2024)**

### 4.2 Impact of Women's Participation in Agricultural Cooperatives on their Socio- economic Status

Table 2 presents an analysis of the impact of women's participation in agricultural cooperatives on their socio-economic status, revealing positive outcomes in several key areas. Table 2 shows that majority (61.75%) of women reported an increase in their income levels as a result of their involvement in agricultural cooperatives. This finding highlights one of the primary objectives of agricultural cooperatives: to enhance the income of members by providing access to resources such as training, market access, and collective bargaining.

Additionally, 65.96% of women reported increased productivity due to their participation in these cooperatives. Agricultural cooperatives play a critical role in boosting the productivity of women farmers by facilitating access to credit, which enables them to procure essential inputs like seeds, fertilizers, and tools. Access to these resources enhances their ability to engage in efficient agricultural practices, leading to better outputs.

Furthermore, the study found that women's participation in agricultural cooperatives contributed to an overall improvement in their livelihood. In rural settings, where livelihoods are often closely tied to agricultural productivity, an increase in income and productivity directly translates into greater food security and purchasing power. With higher income levels, women can also hire additional labor, allowing them to focus on other business ventures, further improving their financial stability and quality of life.

These findings underscore the vital role that agricultural cooperatives play in improving the socio-economic status of women, especially in rural areas. Income enhancement is one of the most direct benefits of cooperative participation, as cooperatives often provide

better market access, lower input costs, and the ability to aggregate produce, thereby securing better prices for farmers. This aligns with broader studies, such as those by Oludayo *et al.* (2021), who highlighted the role of cooperatives in increasing members' incomes through shared resources, training programs, and collective marketing strategies. Similarly, Adamu & Mohammed (2017) found that women's involvement in cooperatives resulted in increased income, allowing them to invest in both household needs and business ventures, thereby improving their overall socio-economic status.

The increase in productivity reported by the women in this study (65.96%) is also a significant finding. Women's roles in agricultural production are often undervalued, despite their critical contributions to food security and rural economies. Studies like Kabbah *et al.* (2018) and Akinboye (2019) reported that women's productivity in agriculture is constrained by limited access to resources such as credit, land, and training. Agricultural cooperatives, however, provide a platform for women to overcome these barriers. By pooling resources, women gain access to credit, training, and technical assistance that help them adopt more efficient and sustainable agricultural practices. The ability to increase productivity through these resources is crucial not only for women's economic well-being but also for improving food security in their communities.

The study also found that women's participation in agricultural cooperatives leads to an overall improvement in their livelihood, with the dual benefits of increased income and productivity translating into better food security and purchasing power. In rural areas, where livelihoods are often centered on agriculture, the ability to generate income and increase productivity can have a transformative effect. This is consistent with Hussain *et al.* (2020), who found that women's economic empowerment through cooperatives not only boosts household income but also allows women to engage in other income-

generating activities. The study noted that women who had access to cooperative resources were more likely to diversify their income sources, improving their overall livelihood and reducing economic vulnerability.

Furthermore, increased income enables women to hire labor, which alleviates some of the physical burden of agricultural work. The ability to outsource labor allows women to free up time, enabling them to engage in additional business activities or invest in other forms of livelihood, such as trading or small-scale enterprises. This aligns with the findings of Oludayo *et al.* (2021), which emphasize the positive effect of increased income on women's ability to diversify their sources of income, improve their household's standard of living, and contribute to community development.

Another key benefit of women's participation in agricultural cooperatives is skill development. The study found that 67.47% of women cited skill acquisition as one of the most significant benefits. Agricultural cooperatives often offer hands-on training programs that empower members with new skills, which can increase their productivity and financial autonomy. These skills are not only valuable for agricultural activities but also translate into capital for women, providing them with the knowledge and tools to run their farms more efficiently and explore alternative income-generating activities.

The importance of skill development within cooperatives has been well-documented in other studies. For example, Omoniyi (2018) emphasizes the role of cooperatives in offering training that enhances women's technical and managerial skills, leading to better farm management and higher productivity. Similarly, Kabbah *et al.* (2018) found that cooperatives offer training programs that improve women's financial literacy, business skills, and knowledge of sustainable farming practices. These skills are particularly important for rural women, who may have limited access to formal education and

training opportunities outside of cooperative settings. The acquisition of new skills allows women to improve not only their agricultural practices but also their ability to engage in other entrepreneurial activities, thereby contributing to their overall socio-economic empowerment.

The findings of this study are consistent with a growing body of literature that highlights the socio-economic benefits of women's participation in agricultural cooperatives. Njoku (2016) and Hussain *et al.* (2020) argue that agricultural cooperatives offer women unique opportunities to overcome barriers to resource access, such as credit, land, and training, which are often controlled by men in traditional settings. The study also supports the argument that women's participation in cooperatives can have a multiplier effect, improving their productivity, income, and overall livelihoods. In many rural settings, cooperatives serve as a mechanism for economic empowerment, helping women break free from traditional gender roles and take control of their economic futures.

Moreover, the role of skill development in enhancing women's socio-economic status is echoed in studies by Kabbah *et al.* (2018), who highlight that training programs offered by cooperatives can lead to increased agricultural productivity and better business acumen. This is critical for women who often face barriers to accessing formal education or training programs in rural areas. By equipping women with practical skills, cooperatives help bridge the gender gap in agricultural knowledge and improve women's economic standing.

**Table 2: Impact of Women's Participation in Agricultural Cooperatives on their Socio - economic Status**

| Women's participation and socio-economic status | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Impact of women's participation in cooperatives on income level** | | |
| Decreased | 107 | 32.23 |
| Increased | 205 | 61.75 |
| No change | 20 | 6.02 |
| **Impact of women's participation in cooperatives on productivity** | | |
| Decreased | 99 | 29.82 |
| Increased | 219 | 65.96 |
| No change | 14 | 4.22 |
| **Impact of women's participation in Cooperatives on overall livelihood** | | |
| Improved | 302 | 90.96 |
| No change | 14 | 4.22 |
| Worsened | 16 | 4.82 |
| **Benefits of women's participation in cooperatives*** | | |
| Financial empowerment | 205 | 61.75 |
| Skill development | 224 | 67.47 |
| Social network | 196 | 59.04 |
| Increased Market Access | 201 | 60.54 |

* Percentage > 100 due to multiple responses.

**Source**: Author's Computation, 2024.

### 4.3 Relationship between Gender Disparity and the Level of Women's Participation in Agricultural Cooperatives

The hypothesis testing, conducted using Spearman's rank correlation analysis, aimed to examine the relationship between gender disparity and the level of women's participation in agricultural cooperatives. As shown in Table 3, the result was statistically significant at the 1% level, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This indicates that there is a significant relationship between gender disparity and the level of women's participation

in agricultural cooperatives. Specifically, the correlation coefficient was negative, suggesting that an increase in gender disparity is associated with a decrease in women's participation in agricultural cooperatives.

The negative correlation implies that when women face greater gender disparity whether in terms of leadership roles, access to resources, or decision-making power their engagement in cooperative activities diminishes. This result underscores the detrimental impact of gender-based discrimination on women's active involvement in agricultural cooperatives. The lack of gender equity in cooperative structures, such as exclusion from leadership positions or unequal access to critical resources like credit, training, and market access, creates barriers that ultimately discourage women from participating or fully benefiting from cooperatives.

As the study suggests, gender inequality in cooperatives leads to a decline in women's participation. Women, who are often marginalized in the decision-making processes and denied equal access to key resources, become less inclined to engage with or invest in cooperative activities. This has broader implications for the agricultural sector, where women's roles are central to production, processing, and marketing. The underutilization of women's potential in agricultural cooperatives, due to gender-based exclusion, hampers the overall productivity and sustainability of these organizations.

Women's involvement in agricultural cooperatives is critical for food security, sustainable agriculture, and the economic empowerment of rural communities. In many developing countries, including Nigeria, women contribute significantly to agricultural labor, yet they often face systemic gender bias that limits their access to leadership roles and critical resources. The negative relationship between gender disparity and women's

participation aligns with findings from several studies, including Akinboye (2019), which emphasize how unequal access to cooperative leadership and resources significantly restricts women's potential to improve their agricultural productivity and economic status.

For instance, Kabbah *et al.* (2018) observed that gender imbalances in agricultural cooperatives prevent women from accessing crucial agricultural inputs such as credit, training, and technical support, which in turn undermines their participation. The inability of women to assume leadership positions, due to cultural norms or institutional bias, further deepens this gap and reinforces the vicious cycle of gender inequality in cooperatives.

Moreover, the findings of Oludayo *et al.* (2021) also highlight that gender disparity in agricultural cooperatives results in women having a more limited voice in policy formulation, decision-making, and the distribution of benefits. When women are excluded from these processes, it not only affects their personal economic outcomes but also the collective welfare of their communities, as cooperatives are less likely to address the specific needs and challenges that women face.

**Table 3: Relationship between Gender Disparity and the Level of Women's Participation in Agricultural Cooperatives**

| Parameters | Statistics |
|---|---|
| Number of observations | 332 |
| Spearman's *rho* | -0.7797 |
| Prob. > \|t\| | 0.0000 |

**Source:** Author 's Computation, 2024

## 5.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that:

i. Efforts to promote gender equality in agricultural cooperatives must involve both cultural and policy reforms. While shifting entrenched cultural attitudes may take time, targeted interventions such as gender training, advocacy, and affirmative action policies could begin to challenge these socio-cultural norms and pave the way for greater women's empowerment within agricultural cooperatives; and

ii. The government and traditional institutions should encourage the participation of women in cooperative societies to increased improvement in overall livelihood, income level and productivity.

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