

Rural Women Empowerment through Self Help Groups in Nigeria: The Role of Participation and Volunteerism

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Abstract: Active participation and volunteerism of rural women in self help group's activities are vital for sustainable women development. This paper seeks to examine the role of participation and volunteerism in SHG's activities towards women's empowerment. Participation and volunteerism in SHGs by women occur as a result of their awareness of their felt needs and that they can always come together to solve their problems through collective efforts. The general aim of this paper is to describe how participation and volunteerism in women's SHGs reinforce a sense of personal ability that creates expectation for a successful women development. The paper also briefly looks at the extent to which rural women are empowered through and genuine participation of the members. A sample of 282 SHG members were selected through simple random (lottery method) out of 30 SHGs identified in agricultural activities from the three senatorial districts of Niger State and a schedule was designed and administered among the respondents. The results of this study indicated that majority of the respondents had participated in SHGs voluntary (Self Mobilization) and were fully motivated and involved in carrying out every aspect of group activities. The study also revealed that respondents had shown greater level of volunteerism towards the success of the group approaches. It was observed that the majority of the respondents had always encouraged themselves for maximum participation towards the success of the group goals. Thus, with self mobilization type of participation and a high spirit of volunteerism within individuals and groups in organization, the success of building a group, community and society will be fully attainable.

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Introduction

Participation and volunteerism are widely used as the central concepts and foundation of community development. Some agencies of development emphasize participation and volunteerism on development, and they believe that, without genuine participation and volunteerism, sustainable development would not be achieved. In community development context, participation and volunteerism are "the inclusive of a diversion range of stakeholder contribution in group or community development process, from identification of problem areas, to the development, implementation and management of strategic planning (Schafft and Greenwood, 2003). Participation is an empowering process which people in partnership with each other identify problems and needs, mobilize resources, control and access the individual and collective actions that they themselves decided upon (Bretty 2003, Lim 2009). Thus, through volunteerism and participation of women in SHG programs, it is an avenue for the development of skills and abilities to plan, to make decisions and implement projects and programs.

Therefore, an important aspect of SHG activities is the implicit assumption that through volunteerism and active participation in the process, women will

improve their 'position' within the family and the society (Mazumdar, 1986). The increased formation of SHGs and participation of Nigerian rural women in group activities, as a strategy for their empowerment, arise from the perceived problem of women's lack of access to resources. As a group oriented model, SHG is a strategy that brings about individual and collective empowerment. Therefore, the increasing awareness of the importance of the linkages among participation, volunteerism and women empowerment calls for an in-depth study of women participation in SHG's activities and in addition, the benefits they derived from their participation should be documented. The aim of this paper is to understand and describe the role of participation and volunteerism in women SHGs.

Participation and Volunteerism – A Theoretical Account

The term participation has been used in variety of contexts such as community development, institutional arrangements, social mobilization and political movements. It is a very broad concept that means different things to different people (Husseni 1995, Kelly 2001). Participation is an ideological contested concept which provides a range of competing meanings and applications. Chamala (1995) and Ndekha (2003) provided good holistic starting points

for defining participation “a social process whereby specific groups with share needs living in a defined geographic area actively pursue identification of their needs, take decision and establish mechanisms to meet these needs. Lane (1995) provided a similar definition adding the importance of participation at different stage of action, meaningful participation of individual and groups at all stages of the development process including that of initiating action. The only way to ensure that individual have the power to attack the root causes of underdevelopment is to enable them to influence all decisions, at all levels that affect their lives (Lane 1995). The World Bank (1996) identified the importance of participation of disadvantaged groups in their definition, ‘the {genuine} participation of the poor and others who are disadvantaged in terms of wealth, education, ethnicity or gender and this view was supported by Ndekha (2003) that overall objective of community participation is a mechanism and facilitate an improvement in the lives of the world’s poor people. Participation has grown in popularity since the 1970 and has become very relevant in development studies and practice (Hjortson, 2004). Participation theory represents a move from the global and top down strategies that dominated early development initiatives to more locally sensitive methodologies (Storey, 1999).

This paper rely on Pretty (1995) and Wilcox (1999) theory of participation as supported by others. According to this theory, participation may be viewed along a spectrum with passive at one end and self mobilization at the other end. Passive participation, as the term suggest, is where people are told what to do, on the other hand, there is self mobilization where the local people themselves are in total command. As one moves from passive participation to self mobilization, the control of the local people and outsiders over the process varies. At the end of the spectrum, say in the case of passive participation, people’s control is almost no-existent while at the other end, in the case of self mobilization, people have almost total control over the process while the role of outsiders is at best minimal. If one looks at the typology of participation, the impact of different kind of participation can disempowered and participation of self mobilization can highly empowered (Pretty 1995, Kumar 2002). Participation reinforces a sense of personality ability creates expectations for a successful solutions for problems, and encourages civic commitment (Pretty 1995). Women’s participation in group and organizational frameworks promotes empowerment as well as individual empowerment (Arnstein 1969). Zimmerman and Rappaport (2003) demonstrated that participation in volunteer experiences can be empowering by enhancing self- acceptance, self- confidence, self-esteem, social and political understanding, and the

ability to play assertive role in controlling one’s resources in the community.

Community development practitioners are among the strongest proponents of women participation as an integral element of economic improvement and social change efforts. Over the years, there has been flow of interest among social science scholars regarding women participation in planning and decision making process (Naparstek and Dooley, 1997, Poose and Colby, 2002, Schafft and Greenwood, 2003, Silverman, 2005). To our understanding, participation like any other social phenomena can be conceptualized as both a means and an end itself as it is a process whereby women are involved in decision making and other development issues that influence their well being. Therefore, participation can be conceptualized as both a means and an end.

Volunteerism on the other hand, is one of the most basic expressions of human behavior and arises out of long- established ancient traditions of sharing and reciprocal exchanges. Voluntary action is deeply embedded in most cultures. It emerges from long-established, ancient traditions of sharing, whether understood as mutual aid and self help group, philanthropy and community service, or civic participation. Volunteerism is both an opportunity and an asset for development (UNV, 2009). Volunteerism provides people, regardless of age, gender, educational level, marital status, and socio-economic level, with opportunity to participate in the community. In addition, volunteerism allows group with access to different amounts and types of power to interact with each other for common purposes (Wuthnow, 1991)

The Social Psychologists Clary and Snyder are prominent researchers in the field community volunteering. They have examined major theories of volunteerism which includes functional theory. They have identified the motivational functions that volunteering satisfied. Theories of volunteerism (Clary et al, 1998) have recommended taking on a motivational perspective when addressing the questions of why individual choose to volunteer and what factor support volunteerism over prolong time periods. (Clary et al, 1998) have selected functional theory to deal with these motivational questions. This theory emphasizes that people are social entities whose interactions with their social surroundings shape their behavior, beliefs, values, and world perspective. People’s affiliation group (be it group or community) play an important role in developing the norms and values of both group and individual. Group membership influences behavior through the mediating role of group norms. People will be more likely to engage in a particular behavior if it is in accord with the norms of the group.

To our understanding, volunteerism services enhancement function which promotes one's self-esteem, self-confidence and self improvement.

Participation in Self Help Group Approach and Women's Empowerment

The recent literature on participation of women in SHGs has stressed the involvement of women as imperative in the process of their empowerment. Some researchers have observed positive outcomes being generated through participation in SHG (Sambangi, 2009). Participation in SHGs occur as a result of people's awareness of their felt needs and the fact that they possess the ability to confront and dislodge their limitations and solve their problems through their own individual or collective efforts (Josephine, 2011). It is a strong desire for advancement that is move from a worse to a better situation in the socio-economic, political cultural milieu (Agbegbu, 2009). Participation occupies a central place in development thinking and practice of women SHG's approach (Kumar, 2011). In SHG activities, the word participation is referred to power and power relationship (World Bank 1996). Women participation in SHG programs promotes empowerment (Vida, 2011). He noted that participating in volunteer experience can be empowering by enhancing confidence and well being. Participation in SHG according to France (1998) is a process of empowering that helps to involve women in the process of identifying problems, decision-making and implementing a program, where it can contribute to their development. Narayan et al, (1999) pointed out that empowerment will be derive in the greater participation of the poor and marginalized in the economic, social and civic domains within their communities, thereby gaining access to government and community resources. Abbot (1996) expressed that empowerment will be achieved through participation as an end. Therefore, the participation and involvement of women in SHG programs can lead to empowerment where they can gain control over their lives and resources.

The strong correlation between SHG participation and self confidence, self efficacy, civil responsibility, and political efficacy has been supported in research studies (Florin & Wanderman, 2007, Zimmerman & Rappapot, 2003). Active and genuine participation of women in SHG development process is one of the vital conditions for sustainable women and community development (Khairu, 2005). Social science theories, such as the theories of affiliation, attribution, change and social exchange provide some explanations of why participation in SHGs empowers members. Steward (2005) concludes, after synthesizing some theoretical and empirical studies that, 'the provision of social support and social learning in SHGs is the major factor in SHG effectiveness.

Methodology

The study was carried out in Niger State area of Nigeria. The study is descriptive in nature as it has attempted to describe the role of participation and volunteerism in women SHG approach as well as empowerment benefits derived through such group activities. The sample size for this study came from a population of 30 SHGs who are involved in agricultural activities from the study area. The total population from the 30 SHGs was 712 and since the population is large and logically homogeneous, the most convenience method of multi-stage sampling technique was adopted. In this regard, in the first stage, study area was divided into three locations (Tribes), in the second stage, all the SHGs that are involved in agricultural activities were chosen and in the last stage, the respondents were selected through simple random (lottery method) from all SHGs identified from the three locations. The sample size of 282 was then selected for the study. The research instrument for data collection for this study was through questionnaire. The suggested items in measuring the level of participation, types of participation and volunteerism were originally developed by past researchers and reported high rating on its validity and reliability. Level of participation was measured by 13 and the scale had an alpha value of .723, indicating that it has a high degree of reliability. Passive participation, interactive participation and self mobilization participation were measured by 17 items and the scales had alpha value of .701, .656, .711 respectively, indicating that they have high degree of reliability. Level of volunteerism was measured by 10 items and the scale had an alpha value of .671, indicating that it had high degree of reliability.

Result

Level of Participation

The main idea behind this section "Level of Participation" was to measure the level of involvement of the respondents in carrying out group activities. The analysis showed that the overall mean score of level of participation was 3.86 and that the majority of the respondents of SHGs were fully involved in carrying out group activities especially in the process of making every member to feel happy which has the highest mean score of 4.35, attendance of group meetings, acceptance of individual and group tasks, active involvement in organized group activities and their contribution toward the success of the group activities. The result also reported that majority of the respondents spend their time doing things in the group while others learn through the process. There was an indication that majority of the respondents actively and constantly do their individual and group assignment which led to the success of women's group approach. The overall frequency thus indicated that women who participate in SHGs had high level of involvement in

all aspects of SHG's activities which is considered to be the most necessary condition for the success of such group efforts.

Table1: Level of Participation in SGH Activities (N = 282, overall Mean = 3.86)

S/N	Items	M	SD	Low (1-2.33)	Level Mod (2.34-3.66)	High (3.67-5)
1	I do everything possible for other members to feel happy	4.35	0.58	0.7%	2.5%	96.8%
2	I attend every meeting	4.32	0.60	3 (1.1%)	4.3%	94.7%
3	I always accept every task assign to me	4.30	0.70	2.5%	5.7%	91.8%
4	I take an active part in organized group activities	4.16	0.56	1.8%	2.5%	95.7%
5	I always contribute to the success of the group activity	4.16	0.50	1.1%	2.8%	96.1%
6	I allow other members to learn from me	3.86	0.67	3.9%	18.4%	77.7%
7	I spend time doing thing with people in the group	3.86	0.56	4 (1.4%)	18.8%	79.8%
8	I often find time for every group activities	3.80	0.65	1.4%	28.7%	69.9%
9	Much of my time is spent working in the group	3.74	0.73	5.3%	25.9%	68.8%
10	I actively and constantly do my group work	3.71	0.74	14 (5.0%)	31.2%	63.8%
11	I am very active in making suggestions	3.62	0.84	11.0%	25.9%	63.1%
12	I assist others in their individual/group activities	3.34	0.85	12.8%	48.6%	38.7%
13	I voluntary spend my time for group activities	2.97	0.98	35.8%	35.8%	28.4%

Types of Participation

The main idea behind this section "types of participation" was to measure the types of respondent's involvement in group activities. The types of participation of the respondents in the SHGs were grouped into three categories which were passive participation, interactive participation and self mobilization participation. In the passive participation, the analysis showed that the overall mean score was as low as 1.90. All the items under it had low mean scores except one item. Under the interactive participation, the analysis showed the overall mean score of 2.60 and all the items of interactive participation had reported

moderate mean scores. The analysis of self mobilization showed that majority of the respondents had participated in the group approach voluntary (self mobilization). The analysis showed that the overall mean score of self mobilization was 3.58 and virtually all the items of self mobilization type of participation reported high level mean scores.

The result in this section had proved that self mobilization type was the ideal type of participation and its represents authentic participation. Therefore, it can be concluded that passive participation can't empower, but both interactive and self mobilization participation can be highly empowering.

Table 2: Level of Passive, Interactive and Self-mobilization Participation (N = 282)

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Low (1-2)	Level Mod (2.1-3)	High (3.1-4)
Level of Passive (Overall Mean = 1.90)						
1	I enjoy exchange of ideas with knowledgeable people	2.36	0.67	61.0%	34.4%	4.6%
2	I respect opinion that are from others	1.97	0.58	86.5%	12.4%	1.1%
3	I listen to the opinion of others	1.91	0.61	87.2%	11.7%	1.1%
4	I get involve when others ask me to do so	1.71	0.60	95.0%	3.5%	1.4%
5	I take part base on discussion from others	1.59	0.60	95.4%	3.5%	0.7%
Level of Interactive (Overall Mean = 2.60)						
6	I take part to have new views	2.91	0.58	18.1%	70.6%	11.3%
7	I appreciate interacting with others	2.90	0.62	20.9%	66.0%	13.1%
8	I participate where people with different background are found	2.63	0.70	42.2%	46.5%	11.3%
9	I cherish participation when people are sensitive to each other's opinion	2.56	0.72	33.0%	54.6%	12.4%
10	I take part because I respect group decisions	2.54	0.80	21.3%	61.0%	17.7%
11	I take part when views are respected	2.39	0.66	66.3%	25.5%	8.2%
12	I feel happy when advice on group activities	2.31	0.63	65.6%	31.2%	3.2%
Level of Self-mobilization (Overall Mean = 3.58)						
13	I appreciate collective actions	3.64	0.47	-	35.1%	64.9%
14	I learn more from group efforts	3.63	0.49	0.7%	35.5%	63.8%
15	I like group activities	3.60	0.49	0.4%	39.0%	60.6%
16	I am involve to enrich my happiness	3.57	0.50	0.4%	41.8%	57.8%
17	I realize my potentialities through collective initiatives	3.49	0.51	0.7%	48.9%	50.4%

Level of Volunteerism

The main idea behind this section “level of volunteerism” is to measure the level of respondent’s willingness towards group activities. The analysis showed that the overall mean score of level of volunteerism was 3.15 and the majority of the respondents have always encouraged themselves for maximum participation towards the success of the group goals, they have built team spirit and strong cooperation and this led to greater success. The result also reported the willingness of the respondents in accepting tasks and group executive positions in order

to smooth the activities of the group as well as making material contribution for the attainment of group goals. The overall result reported that 104 (36.9) were at the high level of volunteerism, 174 (61.7%) were at the moderate level and a few 4 (1.4%) at the low level of volunteerism. Thus, with a high spirit of volunteerism within individuals and groups in organization the success of building a group, community and society will be fully attainable. Hence, volunteerism completes and complements the development of a people and community.

Table3: Level of Volunteerism (N = 282, Overall Mean=3.15)

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Level		
				Low (1-2.33)	Mod (2.34-3.66)	High (3.67-5)
1	I will always encourage others for maximum participation in group activities	3.58	0.53	1.8%	57.8%	40.4%
2	I can always encourage team spirit and cooperation among members	3.34	0.51	1.1%	63.5%	35.5%
3	I can always do everything possible for the success of the group	3.30	0.49	1.1%	66.7%	32.3%
4	I can always accept every task assign to me	3.27	0.52	3.9%	64.5%	31.6%
5	I can always make any material contribution to group activities	3.13	0.54	8.5%	69.5%	22.0%
6	I don't mind taking any group executive position	3.13	0.69	17.1%	50.7%	31.6%
7	I don't mind spending time with group members when necessary	3.10	0.46	5.7%	78.0%	16.3%
8	I can always assist in mobilization of material resources for attainment of group goals	3.05	0.51	9.9%	74.1%	16.0%
9	No problem for me to participate in SHG	2.92	0.47	15.2%	77.0%	7.8%
10	It's okay for me to contribute money to group activities	2.76	0.60	32.3%	58.5%	9.2%

Discussion

The study was designed to understand and describe the role of participation and volunteerism in women’s self help group activities. The results obtained from the study had shown great impact of participation and volunteerism towards the success of group approach. The outcome of the study showed that participation is the inclusive of a diversion range of member’s contribution in self help group process. In addition, the study indicated that through active participation and volunteerism, the majority of the respondents of this study being members of SHGs in agricultural activities had seen themselves as social entities whose interactions with their social surroundings shape their behavior, beliefs and values. Respondents of this study have come to believe that through participation and volunteerism, women’s affiliation group play an important role in developing the norms and values of both the group and individual.

The findings of this study is consistent with previous studies (Schafft & Greenwood, 2003, Lim, 2009, Oakley, 1995) when they observed that participation is an empowering process whereby people in partnership with each other identify problems and needs, mobilize resources, and assume responsibility to plan, manage, control and access the individual and collective actions that they themselves decided upon. It can be concluded from this study that high level of volunteerism had led to active participation which in turn led to the approaching playing a valuable role in reducing the vulnerability of the Nigerian poor rural women, through provision of emergency assistance and empowering women by giving them control over assets and increased self esteem and knowledge (Safiya, 2011).

It was understood from the study that SHGs are playing a vital role in empowering Nigerian poor rural women as it was observed that through participation and high level of volunteerism in group activities,

social changes result in a form of social power that identify improve social status. Therefore, active participation and volunteerism in the alternative approach of SHG activities are necessary conditions for its maximum success. Finally, it is concluded that active participation and high level of volunteerism in SHG approach by Nigerian rural women is therefore a vital tool for women empowerment in Nigeria as it creates opportunities to enhance capabilities in their full development and growth.

Conclusion

The outcome of this study has shown the impact of volunteerism and participation in SHGs on the empowerment of Nigerian rural women. From the details of this paper, a conclusion could be reached that self help group approach is a relevant strategy for rural women empowerment in Nigeria. It is concluded that in SHG approach, intrinsic value is accorded to participation and volunteerism of the members in group efforts and it is evident that there is a strong linkage among participation, volunteerism and women empowerment. Thus, it is clear from this study that the majority of women who participate in SHGs have been empowered. Thus, it can be concluded that Participation in this group approach creates tremendous impact upon their living conditions.

Recommendations

The following recommendations would improve the effectiveness of women group approach in Nigeria.

One major problem of SHGs in Nigeria is lack of credit facilities, Banks such as community Banks, Micro-finance institutions and other financial institutions in the country should work with open-mind and service to promote participation in SHGs among Nigeria rural poor women.

Federal, State and Local Governments in Nigeria should work hand-in hand to support and promote the formation of women SHGs without political biasness.

It is finally recommended that the three tiers of government should enhance public awareness and to educate Nigerian women to Join SHGs. The media together with the existing various SHGs should play a lead role in educating the public and their members on the benefits accrue to members through participation in SHG approach.

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