

Gender and Socio – Economic Development of Palm Oil Production Among the Rural Communities in Igala land.

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Abstract

Palm oil production has historically been one of the most important agricultural activities in Nigeria, alas in Igala land. Serving as major sources of livelihood, employment, and rural economic development, the industry has depended on the complementary contributions of men and women in the cultivation, harvesting, processing and marketing of palm products. This study examines the relationship between gender dynamics and socioeconomics development in palm oil production in Igala land the period 1900 – 2000. The study explores the historical evolution of gender roles, the division of labour, and the extent to which the participation of both men and women has contributed to household welfare and community development. The work adopts the historical research method, utilizing oral interviews, archival materials, government documents and relevant secondary literature. Data are analyzed through qualitative historical interpretation. The finding indicates that while men have traditionally dominated palm fruit harvesting and other labour intensive activities, women have played indispensable roles in fruit collections, processing, storage and marketing which forms the bulk in the chain of production. The complementary roles have enhanced household incomes, promoted food security, created employment opportunities and contributed to the socioeconomic transformation of rural communities in Igala land. The study concludes that promoting gender inclusive agricultural policies and improving equitable access to production resource are essential for enhancing the sustainability of local palm oil production and accelerating rural socio-economic development in Igala land.

Keywords: *gender, palm oil production, socioeconomic development, Igala land*

Introduction

Of course, the socio-economic activities geared towards development are shared gender responsibilities of everyone in many developing countries, where household and family/communal labour workforce continues to play important roles to sustain economic activities towards production. There are several socio-economic such as farming, trading, rearing of animals, food processing, it therefore means that no human society develops without taking in to cognizant of the men and women especially women contributions in production. In Nigeria just like in many developing countries, there are many societies with strong narrative of women's bravery and exploits not just in warfare and safety of the people, but also in economic production (Idoko, 2026).

This perhaps, indicates that the development of any society could hardly be attained without acknowledging, and appreciating the gender efforts, especially women's contribution in the development (Abdulkadir, 2014)).

Alas, the Igala women who against all odds continue to factor in many ways in the promotion of peace and harmony through their roles as workers, producer, traders, mothers, and wives in the socio-economic activities driven towards development of not just the rural economy, but to the overall growth and economic development of the entire Igala communities especially in palm oil production is often not given much attention (Ugbedejo, 2026).

This informs the choice and the need to examine gender and socio – economic activities involved in the palm oil production among the rural communities in Igalaland. The socio-economic activities of the famous Igala palm oil (*Ekpo Oje*) and its production among the Igala people in the eastern part of Kogi state in north central Nigeria remains a blend of the traditional and modern processing method. However, the traditional skills involving complex activities undertaken by men and the women as form of division of labour, continues to drive production in the rural communities.

Conceptual Clarification

Palm oil is an edible oil derived from the fruits of the oil palm (*elaeis guineensis*) especially from the mesocarp, it is common household ingredients used in food preparation, and contain unique fatty acid which is free of cholesterol. And therefore, provide antioxidant activity and protective properties in food and the body against inflammation. Among the Igala speaking people, it is known as *ekpo*, it is of course, not just a very popular recipe but an essential ingredient on the food menu of many, if not all Nigerian household.

Gender:

This often refers an individual's personal and social/biological identity either as man or a woman, is be taken as a social and cultural constructed roles, behaviors, responsibilities, expectations and relationship that societies assign to people based on whether they are male of female is an important factor in learning and assigning of socio economic activities in the palm oil production among the Igala people of north central area of Nigeria.

Igala

One of the major ethnic groups in Kogi state, which is predominantly found in the eastern part of the state famous in the production palm oil with high regards in most markets especially the north region. Their homeland commonly referred to as Igalaland, with major centres/towns like Idah, Ankpa, Dekina, Anyingba, Ofu, and many other rural communities where the practice and production of palm oil production is not new (Ufedejo, 2026). Before the colonial era various communities employed communal efforts as mechanism for mobilizing community resources to effect physical improvement and functional facilities in their various localities. In the socio-economic aspect of their lives, mobilization of communal labour farmland was cultivated, homes steeds constructed and other needed amenities provided. In the colonial era a new concept of community development was introduced in the area of mass mobilization for self-help activities.

Historical Background to Palm oil production

Oil palm, is of great antiquity, it is a monocotyledonous tree belonging to the palmae family, It produces bunches of fleshy fruits, the pulp (mesocarp) of two which yields a solid, edible, orange-

red oil called palm oil, the endosperm or kernel yields a clear, yellowish oil that is also edible and solid, and is called palm kernel oil, the very young leaves is used as vegetable (palm cabbage). These two products are important in world trade beginning from the 18 century when the industrial revolution in Europe was intensified. The oil palm tree has a wide adaptability range of soils to low pH but sensitive to high pH (above 7.5) and stagnant water. Neutral pH of which Igala soils especially in the communities of Emame, Okpe, Ogugu soils are most favoured. In the 19 century, palm oil was the basis of most of the people's wealth in Igalaland and its production was privately controlled at subsistence level either as a producer or retailer in the business. The greatest output of palm oil came from the individual homesteads (Akpa, 2025); it was a true example of a communal economic system of production. The methods were traditional with simple implements: axes, cutlasses, drums/pots, mortars, pestle in some parts of the communities of Igalaland. Traditionally the work of oil palm fruit collection and preparation was shared by all members of the household. The young men, cut down the fruit bunches, the women carried them to the compound, and the men piece the large bunches into pieces and then the women boiled the fruits to soften it and then pounded with mortar and pestle to separate the oil from the kernels and waste fibre.

Women then mashed the fruits with their feet for half an hour until the fruits were reduced to a mass within which oil began to appear, women and young girls then remove the mass which they wash and squeezed to obtain the oil. The oil was boiled and the whole mass of fibre would then be squeezed in earnest, the boiling of the fruits and the oil itself destroyed the enzyme, which created the fatty acid and enables it produced the high quality 'soft' oil. As a result of the division of labour involved, the men had sole right over the oil, while the women prerequisite was the palm nuts which were essentially their property rights.

The palm tree from which palm oil gotten is not just an important agricultural plant that yields many important sources of food: (palm oil, palm kernel oil and palm kernel cake) but much more of economic and cultural importance in Africa hence, it exclusive belong to the men. Historically, it has been one of the most important economic trees widely exploited by indigenous communities for food, medicine in Nigeria especially in the southern part of Nigeria where it grows willfully long before the coming of the Europeans. Before the discovery and exploration of crude oil in Nigeria, the palm oil related products had been the major source of income and the bases of trade relationship between Europeans and African.

Beyond its socio-cultural and economic importance, palm oil a reddish-orange liquid/semi solid substance remains perhaps the commonest and important byproduct of the palm oil tree is one of the world most widely produced and consumed oil is no doubt a major ingredient in the preparation of food. It serves not just as seasoning, and source of vital vitamin supplement to the body, it is also in great demand for the production of margarines, lubricants, animal feeds, candles and soap, making it a highly sought-after product both locally and internationally (Abdulkadir, 2014)).

The production, harvesting and processing of palm tree and its nuts has been confirmed by various studies as a profitable venture, this is evidenced in its versatile use in the production of palm oil, vegetable oil, cosmetics, biofuels, bio-fertilizer amongst others, culminating into its great demand globally (Attah, 2010.).

Agriculture has always been the backbone of the Igala economy. Farmers cultivate yam, cassava, maize, rice, millet, sorghum, beans, cocoyam, vegetables, and groundnuts. Different ecological zones specialize in different crops depending on soil fertility and climate. Agricultural production ensured food security while providing surplus products for trade (Okafor, 2014). Despite the intensive labour demand in palm oil production continues to sustain thousands of rural households.

Improved processing machines, cooperative societies, and government agricultural programmes have helped revive production in some communities. Although palm oil remained highly significant both in the local and international markets, several other economic activities developed alongside from its production. The local production processing method is gradually going into extinction.

Uses of the Palm oil

The production of palm oil involves a long complex chained activity from seed sourcing, which entail, climbing, harvesting, collection and transportation, cooking of the red fresh fruit bunches to home or mills which makes it a gendered work. Palm oil production plays a role in the employment of labour in Igala land of Nigeria. Palm oil has traditionally been and will remain an essential diet of the Igala people and many Nigerian people irrespective of the region (Agbebaku, 2012). Palm oil production of course generates employment for different groups of people both male and female, whether young or oiling Igalaland. Many young men make a living (money) from the climbing and harvesting of fruit bunches, movement of the gathered bunches to centres of production, operating processing machine. The women are often in charge of collection, picking of the nuts, boiling, pounding the boiled nuts, oil extraction and marketing of the oil. Though the level of incomes available to both male and female at this stage of production largely depends on scale of the production and oil price in the market, the involvement of the both gender in the production processes, however, the money made from participating in the production process help to reduce poverty. The sale of oil and kernel serves as a major source of household income particularly in the peak of harvest season. Many families either as traders or processors rely on palm oil earning to meet their daily needs. The industry therefore, plays a significant in the reduction of unemployment and poverty among the Igala people especially in the rural communities. Another important benefits of gender participation in the production of palm oil production and business is that palm oil production help to stimulate local market and trading activities in Igala land. The industry has stimulated socio economic activities like trading who are now popular in the oil business as merchants and dealers who buy and store up the oil produced in the area. It is used as a raw material for the production of soap and pomade. With a population growth rate of 2.5% (Agbebaku, 2012), domestic and industrial consumption will continue to increase. Palm oil processing also produces palm kernels, palm kernel cake for livestock feed, and palm kernel oil. With increasing number of men and women in palm oil production and future prospects of expansion of plant area of oil palm in Igala land, it has become imperative to examine the gender perspective of palm oil production.

Issues on Gender in Oil Production

The organization of palm oil production in Igalaland has historically been shaped by socially constructed gender relations that define the allocation of labour, access to productive resources, and control over economic benefits. Rather than representing a rigid separation, the socio-economic activities of both men and women are essentially needed in the production chain of palm oil in most rural communities in the entire Igalaland. As rural farmers continue to produce at the subsistence level, increasing their access to necessary production resources such as land, credit, labour, other inputs such as technologies and extension services continue to dwindle. The accessibility of these farm production resources over the years has been observed to vary among male and female farmers thereby bringing about lopsided gender related issues. This has a direct

effect on agricultural productivity of the rural populace. Gender based differences are therefore important at the family and community levels.

Besides the fact that Igala women form the majority of the population in the socio-economic activities in the production processes of (ekpo oje, Opa, abacha); the red oil and palm kernel oil, they are also known to be engaged in long distance trade especially in the sales of palm oil and its other related products such as kernel and palm kernel oil (Ojochenemi, 2026). When the women do these, they help to sustain the home, through the various medium of works and money made in processing palm oil production; they do this, not for themselves but for the survival of the family. Though, critical decisions in the production processes often come from the man of the house, yet, it is not men alone who decides. Behind men, are wife, children, and the entire family providing support, intervening and take part with the men in the chain of production processes (Abdulkadir, 2014). Therefore, Gender is not just about a particular sex, it ultimately capsulate the entirety of humans. It particularly relates to the role played by men and women in the society. Gender refers to the economic, social, political and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female . Gender is about the socio-cultural roles assigned to men and women and the dynamics between them. The social definitions of what it means to be male and female vary among cultures. Gender roles are not static, but change with society, time and place [5]. It is historically been a defining factor in the organization of palm oil production in Igalaland. Rather than functioning independently, men and women have performed complimentary roles that help to sustain the work in the oil production industry and had contributed immensely to household livelihoods and especially rural economies in Igalaland.

In many Igala communities, gendered based communal developmental practice is not new. Many communities, if not all, mobilize and employ gender efforts as mechanism for community communal resources for development. Man is by nature an independent social being and cannot develop, actualize and objectify himself through labor in isolation from others and from the social environment (Okepanachi, 2026). This is why; men have to interact with others to live well and to achieve more meaningful sustainable socio-economic development. The relationship between men and women has for a long time been marked by the sub-ordination of one group to the whips and caprices of another. Women's position being relegated to the background and placed in a dependency position makes it almost difficult if not impossible for them to take their own decision on issues and problems to affect them more especially on reproductive health.

Cheng HaiTeoh (2010) opined that "women are at the heart of development. They control most of the non-money economy (subsistence agriculture, bearing and raising children, doing domestic labor) and taking important part in the money economy (trading, the formal sector, wage employment)". He further stressed that everywhere world, women have two jobs, around the home and outside it. This assertion implies that women have a lot in of contribution to make towards the healthy socio-economic development of every county but women are constantly denied this opportunity by the nature of our societal organizations, and the cultural set up that makes it more comfortable for men to maintain the status quo (Igoche, 2026). Today, awareness has led to the recognition of the important role women can play in national development and this calls for an urgent need to address these critical areas that have hindered full recognition of women's talents, women's right, women's development and empowerment.

According to the United Nations Millennium Campaign to reduce world poverty by the year 2015, women work two-third of the world's working hours. The overwhelming majority of the labor that sustain life-growing food, cooking, raising children, caring for the elderly, maintaining a house, hauling water is done by women, and universally this work is accorded low status and with little

or no pay. The ceaseless cycle of labor rarely shows up in economic analysis of a society's product and value (Abdulkadir, 2014).

Decision making as related to Gender in Palm oil production

Women earn only 10 percent of the world income. Where women work, they are limited to a set of jobs deemed suitable for women invariable low pay, low status position. Furthermore, there are certain laws or customs that prevent women from getting loans or credit, or having the right to inheritance or to own their homes, they have no assets to leverage for economic stability and cannot invest in their own or their children's future. Perhaps the greatest change will come when women and men agree to work together for gender equality.

Result shows that on key decision-making areas of palm oil production, men dominated in two aspects. They are type and cost of labour and time to do harvesting of fruits. What to do with income from palm oil is the prerogative of both men and women. Women dominated four out of seven aspects of decision making. They are processing methods, where to sell, quantity to sell and price at which to sell. It was found that sometimes both men and women jointly take a decision in the performance of their roles.

Do the roles of men and women differ in palm oil production? Is there a significant difference between men and women in level of palm oil production? The problem centres on doing a gender analysis to ascertain the degree of dissimilarity of male and female involvement in the various palm oil production stages. The specific objectives of this study are to: (1) identify the responsibilities of men and women in the various palm oil production stages; (2) ascertain the levels of resource utilization and palm oil production by gender; (3) determine the contribution of socio-economic characteristics of respondents to palm oil production level by gender; (4) specify the gender that takes decision in different activities of palm oil production. The following three hypotheses were tested: (a) level of palm oil production for men and women do not significantly differ; (b) socioeconomic characteristics of the processors do not significantly contribute to level of palm oil production (for men and women); (c) resources in palm oil production are underutilized for men and women.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Part of the objectives included examining the extent of gender involvement in oil palm production activities; and study has shown that oil palm is not just indigenous to area, but had been central to the economy of Igala rural communities for generations. Its production reflects an interaction between environmental resources, indigenous knowledge, and gender division of labour in the kingdom. As a household subsistence activity, palm oil production latter evolved into a major commercial enterprise linking Igalaland to regional and global markets.

Alongside other agriculture such as: fishing, hunting, craft industries, trade, livestock rearing, palm oil production continues to contribute significantly to the socio-economic development of the kingdom. Together, these activities shaped the economic history of Igalaland and continue to impact on livelihoods in contemporary Igala society. It can indeed, be safely concluded that though, tradition method in palm oil production had declined drastically due to the introduction and adoption of milling machine in the production process, was perhaps the first socio-economic activities that integrated the Igala economy to the regional commerce, and global economic development.

Given the complimentary role of gender in palm oil production and marketing, policies should be aimed at promoting equal access to credit and farm land to grow improved oil palm yielding trees

in the area. The indigenous knowledge system relating to oil palm cultivation, processing and marketing should be systematically documented and integrated with modern agricultural innovations. In this way, the cultural heritage of the people would be preserved while promoting resilience and sustainability of local production.

Since Igala is fertile for the wild growth of the palm tree, deliberate efforts should be put in place by the government, people to attract the young people of the area in to agricultural practice and the palm oil production as this will help the government to curb the high rate of young unemployment and over reliance on the government to providing jobs and by large, reduce the alarming rate of rural to urban migration of the youth out of the area.

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