

FORUM

EXPLORING THE GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE RICE VALUE CHAIN INTERVENTIONS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This study, conducted in Taraba, Kebbi, Kwara, Ebonyi, Akwa-Ibom, and Ekiti states, Nigeria, explored the structure of the rice value chain (RVC) and gender dynamics therein using a qualitative methodology. Data was collected through in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGDs) and analyzed using content analysis. The study was grounded in the framework of African feminism. The findings revealed that the RVC is organized along gender lines, with men predominantly involved in rice farming and large-scale rice processing in most of the communities studied. Hegemonic masculinity rooted in gender norms and roles played a significant role in shaping the structure and 'genderization' within the RVC. The results further indicated that female rice farmers and processors faced specific barriers in accessing government-supported interventions in the RVC. The study concluded that establishing female-only rice farmer associations across Nigeria or women wings in the existing associations is crucial for increasing women's participation in government-supported programs within the RVC. Additionally, relaxing the requirements for small and medium-scale female rice farmers and processors would further boost their involvement, ultimately enhancing agricultural productivity and food security in Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: *Anchor Borrower's Program (ABP) , gender, structurization, rice value chain (RVC), Nigeria*

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INTRODUCTION

The contributions of women to rice values chain (RVC) have sparked debates at the international level. These discussions have raised concerns that women's roles and contributions to the RVC are often overlooked, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Olaitan 2023). Additionally, emanating from these global discourses are numerous challenges faced by female rice farmers, including issues related to land ownership, limited access to quality land, technology, incentives, and financial instruments (Ojo et al. 2021). For instance, only 37% of women in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have bank accounts, compared to 48% of men (Morsy 2020). Many of these female rice farmers lack collateral to access credit and loans, largely due to cultural constraints rooted in gender norms (*ibid.*). The disparities between men and women highlight deeply ingrained gender inequalities, particularly within the agricultural sector, necessitating targeted interventions to ensure equitable resource allocation and opportunities. Understanding the socio-cultural context is also essential in addressing the challenges faced by female farmers in these societies.

Globally, and particularly in Nigeria, gender mainstreaming and inclusiveness are increasingly integrated into gender-related policy formulation to address gender inequalities across various sectors, including agriculture. In Nigeria, the Women Economic Empowerment (WEE) policy (WEE 2023) was specifically developed to equip women with the skills, resources, and opportunities necessary to compete fairly in the marketplace. This policy outlines comprehensive strategies to enhance women's economic empowerment by improving access to finance, promoting entrepreneurship, strengthening labor protections, and expanding women's participation in national development (FMARD 2019). In addition, the Nigeria's gender policy in agriculture aims to promote and ensure the adoption of gender-sensitive and gender-responsive approaches in agricultural planning and programming. The goal is to provide women with equal access to and control over productive resources, thereby enabling them to achieve sustainable livelihoods (*ibid.*).

Notably, efforts to mainstream gender-sensitive policies in Nigeria have led to significant progress, particularly in areas such as girls' school enrollment, women's literacy rates, and female labor-force participation (Bello et al. 2021). However, hegemonic masculinity rooted in customs, traditions, cultural biases, and the sexual stereotyping of social roles continue to limit women's full participation in national development on equal footing with men (Akinagbe–Ayibiowu 2020). Women still face systemic cultural and institutional barriers that hinder their access to government empowerment and intervention programs

(Akinagbe–Ayibiowu 2020; Bello et al. 2021). In the RVC in Nigeria, women encounter additional challenges, including low input efficiency, poor access to modern agricultural technologies, and difficulties in securing credit facilities (Christiaensen–Maertens 2022). These obstacles compound the vulnerabilities of female farmers, limiting their ability to thrive. This underscores the urgent need for more comprehensive gender-sensitive strategies to address and mitigate the challenges facing female farmers in Nigeria.

However, there remains a scarcity of research exploring gender dynamics in the RVC in Nigeria. Despite more than a decade of scholarly attention to the gendered dynamics of global economic processes especially in relation to the unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women, gender inequality remains deeply entrenched in Africa's and Nigeria's political economy (Peterson–Runyan 2010). Gender disparities are particularly pronounced in the RVC in Nigeria, where traditional roles confine women to domestic tasks, while men dominate income-generating activities and decision-making. These imbalances are worsened by policies that fail to address structural inequities in resource distribution and power dynamics. As a result, women are disproportionately marginalized in the agricultural sector, undermining efforts to achieve gender equality, food security, and poverty eradication, as outlined by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Beyond gender disparity, this study critically examines the impact of state intervention programs on the value chain, with a focus on how these programs have unintentionally reinforced gender inequalities in access to resources and interventions as well as power dynamics. It also investigates how the labor contributions of both men and women are valued and accounted for within the RVC. Furthermore, the study explores how gender norms shape the structure and genderization of the RVC, and how these norms affect access to resources, power, and control within the RVC in Nigeria. By examining these gendered disparities within the RVC, this research seeks to identify the barriers and opportunities for promoting equitable participation, contributing to broader societal goals of gender equality and economic empowerment. The study relied on the assumptions of the qualitative research methodology to dissect the problem under investigation. This methodology provides rich data that can inform policy change tailored towards gender balancing and mainstreaming in the value chain. Findings will not only enhance women's productivity but also improve the overall efficiency and food security in Nigeria.

Theoretical underpinning: African feminism

Several explanations have been put forward to dissect the underlying factors in gender differences across human societies. Some attributed differences in gender roles to agricultural origin, particularly in the preindustrial era (Alesina et al. 2013). For the 19th century structural functionalists, divisions of labor along gender lines were natural, stemming from the hunting and gathering societies of over a thousand years ago. Structural functionalism posits that women excel at socializing because they are biologically programmed to give birth and raise children (Aeby et al. 2019; Nyarko Ayisi – Toth 2022). For this perspective, men and women have distinct roles based on their natural abilities and societal needs. Pioneer structural functionalists like Talcott Parsons (1951) explained that men typically perform instrumental roles, while women take on expressive roles. Men's instrumental role allows them to focus on providing for the family and engaging in external social activities while women's expressive role is centered on nurturing and caring for the family. This arrangement, according to functionalism, is efficient and necessary for societal stability and social order (Nyarko Ayisi – Toth 2022).

However, all these viewpoints have faced criticism on several fronts, leading to the emergence of more nuanced, gender-sensitive theories, among which are the feminist theories. Although feminism is fragmented, it has evolved through multiple waves: the First (19th to 20th centuries), Second (1960s to 1980s), and Third (1990s to 2000s) (Ntozini–Abdullahi 2016). Emerging from the 21st-century feminism is African feminism, whose arguments, propositions and assumptions serve as the foundation for the current study. Simplistically, African feminism generally challenges the generalizations of Western feminism regarding the challenges women face globally (Nzegwu 2004) and seeks to explain the unique experiences of African women regarding gender inequality and domination by men, distinct from the Western perspective (Atanga 2013). More so, western feminism is believed to be anti-men, anti-child-bearing, anti-marriage and anti-family, which, according to some African feminists, contradicts the principles of African culture and realities (Stuhlhofer 2021). Many of the argument of African feminism resonates and aligns with African realities, history, and philosophy, particularly as the inclusive elements of earlier feminist movements have diminished (Okome 2005). According to Fayemi (2009), African feminism aims to construct models and paradigms that honor and respect African women, viewing them as more than mere sexual objects.

Generally, while acknowledging the entrenchment of 'hegemonic masculinity' in African culture, African feminism upholds the sanctity of marriage and family institutions because it conforms with African culture and realities. More so, some

African feminists believe that gender inequality is a political imperative that is further perpetuated by development aid and programs that overtly or covertly promote the employment of women in low-skilled jobs (Abdul et al. 2011).

Therefore, African feminism advocates for the creation of spaces that allow women to contribute meaningfully to personal and economic growth without necessarily challenging male dominance and authority or the institutions of marriage and child-rearing (ibid.). It calls for greater participation of women in politics, education, industry, and other sectors of the economy. This world view is particularly relevant in understanding how hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy, gender roles, and norms perpetuate inequality and discrimination between men and women in the RVC, as well as how governmental interventions, whether home-grown or international, have reinforced the status quo. Therefore, how is the RVC structured and ‘genderized’? How is gender normativity typical to the Nigerian culture affects female participation in the RVC? How does the government regulate and intervene in the RVC programs and how does power and gender dynamics play out in the RVC process? These questions are qualitatively interrogated to understand the structure of the RVC in Nigeria and the gender dynamics therein.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study settings

The study was conducted across the six geo-political zones in Nigeria: North-west (Kebbi State), North-east (Taraba State), North-central (Kwara State), South-west (Ekiti State), South-east (Ebonyi State) and South-south (Akwa-Ibom State). These states are among the largest rice producers in the country. The study was specifically carried out in the largest rice producing local governments in each of the selected states (see Table 1).

Table 1. Showing the study settings in each of the selected states

Geo-political zone	State	Rice producing local government (s) and communities
North-west	Kebbi	Argungu, Birni-Kebbi, Jega, and Augie
North-east	Taraba	Karim Lamido and Gassol
North-central	Kwara	Lafiagi, Pategi and Share in Edu, Pategi and Ifelodun local government areas

Table 1. (Continued)

Geo-political zone	State	Rice producing local government (s) and communities
South-west	Ekiti	Efon Alaye, Irepodun/Ifelodun and Ijero local government areas respectively
South-east	Eboyin	Abakaliki and Ebonyi local government areas
South-south	Akwa-Ibom	Ibiono Ibom, Uruan and Ini local government areas

Figure 1. Map of Nigeria showing the six geo-political zones and the study settings



The design

The current study is situated within the collective assumptions of interpretive and social constructivist perspectives to explore RVC structure and gender dynamics in it in Nigeria. Both the interpretive tradition and social constructivism are grounded in pragmatism, symbolic interpretivism, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology. While each has its unique characteristics and assumptions about social reality, they share the philosophical belief that the social world is ontologically distinct from the natural, physical world, necessitating different approaches for study and understanding. For instance, social constructivism

posits that knowledge is produced through daily interactions and asserts that our constructions of reality are closely tied to power relations (Chen et al. 2011: 130). Together, interpretive and social constructivist frameworks provide a philosophical foundation for qualitative research methodologies, representing a paradigm shift from positivist ideology. The primary focus of qualitative methodology is on the lived experiences of individuals and participants in a study. Qualitative researchers believe that people construct their realities and assign symbolic meanings to them.

In this study, a qualitative research design was chosen to answer the research questions earlier formulated to enable in-depth and candid exploration of structuring and “genderization” narratives within the RVC in Nigeria. This approach is ideal for examining how these structures and gender dynamics shape access to government-supported programs. By focusing on verbatim data collection and avoiding statistical analysis, the qualitative methodology fosters open, meaningful person-to-person discussions conducted in a systematic and purposeful manner to answer the questions around how the RVC is structured and ‘genderized, how gender normativity typical to the Nigerian culture affects female participation in the RVC, how the government regulates and intervenes in the RVC programs and how power and gender dynamics played out in the RVC process.

Sampling and study population

The study population consisted of male and female smallholder farmers, marketers, and processors from Taraba, Kebbi, Kwara, Ekiti, Ebonyi, and Akwa-Ibom states in Nigeria. The aim was to understand their social realities concerning the RVC and specifically the impact of gender norms on the RVC and access to government interventions. Small and medium-scale farmers and millers account for 80% of processed rice in Nigeria, while large-scale millers represent 20% (KPMG 2019). Participants included both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the recently suspended Anchor Borrower’s Program (ABP) of the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Purposive sampling was employed to select both the participating states and the respondents. This technique is particularly effective in preliminary studies (Poggie 1972), comparisons of cultural practices (Neupane et al. 2001), and case studies (Dolisca et al. 2007).

Data collection

In-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) were the principal qualitative instruments adopted to collect data for the study. First, IDIs were conducted with at least one ‘successful’ female farmer, one ‘successful’ female processor, and one ‘successful’ female marketer in each of the selected states. Additionally, female executive members (where available) in rice-related associations in each state were included, along with the Chairpersons of the Rice Farmers Association of Nigeria (RIFAN), the Rice Processors Association of Nigeria (RIPAN), the National Rice Producers, Processors, Millers, and Marketers Association of Nigeria (NARPPMMAN), and the Rice Millers Association of Nigeria (RIMAN). Government-supported intervention program coordinators in each state were also interviewed. Relevant policy makers in Abuja were also included in the study. In total, 32 IDIs were conducted. The IDIs facilitated probing and reflection on the information gathered (Rutledge–Hogg 2020).

Secondly, a total of 36 FGDs were conducted with male-only and female-only smallholder farmers, processors, and marketers in each selected state to complement the IDIs. Each FGD comprised between 10 to 12 participants and was conducted in both English and local languages as necessary. FGDs were utilized to gain further insights into the subject-matter and were moderated by more than one moderator to minimize subjectivity. The qualitative data allowed the collection of rich data for the study.

All sessions in both the FGDs and IDIs were audio-taped using digital recorders, and notes were taken. Voice recordings were uploaded to computers and labeled correctly each day. Data collected in local languages were transcribed into English. Data collection for the study took place between July and October 2023.

Data analysis

The ATLAS.ti 23 software was used for data analysis. During the coding process, some new codes emerged from participants’ own words which were used to review the initially generated code book following deliberations among coders. The transcripts were re-read using the new codebook. This approach was used to develop categories, which were then explored and used to discuss the research objectives. The discussions were structured around the generated themes and sub-themes. After completing the coding process, the data bundle was exported, which was then merged by the team lead for second-level coding,

grouping, and analysis. The team lead and the supporting analyst selected 10% of the entire transcripts and conducted independent line-by-line coding to assess intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability was determined through code-by-code comparisons, revealing an initial 80% agreement among codes. The analysts then carefully reviewed any confusing or ambiguous codes until a 100% agreement was reached. Each code's description was displayed in the codebook. Initially, over 230 codes were generated through a combination of deductive and inductive coding techniques. Subsequently, these codes were streamlined and condensed to a total of 168 codes. The transcripts were later grouped into eight document groups according to state. The consolidation of codes in the latter stage generated 13 themes that were discussed to address the research objectives of the study.

Ethical considerations

The ethical approval/clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Ilorin Research and Ethical Review Committee with approval number UERC/ASN/2023/2525. Detailed informed consent form (stating all the ethical requirements) were signed by consenting participants. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were guaranteed.

RESULTS

The findings are organized thematically into five overarching themes, encompassing the structurization and genderization of the RVC, intervention programs in the RVC, Power dynamics within rice associations, and the intersectionality between gender norms and RVC structurization.

Structurization and 'genderization' of the rice value chain

The value chain comprises three key stages: production, processing, and marketing. The production stage involves activities such as farm cultivation, planting, and harvesting. In the processing stage, particularly for small-scale rice processing, steps include parboiling, washing, milling, destoning, and packaging. The marketing stage involves transporting the rice to the market and distributing it to wholesalers, retailers, and final consumers.

The participants unanimously agreed that men predominantly take the lead in rice production and farming, as it is a labor-intensive process. Although some women engaged in rice farming, they often rely on their male children or hire men to assist them. In certain cases, married women worked alongside their husbands on the farm. This perspective was evident in the participants' statements:

Men dominate rice farming because it is a physically draining and time-consuming task. Women typically avoid rice farming unless they have the financial resources to invest and grown-up children to help on the farm. The process of land preparation alone is a major operation, requiring strength and ability that women generally do not possess. (IDI, female, Executive, RIFAN, RVC, Kwara)

According to another participant:

Rice farming is largely dominated by men, as they handle most, if not all, of the farming tasks. (FGD, male, G-RVC, Kebbi)

However, there was no consensus among participants regarding who dominated rice processing. A community-by-community analysis revealed varied perceptions regarding rice processing. Most participants from Taraba believed that women dominated rice processing. In Kebbi State, opinions were divided, with some asserting women's dominance and others suggesting that men held the majority. In Ebonyi, a larger number of participants believed that men dominated rice processing business. In Kwara, the majority opinion favored women, although a few participants felt that men were dominant. Conversely, in Ekiti and Akwa Ibom, rice processing was widely believed to be dominated by men.

Clarity was provided by participants regarding rice processing. Two types of rice processors were differentiated: small-scale and large-scale. Therefore, while the small-scale traditional rice processing was predominantly led by females in some communities, the large-scale processing was dominated by males. Mechanized, large-scale rice processing was predominantly male-dominated for two major reasons:

- Men are physically stronger than women.
- Men have better access to credit facilities and interventions that could boost their businesses compared to women.

A male participant from Birnin-Kebbi expressed this clearly:

Rice processing occurs in two main ways: the traditional, domestic method, which is dominated by women, and the machine-based method, which is dominated by men. For example, in our community, both Mubadala Rice Mills and Gano Rice have very few or no women working there, and the companies are owned by men. (FGD, male, G-RVC, Kebbi).

In extreme cases, participants from Ebonyi and Kwara fearlessly declared that women were often restricted from owning or operating rice mills in their communities – except in cases where a woman inherits the business from her deceased husband, who was a rice miller. In communities like these, it is considered a taboo for a woman to own a milling machine. This was reflected in the participants' statements:

There is no discrimination against women in rice washing, parboiling, and drying. However, when it comes to milling rice, women are not allowed to operate the machines. Machine operations are tedious and require more energy, making it difficult for them to perform. (IDI, Member NARPPMAN RVC, Kwara)

Traditionally, women are not entitled to own a rice mill. However, if a woman's husband dies, we do allow for a replacement, where she can take over from her deceased husband or inherit his membership if he willed it to her. The truth is that most of the tasks we perform here require strength and energy. The engines used for milling are not something that women can easily handle. We established this law some time ago, but as time goes on, things might change... (IDI, Chairman RIFAN, Abakaliki (1) Ebonyi)

Divergent views also emerged among participants regarding who dominated rice marketing even though rice intervention programs do not often support the marketing component of the RVC. Some argued that rice marketing was predominantly led by men, citing the need for travel and extended absences from home as factors that women might find challenging. Conversely, others contended that marketing is suitable for women since it involves staying in one place – something they believed many men might not prefer. This perspective is substantiated by the following excerpts:

The majority of those involved in rice marketing are women. They purchase rice from farmers, then parboil, mill, and sell it to customers. Around 90% of those in rice sales are women. (IDI, Chairman, RIPAN Abakaliki, Ebonyi).

Women dominate rice marketing because it often requires sitting in one place for long periods. Men typically dislike staying in one spot for extended times, but women are more comfortable with this, making them more suited to marketing activities. (IDI, male, Executive, RIFAN, RVC, Kwara).

From the foregoing, opinion differs from state to state as to who dominates what. However, what is clear is that there is a consensus that men dominated farming owing to biological and social advantages they have over women. They are physically strong and have social connection to access loans and other credit facilities to boost production. However, while some participants believed that small-scale, traditional system of rice processing was dominated by women in some communities, men usually dominated large-scale rice processing. Large-scale rice processing is capital-intensive which is to the disadvantage of women. Who dominates rice marketing also varies from society to society but in most cases, marketing is believed to have been dominated by women in most of the communities studied.

Intervention programs in the rice value chain

Rice farming has received considerable political attention in Nigeria, with both government and non-governmental organizations investing in the sector through various interventionist approaches. The federal and state governments have actively supported rice production and processing to boost output and achieve food sufficiency. These interventions have included the provision of farm inputs such as seeds, chemicals, and fertilizers, along with financial support through grants from the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and other commercial banks.

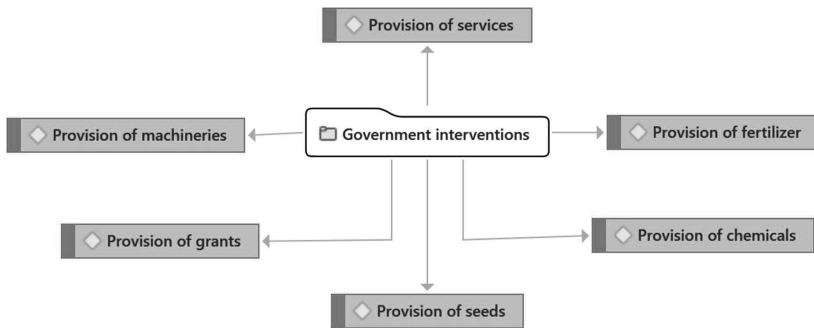
Additionally, machinery such as milling machines, farm implements, sprayers, and pumping machines have been supplied to enhance farming efficiency, improve farmers' livelihoods, increase rice production, and shield stakeholders from fluctuations in commodity prices. Notably, the now-suspended Anchor Borrowers' Program (ABP) of the Central Bank of Nigeria was designed to enhance farm yields and household incomes, with a significant positive impact

on beneficiaries' standard of living. Access to the ABP for smallholder farmers (SHFs) was contingent upon:

- Membership of duly registered farmer group.
- Have a bank account with the participating financial institutions (PFIs).
- Valid Bank Verification Number (BVN).
- Validated farmland.
- 10% minimum equity contribution (Development Finance Department 2021).

Figure 2 below presents the forms of support rice farmers had received from the government.

Figure 2. *Forms of government interventions in rice farming*



However, interventions like the ABP have been plagued by numerous challenges, as highlighted by the participants. These include corruption, high interest rates, borrowers' inability to repay, limited land availability, and delays in interventions that result in farmers receiving inputs after the planting season. Additionally, lengthy bureaucratic processes often reduce the effectiveness of interventions, as multiple intermediaries take their share. Other issues raised include the poor quality of supplied chemicals and seeds, flawed program implementation, complex application procedures, selective approval of applicants, short loan durations, and adverse weather conditions. As described by the participants:

Government do give such things you mentioned but the problem is that the people in government normally send to give us do not bring them to us. That is the problem. The people don't share with us what the government normally give. (FGD, female, G-RVC, Abakiliki, Ebonyi)

Furthermore, previous applicants reported being deceived and swindled, with some having cleared their farmland in anticipation of receiving the promised facilities, only to be left disappointed. Some participants shared their experiences:

There was a time when the Federal Government said they wanted to provide funding to rice farmers. I went and begged my father-in-law for land. He gave me the land, and we wrote the proposal, but the money never came. (FGD, male, G-RVC, Ekiti)

I was invited to apply for a particular facility from the government. We filled out the forms and submitted our passport photographs. Up until now, we have not heard anything. That is how they come and deceive us. (FGD, female, G-RVC, Abakaliki)

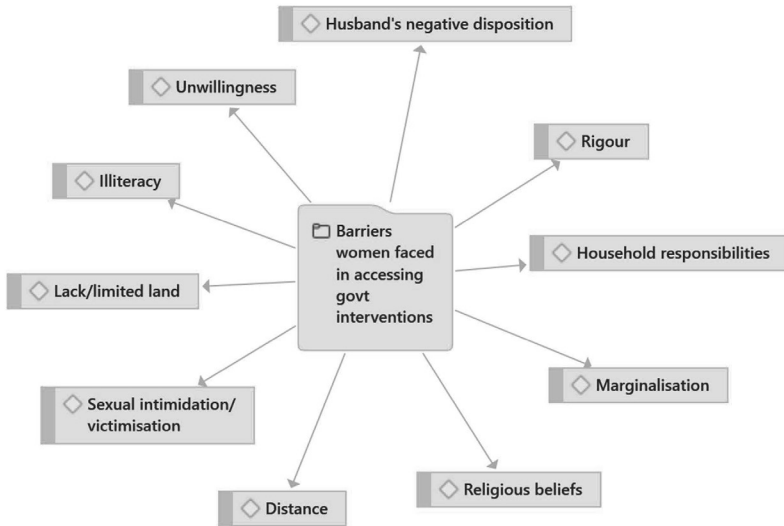
Beyond the general barriers highlighted by both male and female participants, women faced unique gender-related challenges in accessing government loans and interventions. “These government programs were not gender-sensitive,” one woman remarked. “They simply outlined the requirements for accessing funds, loans, or grants, treating all applicants equally without considering the specific challenges women face.” An RVC Program Coordinator in Abakaliki bluntly stated:

There is no percentage designed specifically for a particular gender. Let's say 20% or 40% of women, no it's not done that way. Once you're able to meet the requirements you can apply for it regardless of your gender and once you meet the requirements of the bank you can access it. (IDI, Deputy Director RVC, Abuja)

However, this argument stands in stark contrast to the provisions of the National Gender Policy on Agriculture. A Director in a Ministry highlighted the formulation and approval of a six-year gender policy (2021–2026), emphasizing that stakeholders from all six geopolitical zones were responsible for developing work plans to ensure its nationwide implementation. According to the Director:

The Ministry of Agriculture has tried to change the status quo in terms of policy direction as it is said that when categories of men and women are marginalised by a process, policies are needed to address the vulnerability and that is why the ministry came up with the national gender policy on agriculture with affirmative action of at least 35% across the board. (IDI, Deputy Director Gender in FMARD, Abuja)

Figure 3. *Barriers women encountered in accessing government intervention programs meant for rice farmers*



Note: 'govt' means 'government'.

Due to the government's failure to fully implement its own policies and programs, female rice farmers and processors faced distinct challenges. While some of these obstacles were personal, many were structural. These challenges included household responsibilities, negative attitudes from husbands, illiteracy, limited or no access to farmland for collateral, marginalization, restrictive religious beliefs, complex application processes, reluctance to apply due to past negative experiences, sexual victimization, and the long distance between rural villages and urban centers where interventions are administered (see Figure 3.). For instance, some female participants recounted:

I have gone to borrow money, and they said they would come and see my land, but I don't have any. If a woman cannot show land, she won't receive the money. (FGD, female, G-RVC, Abakaliki, Ebonyi)

Everyone is allowed to apply. However, some husbands here may not agree, considering our religion and tradition. (FGD, male, G-RVC, Kebbi)

Discrimination can occur if women find themselves at the mercy of administrators who are prone to sexually abusing them. If a woman resists such advances, she may not receive the benefits. (IDI_Chairman, RIMAN RVC, Kwara)

Power dynamics within rice associations

An investigation into the power dynamics within rice associations revealed a clear imbalance, with men overwhelmingly dominating both membership and leadership positions. Across the communities studied, men controlled access to these associations, resulting in the underrepresentation of women. Consequently, women were systematically denied equal opportunities to hold leadership roles.

As one participant stated, “Women face marginalization when it comes to appointments to top positions.” While certain roles – such as Treasurer, Assistant Secretary, and Women Leader – were traditionally designated for women, the highest leadership positions remained exclusively male-dominated. This male predominance within the associations gave men a significant advantage over women. For example,

In RIFAN, there are specific positions designated for women designated for women, for example Women Leader and Assistant Secretary. And the State Treasurer roles are also held by women. These positions demonstrate that women occupy important roles within the organization. (IDI, Secretary, RIFAN RVC, Taraba)

I have never heard of a woman serving as the head of any rice association. While women can be part of the executive team and are included in discussions, they hardly ever hold held leadership positions. (IDI, Program Coordinator, RVC, Ekiti)

The power dynamics within the associations clearly reflected male dominance in leadership roles, relegating women to lower-level positions. As a result, decisions that directly impacted women were typically made by men, limiting women’s ability to influence policies and advocate for their specific needs within the associations.

The intersectionality between gender norms and RVC structurization

Historically, rice farming and processing in most of the communities studied have been dominated by men. As a result, these activities have been structured to favor men, while female farmers and processors have faced systemic marginalization. Marginalization within the rice value chain (RVC) is not only institutional but, at times, deliberate. This marginalization is largely rooted in systemic hegemonic masculinity, reinforced by gender norms, roles, and inequalities. In all the communities studied, the concept of “man” or “male” carries deep cultural significance, reflecting a patriarchal understanding of masculinity. Participants emphasized that beyond biological differences, being a man is associated with traits such as *responsibility, strength, independence, athleticism, ruggedness, intimidation, seriousness, and toughness*. To be recognized as a man, one must be capable of providing food, shelter, clothing, and other essential needs for their family. According to the participants:

In the family, the man is considered the leader, taking on key responsibilities. The woman is expected to heed his preferences, meaning that if he disapproves of something or prefers a certain direction, she is to respect his wishes. (FGD, female G-RVC, Akwa-Ibom)

In this community, the man is regarded as the head of the household, responsible for providing for and sustaining the family. (FGD, female, G-RVC, Kebbi).

As a man, it is my duty to protect my wife; it is my responsibility to shield her from external threats or aggression. (IDI, Chairman, RIPAN Abakaliki, Ebonyi)

Conversely, a significant portion of both male and female participants across all states and communities studied agreed that being female primarily involves fulfilling the role of a homemaker. This role includes responsibilities such as preparing meals for the family, caring for children, and maintaining a well-kept home. Participants shared the belief that women are expected to stay at home and manage household affairs, a sentiment that resonated with most, regardless of their state of origin. The following excerpts reflect these opinions:

It is the exclusive duty of women to care for the children, take them to school, and prepare meals for the family. (FGD, male, G-RV, Ifelodun, Kwara)

A woman's role is to bear children and assist the man. She takes on tasks the man cannot, such as childbearing and caring for the children. (IDI, Women Leader, RIFAN, Akwa-Ibom).

Consequently, the males enjoyed the most rights as defined by culture and tradition, while females have limited rights. Males have the right to inherit a share of their parents' estate, particularly from their fathers. They are considered heirs and possess a legitimate right to inherit properties such as houses, farmland, economic trees, and land left behind by their deceased fathers. This is reflected in the following statements:

In Igbo culture, particularly in Abakaliki, when a son is born, he automatically gains the right to inherit his father's property. He holds inherent rights within his community, village, and family compound as a recognized citizen. (FGD, male, G-RVC, Abakaliki, Ebonyi)

As a male child, you're expected to grow into a full member of the family. Unlike women who may leave upon marriage, men remain in the family and eventually marry within the community. (IDI Program Coordinator, RVC, Ekiti)

In addition, men also hold leadership rights, consistently occupying positions within the communities and religious groups. They possess the right to practice polygyny, allowing them to marry multiple wives simultaneously. They also enjoy respect and reverence from both their wives and their communities. Men could seek community support, such as financial assistance for their businesses or employment opportunities, which women are often unable to do. This was echoed by several participants, as illustrated in the following statements:

Leadership roles are reserved exclusively for men; a woman cannot serve as a village head or as a religious leader, such as an Imam. (FGD, male, G-RV, Sapefu, Kwara).

In this community, a man has the right to marry multiple wives, even if it goes against the wishes of his current wife. (IDI, female Processor, RVC, Kwara)

Specifically, among the Nupe people in Kwara State, as expressed by the participants, the right to own a farm exclusively belongs to males. Men also reserve the authority to make decisions for their households, determining what crops to plant on the family farm, where and how they will be planted, as well as how the proceeds from the family farm will be utilized. A female participant declared that:

Only men can own a farmland. Women can't. (FGD, female, G-RVC, Lafiagi, Kwara).

These statements underscore the complex interplay of socio-cultural factors shaping gender roles and rights in the communities studied. Participants' insights across these communities studied vividly illustrate the diverse array of rights and privileges accorded to males and females, highlighting the cultural and regional nuances in gender dynamics and rights.

However, it is important to note that gender roles and norms are undergoing significant alterations across the communities studied. Gender roles, for example, have evolved, with some women now occupying the position of breadwinners within the households. They now actively participate in work, sometimes even surpassing their male counterparts. Thus, there has been some shift in farming practices, with women now actively involved, a departure from the old order. Additionally, some women now have access to loans and government interventions, expanding their activities beyond the confines of the home, a contrast to the earlier limitations. Reflecting the participants' statements:

In Ikot Asidem, Ibiono Ibom, Akwa Ibom State today, if a woman has the means, she is free to buy land, cultivate it, and support herself and her family. No one has the right to prevent her. If she has the money and chooses to build a house, she is completely free to do so in our community. (FGD, male, G-RVC, Akwa-Ibom)

I personally own several lands, including those that I borrowed. Women here are free to purchase any property they desire without any obstruction these days. (IDI, female Executive, RVC, Ekiti)

Islam allows a woman to inherit estates left behind by her parents. With that, she can own properties and take control. Through personal efforts, some women own properties too. However, for peace to rain in the house such women do share whatever they inherited with their husbands. (IDI, male, Kwara)

However, these gender shifts are not enough to dismantle or challenge the longstanding dominance of males in both rice farming and processing across all the communities studied. The entrenched patriarchal structures continue to overshadow any progress toward gender equality in these areas.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study reaffirm the deep-rooted presence of hegemonic masculinity in the communities examined. Gender normativity dictates that a ‘man’ embodies leadership, responsibility, and provision. This perspective was consistently shared by participants across the studied states (Akwa Ibom, Ebonyi, Ekiti, Kebbi, Kwara, and Taraba). Being a man means being the head of the family, holding positions of authority, and controlling land ownership, collateral, household affairs, and decision-making processes.

In contrast, a woman is typically viewed as an assistant to a man, primarily expected to fulfill the role of a homemaker. As a homemaker, she is expected to be submissive and respectful, taking orders from her husband, who is seen as the head of the family. These perceptions of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ or male and female, underpin gender inequality and discrimination, not only in agriculture but also across other sectors such as education, politics, and governance. Such perceptions significantly influence the structure and gender dynamics within the RVC, shaping who controls what, when, and how. This aligns with the findings of Agboh-Noameshie et al. (2013) and Osabuohien et al. (2018), which emphasized the impact of these entrenched gender norms on power relations and resource control.

Interestingly, such biases are not unique to the communities studied; they represent a global issue prevalent in both developed countries and LMICs (UNDP 2023). For example, the Gender Norm Index (GNI) indicates that half of the world’s population believes that men make better political leaders than women. In the same report, two out of five individuals contend that men are superior business executives compared to women. This further affirmed the position of the findings by Akinagbe et al. (2020) and Bello et al. (2021).

The consensus among participants in this study was that men predominantly take the lead in rice farming and large-scale rice milling, a trend consistent with previous findings. Das et al. (2020) study on gender roles in rice farming in Sankilo and Tentapur villages of Odisha provides a comprehensive analysis of gender disparities in the rice value chain (RVC). The study found that women primarily contributed to value-added activities in rice farming, with

95% participation in product preparation, while men retained greater control over intercultural operations. The research highlights that both male and female farmers had joint access to infrastructure and machinery (72.5%), but men maintained higher control over these resources (60%). Additionally, the study identifies skill gaps among female farmers, particularly in areas like pesticide application and disease management, which are crucial for safe and profitable farming. By assessing awareness levels and training needs, the study advocates for a woman-centric value chain model that addresses these gaps, aiming for a more equitable distribution of resources and decision-making. This approach would not only empower women but also benefit all stakeholders by reducing market losses and boosting overall productivity.

In addition, gender inequality in agricultural productivity in southwestern Nigeria contributed to a productivity gap of nearly 29% in favor of males (Ojo–Baiyegunhi 2023). Plots managed by females were 29% less productive than those managed by males. However, rice farming and production are predominantly dominated by women in The Gambia (Agboh-Noameshie et al. 2013) and Mali (Cullen et al. 2018), while in Sierra Leone and Cameroon, responsibilities are shared between both genders (Agboh-Noameshie et al. 2013; Osabuohien et al. 2018).

The current study further revealed that female farmers and processors faced significant socio-cultural challenges, particularly in accessing credit facilities and government intervention programs, as also noted by Bello et al. (2021), Osabuohien et al. (2018), and Sadiq et al. (2021). These challenges include household responsibilities, negative attitudes from husbands, land ownership issues, marginalization, religious beliefs, complex application processes, and sexual victimization when attempting to access government interventions in the RVC. According to a World Bank report (World Bank 2012), there remains a 9% gap between men's and women's access to financial instruments globally, underscoring the systemic barriers women continue to face.

To address these issues, dismantling the socio-cultural barriers through targeted policies would improve opportunities for equitable participation, aligning with broader societal goals of gender equality and economic empowerment, as advocated by African feminism. Some African feminists argue for the creation of spaces where women can discover their potential and thrive in both their private and public lives without necessarily dismantling male dominance and authority (Abdul et al. 2011). By creating such spaces in the RVC through intentional policies, women's productivity would improve, thereby enhancing the overall efficiency and sustainability of the value chain. However, as shown in the current study, policy formulation is not the problem in Nigeria; policy implementation is.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study illuminate the normative gender roles and rights prevailing within the context of the RVC in Nigeria. Participants' perspectives on the roles of males and females in family and community settings reveal deeply ingrained societal expectations and the influence of hegemonic masculinity. The study reveals a complex interplay of perspectives regarding gender dynamics in the RVC. While men dominate rice production, women play a significant role in rice processing but were discriminated against in large-scale rice processing. This underscores the need to recognize the diversity of experiences within the RVC, as female farmers and processors encounter systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers in accessing empowerment interventions compared to their male counterparts.

Recommendations

The following policy recommendations can be derived from our analysis:

1. Women access to fund

To effectively address gender disparities in the RVC, the government should enhance female access to funding. Improved financial support will enable women to actively participate in rice farming activities and expand their operations. While lack of funds is a major obstacle for women, preventing them from acquiring necessary machinery, farm inputs, and hiring laborers will further compound the problems. Therefore, government interventions should specifically target providing funds for women in rice farming, which will empower them and encourage greater female participation. Establishing female only association of rice farmers may help with this or a special arrangement with the women wings of relevant rice associations.

2. Empowerment through training and resources

Empowering women is crucial for increasing their involvement in rice cultivation and processing. Empowerment initiatives should include training programs focused on leadership, self-reliance, and essential skill acquisition to enhance female productivity in the RVC. Such empowerment not only boosts productivity but also contributes to improved livelihoods and family health. Specific measures for empowering women in rice farming could involve providing access to machinery, seeds, chemicals, fertilizers, and other necessary resources.

3. Introduction of women-friendly technology

Furthermore, implementing women-friendly technology is essential. Many

rice mills are owned and operated by men, based on the belief that women cannot handle the machinery. By providing farm machines designed for ease of use by women, the barriers to operation can be reduced. Additionally, women should be empowered to make decisions regarding their farming practices.

4. Accessing loans through cooperative societies

Facilitating access to loans through cooperative societies that female farmers are members of could streamline the process. This approach would not only ease access to funds but also help identify genuine female rice farmers, ensuring that interventions reach the right individuals. Establishing a dedicated women's wing within the RIFAN and similar organizations is essential.

5. Gender-sensitive loans and interventions

Finally, it is critical that loans and government interventions are gender-sensitive, with a certain percentage specifically allocated for female rice farmers through their associations. This targeted approach will foster greater equity within the RVC and contribute to the empowerment of women in the sector.

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