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Role of Cooperative Societies in Promoting Gender Equality in Rural Areas in Aguata, L.G.A. Anambra State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated the role of cooperative Societies in promoting gender equality in rural areas in Aguata L.G.A of Anambra State, Nigeria. Three research questions guided the study and two hypotheses were tested. The study adopted the survey research design. The population of the study comprised 2000 registered cooperative societies in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. The sample size of the study is 117 members of cooperative societies. The instruments of data collection that was employed in this research was structured questionnaire. Mean, correlation statistics and linear regression was used to analyze data for the study. Findings of the study revealed that extension services has a significant influence on decision-making in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State. Findings further showed that extension services has a significant role in mitigating gender-based violence against women. Based on these findings, the researcher recommended among others that Cooperative members, local NGOs, agricultural extension services should establish clear governance structures and decision-making processes by building capacity of leaders and members through training and mentorship.

Keywords: Role, Cooperative Societies, Gender Equality, Rural Areas

Introduction

Globally, women encounter various barriers that hinder their ability to engage in economic activities, access education, secure healthcare, ensure safety, and achieve political representation. These inequalities exist in both developed and developing nations, significantly affecting women's lives in diverse ways. Upholding women's rights and providing opportunities for them to realize their full potentials is essential not only for achieving gender equality but also for advancing broader international development objectives. The term "gender" refers to the roles and responsibilities that societies have assigned to males and females based on social norms. Gender equality entails granting equal rights, opportunities, and treatment to individuals regardless of their sex. This concept emphasizes that men and women alike have equal access to resources, opportunities, and participation in decision-making processes within society (Olanade *et al*, 2021) ^[8]. UNICEF (2017) ^[12] defined gender equality as the equal access to resources, rights, benefits, and protections for both males and females. Similarly, UNDP (2024) ^[13] highlights that women in rural areas remain disproportionately affected by poverty and illiteracy, despite numerous international agreements affirming their human rights. A society that prioritizes gender equality creates an environment conducive to empowering women, which is a crucial factor in national development. Obayelu and Chime (2020) ^[6] opined that assessing women's participation in social, political, and economic domains can gauge the level of empowerment in a country. True empowerment involves addressing all aspects simultaneously, including women's self-worth, autonomy, and ability to drive social change.

The World Economic Forum recently ranked the United States 19th globally on the gender gap index. While women represent less than 20% of elected Congress members, political empowerment remains the country's most significant gender equity challenge. Although the U.S. performs better in economic empowerment, women's earnings are still about 20% lower than men. The U.S. excels in educational attainment, with high literacy rates and enrollment levels (World Economic Forum, 2024). Despite these advancements, no nation has completely achieved gender equality. However, Scandinavian countries such as Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Sweden have made remarkable progress in closing the gender gap, particularly in equitable

income distribution and resource access. Conversely, regions like the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia often exhibit the largest gender disparities. Yet, some countries within these regions, including Lesotho, South Africa, and Sri Lanka, have made significant progress in promoting gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2020). Women's livelihoods can improve through cooperative efforts, particularly in Africa, where women can pool resources, share expertise, and collectively address gender inequalities in rural areas (Amos & Lutego, 2022) ^[1]. Cooperatives provide women with training on financial management, entrepreneurship, agricultural techniques, and leadership, equipping them with the skills necessary for running successful businesses and actively participating in decision-making processes. Furthermore, cooperatives serve as advocacy platforms, enabling women to amplify their voices and champion policies that support gender equality and protect women's rights (UNDP, 2020) ^[13]. Given this context, this research sought to examine the role of cooperatives in advancing gender equality in rural areas, focusing on Aguata Local Government Area in Anambra State as a case study.

Statement of the problem

More than half of African women, particularly those living in rural areas are still suffering from poverty, they only have minimal access to services, information and resources both inside and outside their home due to gender inequality. Despite the fact that there are numerous cooperatives in different nations, many women are still unable to access the services they offer. In Nigeria, a study by Obayelu & Chime (2020) ^[6] on dimensions and drivers of women's empowerment in rural Nigeria, it was discovered that most of the decisions were made by the women's spouses, while decisions on how to spend her earnings were jointly made with her spouse and women in the northern zones of Nigeria were less empowered than their southern counterparts. Another study by Urhibo and Orhero (2023) ^[15] on rural women empowerment and development in Nigeria, revealed that rural women empowerment has a positive and statistically significant impact on rural development in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone.

Despite efforts, gender equality progress is slow in many rural communities, requiring continued research and programs to empower women, making co-operative a powerful tool for gender equality. Numerous studies have been carried out by different researchers on gender equality but to the best of the researchers' knowledge none have been done in regards to rural areas in Aguata, L.G.A, Anambra State and this study intends to fill the gap by analyzing the role cooperating plays in promoting gender equality.

Research Objectives

The general objective of the study is to analyze the role of cooperative in promoting gender equality in rural areas in Aguata, L.G.A, Anambra State. The study specifically aims to:

- To examine the effect of extension services on decision-making in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State.
- To assess the effect of extension services on reducing gender-based violence against women in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State.
- To investigate the extent to which extension services challenge and transform harmful gender stereotypes that limit women's participation in in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State.

Research Questions

The following questions will guide the research:

- What is the effect of extension services on decision-making in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State?
- Do extension services reduce gender-based violence against women in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State?
- To what extent do extension services challenge and transform harmful gender stereotypes that limit women's participation in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State?

Research Hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant relationship between extension services and reduction of gender-based violence against women in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State.

H₁: Extension services are significantly associated with reduced gender-based violence against women in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State.

Theoretical Review

Social capital theory

The Social Capital Theory, developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) ^[3], James Coleman (1988) ^[4], and Robert Putnam (1995) ^[9], views social capital (SC) as a resource derived from interpersonal interactions, network ties, trust, and reciprocity that facilitate cooperation and collective action. Bourdieu's individualist approach highlights the material advantages individuals gain from participating in social networks, emphasizing the importance of access and utilization of SC at the individual level. In contrast, Putnam's collective approach defines SC as a community or group characteristic, encompassing trust, civic engagement, and shared resources that foster collective resilience. The theory's multidimensional nature acknowledges that SC benefits vary based on individual access and usage or collective activation within communities. Social capital theory is particularly relevant to cooperatives promoting gender equality in rural areas. By fostering social connections, trust, and a sense of community, cooperatives help women build networks and access resources. This environment of reciprocity and support enhances women's participation, decision-making, and economic autonomy. Through SC, cooperatives challenge harmful gender norms, improve access to markets, finance, and technology, and advance equality, contributing to a more equitable and sustainable future.

Empirical Review

Sharma and Shahi (2022) ^[10] explored the contributions of Mangalgadhi Multipurpose Cooperative Limited (MMCL) to women's empowerment across economic, socio-cultural, and political dimensions. They found significant improvements in all areas, with women gaining greater participation in economic activities, cultural programs, and political events, as well as fostering stronger social relationships. This highlights the transformative potential of cooperatives in addressing gender disparities. Similarly, Upreti (2019) ^[14] examined the role of small cooperatives in Chandrapur Municipality and concluded that these organizations enhance women's economic autonomy, decision-making, and access to essential resources like markets and financial services. However, Upreti also noted persistent challenges, such as societal norms and institutional barriers that must be addressed to fully realize the benefits of cooperatives. Building on this theme, Tamang (2019) ^[11] focused on saving and credit cooperatives, finding that membership significantly improved women's socio-economic status.

These cooperatives not only enhanced access to credit and financial services but also promoted entrepreneurship and income generation, allowing women to contribute to household incomes and gain greater decision-making power. Complementing these findings, Bharti (2021) [2] emphasized that women’s cooperatives are instrumental in economic empowerment by increasing income, savings, and employment opportunities. Successful cooperatives, according to Bharti, were characterized by strong leadership and community engagement. On a different note, Okafor, Okafor, and Uzundu (2018) [7] shed light on the challenges faced by women agricultural cooperatives in Awka North LGA of Anambra State. They identified significant barriers, including inadequate financing, low literacy levels, and poor access to healthcare, which hindered women’s active participation in cooperative activities. Focusing on broader impacts, Urhibo and Orhero (2023) [15] examined the relationship between women’s empowerment and rural development in Nigeria’s south-south geopolitical zone. Their findings indicated a strong positive correlation, showing that empowering women contributes significantly to community development. This aligns with Obayelu and Chime (2020) [6], who analyzed empowerment determinants in rural Nigeria. They revealed that while women in southern regions were more empowered, decision-making often remained dominated by male spouses, and women’s education played a crucial role in enhancing empowerment. Lastly, Korlat *et al* (2022) [5] explored gender roles among adolescents, finding greater gender similarities than differences in self-descriptions, thereby challenging traditional gender norms. This focus on changing perceptions complements the broader narrative of cooperatives as tools

for dismantling societal barriers and promoting inclusivity. Together, these studies collectively highlight the significant, yet multifaceted, role of cooperatives in empowering women across diverse contexts.

Methodology

This study adopted a case study design method which enabled the researcher analyze the role of cooperative in promoting gender equality in rural areas in Aguata, L.G.A, Anambra State. This study adopted a case study design method which enabled the researcher analyze the role of cooperative in promoting gender equality in rural areas in Aguata, L.G.A, Anambra State. Aguata Local Government Area is relevant to this study because it faces challenges related to gender inequality, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for women. The region has a strong tradition of cooperative societies, which provides a solid foundation for exploring their impact on gender equality. The population consists of members of registered cooperative societies in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. According to the department of cooperative-Aguata L.G.A, Secretariat, (2024), there are 2000 registered cooperative societies and only 200 are active in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State.

The study adopted the stratified random sampling. This sampling technique is adopted because it allowed the researcher represents various cooperative types, ensures diversity in member experiences, allows for generalizability of findings and controls for extraneous variables. Therefore, out of the 200 active cooperative societies in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State, ten (10) was randomly selected are represented in the table below:

Table 1: Distribution of the selected cooperatives societies in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State

S/N	Names of Cooperative Societies	No of Members
1.	Umuoganiru (Isuofia) MCS Ltd.	15
2.	Evergreen (Uga) MCS Ltd.	15
3.	Efficient Farmers (Umuchu) MCS Ltd.	14
4.	Munachi (Ekwulobia) MCS Ltd.	14
5.	Real farmers (Ekwulobia) MCS Ltd.	18
6.	Ekwulobia Pig Breeder Coop. Soc. Ltd.	15
7.	God’s Own (Anesi) MCS Ltd.	20
8.	Ofuobi (Anesi) MCS Ltd.	22
9.	Ada-Ugo (Aguata) MCS Ltd.	13
10.	Chibugo (Uga) MCS Ltd.	20
	Total	166

Source: Department of Cooperatives Aguata L.G.A Secretariat, Aguata (2024)

The sample size is the number of individuals to include in a sample. The sample size is based on the following considerations: The formula developed by Tara Yamane in 1967 was adopted in determining the sample size for this study

Below is the mathematical illustration for the Taro Yamane method:

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

Where:

n signifies the sample size

N signifies the population under study

e signifies the margin error (0.05)

$$n = \frac{166}{(1 + 166 (0.05)^2)}$$

$$n = \frac{166}{(1 + 166 (0.0025))}$$

$$n = \frac{166}{1 + 0.415}$$

$$n = \frac{166}{1.415} = 117.3$$

The sample size is 117

The instruments of data collection that was employed in this research was questionnaire. A questionnaire was justified for use in this study as it enhanced collection of quantitative data. The questionnaires comprised closed ended questions. First section (Section A) sought information on the demographic information regarding gender, age, academic qualification and years of experience. Second section sought information regarding other items laid in the research objectives. The second part of the questionnaire (section B) had questions to reflecting the research objectives by using Likert scale. This research used the parallel form of reliability test and this

was done by the distribution of questionnaires to respondents. In addition, the Cronbach alpha was used to test reliability of the measurement instrument. The range of the coefficient qualities was from 0 to 1. An instrument with high reliability usually has a coefficient value near 1 as could reasonably be expected though a score that is near 0 is an indication that the instrument has a low or no reliability. Generally, a score of 0.7 or more means that the instrument is reliable.

Cronbach's Alpha	No of items
0 to 1	15

Data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviation) and mathematical percentages technique were used. The

mathematical percentage formula is stated below:

$$\frac{x}{n} \times \frac{100}{1}$$

Where;

- X = frequency of response to each question
- N = the number of respondents

Correlation statistics and linear regression was used to test the hypothesis in the study.

Results
Descriptive statistics result

Table 2: The effect of extension services on decision-making in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State

Variables	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
Extension services provide individuals with timely and relevant information, enabling informed decision-making	54	32	6	2	4.45	Accepted
Training and capacity-building programs improve individual's understanding of best practices, technologies, and market trends	38	49	3	4	4.24	Accepted
Extension services boosts self-confidence through independent decision making.	27	11	25	31	3.03	Accepted
Extension services help individuals adapt to changing environmental, market, and technological conditions	15	30	35	14	3.34	Accepted
Extension agents facilitate problem-solving and critical thinking skills	34	30	15	15	3.72	Accepted
Grand Mean					3.13	

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 2 above, revealed the effect of extension services on decision-making in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State. It was discovered that all the items of the variables met a minimum theoretical threshold of 3.0, which is the established mean

cut-off. The results have a grand mean of 3.13, which is accepted indicating that respondents generally accept the potential effects of extension services on decision-making.

Table 3: The effect of extension services on reducing gender-based violence against women in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State

Variables	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
Extension services provide women with income-generating opportunities, reducing financial dependence on abusive partner	45	25	14	10	4.01	Accepted
Extension services raise awareness about GBV, women's rights, and available support services.	44	40	8	2	4.32	Accepted
Extension services mobilize communities to address GBV, promoting collective action and social change.	30	30	24	10	3.74	Accepted
Extension services build women's confidence and self-worth, reducing vulnerability to abuse	60	28	2	4	4.49	Accepted
Extension services empower women to make informed decisions about their lives, reducing power imbalances	40	25	25	4	4.03	Accepted
Grand Mean					3.43	

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 3 above, revealed the effect of extension services on reducing gender-based violence against women in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State. It was discovered that all the items of the variables met a minimum theoretical threshold of 3.0, which is the established mean cut-off. The results have a

grand mean of 3.43, which is accepted indicating that respondents generally accept the potential effects of extension services on reducing gender-based violence against women.

Table 4: The extent to which extension services challenge and transform harmful gender stereotypes that limit women's participation in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State

Variables	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
Extension services do not address gender stereotypes at all.	40	30	15	14	3.83	Accepted
Extension services slightly raise awareness about gender stereotypes, but do not challenge them	50	20	20	4	4.19	Accepted
Extension services moderately challenge gender stereotypes through education and training	20	50	20	4	3.87	Accepted
Extension services significantly challenge and transform gender stereotypes, promoting gender equality	20	50	20	4	3.87	Accepted
Extension services completely transform gender stereotypes, achieving gender parity.	20	50	15	9	3.77	Accepted
Grand Mean					3.26	

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 4 above, revealed the extent to which extension services challenge and transform harmful gender stereotypes that limit women's participation in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State. It was discovered that all the items of the variables met a minimum theoretical threshold of 3.0, which is the

established mean cut-off. The results have a grand mean of 3.26, which is accepted.

Test of Hypothesis

Table 5: Relationship between extension services and reduction of gender-based violence against women in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State

Correlation Coefficient		Extension services	Reduction of gender-based violence against women
Extension services	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1	0.754 0.000
	N	94	94
Reduction of gender-based violence against women	Pearson correlation	0.754	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	94	94

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 levels (2-tailed)

Source: SPSS version 23, 2024

Table 5 depicts the relationship between extension services and reduction of gender-based violence against women in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State. Extension services and reduction of gender-based violence against women have a significant positive high correlation ($r=0.754$, $n = 476$, $p = 0.01$). This implies that extension services is strongly linked

to reduction of gender-based violence against women in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State. The null hypothesis is thus rejected.

Linear regression analysis

Table 6: Model Summary^b

Model	R	R ²	R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.67 ^a	.709	.686	21.640

Dependent variable: Reduction of gender-based violence against women

Predictors: (constant): Extension services

Source: SPSS version 23, 2024

Table 7: ANOVA^a

Model	Sum of square	Df	Mean	F.Sat.	Sig.	Remark
Regression	8.472	3	3.651	17.803	0.005 ^b	Sig.
Residual	3.556	88	0.223			
Total	12.028	91				

Predictors: (constant): Extension services

Dependent variable: Reduction of gender-based violence against women

Source: SPSS version 23, 2024

The F statistic of 17.803 indicates that the model is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. The null hypothesis is thus rejected. It is possible to conclude that extension services are significantly associated with reduced gender-based violence against women in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State.

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings revealed that there is an effect of extension services on decision-making in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State. This is in line with the findings of Sharma and Shahi (2022) ^[10] who revealed that effective extension services empower women by providing access to essential resources like credit, land, and technology, enabling them to participate in decision-making and improving their economic status, ultimately promoting a more equitable distribution of power within households.

The study revealed that respondents in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State, acknowledge the effect of extension services in mitigating gender-based violence against women, which is in line with Urhobo and Orhero (2023) ^[15] who revealed that stated as women's economic status improves through extension programs, incidents of domestic violence tend to decrease.

The study findings revealed that extension services challenge and transform harmful gender stereotypes that limit women's

participation in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State. The finding aligns with Obayelu and Chime (2020) ^[6] who revealed that traditionally, women have had limited access to land, credit, and technology due to societal norms but extension services can advocate for policies that ensure equitable access to these resources for women by facilitating their access to inputs such as seeds and fertilizers or financial resources like microloans, extension services empower women economically and socially.

Finally, it was discovered that extension services are significantly associated with reduced gender-based violence against women in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State. This finding is also consistent with the views of Okafor, Okafor and Uzundu (2018) ^[7] who suggested that reducing gender inequity in access to public extension and similar services (such as training provided by non-governmental organizations or the private sector) could increase yields for women's farms by 20 to 30 percent.

Conclusion

This study has analyze the role of cooperative in promoting gender equality in rural areas in Aguata, L.G.A, Anambra State. The study has specifically examined the effect of extension services on decision-making, assessed the effect of extension services on reducing gender-based violence against women and investigated the extent to which extension

services challenge and transform harmful gender stereotypes that limit women's participation in in Aguata L.G.A, Anambra State. The study therefore concludes that cooperatives are key drivers of gender equality in rural areas. They empower women economically, socially, and politically, bridging the gender gap and promoting rural development.

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