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Participating in Research Surveys in Rural Communities: Challenges Women Face and Recommendations for Improvement

By

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PROJECT PROFILE

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INTRODUCTION

Research have shown that there is trend in who responds to surveys and who do not. This is particularly true of the traditional method of data collection, especially through the use of questionnaires. It has been observed that various factors contribute to the availability of respondents for a particular survey. For example, it is generally believed that educational status and other social status indicators have a role to play. Educated and more affluent people are more likely to participate in surveys than less educated and less affluent people (Curtin et al, 2000; Goyder et al, 2002).

It has also been shown that age is a factor that determines whether a person will readily avail his or herself to respond to a survey. The younger people are more likely to participate in survey than older people (Goyder, 1986; Moore & Tarnai, 2002), and white people are more likely to participate than non-white people (Curtin et al 2000). Relevance of the survey topic has also been shown to influence response rates (Groves et al, 2000), as has response burden (Goyder, 1987), survey fatigue (Saxon et al, 2003), and even factors such as the focus of the study, the methods of contact, the methods of data collection, and the wording of the questionnaire title as well as the length of the survey instrument and the survey format. Previous surveys reveal that women are more likely to participate than men (Curtin et al 2000; Moore & Tarnai, 2002; Singer et al 2000).

Although the factors enumerated above affect everyone, women in rural communities of Niger Delta face additional challenges because of their gender. Women in these communities have the responsibility of securing biomass used for cooking, water, agricultural activities that provides food and income for the family, caring

for husband and children as well as household management. They wake up very early in the morning to attend to household chores, prepare the children for school where applicable before going out to securing food, trekking through distances and lonely roads. Beside these observable factors, there are other challenges women face, especially those in rural communities that makes it hard for them to attend to researchers and get a chance to contribute their experiences in the formulation of public policies.

This policy brief, therefore, seeks to explore these factors and make recommendations for improvement. The data for this policy development was gotten from harnessing the stories and reports of 40 Research Assistants and Field Supervisors who worked for a period of 3 months in 10 Local Government Areas (LGA) of Delta state selected from the three ecological zones of the state. A little above 4000 household members completed household questionnaires of which 4000 were cleaned and used for this study and about 55% of the respondents were females. Also key informant interviews were conducted amongst 107 participants comprising 51.4% females and 48.6% males. Focus group discussions were organised in groups of male only, female only and a mix of male and female respondents in each of the 10 LGA. Participant observations, unstructured interaction with rural women and girls as well as note taken were also used for the development of this policy brief.

WHAT WERE THE KEY FINDINGS?

Below are the key findings that relates to the unrecognized challenges women face in responding to, and participating research survey and interviews.

1. Gender Inequality

It is no longer news that the women folks are relegated to the background when it comes to issue of *importance*. Their opinion is seen as non-relevant and in most cases they are being disregarded. The truth is that these women are now accustomed to this stereotype and have resigned to their fate. Hence, they no longer trust their opinion resulting in their being reluctant to participate in surveys.

2. Fear

Women are afraid to talk or answer question when they are with their male counterparts, they accord the power of superiority to the men, they often believe that the men should be in charge and they will follow suit even when they know that some of these decisions are wrong and can be corrected. They believe that these men are the head of their homes and when they are corrected, it becomes an act of disrespect. Some see it as a taboo in their culture. During the field survey a woman said: ***Whatever my husband says- whether good or bad I will concur***. They are afraid of being seen as rebels in the community or being disciplined by their husbands and eventually losing their marriages.

3. Lack of Education

Most of the women in the survey location had little or no education which could be attributed to the fact that it is a rural area. When asked questions, they are usually bereft of ideas and opinions. Even when they have something to say, they are usually not good at expressing it. They generally lack awareness, sensitization and orientation. This is an issue of serious concern.

4. Inferiority Complex

This comes to play when women consider themselves as inferior to their male folks. Most of these women in the rural communities do this because they lack confidence of themselves. They don't want to talk even when they are given equal stake to say something. They feel if they talk they be laughed at and this will bring about embarrassment to them. In order to avoid this issues, they keep silent even in the face of persuasion.

5. Financial & Family Obligation

The women in rural areas are very passionate about what they do that helps them meet their need. It is either they are in the farm, market, or cooking for her family. They barely have leisure time which could have been utilized for responding to questionnaires. A woman who is occupied with either of these activities would not accord time to asked survey questions. It is therefore left for the research assistant to wait patiently for her to finish her task, join such a woman in the task or return at another time that the interview is still not guaranteed. They are usually of the opinion that if they are not up and doing their home will suffer.

6. Distractions

Women who are of child bearing age and nursing children may be distracted or forced to stop responding to a questionnaire half way even when they have the intention of participating in the survey.



Photo: Field Assistant with Respondent who was Initially Scheduled for Interview

RECOMMENDATIONS IN GOING FORWARD

Judging from the foregoing, it is pertinent to build the capacity of these women in order to minimize the challenges. For this to be achieved, the following recommendations are made and should be taken into considerations.

1. Sensitization and Awareness Creation:

These women need to be sensitized about their rights and their importance in nation building and sustainable development. Women who are relatively exposed and educated should take the initiative in sensitizing their fellow women.

2. Educating the Girl Child:

Education is said to be the key to success. When the girl child is educated, she will be confident to air her views without fear or dismay. An educated woman will also be aware of her rights as a person and consequently fight for such right.

3. Advocacy:

Women should advocate for other women. When a woman sees her fellow woman speaking on her behalf for good, she will be motivated to join the struggle.

4. Leadership Role:

Women should not be sidelined instead they should be encouraged by giving them equal opportunities with that of their male counterparts as to different positions in the economy. This will further build their confidence.

5. Simplicity of Survey Instruments:

Efforts should be made at simplifying survey instruments without necessarily omitting important points in order for women to find it easier to respond to such surveys.

6. Integrate Women into the Policy Making Process:

The role of women in nation building cannot be over emphasized. Women should be encouraged to take up leadership roles. This will help build their confidence and proffer solution to some issues bedeviling the nation. It is therefore recommended that policy makers formulate gender specific policies targeted at investing in women through education for a sustainable future that will translate into growth and development.

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