

Empowerment Programmes and Socio Economic Wellbeing of Rural Women: A Study of “First Ladies” Projects in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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Abstract: *The study investigated and assessed the effect/relationship between ‘First Ladies’ empowerment programmes and socio economic wellbeing of rural women in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Particularly the Family Life Enhancement Initiative (FLEI) of the present First Lady. Four hypotheses were formulated based on the categorized empowerment programmes, namely: mobilization for political participation, agricultural support programme through Micro Credit Scheme, small scale enterprise promotion, healthcare delivery services and promotion of cooperative societies. Data were generated using research questionnaire, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII). Survey research was adopted while data were obtained from 960 randomly selected female respondents. A multi-stage sampling procedure was variously applied at appropriate stages of the study. The generated data were statistically tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient analytical procedure of the SPSS package. Results revealed that First Ladies programmes have affected rural women socio economic wellbeing in terms of food security, self employment, improved mother and child health, improved access to productive resources. The policy implication arising from the study suggest that First Ladies empowerment programmes in Nigeria should be sustained since they have given rural women a voice, shown consistency in tackling gender biases in rural development and improve their well being.*

Keywords: *Empowerment Programmes, Socio-economic, rural women, First Ladies.*

I. Introduction

Man’s wellbeing is the essential goal of all development effort. Achieving wellbeing enhances or maintains the social functioning of the individual in the community. Wellbeing has occurred when there has been improvement in basic needs, when economic progress has contributed to a greater sense of self esteem for the community and individuals within it and when material advancement has expanded the range of choice for individuals (Thirdwall, 1994).

Development programmes and policies have always targeted improvements in metrics such as life expectancy, literacy, level of employment; changes in less tangible factors such as personal dignity, freedom of association, personal safety and freedom from fear of physical harm and extent of participation in community life. Specifically, government interventions have aimed at protection from the degradation and insecurity of ignorance, illness, disability, unemployment and poverty especially in rural areas. However, not much have been achieved in this direction by either government or non governmental organizations in sub-Saharan Africa over the decades as there has been no significant improvement in the livelihood of rural dwellers especially the quality of life of rural women.

Interest in socio economic wellbeing of rural women in Nigeria is not new. What is new, however, is the unprecedented concern as the problems of rural women have increased over the decades. The well-being of rural women, therefore, involves creating and widening of potentials for economic development, enhancing the quality of life; accessing empowerment opportunities, facilities and amenities; improving standard of living and positive transformation in general aspect of life (Obinne, 2001). The experience of women in Nigeria’s contemporary rural society has been that of marginalization and severance from the process of development. The patriarchal rural community subjects women to domestic violence and abuse, cultural definition of gender roles and undervaluation of their contributions, denial of inheritance right, loss of self-esteem and powerlessness (Oghazi, 2002). These have negatively affected their socio economic wellbeing.

The need to consciously accelerate the pace of rural socio economic development has been quite appealing since independence in 1960. Towards this end, the various governments of Nigeria embarked on a number of Development Plans between 1962 and 1985. Other strategies and development programmes for rural socio economic development were the Integrated Rural Development (IRD) programme, later renamed Agricultural Development Project (ADP), River Basin Development Authorities (RBDA), Operation Feed the

Nation (OFN) 1976, National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPF) 1976, Green Revolution (IR) 1980 and the Directorate for Food, Roads and rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) 1985 (Nkpoyen, 2013).

Despite these programmes, the rural women's condition is still impoverished. Udofia (2001) observed that more than 70 percent of rural dwellers in Nigeria are women and 51 percent live below the poverty line. Past development efforts concentrated on a lopsided platform neglecting the rural women as a vital catalyst in the development process. Federal Republic of Nigeria (1994) stressed that things started to change when Ibrahim Babangida became Nigeria's President in 1985. This Administration meddled the institution of the First Ladyship in Nigeria's socio political landscape. The identification of women as a critical target group in the development process during Babangida's Administration and following the outcome of Beijing Conference in 1985 motivated, First Lady, Maryam Babangida, to initiate her empowerment programme known as the Better Life programme for Rural Women (BLPRW) in 1987. It was the premier first lady empowerment programme in Nigeria.

The activities of Maryam Babangida with the introduction of BLFRW turned the traditionally ceremonial post of "First Lady" into a potent force for women's rural development in Nigeria. This programme gingered successive Nigerian First Ladies, Vice presidents' wives and wives of Governors of various states to embark on empowerment programmes. In Akwa Ibom State, one of the 36 states in Nigeria, the First Ladies have over the years become aware of the role of women as agents and catalysts for rural socio economic development. They have initiated various empowerment programmes in various areas of socio economic lives. First Lady Mrs. Tunde Ogbeha – 1987 played a key role in mobilizing, recognizing and giving full recognition to the activities of rural women. First Lady Obonganwan Imo Isemin – 1992 initiated Uforo Community Bank, Door-Step Health Programme, Uforo Farms, Nka Uforo Iban Investment Limited. First Lady Mrs. Aisha Yakubu Bako – 1995 promoted social welfare services for motherless babies including worm infestation. First Lady Dr. (Mrs.) Iyabode Adewusi – 1997 promoted maternal and child health services, immunization services, Agro-processing and cooperative societies. First Lady Mrs. Patience Abbe – 1998 established micro enterprises. First Lady Nenyin Halison Attah – 2005 initiated Child Development Trust (CDI). The incumbent First Lady, Mrs. Ekaette Unoma Akpabio has established Family Life Enhancement Programme (FLEI); Women Agro-Entrepreneurship Development Programme (NAEDP) etc.

First Ladies through their empowerment programmes have facilitated socio economic wellbeing of rural women in major areas such as economic empowerment, educational empowerment, vocational skills acquisition, political empowerment, health and social welfare and social justice for women. Their concern have been to enhance quality of life for women and children. The questions that this study sought to answer were: What are the activities of First Ladies in the Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria? To what extent have these programmes positively affected socio economic lives of women? What are the major challenges of these empowerment programmes? What measures should be initiated to ensure sustainability?

Five central aspects of Akwa Ibom State first lady empowerment programmes were distinguished as study objectives. The first aspect, political participation in political development measured by the proportion of rural women in politics or received political appointments. The second aspect, health care services measured by reduced maternal/child mortality, HIV/AIDS and other diseases. The third aspect, social welfare services measured by social rehabilitation of those suffering from disabilities. The fourth aspect, agriculture measured by food security. The fifth aspect, promotion of cooperative societies measured by the proportion of people able to mobilize small savings for productive purposes. Socio-economic wellbeing of rural women was measured by higher political awareness and participation by women; enhanced health status, reduced social disadvantage among women and children; self employment; improved nutritional status and enhanced household income and social capital.

II. Literature review

I. Women empowerment and socio economic wellbeing:

Empowerment has different meanings in different socio-cultural and political contexts. Women empowerment is the expansion of freedom of choice and action. It means increasing women's authority and control over the resources and decisions that affect their lives. As women exercise real choice, they gain increased control over their lives. Rural women's choice are extremely limited both by their lack of assets and by their powerlessness to negotiate better terms for themselves with a range of institutions both formal and informal (Bank, 2005). Becker (2000) stated that women empowerment is concerned with the processes by which rural women become aware of their own interests and how these relate to the interest of others in order to participate from a position of greater strength in decision making and actually influence such decisions. The United Nations Programme for African Economic Recovery and Development (1986 – 1990) stated that the role of women in development should be taken seriously not only in development planning but also in the allocation of resources. The Abuja Declaration on Participatory Development in 1989 which was adopted in the Fourth Regional Conference emphasized the need to promote women in employment (Agba, 2005).

Sociologically, empowerment is the process of obtaining basic opportunities for marginalized people, either directly by those people themselves or through the help of non marginalized others who share their own access to these opportunities. It also includes actively thwarting attempts to deny these opportunities. Empowerment also includes encouraging and developing the skills for self sufficiency, with a focus on eliminating the need for charity or welfare in the individuals, groups or community (Wikipedia, 2007). This process can be difficult to start and to implement effectively, but there are many examples of empowerment projects which have succeeded. Empowerment programmes are meant to translate to socio economic wellbeing through:

- (1) improved income levels of the poor and non-poor
- (2) changes in household food security
- (3) improved basic needs (shelter, health and nutrition)
- (4) changes in income distribution and decreases in inequities
- (5) diversification of income sources
- (6) changes in income security
- (7) improved human rights
- (8) increased access to public goods and services
- (9) increased yields
- (10) changes in consumption and diet
- (11) improved quality of life
- (12) higher political awareness and participation etc.

II First Ladies and empowerment projects

First Ladyship has its origin in the United States of America traceable to 1849 when President Zachary Taylor called Dolley Madison “First Lady”. The term is now used all over the world to describe the wife of President or Head of State. In Nigeria, apart from using it to designate the president’s wife, it is also used for wives of governors and those of Local Government Chairmen (Ojo, 2013). Watson (2000) identified eleven key duties that first ladies in the United States of America must undertake: act as a wife, social advocate, public figure and celebrity, social hostess, diplomat, symbol of American women, White House Manager and preservationist, campaigner, presidential and political party booster, presidential spokesperson and political and presidential partner. Akanbi and Jekayinka (2011) maintained that the above roles are not the exclusive preserve of American First Ladies but applicable to all responsible wives of leaders, especially political office holders. Akanbi and Jekayinka agreed that first ladies occupy an important political space and must be used to benefit the society.

Much was not heard of this term in Nigeria until the Administration of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida (rtd) came to power in 1985. Hitherto, wives of the former Prime Minister and Heads of state played only ceremonial roles. However, Mrs. Maryam Babangida repackaged and rebranded the concept of First Ladyship in Nigeria. The radicalization of First Ladyship in Nigeria was a by-product of the Beijing Conference in 1985. The initiation of the Better Life Programme for Rural Women (BLPRW) in 1987 by First Lady, Mrs. Maryam Babangida created a new wave of consciousness in women.

Maryam Babangida BLPRW programme sought to empower women’s social, economic and political status in many areas. At the end of 1993, the Better Life Programme had facilitated the establishment of 7,625 Farmers Cooperative Societies, 1,435 cottage industries, 1784 new farms and gardens, 495 new shops and markets, 1094 multipurpose women’s centres, 135 fish and livestock farms and 163 social welfare programmes. It was also during this era of Mrs. Babangida’s pet project that the National Centre for Women Development was built in Abuja in 1992 (Ojo, 2013).

After Maryam Babangida, Mrs. Mariam Abacha launched her empowerment project known as Family Support Programme (FSP), an offshoot of Family Economic Advancement programme (FEAP). After the demise of Abacha’s Administration, Hon. Justice Fati Abubakar, established Women’s Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA). Mrs. Stella Obasanjo set up her own pet project known as Child Care Trust (CCT). Mrs. Titi Abubakar, wife of the Vice President established a pet project known as the Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF). Mrs. Turai yar’Adua set up the Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF). The incumbent First Lady, Mrs. Patience Jonathan launched a pet project known as Women for Change Initiative, aside from A. Areuera Reachout Foundation which she established as the First Lady in Bayelsa State as wife of then Governor Jonathan.

First Ladies in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria too have designed various empowerment programmes to enhance the socio economic wellbeing of rural women. Through their pet programmes, they have contributed to the socio economic advancement of rural women through increased income generation, increased political participation, health awareness, vocational skill acquisition, knowledge acquisition through formal and non-formal education (Akpabio, 2007). First Lady Mrs. Ekaette Unoma Akpabio followed the footsteps of her

predecessors by initiating the Family Life Enhancement Initiative (FLEI) in 2007 as a channel for implementing social and humanitarian programmes. It was founded as a response to the widespread social disadvantages in our society which have, over time, impacted negatively on family values, thereby undermining the role of the family unit in the development process. The idea is therefore to provide a platform for redirecting the focus of development efforts on the family as a strategy for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The focus is on reducing the high incidence of child labour and trafficking, HIV and AIDS, maternal and child mortality, teenage pregnancy and youth unemployment and other social problems. It aims to restore values and reduce social disadvantage among Akwa Ibom Families. It seeks to reengineer and empower the family by promoting values and linking disadvantaged individuals and groups with the tools and opportunities they need to overcome social disadvantage and unlock their potentials. The target beneficiaries of FLEI's programmes include girls, women, young people, exploited and abused children, widows, persons with disability and other vulnerable constituencies (First Lady, 2012).

Transformation through Family Life Enhancement Initiative (FLEI) projects include, among others:

- (a) provision of houses for widows across the state
- (b) reducing maternal and child mortality and morbidity
- (c) combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases,
- (d) rehabilitation and ongoing support for social welfare centres at restoration of pride in womanhood.

III. Impact of Akwa Ibom State First Ladies empowerment programmes on socio economic wellbeing of rural women

a) Mobilization for political participation and socio-economic wellbeing of rural women:

Afinja and Aina (2009) revealed that women have been described as an integral part of nation building. They are integral agent for sustainable development at all levels. As in other democracies of the world, successive governments in Nigeria have been engaged in the sustained campaign for greater and effective participation in politics in line with the Beijing conference declaration which advocates for 35 percent in appointments into political and public offices. According to Ukpom (2009) to realize the 35 percent affirmative action the federal government set up the National Gender Policy to promote the attainment of this target.

Ubeku (2008) stated that consequent upon the establishment of National Commission for Women by Maryam Babangida and later upgraded to the Ministry of Women Affairs at the national level. This was followed by State Governments throughout the country. These institutions are permanent structure of government today. There has been continued impetus for the increasing positive role of women in politics as indicated by the emphasis on the mobilization of rural women by First Ladies at State level. Through the political activities of state first ladies, women organizations are now beginning to find a rallying point for common action politically, economically and socially. Ukpom (2009) commented that with Women for Change Initiative, the empowerment project of First Lady, Dame Jonathan Nigerian women have been awakened and empowered through various summits, programmes, enlightenment campaigns to ensure that women are constitutionally recognized as stakeholders. Tolabi (2010) stressed that First Ladies in Akwa Ibom State have canvassed for their women to be given opportunities to contribute to the development of the nation and this has yielded results through the high proportion of women in political offices in the present government.

b) Empowerment programme on health care services and socio economic wellbeing of rural women:

The overriding importance of an effective maternal and child health or health care delivery system is underscored as it represents one of the drivers of rapid economic, social and political development. Social health of the citizenry ensures greater human development (Anam, 2011). The affirmation by the Alma-Ata declaration of 1978 stated access to basic health care services including maternal and child services is a fundamental human rights. However, after many decades a high proportion of people particularly in rural areas lack access to basic health care services. UNDP (2003) report confirmed that over 30,000 children die each day from preventable diseases, more than 500,000 women die during child birth and complications in pregnancy over 1 million under 5 years old children die of malaria every year, approximately 20 million people have died of HIV/AIDS while over 38 million are living with the disease, 8 million people develop active TB each year out of which 3 million die of it (Bushy, 2008).

Maternal and child health care programme have been the concen of First Ladies in Akwa Ibom State. The link between health and socio economic wellbeing of rural women has been established in the literature (Omo-Aghoja, Aisien, Akuse, Bergstrom and Okonofua, 2010; Bushy, 2008).

IV. Empowerment programme on social welfare services and socio economic wellbeing of rural women

Akwa Ibom State First Ladies concern in social welfare includes initiating programmes whose explicit purpose is to protect adults and children from the degradation and insecurity of ignorance, illness, disability, unemployment and poverty. Social welfare generally denotes the full range of organized activities of voluntary and governmental organizations that seek to prevent, alleviate or contribute to the solution of recognized social problems or to improve the wellbeing of individual, groups and communities (Nkpoyen, 2012). The First Ladies have over the years embarked on social interventions intended to enhance or maintain the social functioning of women and children especially in alleviating distress and poverty or ameliorating conditions of causalities of society as indicated by various social and economic rehabilitation activities.

V. Empowerment programme in agriculture and socio-economic wellbeing of rural women

Williams (2008) reported that the involvement of First Lady Ekaette Unoma Akpabio in the affairs of Akwa Ibom State rural women in the area of agriculture has had enormous socio-economic impact on the rural environment. The First Lady's Women's Agricultural Entrepreneurship Development Programme makes loans available to rural women farmers. Over 4,500 women benefited from the programme in 2011 across the 31 local government areas. This is one of the life touching social intervention projects designed to make a difference in the lives of women, children and the less privileged at the grassroot. The women were enrolled for training in agro-production and agro-trading and equally empowered with an interest free loan. The First Lady stressed that investments in women and children were important because of the multiplier effects on the economy.

VI. First Ladies empowerment through promotion of cooperative societies and socio-economic wellbeing of rural women

Development organizations are emphasizing the use of women's groups as a strategy to improve rural women's lives. Ihejimaizu (2002) observed that the formation and management of cooperative societies is one of the important ways rural dwellers are using to address problems of neglect, poverty and deprivation. The First Ladies all agreed as manifested in their empowerment activities that women are oppressed and seriously hit by poverty. Thus, their empowerment programmes through promoting cooperative societies have helped to transform the lives of rural women since cooperatives are meant to build social and economic capacities (Umoh, 2011). First Lady, Ekaette Unoma Akpabio stated that the establishment of cooperative societies in rural areas for rural women is an effective method for facilitating their access to the means of production, hence, personal and household income (Akpan, 2012). Rural women cooperatives, as aspect of empowerment programme for socio-economic wellbeing have created avenues for women to participate in development thereby improving their quality of life.

Theoretical framework

The study was theoretically embedded in Sara Hupekile Longwe's (1995) women empowerment model, Hall (1990) empowerment theory, sustainable livelihoods approach associated with Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway (1991) and rights-based approach. According to Longwe, five levels of equality are essential in the women empowerment framework. These are: welfare, access, conscientization, mobilization and control. The model implies that to secure women's equality politically, materially and culturally, women must be empowered. The premise of identity empowerment theory is that women's behaviour and quality of life could be changed by increasing that awareness of the strength of social influences and of the interplay between intended consequences of women's decisions and unintended actions. To facilitate the accomplishment of creative changes in women's lives, they must consciously connect personal and public aspects of their lives to enable them enlarge their world and participate in broader spheres of activity exclusively for men. Hall's theory views women empowerment as a tool that can transform women's individual and social realities (Agba, 2005).

Rights-based and sustainable livelihoods approaches are complementary perspectives popularized by DFID in the 1990s. The approaches seek to achieve the same goal: empowerment of the most vulnerable and a strengthened capacity of the poor to achieve secure livelihoods. The rights-based perspective establishes a link between public institutions and civil society, particularly how to increase the accountability of public institutions to the socially disabled citizens. The livelihoods approach takes as its starting point a need to understand the livelihoods of poor people in context. From this starting point, it tries to identify the specific constraints which prevent the realization of people's rights and consequently the improvement of their livelihoods on a sustainable basis.

The framework also included feminism in Nigeria: the empowerment dimension. In Nigeria, feminist's movement and proponent of women rights have concerned essentially with women liberation, emancipation and empowerment. The thinking has been that people should jettison old ways of looking at women's problems and that women should redefine themselves (Charles, 2010). Emphasis is placed on societal and institutional

changes in policies and practices so that equal and more opportunities and resources could be available to women. These changes could be realized if women are empowered.

Therefore, based on these approaches, empowerment programmes of First Ladies are necessary to create awareness, mobilize and sensitize women to enhance their participation in rural and national life. The major goal of these approaches is to help poor rural women achieve lasting improvement against the interceptors of socio economic wellbeing identified by them.

III. Methodology

The survey research design was adopted for the study. Akwa Ibom State, one of the 36 states of Nigeria was the study area. About 60% of the population is agrarian and such related employ, 25% is commercial oriented while the remaining 15% constitute the civil and public sector. The state was created in 1987. It is located in the coastal south-southern part of Nigeria, lying between latitudes 4°32'N and 5°33'N north, and longitude 7°25' E and 8°25' E east. The first Governor of the state was Tunde Ogbeha. So far, 9 First Ladies have existed including the incumbent First Lady, Mrs. Ekaette Unoma Akpabio. The state was created in 1987. It has a population of 3,902,051 (1,983,202 male and 1,918,849 female) (NPC, 2006). It has 31 local government areas. The three senatorial districts represented the 3 strata of the study. Four (4) local government areas were selected from each stratum using the hat and draw method of simple random sampling to constitute the 4 clusters of the study. Altogether, 12 clusters were involved. To draw the sample communities per cluster, the sample frame was used to select the first two communities. This amounted to 8 communities per cluster, a total of 24 communities in all. Systematic sampling technique was used to draw the sample population. A total of 40 women were sampled from each community. It gave rise to 80 women per cluster, 960 women (respondents) in all from the 12 clusters participated in the study. Thus, the sample of the study was 960 respondents (females). Data sources included questionnaire, key informant interview and focus group discussion (FGD).

Analysis

Table 1: Respondents demography

Variables	Respondents	Percentages (%)
I Marital status:	Married	521 54.27
	Single	386 40.21
	Divorced/ separated	53 5.52
II Level of education:	Primary	491 51.14
	Secondary	411 42.81
	Tertiary	58 6.04
III Occupation:	Farmer	331 34.47
	Trader	290 30.21
	Civil servant	201 20.94
	Self employed	138 14.37
	960	100.00

Source: Field survey, 2013

From table 1, a total of 960 respondents participated. 521 (54.27%) married, 386(40.20%) single while 53(5.52%) divorced/separated/widowed. 491(51.14%) acquired primary education, 411(42.81%) acquired secondary education, 58(6.014%) acquired tertiary education. 331(34.47%) were farmers, 290(30.21%) traders, 201(20.94%) civil servants, while 138(14.37%) were self-employed.

Test of hypotheses

Ho: 1 There is no significant relationship between First Lady's empowerment programme for political participation in political development and socio economic wellbeing of rural women.

Ho: 2 Empowerment programme on health care services (reduced maternal/child mortality, HIV/AIDS and other diseases) has no significant relationship with socio economic wellbeing of rural women.

Ho: 3 Empowerment programme on social welfare services does not significantly relate to socio economic wellbeing of rural women.

Ho: 4 promotion of agriculture has no significant relationship with socio economic wellbeing of rural women.

Ho: 5 There is no significant relationship between promotion of cooperative societies and socio economic wellbeing of rural women.

From table 2, the calculated values of 0.849*, 0.941*, 0.875*, 0.708* and 0.820* were all found to be higher than the critical r-value of 0.196 tested at 0.05 level of significance with 958 degrees of freedom. This means that all the null hypotheses were rejected and the alternative hypotheses accepted. The significant value

of *r* indicates that a positive relationship exists between first ladies empowerment programme on political participation in political development, health care services (reduced maternity/child mortality/HIV/AIDS and other diseases), social welfare services, promotion of agriculture and promotion of cooperative societies and socio economic wellbeing of rural women in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Table 2: Pearson product moment correlation analysis of the relationship between First Ladies' empowerment programme and women socio economic wellbeing N = 960

Variable	$\sum y$ $\sum x$	$\sum x^2$ $\sum y^2$	$\sum xy$	r-cal
Rural women socio economic wellbeing (Y)	16385	372865		
Political participation in political development (X ₁)	18325	285660	322755	0.849*
Health care services (reduced maternity/child mortality/HIV/AIDS and other diseases (X ₂))	18450	374525	325200	0.941*
Social welfare services (X ₃)	18275	373755	323070	0.875*
Promotion of agriculture (X ₄)	18251	374575	320225	0.708*
Promotion of cooperative societies (X ₅)	18180	375850	371580	0.820*

*Correlation is significant at P<.05, 92-tailed) df=958, crit-r = 0.196

IV. Discussion of findings

I. Empowerment for political participation and socio economic wellbeing:

The findings support Tolabi (2010) who revealed that First Ladies in Akwa Ibom State have over the years canvassed for their women to be given opportunities to contribute to the development of the nation through political appointments. Ubon (2012) further revealed that it is to the credit of First Lady Ekaette Unoma Akpabio that rural women were effectively mobilized for the 2011 election. The findings indicate that rural women have been mobilized politically and their interests have been brought to limelight in the nation's politics at national, state and grassroot levels. Such political mobilization has enhanced rural socio economic wellbeing. This was confirmed by the FGD data and the Key Informant Interview (KII).

Findings also confirmed Ekong (2011) who revealed that the Akwa Ibom State incumbent First Lady Ekaette Unoma Akpabio's empowerment programme (FLEI) has significantly improved the lives of women and children. From the FGD, participants agreed that the First Ladies have been in the forefront of women empowerment for political participation. According to Ekong (2011) the present First Lady stressed that investment in women and children are very important because of multiplier effect it has on the economy and the populace. This explains why her empowerment projects are tailored towards the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger through women empowerment. During the FGD, participants admitted that she has facilitated the 35% Affirmative Action in political opponents in Akwa Ibom State.

The findings also support Ndaeyo (2012) who reported that First Ladies in Akwa Ibom State have contributed tremendously to women political empowerment which has manifested in their improved socio economic lives. Ndaeyo argued that First Ladies here, especially those who are politically minded have been the arrow head of the campaign for political empowerment through ensuring that more women are appointed into political offices. This study found out that more representation of women in policy making has made economic empowerment easier to attain. Without economic empowerment it is almost impossible for women to be actively involved in politics and policy making. Their management and leadership skills have been tapped through increased opportunities offered for them in political arena.

Umelis (2010) observation has been affirmed by this study. Umeh stated that First Lady Ekaette Unoma Akpabio believes strongly that an association exists between political participation and socio economic wellbeing of rural women. Women empowerment has opened a floodgate for full political, economic and social emancipation. Umeh revealed that there is wider involvement of women today in politics. Akpe's (2006) report has been confirmed by this study. Akpe stated that through the activities of First Lady Iyabode Adeusi rural women were able to break new groups in political participation. Rural women became highly sensitized, broke barriers and pulled down road blocks raised against them in the past as a major means to uplift their socio economic wellbeing.

The findings corroborated Akpabio (2006) who revealed that First Lady Nnenyin Alison Attah worked hard to sensitize rural women to the fact they should not only be content with going out to vote during elections but should also stand and be voted for. First Lady Attah's emphasized that as good managers at home, rural women could do well if given the opportunity to manage offices in the political arena at the grassroot level. Akpe (1997) reported that First Lady Jackie Jonathan Tunde Ogbeha, pioneered efforts in effectively mobilizing, organizing and giving full recognition to the rural women especially in the area of political participation. The participants during the FGD reported that First Lady Jackie Ogbeha created awareness and stimulated the consciousness of rural women towards knowing their rights to social factors such as health, housing, food, environment and political leadership.

Umana (2007) agreed that other First Ladies – Mrs. Patience Abbe, Uduak Nkana, Obonganwan Imo Isemin, contributed immensely to the improvement of socio economic life of rural women by encouraging them to emerge from the smoke-filled kitchen to the political podium. The findings support Akpan (1997) that “men who pulled and shouted down at women years back, declaring them naïve, kitchen bound and back benchers, now give them a nod for active participation in politics. Men are now campaign managers for women. William (2011) reported that First Lady Ekaette Unoma Akpabio’s empowerment activities have politically dwarfed previous First Ladies in terms of creating a political conscious generation of women.

II. Empowerment programme on health care services and socio economic wellbeing of rural women:

The findings support Udofia (1997) that First Lady Iyabode Adeusi used the Family Support Programme (FSP) to vigorously pursue maternal and child health services. Her health programme included mass deworming of school children. Udofia revealed that First Lady Adeusi significantly sensitized the rural women to the benefits of immunization. The FGD indicated that she took necessary steps to educate and raise awareness level of people on the reality of HIV/AIDS. The First Ladies at the local government level strongly articulated the philosophy of “health is wealth”. The discussants agreed that more maternity homes were opened and National Programme on Immunization and campaigns against HIV/AIDS were vigorously pursued. This helped to enhance the health status of rural women. The findings support Etuk (2006) who revealed that First Lady Nnenyin Allison Attah’s health empowerment programme rested on the assumption that women are the immediate care givers to their husband, children and households in general. Her empowerment programme afforded women health education about diseases such as HIV/AIDS, TB, blindness, hypertension, diabetes etc and how to prevent them. Women were also enlightened on their right to satisfy their personal needs.

William (2012) stated that the Family Life Enhancement Initiative (FLEI) of First Lady, Ekaette Unoma Akpabio has been at the forefront of the campaign to reduce maternal and child mortality/morbidity. The premise of FLEI is that the promotion of maternal and child health are the key to achieving the globally agreed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The finding of this study support William (2012) that FLEI is responding to the challenge of reducing the state’s high child and maternal mortality statistics through the use of innovative advocacy strategies. *Uforo Ubon*, FLEI magazine is currently being used as an advocacy tool to take the campaign to women and the wider public. FLEI is also employing its wide grassroots network to mobilize and educate rural women on the importance of registering early at the primary health facilities in their communities for child birth and immunization.

The FGD session revealed that women have benefited from FLEI’s quarterly intervention event to enlighten the women on healthy living and support them with a subsistence grant. Hundreds of multiple birth families are impacted yearly through this intervention. The women agreed that their health care has been significantly enhanced and this has manifested in improved health status. The women, children and the aged have been touched through the activities of FLEI.

The findings are consistent with Archibong (2010) that the people oriented programme of the Child Development Trust (CDT) supervised by First Lady Nnenyin Alison Attah was significant in catering for a great number of malnourished children in the thirty-one local government areas of the state. The women at the FGD session agreed that the programme helped to promote sustainable physical and mental health of children through the eradication of protein energy malnutrition in children. The First Lady believed that the protein energy malnutrition was the leading cause of child morbidity and mortality. The affected children also received treatment for malaria, worm infestation, anaemia, diarrhea and surgical operations. Archibong (2010) commented that the CDT also took a holistic approach to solve the problem of poverty in the families of the treated children through financial empowerment to their mothers. Mothers were educated on good nutritional habit for their children, provided care and support to people and families battling with HIV/AIDS.

Findings of this study support Atakpo (1997) who stated that First Lady Obonganwan Imo Isemin was able to forge a link between health care services and socio economic wellbeing of rural women. Under the auspices of Better Life Programme (BLP) she was able to stimulate and motivate the rural women towards achieving better health standard. She introduced the “Door-Step health Programme” and the “Better Alive” health campaigns. The aim was to create health awareness, provide health information, stimulate healthy living habits, provide healthy mental attitude and cultivate healthy behavioural patterns with the ultimate goal of improving socio economic wellbeing through good health and longevity. The FGD session revealed that First Lady Ekaette Unoma Akpabio is presently raising awareness within the family of its role in reducing the spread of diseases, HIV/AIDS, and malaria prevention by popularizing the use of insecticide treated nets and donating same to pregnant women in rural communities. According to First Lady (2013), five rural communities have so far benefited from this initiative.

III. Social welfare services and socio economic wellbeing of rural women:

The findings of this study support First Lady (2013) that Her Excellency, Ekaette Unoma Akpabio has made rehabilitation and support for social welfare centres as a priority concern. As part of FLEI's programme for empowerment, various welfare centres have long played an important role in the lives of disadvantaged groups in the state. These include half way home facilities, rehabilitation centres, hospitals and other such facilities whose inmates sometimes seem to be forgotten. In view of the importance of these facilities to the social economy of the state, the First Lady's pet project has reached out to a number of them in significant ways. For instance, the Ikot Ekpene Children's Home, a facility for mentally challenged children has been transformed from a derelict structure to a befitting centre for alternative care giving and education. In the same way, FLEI has provided a lifeline for the Leprosy Hospital, Ekpene Obom, Etinan through a monthly house keeping allowance of N100,000.00 for inmates and caregivers (First Lady, 2013).

The activities of FLEI have also facilitated the construction of an access road to the Deaf and Dumb centres by the State Government. For some Motherless Babies Homes, the intervention has been by way of instituting a scholarship fund to support the less privileged to university level. Other centres that have benefited from the social rehabilitation intervention include the Motherless babies Home, Ikot Iniang, Eket, Holy Family Sisters Home of the Needy, Ikpe Ikot Nkon, Ini; St. Anthony Destitute Homes, Uyo etc. The focus of FLEI in this direction has been to provide education and livelihood alternatives for the less privileged, make resources available for their day-to-day upkeep and rehabilitate existing physical infrastructure thereby improving the quality of life at these centres so that these institutions can live up to their role in providing care and support for socially vulnerable groups in the state (First Lady, 2013).

Ukafia (2008) reported that First Lady, Nneyin Alison Attah was described as epitome and catalyst of compassion for balancing infrastructural development in the state with welfare provision for the less privileged in the society as part of her empowerment programme, Child Development Trust (CDT). As part of the effort to improve upon social welfare services in the state and ensure that such services became accessible to families at the grassroot level, fourteen social welfare outstations spruced up in 14 local government areas, Akpambang (1997) stated that the Family Support Programme (FSP) under the leadership of First Lady Adeusi carried out several humanitarian assignments especially rehabilitation of destitute and widows in rural areas.

William (2012) revealed that First Lady Ekaette Unoma Akpabio's FLEI pro-poor programmes, especially the Shelter Support Programme has put a roof over the heads of rural widows across the state thereby enhancing their socio economic wellbeing. The FGD session also confirmed that the intervention of FLEI has repatriated thousands of former victims of child labour and trafficking. They have received social and medical rehabilitation and are reintegrated into the school system to benefit from the state's No Child Left Behind Programme which makes education free and compulsory up to the secondary school level. FLEI has given greater meaning to the state's Child Rights Act especially in rehabilitation of street children. Akimoyo (2012) revealed that through FLEI, the first lady has distributed economic empowerment tools to widows, orphans and persons with disability to help them earn sustainable livelihood. They are also given items ranging from hair dressing and barbing equipment, palm oil and cassava processing mills, sewing/weaving machines and catering equipment in addition to cash grant.

IV. Promotion of cooperative societies and socio economic wellbeing of rural women:

The findings revealed the existence of a significant relationship between promotion of cooperative societies and socio economic wellbeing of rural women. This supported Akpe (1997) who revealed that in 1991, under the leadership of First Lady Uduak Nkanga, about 77 registered cooperative societies were established while the period witnessed the disbursement of a revolving and defunct Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) loans for which about 46 rural women benefited. Cooperatives enhance self empowerment. The FGD participant agreed that First Ladies have encouraged the formation of cooperative societies as means to solve housing needs of the less privileged, improve access to capital, mobilize savings; develop women's potentials in generating income, improve health education and nutrition. However, the discussants agreed that providing training and financial management and marketing assistance are required.

V. Conclusion

The empowerment projects of First Ladies in Akwa Ibom State have made significant impact on the lives of women, children and the socially disable especially FLEI. Feminism in the state places emphasis on societal and institutional changes in policies and practices so that equal and more opportunities and resources could be available to the women. These envisaged changes could only be realized through women empowerment. This empowerment started with Babangida's government when the wife, the then "First Lady" floated the "Better Life Programme for Rural Women (BLPRW)" in 1987. In Akwa Ibom State, "First Ladies" have mobilized women to be more visible and created meaningful impact in the family, organizations and society at large.

VI. Recommendation

1. There should be programme continuity after the expiration of the tenure of the First Lady.
2. Empowerment programmes should be left in the hands of professionals to ensure that implementation is based on adequate planning.
3. Appropriate programme findings are required to further ensure its continuity.
4. First Ladies empowerment programmes should be constitutionally linked to the Ministry of Women Affairs.
5. An independent evaluation of the problem should be conducted that will provide information helpful to Policy makers and programme developments.

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