



Women's Participation in Rural Development: Assessing the Community-Based Agriculture and Rural Development Project (CBARDP) in Bauchi State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The participation of women is critical for sustainable agricultural and rural development, but their voices are underrepresented in many African communities. This study examines women's participation in the Community-Based Agriculture and Rural Development Project (CBARDP) in Bauchi State, Nigeria, concentrating on their personal experiences, problems, and contributions to local development outcomes. Guided by Empowerment Theory, the research adopted a Qualitative approach that included interviews that are semi-structured with 35 respondents comprising ten (10) state CBARDP officials, ten (10) local government officials, and fifteen (15) women beneficiaries. These interviews were complemented by a focus group discussion. Findings reveal that CBARDP significantly enhanced women's participation in community programmes, improved livelihood opportunities, and strengthened collective decision-making. However, cultural attitudes, gender bias, and low literacy levels continue to impede full inclusion. To promote equitable involvement in rural development projects, the study suggests that culturally sensitive approaches, policy reforms, collaboration between non-governmental organizations, public institutions, and traditional institutions are required for long-term women's empowerment.

Keywords: Women's participation, rural development, CBARDP, Bauchi, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Women continue to contribute significantly to rural and agricultural development across the world (Adebayo & Worth, 2024; Akpa et al., 2024), however, in program execution and decision-making, their contributions are often underappreciated and undervalued. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2023) estimates that women constitute around 50% of the labor force in agriculture in emerging countries, yet they

continue to encounter structural impediments that constrain their availability of money, land, training, and productive assets. Gender gaps, therefore, persist across rural livelihood structures and value chains, affecting productivity, income distribution, and poverty reduction (Adebayo et al., 2024). Improved household welfare, nutritional outcomes, and community resilience have all been associated with increasing women's

involvement in agricultural projects worldwide, highlighting the importance of gender-sensitive rural development programmes (Malhotra et al., 2024).

Across sub-Saharan Africa, women make substantial contributions to smallholder agriculture and food production, but their efforts are frequently hampered by traditional norms, unequal access to extension services, and limited participation in leadership or cooperative structures (Awoyemi et al., 2023; CABI, 2024). According to Pienaaah (2025), women in Ghana and Nigeria, for example, play crucial roles in local marketing and post-harvest processing, yet they remain under-represented in the design and evaluation of community-based projects. These disparities are exacerbated by socio-cultural beliefs that undermine women's decision-making roles and restrict their mobility within rural areas (Antwi et al., 2024). Despite significant donor investment and government attention, many African community-based agricultural projects have struggled to achieve long-term gender inclusion (Okunola, 2024).

Against this backdrop, Nigeria introduced the Community-Based Agriculture and Rural Development Project (CBARDP) as a flagship initiative designed to enhance rural livelihoods, improve food security, and reduce poverty in grassroots communities. The CBARDP is particularly noteworthy as it marked the first attempt to implement a comprehensive community-driven development (CDD) approach across multiple states in northern Nigeria (Adewumi et al., 2015; Samani & Marinova, 2020). The collaboration between ADB and the Nigerian government led to the second project of CBARDP in Nigeria, which was implemented in five states: Adamawa, Bauchi, Gombe, Kaduna, and Kwara which started from 2006-2013 and was

financed by the African Development Bank (ADB) (Adegboye, et al. 2016).

The programme emphasises gender equity, participatory planning, and coordinated service provision as essential components of rural development. Though, evidence from implementation has shown that the degree of success in achieving these objectives varies significantly across contexts, particularly concerning women's participation. While the framework is designed to be inclusive, the lived realities of rural women suggest that their involvement is often limited, tokenistic, or overshadowed by structural and cultural barriers.

Despite increased emphasis on gender and development, there is little qualitative research on how women in northern Nigeria engage with community-based agricultural initiatives. While women's inclusion has been proven to boost creativity and social cohesion, cultural and institutional barriers continue to prevent them from actively participating and leading. To address the knowledge gap, this research investigates women's participation in the CBARDP in Bauchi State, Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To assess the impact of CBARDP on women's livelihoods
2. To identify socio-cultural barriers to participation.

2. Literature Review

Participation of Women in Community Development

The notion of participation has been extensively debated in development research, and its meaning often varies depending on context and perspective. Participation can refer to Collaborative decision-making among individuals, planning, execution, and assessment of programmes that affect their lives (Ahmad & Islam, 2024; Raniga & Simpson, 2002). In community development, participation

goes beyond passive involvement; it embodies empowerment, ownership, and the ability of people to shape the trajectory of their own development.

Women's everyday interactions in households, markets, and the role of social networks is foundation for participatory development processes (Geremew et al., 2024; Langton, 1988; Yazew, 2024). Their active participation not only advances community projects but also challenges long-standing patterns of exclusion and gender disparity. Community development scholars argue that genuine participation must include marginalised groups, particularly women, to achieve equitable and sustainable development outcomes (Singh & Dahiru, 2018; Walker et al., 2019). Thus, women participation in the development of communities should be understood as both a critical necessity for effective programmes and a mechanism for addressing broader issues of social justice and empowerment (Das & Das, 2025).

The Effect of Women's Participation in Community Development

The impact of women's involvement in community development has been well documented across different contexts. In development programmes, women's active engagement has been shown to produce transformative outcomes by improving household welfare, enhancing social cohesion, and promoting inclusive growth (Chikwe et al., 2024; Zunaidi et al., 2025). Agboola (2012) emphasises women as essential economic players, accounting for a significant share of the workforce, with Nigerian women demonstrating energy and ingenuity. For instance, Ge et al. (2022) demonstrate that women entrepreneurs in rural areas substantially increase household income. Empirical evidence consistently shows that when earnings are in the hands of women, poverty reduction becomes more attainable. As opposed to men, women are more likely to reinvest and share their wealth among family

members, thereby boosting economic growth (Akter et al., 2018; Nurasyiah et al., 2022). Overall, this body of research confirms that women's participation in community programming promotes socio-economic and gender equity (Durán-Díaz et al., 2020).

Challenges of Women's Participation in Community Development

Despite evidence of positive impacts, women continue to face substantial obstacles that limit their active participation in developing their communities. Structural inequalities persist in many African societies, where gender disparities in access to resources, representation, and authority remain entrenched. In Nigeria, women's exclusion from land ownership, finance, and decision-making processes reflects deep-seated institutional and cultural biases (Dominic et al., 2017).

Etuk et al. (2014) argue that these institutional impediments, such as lack of financial facilities and limited opportunities for skills development, perpetuate marginalisation of women in economic and social spheres. The discrimination against women in most developing countries and inequality in access to opportunities have made peaceful development and global growth elusive (Nelson & Kuriakose, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2022). This suggests that for a significant and balanced development to be achieved in society, women's empowerment must top the priority list.

Conceptual Framework

To conceptualise women's participation in rural communities, this study adopts Kabeer's (1999) empowerment paradigm. Kabeer (1999) distinguishes three aspects of empowerment: (1) agency, (2) resources, and (3) achievements. To suit the context of CBARDP, the framework describes a sequential process through which rural women access resources as a pathway to empowerment within rural

development activities. Resources refer to access for women to material resources (farming inputs, credit, tools, and machinery), human resources (workshops, conferences, and training), and social networks (group participation and women's associations). Within CBARDP, the provision of these resources forms the foundation for successful participation, addressing the key structural disparities

that have historically limited women's contributions. Agency represents the power to make critical decisions on projects specifically designed to improve their lives. Within the context of CBARDP, the programme's bottom-up strategy incorporates beneficiaries' ideas and opinions in the design and implementation of rural development initiatives.

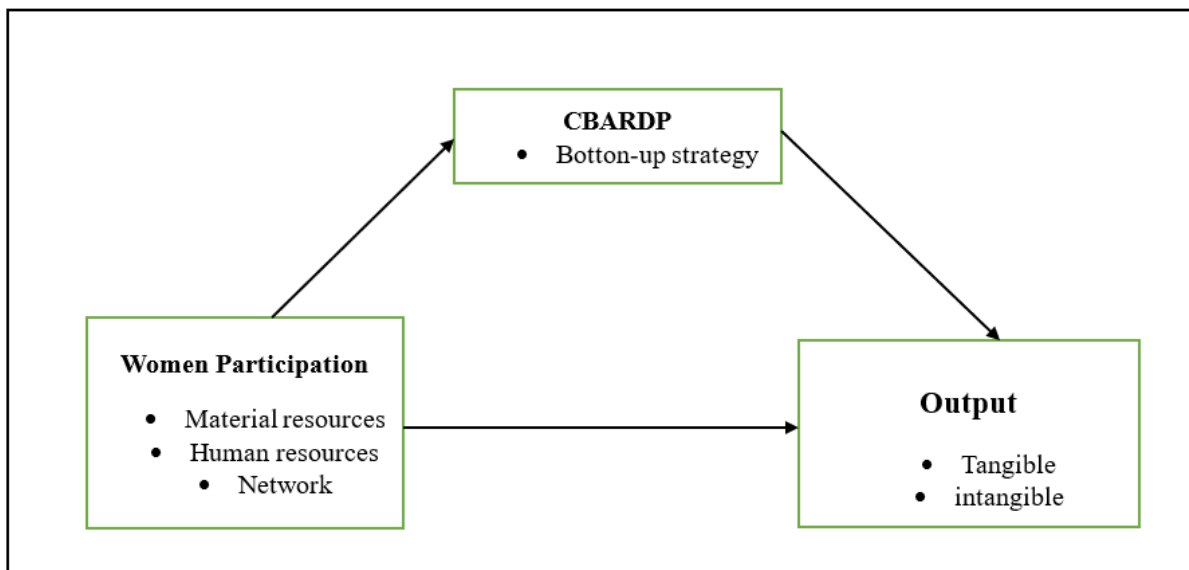


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
Source: Designed by Researchers

3. Methodology

The research was conducted in selected areas of Bauchi State, Nigeria. The research adopted a qualitative approach to examine how women participate in the CBARDP within Bauchi State. This approach enabled the researcher to delve into participants' underlying thoughts and feelings regarding the topic of interest (Iyamu, 2018), guided by Empowerment Theory.

Data Collection: A semi-structured interview was conducted with thirty-five (35) respondents, comprising fifteen (15) women beneficiaries, ten (10) CBARDP state officials, and ten (10) CBARDP Local Government Area (LGA) officials. In addition, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was held with seven women

beneficiaries. State officials were selected because they served as the programme's coordinators at the state level.

The communities involved in the study are the rural village areas (RVAs) of Jangu, Guda, and Sabon Sara from Ningi LGA; Rishi, Palama, and Tulai from Toro LGA; and Kurba, Zirami and Sabon Sara from Giade LGA). The criteria for selecting beneficiaries include involvement of youth and women in the development process; poor performance in agriculture and rural development process; performance of the community-based organization; willingness by the local government area to the principle of deduction of their contribution from the source (Helsen *et al.*, 2003).

Accordingly, participants were coded as follows: CBARDP State Officials (SO), CBARDP Local Government Officers

(LO), CBARDP Women Participants (WP), and Focus Group Discussion participants (FG).

Field Observation: The researcher also visited several project implementation sites, community marketplaces, and cultural events attended by participants, as well as community group meetings. These visits provided opportunities to hold informal conversations with both participants and non-participants related to the study. Such field observations offered rich and detailed first-hand insights that complemented the interview and FGD data.

Sampling and Data Analysis: The selection process used a purposive sampling technique to select active CBARDP participants. The study utilised reflexive thematic analysis, through which themes

were systematically identified, analysed, and reported to capture the depth and diversity of participants' experiences.

4. Results and Discussion

The study found that the participation of women was instrumental in achieving success during the implementation of the CBARDP in Bauchi State. Data from participants' responses indicated a clear relationship between the CBARDP's implementation and women's participation. Two major themes emerge from the data: Impact of Women's Participation in CBARDP and Challenges of the Participation of women in CBARDP in Bauchi State, as depicted in figure 2.

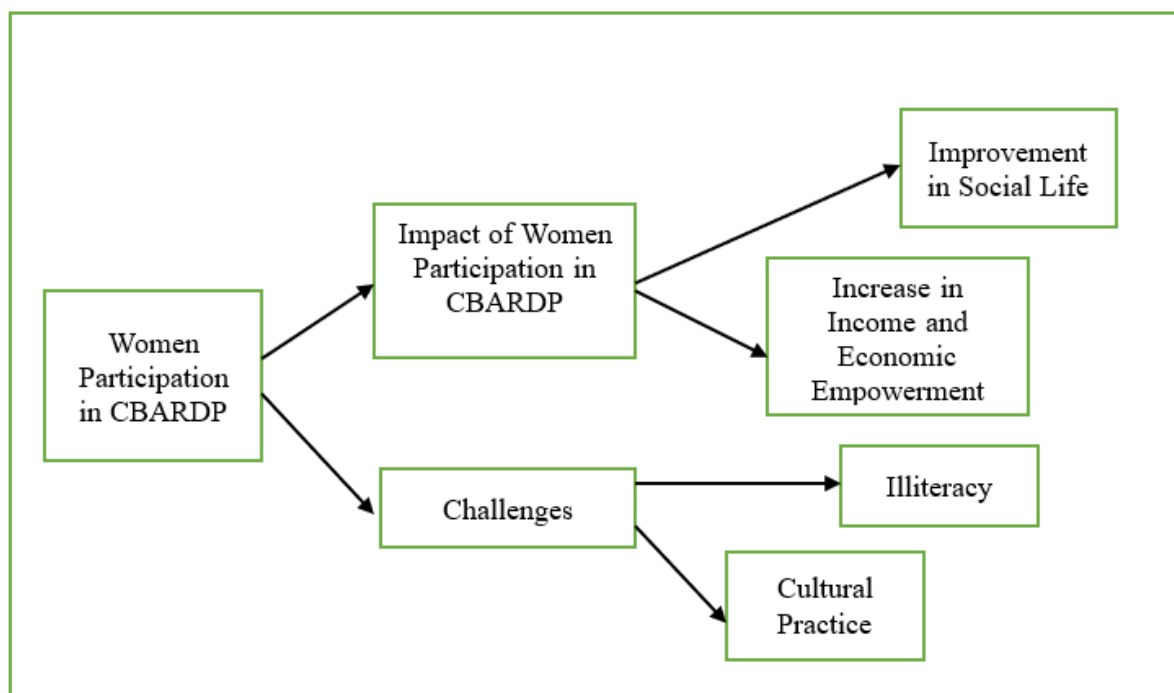


Figure 2: Framework of Findings

Source: Designed by Researchers

Impact of the Participation of women in CBARDP

The findings revealed that women's participation was critical to the overall success of Bauchi State's CBARDP.

Participants frequently noted that the programme's bottom-up approach enhanced diversity and enabled women to get more involved in their community development creativities. This aligns with CBARDP's goal of improving rural

livelihoods through participatory processes.

A state official (SO3) emphasised the transformation in women's social behaviour:

"Our women have amazed me with the active participation I never expected from them. Our women used to be timid when there was a programme like this, but everybody is witnessing a positive change in their collective engagements."

Beneficiaries confirmed that group engagement fostered unity and mutual respect. One participant (WP3) remarked:

"The major aim of initiating the bottom-up approach was to encourage team participation, which the programme beneficiary groups accepted, imbibed, and actively promoted among men and women within their rural communities."

Another group of women beneficiaries (WP3, WP4, WP5, and WP6) affirmed that:

"Our participation in group activities as a single body has made us people of a unified family, and it is increasing love and respect among us in this community."

These findings demonstrate that the CBARDP strengthened social capital and collective efficacy among rural women. Durán-Díaz et al. (2020) similarly discovered that empowering women to contribute to community initiatives produces positive socio-economic outcomes. This supports the argument that women's inclusion in CBARDP contributed to poverty reduction in Bauchi State.

Improvement in Social Life

The results further indicate that women's engagement in CBARDP enhanced their social awareness, leadership confidence, and organisational skills. The programme's continuous training sessions were particularly instrumental to this outcome. One state officer (SO1) stated:

"The CBARDP programme radically changed their socialisation to tolerate

diversity and taught them how to manage a low income rather than squander opportunities. Many recipients are increasingly becoming prominent in contemporary society."

A female beneficiary (WP4) shared a similar experience:

"The programme's ability to organise training is a plus. I recall learning how to create associations, register them, and choose leaders who will ensure the association's growth and development."

During one FGD session, a participant (WP1) added:

"We will never forget the awareness, guidance, and inspiration we received. Our people now feel they can take advantage of their surroundings and start acting in ways that will bring in money even before material intervention arrives."

These reports show that CBARDP's capacity-building component fostered lasting attitudinal change. The training enhanced women's ability to manage group enterprises and encouraged self-reliance. This result aligns with earlier research showing that women's participation in rural development initiatives improves household welfare, strengthens social cohesion, and promotes inclusive growth (Chikwe et al., 2024; Zunaidi et al., 2025). Therefore, increasing women's participation in local development benefits not only individual women but entire communities.

Increase in Income and Economic Empowerment

The data collected and analysed revealed that the project meaningfully increased the income of beneficiaries across the three participating LGAs in Bauchi State, particularly through skill acquisition. One state official (SO1) reported:

"From the approaches used to provide them with improved crop varieties, which in turn increased yield, and through livestock upgrading that provided excess output, the general empowerment

regarding procurement has raised beneficiaries' income."

Beneficiaries corroborated this. One woman (WP6) stated:

"The programme brought fresh opportunities for our women who were previously unemployed and despairing. They are now empowered to manage businesses and earn regular income."

Another beneficiary (WP4) added:

"I am a farmer in this community, but before the coming of the programme, I was practising the traditional farming we inherited from our fathers. When CBARDP was introduced, we were given a modern variety of maize. I used the same portion of land but harvested more than twice what I used to. Since then, my farm produce and income have continued to increase."

These results align with existing literature showing that women who are in charge of their finances are more likely to reinvest in household welfare and community development, thereby amplifying poverty reduction effects (Akter et al., 2018; Nurasyiah et al., 2022). The economic empowerment of women through CBARDP thus represents a crucial driver of rural transformation in Bauchi State.

Challenges of Women's Participation in CBARDP

Despite the achievements recorded during the CBARDP implementation in Bauchi State, participants identified several challenges that constrained the programme's effectiveness. Two major barriers were illiteracy and cultural practices, both of which influenced participation levels and the sustainability of outcomes.

Illiteracy

The findings revealed that illiteracy among beneficiaries was a major obstacle to the full implementation and sustainability of CBARDP activities. A local government officer (LO3) stated:

"The level of literacy was very low among programme beneficiaries. The number of training sessions and workshops conducted for beneficiaries and their officials helped them acquire basic literacy skills essential for implementation. However, in any rural community programme, illiteracy cannot be completely eradicated; some aspects must simply be managed as they are."

This was supported by a woman participant (WP2), who said:

"Despite all the training provided by CBARDP, illiteracy and our village culture posed significant challenges. For instance, some individuals taken to Bauchi and connected to banks for farming loans were scared of engaging with the banks."

Another participant (WP3) added:

"Illiteracy was a major challenge, especially regarding the sustainability of some programme packages. For example, the group managing fisheries once sold fish worth almost one million naira, but due to illiteracy, they became careless and ignored the training. Those who managed properly continue to benefit, while others lost their gains."

These findings confirm that illiteracy limits women's capacity to manage resources, adopt innovations, and sustain project achievements. Previous studies support this, identifying illiteracy as a significant barrier to the success of rural development interventions (Veckalne & Tambovceva, 2023; Yar & Yasouri, 2024). Therefore, improving women's education and functional literacy remains essential for sustainable rural development.

Cultural Practices

Cultural beliefs and customs also constrained women's participation in CBARDP. In many rural parts of Bauchi State, cultural and religious conventions restrict women's mobility and interaction with men, limiting their engagement in community initiatives.

Several participants (SO1, SO2, LO3, WP2, WP4, WP5, and WP2) mentioned this limitation. One participant (WP2) said: "I have been involved in similar initiatives, but none have been as inclusive and women-focused as CBARDP. However, cultural and religious considerations make women's participation in other societies more visible and effective than in ours."

Another woman (WP4) highlighted the influence of purdah:

"In this community, our women are not active participants in community development programmes due to purdah. They are often confined to home-based activities. When CBARDP started, traditional leaders encouraged participation, but success was limited. Many men registered their wives' names to access benefits, but during meetings, they represented their wives and later relayed the information to them at home."

Similarly, WP5 noted:

"Allowing their wives to interact openly with men outside the home remains a challenge for many. Although CBARDP promotes women's involvement, cultural and religious influences still make most husbands object."

These findings underscore the strong influence of cultural and religious norms on participation patterns in rural development. As noted by Emon and Khan (2023) and Thelma and Ngulube (2024), cultural attitudes can significantly shape people's decisions and, if left unaddressed, may hinder project success. Therefore, community sensitisation and culturally sensitive engagement strategies are vital to enhancing women's active participation in future interventions.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates the nature, intricacies, and implications of the participation of women in CBARDP in Bauchi state, with a focus on their experiences, limitations, and contributions

to community and rural development results. The findings revealed that CBARDP has given an important platform for advancing women's agency in a society where gender norms have traditionally inhibited their community engagement. The findings show that women beneficiaries have reported active participation in community programs, unprecedented access to living opportunities, and increased confidence in participating in shared decision-making. The findings imply that CBARDP has helped its woman beneficiaries achieve economic and social empowerment, which is critical for long-range rural development success.

The program aligns with the theoretical prospect that empowerment arises from stretched capabilities and the ability to influence household and community decisions by facilitating their participation in the development process, improving their skills, and ensuring their voices are represented. However, existing cultural conventions and a low level of literacy have made it difficult to achieve the program's aims completely. These obstacles hampered their capacity to assume some leadership roles, participate fully in decision-making, and get equal advantages from the programme. The data thus revealed that while CBARDP has performed wonderfully, certain serious cultural restrictions need to be addressed to attain the long-term empowerment benefits of the program.

In order to attain a sustainable result, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, civil rights organizations, and traditional institutions must work together to establish a robust network of support for raising women's literacy levels and guaranteeing an environment that will allow them to be fully included. In conclusion, CBARDP has shown previously unheard-of potential in a balanced approach to reducing poverty in

rural communities. However, its long-term success depends on coordinated efforts to break down cultural barriers, maintain

inclusive development programs, and give women special recognition as crucial players in attaining rural transformation.

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