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## An Assessment of Women's Knowledge and Attitude to Environmental Information in Nigeria

By

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### Abstract

*This paper discusses the level of awareness the Nigeria women should have about the environment and how important it is to a nation. Some selected group of women traders and female students were studied. The study discovers that formal education have a role to play on how people get environmental information in that the female students seem to have more knowledge about the environment than their trader counterparts. Environmental agencies should intensify their efforts by engaging in environmental enlightenment activities, like public lectures that will cut across all sectors of the society i.e the educated and uneducated, urban and rural. Electronic media houses should produce more jingles/adverts to be aired at all times. The Federal Office of statistics should carry out yearly or monthly survey to determine how environmental information benefits the populace. In other words, the enlightenment of women on environmental issues should be taken serious.*

### Introduction

The Creation of environmental awareness is essential for both the assessment and the management of the environment. When people aware of the environment and its significance to their lives, they will act in such manner that will promote healthy living.

The term environment describes all the physical, biological, social and cultural factors and conditions which influence the growth and well being of an organisation that is man, animal, plants and micro-organism. Environmental issues, according to Rodda, may be natural or as a result of human activities. She stated that natural disasters occur when there is a sudden change within the physical environment e. g. earthquakes, storms, plagues of pest such as locust while man made disasters apart from those related in armed conflicts (wars) are usually associated with accidental release of harmful substances, such as chemicals, oil and radio activity, nuclear accidents and the escape of poisonous gases.

In Nigeria toady, significant environmental problems are reflected in under-development. These environmental problems include refuse dumps, sewage disposal, inadequate supply of portable drinking water, housing. Other general environmental concerns include deforestation, toxic waste, water pollution, erosion and animal exploitation.

The environment covers a very broad area, infact every essential aspect of life. These problems do not endanger merely the quality of life but they threaten life itself, that is both of humans, animals and plants. Many citizen have no grasp of the relationship between themselves and their environment and they tend to be ignorant about some of these areas and this calls for urgent information on the environment.

Consequently, environmental education has become necessary in order to generate general environmental consciousness through enlightenment on the damage done to the environment. Till date the Nigerian public and even the leadership are not fully aware of the harm their various activities have on the environment. For example industrialization in many instances has caused a deterioration of the environment to such an extent that it threatens to reduce its capacity to support life like forest trees are being cut and cleared both for export, domestic use and agriculture. Our water resources have suffered unlimited exploitation as a result of

man's activities. And the spread of urbanization (creation of new states and local government) and the development of transport systems also have an adverse impact on the environment bringing about population explosion, air pollution etc. This is a significant problem in information management and environmental awareness.

Interestingly, the women, the children and the disabled who are more on the receiving end of the environmental abuse have not been appreciated from their disadvantaged position. Being the bearer and the primary educators of the children, women have more impact on environmental perception to accomplish most household chores, etc. the children and the disabled on the other hand rely particularly on the women in the living within the environment.

Environmental education will therefore bring about new opportunities for three most vulnerable in the society that is the women, the children and the disabled. Women's marginalization could easily worsen in the next century if nothing is done along this line, so that they could harness the opportunity of environmental friendly public to enhance their empowerment.

The role of women on the environment towards societies, highlights the importance of women's full participation in sustainable development. No doubt a reconsideration of how much knowledge women have and should have seem to be the first step towards having an environmental conscious citizenry.

#### **Environmental Information Dissemination**

Environmental information according to Modupe<sup>2</sup> is "Public enlightenment whereby the people are made to understand that the consequences of their action is needed to avert any further degradation of the environment". The interpretation of informing the public indeed may vary from one country to another and from one cultural area to another depending on the ideological emphasis attached to the concept of influencing the public mind. The major aim however is to challenge people's thinking, attitudes, values system and life styles.

The fact that environmental problems are essentially people centered, the ideas, attitudes and behaviour of different sections of the population are critical variables in efforts to resolve or prevent environmental problem. Dauda<sup>3</sup> believed that there is a need for people to adopt attitudes and ways of living that are committed to the protection and enhancement of the environment. Adesiyani<sup>4</sup> also agreed saying that "the attitude of the people living in our cities and towns change" towards the environment. Infact the nonchalant attitude of Nigerian city dwellers at environmental sanitation is a serious cause for concern because of the total disregard for the basic rules of hygiene.

It is the main objective of UNESCO in conjunction with UNEP (United Nations environmental Programme) to save the world from environmental disasters by the year 2000. To achieve this, the people have to be properly informed about the environment by giving them a thorough education. UNEP in 1998 agreed that information must be related to local situation since by their very nature environmental problem and choices to be made have often complete solution. While the forms and presentations may change the same body must be transmitted through both educational and public information programme.

In developing countries, people might go superstitious in a situation of unsanitary condition where illness and even death occur; the people attribute such to demonic activities of witches, wizards and other evil powers and may not respond to the information about their environment. Giving people a feeling that that have some control over what happened to the environment is a way to win friend and planning permission.

In Nigeria, according to Dauda<sup>6</sup> it is obvious to inform the citizens for a number of years that Nigeria's future is threatened by various phenomena such as "drought, flooding, desertification, reservoir, sanitation,

pollution, soil erosion, unwise use of pesticides, drug addiction and abuse" for which citizens are largely responsible. It is altogether natural that people should be informed of the risk to which they are exposed to the environment since they are usually the first victims of accidents and furthermore, if they are properly informed and trained they are often able to take steps in preventing some of the disasters that might occur.

In other words, the information about the environment creates public awareness and pressure by stimulating the public into commitment and responsibility over the environment. Different categories of people need to be informed on the environment as it relates to them. For example informing the traders who sit with their wares near refuse dump in the market on daily basis is very important because whatever germs infect the food sold will affect the whole populace. Greater awareness of environment issues will raise public consciousness and redirect peoples efforts in tackling these issues in the right direction and this can duly be achieved by informing the people.

### Review of Scholarship

Scholars have not attended much to the area of women and environmental information. Scholars have rather looked at the roles played by women in the environment. It is also important to note that much of the scholarly activities in the area of environmental studies had been done by experts in other fields while little had been done by information experts. The shortcoming of this is that not much significant contribution has been made on environmental information aspect of the studies. Aside from this, attitude of women to the environment which is very significant has not fully been studied in Nigeria. This attitude varies due to the different information at their disposal. Sangowusi<sup>6</sup> illustrates that the elites, mostly resident in urban settings may feel that their role as relating to their environment is to employ people to take care of it while the rural populace, due to their closeness to the environment, realises that they are duly responsible for the care of the environment. Whereas some environmental issue is traceable to the role of woman in the home. The study of this variation which could also be of real importance in environmental information has not been pursued in details.

Whereas particular attention is to given to the study of women in environmental information because they as Gwagwa<sup>7</sup> observe, "... rely on natural systems, soils water and forestry for survival and therefore have vested interest in environmental protection and repair". Similarly, household pollution is traceable largely to cultural practices in food preparation and waste disposal (Shaib<sup>8</sup>).

### Objective of Study

This study is therefore being conducted to determine the present stage of the knowledge and the attitude that the Nigerian women has on environmental information. The paper is also concerned with what level of awareness the woman should have about the environment. This is linked on the hypothesis that women and environment operate to produce an environmentally conscious nation, that is in line with the popular parable that "if you educate a woman you educate a nation".

Some selected groups of women traders and female students (undergraduate and postgraduate) were selected as samples for the study. The women traders are in the category of foodstuff sellers, provision sellers and cloth sellers among others because of their close and constant interaction with people and the environment. The student class were selected for their exposure to western education as well as their interaction with the different levels of people and the environment.

Questionnaires were distributed among fifty female students, twenty five of whom came from the University of Ibadan (U. I) and twenty five from the Polytechnic, Ibadan. The questionnaires were also distributed to fifty women traders. A total return of questionnaire from each group is explained as follows: the University of Ibadan students returned (20) 80% of the questionnaire given to them, the Polytechnic, Ibadan students had a return of (21) 84% while the women traders had a return of (17) 38%. The analysis of the research

was based on these returns.

### Findings

It was inquired from the respondents if they knew about the existence of environmental agencies in Nigeria. These environmental agencies include the Federal Environmental protection Agency which is a government agency and some other environmental agencies like Field Society of Nigeria, Action for Clean Environment (ACE), Nigeria environmental Society (NES), Nigerian Environmental Study/ Action Team (NEST), Foundation for Environmental Development and Education in Nigeria (FEDEN). A breakdown of the response is that 92 percent of the female students were aware of the existence of environmental agencies in Nigeria. Whereas 41 percent of the women traders have knowledge about the existence of environmental agencies in Nigeria implying that more female students are informed on the environment through some of these agencies than their female trader counterparts. From the response of some of the traders, some thought environmental agencies are those companies with lorries that carry their refuse at homes and in their places of work. In order words, formal education among the female could increase environmental awareness.

The respondents were able to identify the environmental issues that are of concern to them in their neighborhood.

This is shown in Table 1

Table 1: Environmental issues identified

<i>Environmental Issues</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Traders</i>
	%	%
Refuse dumps	16.80	25.56.8
Urinating on the street	12.60	17.38.6
Defecation on the street	12.60	15.34
Noise	9.45	17.38.6
Open drainage	4.20	20.45
Smoke	4.20	9.43.1
Industrial Pollutions	3.15	13.29.4
Wild life Conseryation	3.15	14.31.9
Toxic waste	—	7.15.9

The environmental issues that are of major concern identified by students are refuse dumping and defecation on the street, noise, open drainage and smoke pollution. Among the market women, most of them indicated refuse dump as the most important environmental issues that is of concern to them, followed by open drainage (this goes hand in hand with refuse dump because some of them even have their shops where these dirt/refuse are dumped and the whole place stinks from these open drainage or refuse dumps).

The respondents were then asked how they received environmental information about the environmental issue listed above, 75% of the students indicated the radio as an important source where they received environmental information. This source is followed in importance by television which takes 45% and advertising newspapers and magazines which take 20%. Among the women traders 54.5% indicated the radio as a source of receiving environmental information because they spend most of the day in their shops having their radio beside them and through adverts on the television.

In order to determine how the environmental information (EI) received had made the respondent conscious on the environment they were asked to indicate how the information received made them conscious on the environment, that is, how it effects their attitude.

The students' result implies that 45% concentrate on throwing away their dust bins, 40% respondents partake in the monthly environmental sanitation while 35% admonish people around them when they carelessly throw away refuse. Among the women traders used for the study 36.4% make efforts to empty their dust bins, 34% see to educating people when necessary on the environment, 25% clean their environment on sanitation days. They were also interviewed on how often they participate in the monthly environmental sanitation programmes. The monthly environmental sanitation program was introduced in 1984 by the Federal Government of Nigeria to be observed on the last Saturdays of every month from the early hours of the day to 10am. The main objective of this programme is to enable every citizen of Nigeria to clean and clear their environment of waste generated by human activities and domestic refuse that carelessly strewn about residential areas. This reflected in table 2 below.

Table 2: Participation in monthly Sanitation Programme

Number of Times	Students %	Traders
0-3 times a year	30	11
4-6 times a year	10	15.9
7-9 times a year	15	20.4
11-12 times a year	45	53

According to Table 2, 45% respondents among the female students participate in the monthly sanitation programme between 10-12 times a year, when asked the reason for their low participation in the programme, having claimed they were conscious of the environment. The majority gave the reason of being in campus most of the time and probably they have cleaners in their halls of residence who do the job while 53% among the women traders participate regularly in the monthly sanitation programme.

#### Woman environmental Information (EI) in Nigeria

It is a common knowledge that as far as the environment is concerned there is no better person to be informed or used than the woman. This is so important and crucial that no one can afford to take it lightly. In other words, it is generally believed that women respond most to environmental information because "women have free time while men are out at work". Women are also involved in residential struggles because of their engendered position as mothers and wives because the Home is in their care. As men turn to non-farm employment, women increasingly become the actual manager of the family farm.

When men had not really responded to environmental issues women had made contributions by raising tree seedling and flowers in their nurseries. In Nigeria, as a developing country, women have always had a close relationship with the environment as they are involved in subsistence farming.

Traditionally, women gathered products from the trees and other plant products which provided them with the three basic 'Fs' of fuel, food and fodder among variety of uses, whereas men consider the forest more in terms of commercial possibilities, women see it as a source of domestic needs (Gwagwa<sup>10</sup>, Rodda<sup>11</sup>).

Women groups provide an important and invaluable service to their communities, when it comes to community efforts in tilling the environment (either in making it clean or in beautifying it) women do come out in large numbers because it seems there is a natural love for the monthly environmental programme in Nigeria. Abel<sup>12</sup> discovered that community participation has been achieved by women and they have also forged close links with community leaders such as local chiefs, members of parliament, community development

officers, government and NGO extension personnel.

All over the developing world, women play a crucial role in environmental management; as farmers, stock breeders, suppliers of fuel and water, they interact most closely with the environment. NEST<sup>13</sup> disclosed that women in Nigeria especially those living in rural areas, interact with and shape the environment. They have close link with the protection or destruction of the environment in circumstances which are dictated by their position within the Nigerian structure. In other words, men generate environmental problems and women deal with the consequences according to Ibrahim<sup>14</sup>. And this is the reason why they respond better to EI when there is a bit of formal education, training or public enlightenment.

It has been discovered that cultural beliefs (taboo) especially in Nigeria abound against women in taking some environmental actions. For example a woman, according to Ibrahim<sup>15</sup>, will become barren, her husband will die or the tree itself will die; if a tree is planted by a woman. These taboos are perpetuated to ensure that the customary practise of exclusive ownership of land by men be upheld, since a woman who owns tree may have to claim ownership of that piece of land. Adewale<sup>16</sup> stated that the customary role of women is the supply and management of water which is utilized for cooking and drinking, to wash clothes and water plants. The water is usually not very clean. The storage of water is also the duty of woman. In most communities, there are several customary restrictions on the use of water by women for example in some community women are forbidden to put their feet in the stream or even dip the feet with shoes in the stream. This reduces pollution of the water.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper has concerned itself with women's knowledge and attitude toward environmental information in Nigeria. The study shows that there is a gap that needs to be filled considering the knowledge of environmental information that the female students and women traders have. The female students seem to have more information than their female implies that formal education may have a role to play in how people get environmental information. The majority of the women traders thought that environmental agencies are the companies with lorries that carry their refuse at home. For those that indicated that they know about the existence of environmental agency in Nigeria, the television stations, radio stations and newspaper seem to be their major sources of information.

Women are the worst affected by environmental issue like fuel-wood crisis, water collection for the household, shortage of food crops etc. It is therefore necessary that the link between women and the state of the environment be recognised. Government agencies like the Federal Environmental protection Agency (FEPA) and NGO's like Foundation for Environmental Study/Action Team (NEST) should intensify their efforts in disseminating EI to women by coming down to their level and going around markets to address the traders. Most of the research reports written by these agencies cannot get to the women in the market or rural areas because many of them are not literate. Environmental agencies should also engage themselves in public lectures that cut across the socio-economic class benefiting both the literate and non-literate groups of women especially with the use of visual aids. It is also necessary for Electronic media houses to produce more jingles and have more advertisement campaigns to be aired regularly, environmental days inclusive. The Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) should do a monthly or yearly survey on peoples' attitude to the environmental information they have received i.e if it is of benefit to them. The results derived from the survey should be communicated to these environmental agencies in order to modify the strategies used in disseminating environmental information.

As in education, if the women are enlightened on environmental issues as goes with health and nutrition, the whole nation will be enlightened and consequently the whole world is enlightened. Against this background Nigerian women's involvement in the use and management of natural resources is an important issue that should be tackled by the government.



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