



Gender, access to farm labour and coping strategies: Implication for food productivity in Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This work studied access to farm labour by gender, as well as the coping strategies adopted by each gender in respect of labour scarcity in rural areas of Imo State of Nigeria. The study was a descriptive survey, involving both primary and secondary sources of data collection, such as structured questionnaire, journals, books and internet facilities. 360 copies of questionnaire were distributed to randomly selected respondents and 326 were returned which formed the sample size. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical tools. The result of the study showed that household labour was the most available labour to both male and female farmers. The study also revealed that the male farmers had more access to hired labour than their female counterparts. The most adopted coping strategies, when family labour was inaccessible and cost of hiring labour was high, included, among others, selling/leasing of personal property by the male farmers and reduction of portion of land to be cultivated by the female farmers. The researchers recommended the provisions of appropriate labour-saving machines and implements to farmers in order to ease the labour constraint, and more credit facilities to female farmers.

Keywords: Gender; Access; Farm labour; Coping strategies; Food productivity

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1. Introduction

Agriculture is the mainstay of Nigerian rural economy. Consequently, rural men and women are largely involved in agriculture as a source of livelihood. However, due to the increased migration of young people to the cities in search of non-agricultural jobs and the resultant scarcity of farm labour, rural farmers experience difficulty in accessing the scarce and expensive labour. A number of studies have reflected on the scarcity and high cost trend of farm labour in the communities. For example, Henderson (1995) emphasized the scarcity and high cost of farm labour experienced by rural farmers. Similarly, Ezedinma (2000) stressed that the critical constraint in agricultural production is labour cost, which is estimated to be between 70-90% of total cost. This is more so with the increasing out-migration of male labour.

The problem of access to farm labour poses a serious challenge to farmers, especially in the study area where farming is largely unmechanised. However, this situation varies with gender due to gender-differential access to production resources. Gender is conceived as a variable used to analyze the roles, rights, responsibilities, opportunities, incentives, benefits, costs and constraints which relate to men and women (Kanu 2012). A number of studies, exemplified by Barne (1984) and Kanu (2012), confirmed that access to production resources, including farm labour, varies by gender. Since men and women access farm labour in different ways, they are likely to be affected differently by labour costs and constraints. Horn and Nkambule-Kanyima (1984) observed that female-headed households farm 35 percent less land than male-headed households due primarily to labour and draft shortages experienced by female-headed households in Botswana.

There are various ways through which farmers can access farm labour. The study conducted by Kanu (2012) revealed that the type of labour available to a farmer can determine the type of crops grown, the size of land cultivated and, by extension, the farmer's productivity. Barne (1984) observed that when a shortage of labour occurs, women may decide to plant crops such as cassava, that require less weeding and can be harvested as needed, rather than the traditional crops which are more labour-intensive. Although available literature acknowledged that farmers experience constraints in access to farm labour in Nigerian agriculture, there is still paucity of empirical gender disaggregated data in relation to access to farm labour and coping strategies adopted by farmers when faced with labour challenges in Imo State of Nigeria. This study was embarked on to:

- ascertain the relative access to farm labour by male and female farmers in Imo State;
- Examine the coping strategies adopted by male and female farmers in times of labour scarcity.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted in selected rural areas of Imo State, Nigeria. Imo state is one of the states in Southeastern Nigeria. It lays between latitude 5^o and 6^o North and longitude 6^o and 7^oEast. It occupies a total land mass of 5,100sq km and has a population of 3,934,899 (NPC, 2006). It has 27 Local Government Areas

grouped into three agricultural zones, viz, Orlu, Owerri and Okigwe. The state is made up of a total of 38 blocks and 326 circles for effective extension service delivery.

Agriculture is the predominant occupation of the people. The major food crops include yam, cassava, cocoyam, maize, melon, okro, pumpkin and other vegetables (Imo ADP Annual Report, 2010). The farmers are mainly subsistence farmers, who depend on simple technologies such as matchets and hoes. The researchers adopted a proportionate random sampling technique, and selected 6 blocks from Owerri zone, 3 from Orlu zone and 3 from Okigwe zone.

Simple random sampling technique was used to select 3 circles from each of the selected blocks, making it a total of 36 circles. Each of the selected circles was stratified into male and female farmers. Five male and five female farmers were randomly selected from each circle and this gave a total of 360 (180 males and 180 females) farmers who were administered copies of well structured questionnaire. At the end, a total of 326 copies of the questionnaire were found valid. This gave the sample size for the study. The data were analysed using Chi Square X^2 .

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Sources of Farm Labour by Gender

Types of farm Activities	Sources of Farm Labour							
	Personal %		Household %		Exchange %		Hired %	
	Male:	Female:	Male:	Female:	Male:	Female:	Male:	Female:
Land clearing	7.7	11.0	20.6	27.6	0.0	1.2	20.9	10.4
Mound making	1.2	5.2	21.8	22.4	1.2	0.3	25.5	22.4
Planting	4.0	8.0	33.1	31.0	0.3	1.2	12.3	10.1
Weeding	1.2	3.7	22.4	28.2	5.5	7.1	20.6	11.4
Harvesting	0.0	2.2	38.3	37.7	8.9	10.1	2.5	0.3
Haulage	0.3	1.2	32.5	38.7	0.9	3.1	16.0	7.4
Total	14.4	31.3	168.7	185.6	16.9	23.0	97.5	62.0

Source: Authors' Field work

The results in table 1 above showed that in all the farm activities studied, household labour, generally, constituted the most accessed labour for both male and female farmers. Specifically, the male farmers' access to household labour was lower,(168.7)than that of the female farmers' (185.6%).Another significant source of labour was hired labour, accounting for 97.5% and 62% of the labour used by the male and female farmers respectively. This was, however, mostly used in more tedious farm activities, such as mound making, land clearing and weeding.

The implication of this result is that the female farmers, who depended more on household labour, were more likely to be adversely affected, given the irregular supply of household labour as a result of children's involvement in schooling and other activities. Furthermore, it is an indication that the male farmers have more economic power to hire labour than their female counterparts. This agrees with the findings of Guyer (1984), who observed that agricultural labour shortages frequently affect women more than men, since women generally have less cash to recruit a work party.

Table 2. Most Adopted Coping Strategy by Gender

Coping Strategies	Male %	Female %	Total %
Used Personal Labour	6.4	1.2	7.6
Resorted to Exchange Labour	4.0	2.5	6.5
Reduced Portion of land Cultivated	11.4	28.8	40.2
Avoided Labour-Intensive Crops	2.5	3.4	5.9
Borrowed Money to be able to pay for labour	6.8	6.1	12.9
Sold or Leased personal property to raise money	18.7	8.3	27.0
Total	49.7	50.3	100

Source: Authors' Field work

The most adopted coping strategies, in the face of difficulty in accessing family labour and lack of adequate fund to hire labour, were also investigated and the results are presented in table 2 above. The results showed that the most adopted coping strategy was to reduce the portion of land to be cultivated, which accounted for 40.2%. A greater number, 28.8%, of the female farmers, as against 11.4% of the male farmers, adopted this coping strategy. The next most adopted coping strategy was leasing or outright sale of personal property, such as cash crops, livestock or land. More male (18.7%), than female (8.3%) adopted this coping strategy. This is an indication of the male farmers' greater control over economic resources.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Considering the fact that household labour is usually irregular and hired labour is usually expensive, the productivity of farmers, especially the female, who have weak economic base, is threatened. The implication of this finding is that the male counterparts are, relatively, more economically empowered to overcome labour challenges, given their greater control of productive resources. This accounts for their greater adoption of selling or leasing of personal property in order to raise money to hire labour, than their female counterparts who would rather reduce their farm sizes.

Providing appropriate labour-saving machines and implements for farming will go a long way to ease the labour constraint and thereby improve farmers' productivity in Imo State of Nigeria. This implies providing affordable, location-specific and gender- friendly machines and implements. Economic empowerment of the farmers is also the key to reducing labour challenges. The researchers also recommended that farmers, especially the females, who have less economic power, should be encouraged to form co-operatives to enable them access credit facilities, including local ones such as "isusu". This will enhance their economic power to recruit labour.

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