

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AS COMMUNITY CHANGE AGENTS: FOCUS ON RURAL WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN NIGERIA

¹CAROLINE A. OKORO, ²VICTOR WAGWU & ³OSERADA WILSON

¹Michael Okpara University of Agriculture Umudike, Abia State, Nigeria.

²Dame Patience Goodluck Jonathan Automated Library, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuorlumeni, Port-Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

³Department of Library and Information Science, Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

¹carolokoroamara@gmail.com ²victor.wagwu@iaue.edu.ng ³oserada.wilson@nsuk.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines the role of public libraries as community change agents in empowering rural women entrepreneurs in Nigeria. Set against the backdrop of Nigeria's challenging socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural landscape, the study highlights how rural women, despite being key drivers of grassroots economies, continue to grapple with information poverty, limited access to resources, and exclusion from formal support systems. Rural women entrepreneurs often face barriers such as low digital literacy, gender bias, poor infrastructure, and limited market access, all of which hinder their business growth and sustainability. Public libraries, with their unique mandate of providing free and equitable access to information, are strategically positioned to bridge these gaps. By offering access to digital tools, training, entrepreneurial information, and safe community spaces, libraries can empower women with the knowledge and skills required to thrive. However, the potential of public libraries in this regard remains underutilized due to systemic neglect, poor funding, and lack of targeted programs. Findings from this study reveal that where libraries are actively engaged, they contribute significantly to enhancing the capabilities of rural women entrepreneurs. Yet, many libraries lack the resources, staff training, and institutional support to fulfil this role effectively. The study concludes that repositioning public libraries as development hubs is essential for inclusive growth. It recommends increased government funding, public-private partnerships, gender-sensitive library programming, and community outreach initiatives to strengthen the impact of libraries on rural entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Public libraries, Rural Women Entrepreneurs, Community development, Information access, Nigeria, Digital inclusion.

Introduction

Libraries have been a cornerstone of human civilization, serving as centers of knowledge dissemination, intellectual exchange, and cultural preservation for centuries. Over time, libraries

have transformed from quiet sanctuaries for scholarly pursuits to vibrant hubs of social interaction, education, and innovation. A public library is a community-based institution that provides free and equitable access to information, knowledge, and resources for people of all ages, backgrounds, and educational levels. Funded primarily by government or public funds, it is open to everyone, regardless of membership, income, or social status (American Library Association, 2019). Public libraries are recognized as dynamic serve as community hubs capable of driving social and economic transformation, especially in underserved and marginalized communities.

Many public libraries are located in rural areas. A rural library is a public library situated in a rural region that serves the educational and informational needs of its community. These libraries are essential for bridging information gaps and fostering community development. They provide access to diverse collections that meet the information needs of rural dwellers (Chairtra & Maranna, 2023). Globally, public libraries are key resources for individuals seeking education, information, and community support (IFLA, 2020). Their role is particularly vital in rural areas where access to technology and reliable information is limited, especially for rural women entrepreneurs.

Rural women entrepreneurs in Nigeria face significant challenges that hinder the growth and sustainability of their businesses. These challenges include limited access to relevant information, low digital literacy, and inadequate educational opportunities (Ezeala & Yusuf, 2021). Information poverty, defined as a lack of access to timely and relevant information, further compounds these issues, preventing rural women from making informed decisions and taking advantage of economic opportunities (Okeke, 2019). The digital divide, or the disparity in access to information and communication technologies, also presents a major obstacle (Adeniran & Amusa, 2020). According to Ojedokun (2022), public libraries are well positioned to address these problems by providing access to information, digital literacy training, and supportive learning environments that can empower women entrepreneurs.

However, empirical evidence suggests that government-funded information centers often fail to deliver effective services to rural dwellers in Nigeria (Anunobi, Ogbonna & Osuchukwu, 2014). This paints a troubling picture of national development. A nation is only as strong as its weakest link, and this weakness has direct negative implications for rural women entrepreneurs in Nigeria. This troubling scenario prompted Uzuegbu (2016) to ask: whose responsibility is it to provide effective information services to rural dwellers in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Nigeria?

This study investigates the role of public libraries as community change agents, with a focus on rural women entrepreneurs in Nigeria. It reviews the current services and programmes offered by public libraries, identifies the challenges they face, and assesses their potential impact on women's entrepreneurial success.

The Nigerian Context: Socio-Economic, Cultural, and Infrastructural Landscape

Nigeria is the most populous nation in Sub-Saharan Africa, with an estimated population of over 180 million (World Bank, 2016). The country is predominantly rural, with a large portion of its population living in rural areas. Women constitute about 52% of Nigeria's total population, and approximately 45% of them reside in rural areas (Gamba, 2011). These women are vital economic actors who engage in agriculture and other small-scale economic activities for their livelihoods. They form the backbone of rural families and are essential components of the rural workforce. Increasingly, rural women are venturing into entrepreneurship to improve their economic standing through small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Concept of Rural Women Entrepreneurs

Rural women entrepreneurs are women who establish and operate businesses within rural or less urbanized areas. These regions are typically characterized by low population density and heavy reliance on agriculture and other primary-sector activities. According to the World Bank (2021), rural women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to economic growth and poverty reduction. Unlocking their full potential requires targeted interventions in education, access to finance, and market participation. Adebayo and Yusuf (2020) noted that rural women entrepreneurs are often involved in low-capital, labor-intensive ventures such as farming, food processing, and textile production. In Nigeria, women also engage in various other entrepreneurial activities including crop and livestock production, cassava and rice processing, palm oil production, fisheries, poultry, shea butter production, and non-agricultural activities such as crafts, tailoring, hairdressing, and traditional midwifery.

These women are essential to rural economies. They offer goods, services, and employment opportunities, often reinvesting their earnings into their families and communities, thus fostering local economic growth and improving living standards (Amobi, 2021; Nwaosu & Chikezie, 2022). The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2018) identified rural women entrepreneurs as pivotal to rural development. Similarly, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD, 2019) emphasized their crucial roles across agricultural value chains, while highlighting systemic challenges such as limited access to resources, markets, and decision-making power.

Despite their contributions, rural women in Nigeria remain among the most economically marginalized groups. Barriers include limited access to capital, markets, education, and business information (Adeniran & Amusa, 2020). The United Nations (2023) has urged governments, NGOs, and development agencies to implement empowerment programs focused on rural women's access to education, health care, economic resources, information, and decision-making opportunities. The Nigerian government has acknowledged the importance of supporting women entrepreneurs through initiatives like the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (2020–2030), which promotes digital skills and innovation. Programs offering financial grants, training, and mentorship have been launched. However, their impact has been minimal, especially in rural areas, due to logistical challenges and poor infrastructure (Ezeala & Yusuf, 2021).

The Challenge of Information Poverty

Rural women entrepreneurs often work long hours but still struggle to generate sufficient income to sustain their families. Cultural norms that prioritize male education over female education further limit women's opportunities (Adeniran & Amusa, 2020). Inadequate access to education and vocational training restricts their ability to grow their businesses and adopt new technologies (Okeke, 2019). A significant gap exists in their participation in global entrepreneurship.

Information poverty is a major obstacle. Many women lack access to crucial information for making decisions, managing businesses, and identifying opportunities. The Asian Development Bank (2019) highlighted the role of information in empowering rural women and called for targeted interventions to address this gap. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), information poverty restricts women's ability to innovate and scale their businesses. They often rely on outdated and informal sources such as relatives, friends, religious leaders, and village chiefs. UNESCO (2018) confirmed that limited access to digital technologies further worsens this situation. The digital divide, characterized by unreliable internet access and poor digital literacy, hinders rural women from leveraging technology to expand their businesses. In contrast, entrepreneurs worldwide are harnessing digital platforms and public libraries as participatory spaces for accessing and sharing vital information.

Entrepreneurs require information on market trends, production methods, customer satisfaction, financial assistance, government programs, legal support, pricing strategies, and distribution networks. The lack of access to such information keeps rural women isolated, uninformed, and unable to compete in a globalized economy. If this problem is not addressed, these women will remain trapped in poverty despite their economic potential. The key question is: can public libraries in Nigeria play a transformative role in addressing the challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs? The answer is yes.

Public Libraries as Community Change Agents

Entrepreneurial information exists in various forms, books, journals, magazines, student projects, multimedia, digital databases, and more. Public libraries can serve as gateways for rural women entrepreneurs to explore, access, share, and contribute to global knowledge networks. Rooted in equity and public service, libraries provide free access to diverse resources such as fiction and non-fiction books, audiovisual materials, and digital content. They also offer community programs such as storytelling, book clubs, author talks, computer training, and workshops tailored to community needs. Public libraries, especially those in rural areas serve as safe spaces for information seekers, including the non-literate (Ezeabasili & Chibueze, 2021). According to Osuigwe and Unagha (2018), public libraries serve everyone: children, students, professionals, job seekers, artisans, the physically challenged, and the elderly. Often referred to as "people's universities," they are inclusive institutions open to all, regardless of background.

Public libraries in Nigeria have begun to offer relevant support to local entrepreneurs. Enugu State public library, for example, now provides agricultural and business information (Ezeala & Yusuf, 2021). In Lagos, partnerships with local chambers of commerce have supported business incubation services for women (Afolabi, 2020). Cultural festivals and workshops also strengthen community ties and support entrepreneurial growth (Amobi, 2021). In the digital era, libraries have expanded their roles to include digital literacy, internet access, and computer training. Such efforts are particularly beneficial to rural women entrepreneurs who lack digital skills. According to IFLA (2020), public libraries now function as vital community hubs for education, social support, and civic engagement.

The Challenge

Despite their potential, rural women in Nigeria continue to face limited access to public library services. Most public libraries are concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural regions underserved (Okoye, Mbagwu & Edem, 2019). Igwe (2019) noted the scarcity of functional libraries in rural communities. Where they do exist, these libraries face challenges such as poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, and untrained staff. Yahaya et al. (2024) highlighted similar issues in Kogi State, including unreliable power supply, unstable internet, and lack of local-language materials. Public libraries remain underfunded and underutilized in development efforts (Adepoju & Akobe, 2023; Onuoha & Chukwueke, 2021). Katz (2014) lamented that libraries are often excluded from national literacy initiative. Given the current funding constraints, Nigerian public libraries must strike a balance between maintaining core services and introducing innovative programs to meet evolving user needs (Ogbonna, 2018).

Conclusion

Public libraries in Nigeria hold immense potential as community change agents capable of empowering rural women entrepreneurs. Despite various government and international interventions, many rural women continue to face systemic barriers including information poverty, digital illiteracy, limited educational opportunities, and socio-cultural restrictions. These issues significantly hinder their ability to succeed as entrepreneurs. However, public libraries, if effectively developed, resourced, and repositioned can help bridge these gaps. By offering access to relevant business information, digital tools, and capacity-building programs, libraries can empower women to make informed decisions, improve their livelihoods, and contribute meaningfully to Nigeria's economic development. Thus, the revitalization of public libraries must be prioritized as a strategic tool in addressing the challenges of rural women entrepreneurship.

Way Forward

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Expansion and Funding of Rural Libraries:** The government and stakeholders should ensure the establishment and proper funding of public libraries in rural areas to enhance access to information and technology.

2. Customized Library Programs for Women Entrepreneurs: Public libraries should design women-centered entrepreneurial programs such as digital literacy training, market research support, and small business advisory services.
3. Capacity Building for Librarians: Librarians should be trained in business information services, digital engagement, and community outreach to better support rural women. Stakeholder Collaboration: Libraries should partner with local government bodies, NGOs, business support agencies, and educational institutions to develop and implement inclusive entrepreneurship programs.
4. Awareness Creation: Community sensitization efforts should be intensified to inform rural women about the existence and value of public library services.
5. Integration into National Development Policy: Public libraries should be explicitly recognized and integrated into national and sub-national policies on rural development, gender empowerment, and entrepreneurship.

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