

## **Rural women's empowerment and rural development in Nigeria's South-South Geopolitical Zone**

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**Abstract:** In the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria, the study examined the relationship and effects between rural women's empowerment and rural development. Data were gathered through a survey of 750 people using a non-probability sampling technique and a cross-sectional research design. Of the 750 questionnaires that were distributed, 476 were collected and examined. Data gathered through the use of percentages, Pearson product moment correlation, and linear regression analysis was examined using SPSS version 23. The study showed a strong connection between rural development and women's empowerment in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical region. The study concludes that rural women's empowerment influences rural development in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone in a favorable and statistically significant manner. Based on these findings, the study makes several recommendations; including that government empowerment policy should always consider the female gender for necessary upliftment as this will help to improve their status and rural development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** rural development, women's emancipation, participation, and education

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Rural women's empowerment and rural development are two important concepts for developing countries. A strong appreciation for women's empowerment will contribute significantly to Nigeria's rural development. Rural communities in developing nations have been prompted to create plans to raise their status, social roles, and standard of living. This is because of political and socioeconomic challenges. In an effort to address the issues in their communities, women in particular participate in activities that aid in community development, according to Ojukwu (2013), as cited in Akpomuvie (2018, p. 185). Obetta (2019, p. 346) noted that proper empowerment of women will ensure effective management of rural development projects. Rural change cannot be effective unless rural women's activities and contributions to rural development, community project management, food availability, and household well-being are recognized. Improving the political, economic, and social circumstances of rural women is a necessary part of empowering women. So, in order to empower rural women, patriarchal society must be transformed through a process of collective organization, conscientization, and enlightenment. To do this, rural women must act as a group to reject patriarchal attitudes and beliefs. However, rural women in Nigeria have been a distinct victim of culture, religion, class, and sex oppression/suppression by customs and traditions that promote and uphold male chauvinism since the colonial era.

The term "rural women" is associated with poverty, connoting peasants, depicting and downtrodden masses living in villages and engaged in subsistence agriculture and petty trading

(Ohwofasa, Olueh & Okoh, 2013). In recent decades, much has been written about women's empowerment and its impact on rural development (Ajaegbu, 1976, Ebong, 1991; Ijere, 1991; Okeke, 1995; Nina, 1997; Okpoko, 2002; Ekong, 2003; Obetta, 2009, Okoli, 2012, Ohwofasa et al., 2013; Ering, Otu & Achibong, 2014; Akpomuvie, 2018). Despite these studies, no empirical research on rural women empowerment and its impact on rural development in Nigeria exist. To close this gap, this study investigates the relationship and impact of rural women empowerment and rural development in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone.

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the connection between rural development and the empowerment of women in Nigeria's south-south region.
2. Examine how rural women's empowerment affects rural development in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone.

The following null hypotheses were formulated for testing:

H1: There is no meaningful connection between rural development and the empowerment of rural women.

H2: The empowerment of rural women in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone does not significantly affect rural development.

## **Review of Related Literature Rural Development**

According to some, the idea of development was first introduced in colonial-era Nigeria. Others contend that it was first practiced in traditional

societies, when people built markets, bridges over streams, and village halls as part of self-help initiatives (Obianigwe, 1999; Onyishi, 2000; Ugwu, 2003). Policymakers, development specialists, and academics place a high priority on development issues because of how they affect Third World nations in particular. Writing in 2014, Ering et al. The idea of development has been given many different interpretations, which is not surprising. Regardless of the different definitions, the meaning of development has changed from a limited conceptualization where economic growth was expressed in aggregate economic indicators like Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or per capita income to a more comprehensive conceptualization as a multi-dimensional process involving changes in structures, attitudes, and institutions along with the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality, and the eradication of absolute poverty.

The concept of development, according to Ugwu (2003, p. 133), goes beyond just economic, social, and political changes to encompass a broad and all-encompassing social transformation. It refers to all societal progress, which naturally starts with the individual. The goal of development is to organize society in a way that meets the social and psychological needs of people living in rural areas. In all transitional economies around the world, including Nigeria, the term "rural" has been technically defined as an area of underdevelopment, poverty, and a small population. Rural Nigeria should have its own enclopedum given the extent of policies, attention, care management, and general development inconsistencies in the area (Obianigwe, 1999; Ugwu, 2003, and Mukoro, 2019). Due to the flowing ways,

rural development in Nigeria was given more impetus during the colonial era:

- i. Since the introduction of indirect rule, district offices have used Warrant Chiefs, Obas, and Emirs frequently to inspire the populace to participate in self-help initiatives.
- ii. The introduction of taxation in the 1930s caused rural communities to refuse to provide communal labor for public works. Because they paid taxes to the government, people assumed that the government would provide all social amenities.

On the other hand, the 1955 Local Government Law gave local governments the authority to take full charge of rural development within their sphere of influence. This legislative provision gave District Officers the authority to lead initiatives for rural development in their districts. As a result, the government supports communities that have started self-help projects with matching grants and technical help. Since then, the people and the government share responsibility for rural development (Okeke, 1998). In order to reflect contemporary realities, the definition of rural development has changed over time. According to Roger and Whiting (1976), rural development involves increasing and improving community services in addition to giving rural residents access to jobs and higher incomes. According to Olayinde (1979), rural development is a process in which coordinated efforts are made to encourage significant increases in the productivity of rural resources with the overall goals of boosting rural incomes and expanding employment opportunities in rural communities. Ering et al. (2014) defined rural development as strategies and policies aimed at enhancing the economic and

social well-being of a particular population, the rural poor. This study defines rural development as strategic policies intended to enhance the economic security and standard of living of those residing in sparsely populated, remote areas.

In a nutshell, rural development is the process by which a rural or village community grows as a whole thanks to the efforts of its residents.

"It is rural residents' active inspiration, participation, and involvement in development planning and program implementation processes (Basu, 2012). Since colonial times, Nigeria has made an effort to develop its rural areas." The focus has been on changing the largely agrarian society in order to realize a shared set of development objectives based on the capabilities and needs of the populace. Since the 1960s, numerous governments (federal, state, and local) have implemented and pursued policies aimed at enhancing rural areas. Depression, poverty, depreciation, chronic illness, deprivation, and hunger are the main characteristics of today's rural areas in Nigeria. Basic infrastructure, if it even exists, is insufficient for meaningful development in the majority of Nigeria's rural areas, as it is in other rural areas of developing nations.

Numerous policies and initiatives were put in place by Nigerian governments at various levels to raise the standard of living for rural residents, including Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) in 1967, River Basins and Rural Development Authorities (RBRDA) in 1978, the Green Revolution (GR) in 1980, the Directorate for Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) in 1985, Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW) in 1986, and The Poverty Alleviation

Programme (PAP) in 1999. All of them, however, failed because there was a lack of continuity in government policies and programs, a lack of political will, and a high level of corruption; they were largely inherent and uncoordinated (Ering et al., 2014; Mukoro, 2020).

### **Women Empowerment**

Rural women's empowerment has been a major concern and goal throughout human history in nations all over the world. Recent events have made this problem more urgent than ever. As a multifaceted, multidimensional, and multilayered concept, empowerment is described (Vaid & Kumar, 2015). On the other hand, Mandal (2015) defined empowerment as a multifaceted concept and approach that includes the development of social relations in a particular cultural context. The psychological, cultural, social, economic, organizational, political, and institutional aspects of each aspect of empowerment are discussed. The International Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985 was where the idea of women's empowerment was first introduced. As a result, empowerment is more than a concept defined by a set of accepted criteria. It is not something that could be placed in a capsule and distributed to people who we believe are in need. The empowerment process includes equal access to opportunities for using society's resources, the absence of gender discrimination in thought and action, freedom from violence, financial independence, participation in all decision-making bodies, and the freedom to make personal decisions. This means that empowerment is defined as "the result of a person's strong financial, social, and emotional standing; it results in happiness and satisfaction among a group of people" (Goel & Sah, 2015). This

supports Okpoko's (2000) claim that "empowerment implies that the person or group of people being empowered has hitherto lacked power or authority due to circumstances, either by denial or fault," which was cited by Obetta (2009). The definition of empowerment is the change from a state of powerlessness to one of power or authority.

The process by which women gain a greater degree of control over resources like knowledge, information, and ideas as well as material resources like money, access to money, and authority over decision-making in the family, neighborhood, society, and country is known as women's empowerment (Vaid & Kumar, 2015). Women's empowerment, according to Mandal (2015), is the allocation of social power and control over resources in favor of women, especially rural women. Creating an environment where women can make autonomous decisions about their personal development and excel as equals in society is the definition of women's empowerment (Khati 2015). Women's empowerment, according to Enenuo, 2001, as cited in Obett, (2009), entails the enhancement of women's political, economic, and social circumstances. Women's empowerment, according to Maitra (2015), includes some fundamental elements like women's sense of worth, their right to control their own lives, both inside and outside the boundaries of the family, and their capacity to influence social change in order to create a just social and economic order at regional, national, and international levels." In the context of this study, we define women's empowerment as a process through which women assume ownership and control of their lives through the expression of their own aspirations and change strategies, as well as the

expansion of choice, given that women's lives are closely tied to their socially defined gender roles, responsibilities, and social structure.

### **Rural Women in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, rural women are overwhelmingly poor, with many of them living below the poverty line. Their main source of income is agriculture, which is both unscientific and unprofitable because it frequently involves shifting cultivation. Additionally, those who reside in the plains do not harvest as much food due to floods and other natural disasters. They are now heavily in debt to the lenders as a result. In Nigeria, the vast majority of rural women are illiterate and uninformed about international development. They have little access to transportation and live in remote villages, mountains, hilly areas, and dense forests. They are consequently cut off from urban an area, which hinders their ability to develop materially. In rural Nigeria, issues like female infanticide, child marriage, and polyandry are all frequently encountered. They still rely on magic to heal them and use traditional medicines; they are far from modern ideas of sanitation and healthcare. As a result, many of them contract illnesses like typhoid, malaria, small pox, chicken pox, forest fever, skin conditions, and others. In addition, some rural Nigerian women spent a significant amount of their income on alcoholic drinks, which were bad for their health. Additionally, most of them do not have access to clean drinking water and rarely take baths, which leaves them vulnerable to illness and other health risks.

Women's issues have long involved complex debates about the contradictions in African patriarchal social structures as well as the

circumstances in which these harm women's efforts to achieve social status and prestige (Akpomuvie, 2018). The second concern is the impact of outside cultures on African social structures, especially in terms of gender relations. This supports Modo's (2016) assertion that Africans have distinct cultures that women are expected to uphold constantly in order for the current social structure to remain intact. Modo also asserts that because women are seen as being particularly close to nature, they are expected to uphold the norms and values of their group in order for natural forces and ancestor spirits to always be benevolent toward the group's request. This assertion was made. In most of Africa, especially in rural Nigeria, this is one of the barriers to women's empowerment and development. Women are the cornerstones upon which the foundations of contented homes and families are built, according to Chizea and Njoku (1991). Without a doubt, both rural and urban communities are built on the strength of the family. Communities help to build the nation as a whole. Therefore, if the foundational element—women—are poor, uneducated, and unmotivated, the country is probably going to be the same way. Because how can any nation overcome the collective ignorance of its mothers? Because of their natural role as mothers and the significant impact they have on their children's formative years, women, especially rural women, are the first teachers of societal ethics. A society is therefore as moral or immoral as its motherhood.

The relative roles of men and women in Nigerian culture are determined, and it is novel to break through this artificial barrier. Women and men are thus cultural and environmental creatures. In many societies, men are accepted as the

seeker and breadwinner, full of activity, whereas women are seen as passive, homebound, and always yielding to men's advances and opportunities, always willing to accept men's dictates. Women are traditionally docile, subservient, and powerless as a result of this. Many cultural settings in Nigeria regulate and restrict the activities of women, particularly rural women, during their menstruation periods (Modo, 2016), as cited in Akpomuvie (2018), narrative had it that in some homes, women are confined to their rooms and are forbidden to cook food throughout the period because they were considered impure and polluted. According to Aisuebeogun, as cited in Owhofasa et al. (2013), women are poorer than men in Nigeria because they face unequal economic opportunities due to a lack of access to investible finance, technology, and their deliberate removal from decision-making positions. Women are discriminated against in the labor market, according to research. Cultural norms are cited as one of the major drivers of the gender labor gap in developing countries, particularly Nigeria. As a result, cultural norms limit not only women's time available for productive activities, but also the types of economic activities that women can engage in.

### **Women Discrimination and Underdevelopment**

It is pertinent to consider some aspects of the global marginalization of women's status based on United Nations (UN) 2008 documentation cited in Agrawal (2015). Among the findings are:

1. **1. Agriculture:** Women produce about half of the world's food, but they have limited access to land, struggle to get credit, and are typically expected to perform labor-intensive agricultural

tasks. Additionally, rural women typically do not benefit from new technologies. Because it is believed that women's labor is less productive than men's, their wages are typically lower. Particularly in developing nations where women handle the majority of food production, processing, storage, and preparation, women do not have equal rights to land ownership. In Africa, women perform 75% of the agricultural labor. They are essential to the production of food for the home, to post-harvest activities, to livestock care, and to the marketing of agricultural products (Ohwofasa et al., 2013).

2. **Domestic Work:** Rural women are in charge of all household tasks in addition to helping the men with many farm tasks. Unpaid domestic work is viewed as being done by women. Despite its significance, the work is unpaid, underappreciated, and unrecognized. However, in this regard, women significantly contribute to society.
3. **Inequality in Pay:** In similar jobs around the world, women make less than three-quarters of what men do and only two-thirds of what men make. One-third of the world's workers are humans, but they tend to work in low-paying jobs and are more vulnerable to unemployment than men.
4. **Women in the Informal Sector:** Women are dependent on the informal economy because they lack security or legal protection. In third-world nations, women made up a sizable portion of the food vendors: 94% in Nigeria,

80% in Thailand, and 63 % in the Philippines.

5. **5. Health:** Women provide more medical care than all other medical services put together, and they have greatly benefited from a recent shift in global priorities toward disease prevention and health promotion.
6. **6. Political Affair:** Due to a lack of education, a lack of confidence, and an increased workload, women continue to be underrepresented in their countries' decision-making bodies.
7. **7. Education:** Despite the fact that there are still 3:2 more women than men who are illiterate worldwide, the gender education gap is narrowing.

## **Dimensions of Empowerment for Rural Women**

### **1. Education Empowerment**

Mahatma Gandhi once said: "Educate a man, and you educate one person; educate a woman, and you educate the whole nation." This idea is more important than ever right now. Nowadays, women get the best education possible; the days when just getting to school was a struggle are long gone. Despite having many advantages, urban women still face more challenges than rural counterparts. Her primary problems continue to be a lack of education and support (Bhonde, 2015). Women's empowerment, according to Singh (2015), must start with their involvement in a variety of spheres of life. Education is a major barrier in this regard. In order to be empowered, rural women must be educated about their privileges and rights in contemporary society. Education can help people become more conscious of their social

status, injustices, and treatment disparities.

Rural women who receive education will feel more included in society. According to Mandal (2015), the empowerment of rural women through education will result in: (1) self-esteem and self-confidence of women, (2) a positive image of women by recognizing their contribution to society, polity, and economy, (3) the capacity to think critically, (4) the ability to make decisions and take collective action, (5) choices in areas like education, employment, and health, (6) equal participation in the development process, and (7) knowledge and skill for economic independence and (8) access to legal literary and information relating to their rights. Furthermore, According to Adebukola, 2001, as cited in Obetta (2009), when a woman is professionally empowered, she will use her empowerment in a positive way. She also won't be denied the opportunity to practice because she is a mistress in her field, which will help the country. According to Obetta (2009), a mother's education level influences her children's development as well as their health, education, mortality, and pre-school cognitive ability.

### **Economic Empowerment**

According to the layman's definition of economic empowerment, it is the process of enabling someone to become economically independent by giving them access to some kind of vocational training. It also entails giving them the skills necessary to make financial decisions that will impact their family and the neighborhood as a whole. Women cannot participate in decision-making in the family, community, or country without economic empowerment, according to Agarwalla

(2015). She defines economic empowerment of rural women as "making rural women capable of participating in various economic activities so that they can earn money and become economically strong." The socioeconomic situation of women in society is inextricably linked to that status.

Expanding opportunities for the poor to take on more responsibility is the most efficient way to end poverty, according to Okojie (1999), cited by Obetta (2009); in terms of economics, the task is to assist the poor (rural women) in gaining access to productive resources and the appropriate knowledge for their use. It calls for directly addressing disparities in the distribution of productive assets, specifically through the redistribution of land and the deliberate reallocation of financial resources to meet the needs of low-income borrowers, especially rural women. For gender inequality to be broken, economic empowerment is necessary. It is important to address women's limited access to financial resources and their inability to make financial decisions that will enhance their own and their families' well-being in order to economically empower rural women. It should be noted that poverty decreases and economic growth increases when rural women participate in production activities, both of which are advantageous to society as a whole. On the other hand, rural women's lack of economic empowerment has a significant detrimental effect on the health and education of their children.

### **3. Socio-Cultural Empowerment**

Socio-cultural empowerment, as defined by the United Nations and cited by Obetta (2009), calls for the inclusion of equality in all facets of human resource



development, starting at birth. The patriarchy that permeates most societies is directly contested by this. "Rural women are educated on social benefits like awareness of current societal problems, positive recognition and image in the family and community, role in making significant family decisions, planning and promoting better education for their children, and caring for the elderly and children's health, to name a few. Because of their social empowerment, rural women can better the community by advocating for basic necessities like clean water to drink, streetlights, public restrooms, and the ability to assist the elderly and disabled. Because of this, "rural women's social and cultural empowerment through the dismantling of oppressive social structures will restore the dignity of womanhood and enhance self-image; such a situation will undoubtedly breed mutual respect and love between the sexes and result in happier families" (Okeke, 1995 cited in Obeta, 2009).

#### **4. Political Empowerment**

Structures in the political and legal spheres support dominance and superiority. Men typically hold the majority of political power. Village councils traditionally consist primarily of men. Men and women rarely sit together to discuss village issues in most rural communities. Female leaders are only invited when women's issues are being discussed. Few women currently hold elected or appointed positions in the governments of most countries in the world. Therefore, advancing all women's issues requires empowering women as political and community leaders at the local, national, and international levels. Rural women who want to have a voice in international economic affairs must be politically empowered; even at the household level, women should

participate in family decision-making (Sadda, 1995 cited in Obeta, 2009).

#### **Rural Women Empowerment and Rural Development**

The people of a nation, whether they reside in urban or rural areas, decide how that nation will develop. People influence society and determine its development and performance. Urban and rural areas are similar in terms of their economic, political, and social development. Nigeria's post-independence industrialization has resulted in phenomenal growth and development in the urban sector but little corporate growth in the rural sector. The growth of rural areas and the standard of living of a country's rural population are crucial for its socioeconomic development. Rural women play a significant role in society (Agwarwalla, 2015). Without the social and economic empowerment of women, no society can advance and prosper. In order to build a good country, women must be empowered, claims Mandal (2015). The stability of society is ensured by the empowerment of women. The empowerment of rural women is essential because their beliefs and moral principles will shape a good family, community, society, and, ultimately, a good country. She continued by stating that achieving equality, peace, and development depend on women's empowerment and equal participation in all aspects of society (Mandal, 2015).

Rural development and women's empowerment are now more closely related than ever. Women's empowerment is viewed by organizations and individuals in Nigeria who support rural development as a strategic development that can speed up the process (Obianigwe, 1999; Ugwu,

2003; Obetta, 2009; Ering et al., 2014; Ayevbomwan, Popoola & Adeoti, 2016). The Better Life for Rural Women program was launched by Mrs. Mariam Babangida in 1986 in response to the argument that women make up more than half of the human resources in the world and are essential to the economic and social well-being of a society. The objective was to improve the lives of rural poor women and change their circumstances while also allowing them to support the local economy. The Better Life for Rural Women program was renamed Family Support Programme under Mariam Abacha's leadership, but its objectives and concerns remained the same. Despite having resources and good intentions, the program ended up being a total failure. Due to this circumstance, it became urgent to include the nation's rural areas in the process of national development. Instead of serving the needs of the rural women for whom it was designed, the program benefited wealthy urban women. "Better Life for Urban Women" is how it developed. Rural women have established self-help groups because they understand how important it is to actively participate in community development (SHFs). They have chosen this position to help mold their future.

For instance, the Ezinne Women Self-Help Association of Ohom-Orba provided portable drinking water to the entire Ohom community in Enugu State in 1988. (Obetta, 2009).

It is crucial to note at this point that the development of harmony and unity among community members, regardless of caste or economic diversity, would be supported by the creation of self-help groups and active participation of rural families in the process of planning and implementing community projects. In these situations, communities use a

variety of cutting-edge strategies to volunteer services for rural development and manage development programs more economically. In order to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development in Nigeria, it will be essential to inspire and train target groups to become local or rural leaders. Obetta (2009) draws the conclusion that the government and donor organizations will stop seeing themselves as providers and start acting as facilitators once community members' empowerment (especially that of women) is improved. According to Agrawal (2015), rural industrialization is symbolized by rural development. The best solution for the poverty and unemployment issues that rural women face is rural industrialization. Major obstacles like a lack of credit, the use of outdated technology, machinery, and equipment, and insufficient infrastructure facilities hinder the development of rural industrialization. The development of rural industries is essential for any nation, but Nigeria in particular.

Numerous rural communities have been inspired to develop plans to better their socioeconomic circumstances as a result of the socioeconomic challenges faced by third-world nations. Ojukwu (2013), cited in Akpomuvie (2018), asserts that women in particular participate in activities that aid in rural development in an effort to address issues in their communities. The history of development efforts in the majority of developing countries, he claimed, has shown that rural development has always existed with women at the forefront, contrary to the conventional perception that it is a male activity. Furthermore, according to Akpomuvie (2018), women's voluntary organizations in Nigeria played

significant roles in providing care for the sick, poor, and disabled before there were formal social welfare systems in place in West Africa. In addition to raising money for rural development, they continued by describing how women's organizations like Umuade and married wife associations of different village groups in eastern Nigeria organized various activities for the welfare of members of their natal and marital homes. According to Ojukwu (2013), cited in Akpomuvie (2018; Ekele, Zubiuru, Ayorinde, & Abdulwaheed, 2018), women in Igboland, Nigeria, hold annual "August Meetings" to increase women's involvement in rural community development. In fact, the gatherings give women the chance to take an active role in rural community projects, fostering their confidence in the neighborhood and its activities.

## METHODS

The study area is Nigeria, the country with the largest population on the continent of Africa. The North-West, North-Central, North-East, South-West, South-East, and South-South are Nigeria's six geopolitical regions. Nigeria has the largest population in Africa with over 190 million people (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). A cross-sectional research design and non-probability sampling were used to collect data from 750 respondents in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone. Traditional leaders, rural men, women's self-help groups, young people, and rural women were among the respondents. Despite having an abundance of natural resources, especially in the Niger Delta, where the Nigerian government has been extracting oil for more than 30 years, the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria was chosen because it has one of the worst rates of poverty and

underdevelopment. In this study, the research tool was a structured questionnaire. A 5-point Likert scale was used to rate the measurement items, with responses ranging from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. Experts from the sociology department validated the questionnaire. To ascertain the degree of reliability, a pilot study involving 50 rural women from Cross-Rivers and Delta States was carried out over a three-week period. The instrument's internal consistency was assessed using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1: Reliability Statistics of Variable**

Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Rural women empowerment	9	0.734
Rural development	11	0.718

**Source:** Researchers' computation, 2021

The findings demonstrated that the 0.734 and 0.718 coefficients complied with the generally advised level of 0.70 for the research indicators (Cronbach, 1951). The results showed that the study's instrument was reliable as a result.

The statistical package for social science (SPSS) version 23 was used to analyze the data using simple percentage, Spearman's moment correlation coefficient, and liner regression analysis.

## Research Results

To accomplish the goals of the study, 750 questionnaires are distributed to traditional leaders, rural women, women

self-help groups, rural men, and youths throughout Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone. A response rate of 63.5 percent was obtained when 476 of the 750 copies of the questionnaires that were distributed were retrieved and examined, as shown in the table below.

**Table 2: Distribution of Questionnaire and Response Rate**

S / N	South-South States	Questionnaire	Questionnaire retrieved	Percentage (%)
1	Cross-Rivers	125	97	12.9
2	Delta	125	93	12.4
3	Akwabom	125	81	10.8
4	Rivers	125	51	6.8
5	Edo	125	74	9.9
6	Bayelsa	125	80	10.7
	Total	750	476	63.5

**Source:** Researchers' Field work, 2021

Table 2 displays the distribution of questionnaires and response rates. The table shows that 97 (12.9%) of all responses came from the state of Cross-Rivers; this suggests that Cross-Rivers is the state with the most respondents, followed by Delta.

**Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Variables	Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	171	35.9
	Female	305	64.1

	<b>Total</b>	<b>476</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Age</b>	15-24 years	128	26.9
	25-34 years	169	35.5
	35-49 years	103	21.6
	50 years and above	76	16.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>476</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single	113	23.7
	Married	207	43.5
	Divorced	63	13.2
	Widowed	93	19.5
	<b>Total</b>	<b>476</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Education</b>	No Education	117	24.6
	Complete primary	95	20.0
	Incomplete secondary	66	13.9
	Complete secondary	98	20.5
	Higher	100	21.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>470</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Employment status</b>	Unemployed	188	39.5
	Skilled & unskilled	90	18.9
	Agric & Allied	145	30.5
	Service	53	11.1
	<b>Total</b>		<b>100.0</b>
<b>Literacy</b>	Cannot read at all	223	46.8

	Able to read only parts of a sentence	81	17.0
	Able to read a whole sentence	172	36.2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>476</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Researchers' fieldwork, 2021

Table 3 displays the frequency distribution of respondents by gender, age, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, and literacy. The table shows that 305 respondents, or 64.1% of the total, are men. This suggests that there are more female respondents than male respondents. The table also reveals that 35.5% of the population is between the ages of 25 and 34. The majority of respondents are married, according to the frequency distribution of respondents by marital status. The table shows that 207 (43.5%) of all respondents are married, while only 63 (13.2%) have experienced a divorce. The table also reveals that a staggering 24.6% of respondents lack a formal education. The vast majority of those surveyed do not have jobs. A higher percentage of respondents 39.5 percent were represented by this. While 36.2% of respondents can read a complete sentence, a higher percentage of respondents are illiterate because they cannot read at all. These results are in line with earlier research (Akinwade, 2013, Ayebuomwan et al., 2016).

**Table 4: Relationship between Rural Women Empowerment and Rural Development in South-South Geopolitical zone of Nigeria**

Correlation Coefficient			
		Rural women empowerment	Rural development
Rural women empowerment	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1	0.754 0.000
	N	476	476
Rural development	Pearson correlation	0.754	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	476	476

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

Source: SPSS version 23, 2021

In the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria, Table 4 shows the relationship between rural women's empowerment and rural development. Rural development and the emancipation of women are significantly positively correlated ( $r=0.754$ ,  $n = 476$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). This suggests that rural development in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone is closely related to rural women's empowerment. Thus, the null hypothesis is disproved. **Linear Regression Analysis**

**Table 5: Model Summary<sup>b</sup>**

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup>	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.67 <sub>a</sub>	.709	.686	21.640

a. Dependent variable: Rural development

b. Predictors: (constant): Rural women empowerment

**Source:** SPSS version 23, 2021

**Table ANOVA<sup>a</sup>**

Model	Sum of squares	Df	Mean	F.S	Sig.	Remark
Regression	8.472	3	3.651	17.803	0.005 <sup>b</sup>	Sig.
Residual	3.570	40	0.223			
Total	12.028	43				

a. Predictors: (constant):Rural women empowerment

b. Dependent variable: Rural development

**Source:** SPSS version 23, 2021

In Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone, the results of the linear regression show that rural women's empowerment accounts for 70.9 percent of the variability in rural development. The model is statistically significant at the 0.05 level, according to the F statistic of 17.803. Thus, the null hypothesis is disproved. It is possible to draw the conclusion that rural Nigerian development is significantly impacted by the empowerment of rural women.

### Discussion of Findings

The study's conclusions showed that rural women's empowerment and rural development in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone are positively and significantly correlated. This result is consistent with earlier studies (Obetta, 2009; Ering et al., 2014; Ayevbomwan et al., 2014). This result is also in line with the opinions of Goel and Soh (2015)

and Akpomuvie (2018), who think that the empowerment of rural women promotes rural development. Additionally, a linear regression analysis revealed that in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, the empowerment of rural women explains 70.9 percent of the variable in rural development. Therefore, the study discovered that empowering rural women has a favorable and statistically significant effect on rural development. This is supported by earlier research from Ijere (1991), Okeke (1995), Obetta (2009), Ojukwu (2013), Ayevbomwan et al. (2006), and Akpomuvie (2006). (2018). This result agrees with Okojie's (1999) assertion that "rural women's empowerment is a means of strengthening women's participation in all aspects of a nation's economic, social, and political life, which facilitates rural and national development." Obetta (2009) cited Okojie for this assertion.

Women adopt their own identities, value themselves, boost their self-confidence and self-esteem, and overcome their fear of feeling powerless as a result of the empowerment process (independent Commission on population and quality of life, 1996 cited in Obetta, 2009). The central claim of the rural women's empowerment framework is that there are five levels of equity that can be used to analyze the development of women: welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control. Because it involves equal control and management of the community's systems by women, control is, overall, the highest level of empowerment (UNICEF, 1993 cited in Obetta, 2009).

### CONCLUSION

The discussion that has gone before makes it abundantly clear that rural

women's empowerment and rural development go hand in hand, and that rural women's empowerment positively affects rural development in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone, suggesting that rural women's empowerment is a prerequisite to rural development globally. Based on the results of this study, we draw the conclusion that empowering rural women has a significant positive impact on rural development. Based on the findings and recommendations of the study, we recommend the following public policies:

1. The female gender should always be taken into account in Nigerian government policy when necessary uplift is needed, as this will help to improve their status and rural development in rural Nigeria.
2. Training centers for rural development and self-employment are urgently needed nationwide.
3. The Nigerian government ought to encourage and support adult education for women, especially those who live in rural areas.

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