



ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION IN GENDER MAINSTREAMING FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE USAID FEED THE FUTURE NIGERIA AGRIBUSINESS PROJECT (2018–2023)

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Abstract

The inability of governments at all levels and the development partners to effectively communicate women empowerment issues using participatory communication continues to be a challenge to achieving women's empowerment. This study was conducted to gain insight into the role of participatory communication in gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment using the United States Agency for International Development USAID Feed the Nigeria Agribusiness Project as a case study. Data were collected from Focused Group Discussions of 11 women USAID project beneficiaries purposively selected in Makurdi, the Benue state capital. The data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The study found that participatory communication played a vital role in understanding women's empowerment issues. It established that women understand gender mainstreaming and empowerment issues better through participatory approaches. The study concluded that participatory communication enabled the women not only to understand the importance of empowerment but also facilitated their active participation in issues affecting them. The study recommended that governments at all levels, development partners such as NGOs, and the private sector should deploy participatory communication in the implementation of projects and interventions targeting gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment.

Keywords: Communication, empowerment, gender, participatory, women.

Introduction

Gender mainstreaming is a process of integrating a gender perspective into policies, programs, and activities at all levels of an organization or society to promote gender equality and address gender-based discrimination (UNDP 2018). EIGE (2020) aligns with this definition as it views gender mainstreaming as an important strategy for addressing gender-based discrimination and promoting gender equality in various sectors, including education, health, politics, and the workplace. Gender mainstreaming is an integral approach to empowering women and achieving gender equality. It involves the integration of gender perspectives into all policies and

initiatives to ensure that women's voices are heard, and their needs are addressed. Gender mainstreaming has been a long-standing advocacy for women's rights, and a lot of work has gone into its implementation in various countries (Uche, 2024). Although women constitute a significant proportion of the world's agricultural workforce and contribute significantly to food production and household income, they often face challenges, including limited access to productive resources, unequal pay, and limited participation in decision-making processes.

Udoka (2024) argues that gender mainstreaming cannot be effective without women actively

participating in projects targeted at empowering them through participatory communication. Similarly, Akamoye (2023) points out that gender mainstreaming has been impacting women's empowerment positively but observes that many projects targeted at empowering women do not facilitate their active participation using participatory communication or dialogue. He further argues that excluding women's active participation in issues affecting them is denying them access to making decisions on issues that will foster their empowerment and well-being.

Mainstreaming gender into projects comes with challenges. These challenges stem from patriarchy. They include the lack of political will, inadequate resources, and resistance to change. There is also a lack of understanding of gender mainstreaming, how it can be applied, and communicated in different sectors. The lack of political will and commitment to gender mainstreaming impedes the achievement of results, as some policymakers and decision-makers may not see the importance of gender mainstreaming, and as a result, it may not be implemented effectively (UN Women, 2016). This position further affirmed USAID Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Investment (2019), which found that the constraints experienced by women in the agricultural sector are exacerbated by their low social status as members of a vulnerable economic group. While men and women experience limited access to finance and investment for agribusinesses due to poor land acquisition, land use laws, and a perception among financial lenders that agricultural loans are particularly high risk, women's access is worsened by their subordinate position. Women face gender discrimination in access to and control over land due to patriarchal cultures that restrict rights to inheritance and ownership of land compared to men, who are born with the right to inherit parental and communal land in most of the country's cultures (Obosi, 2023).

Also, data and communication management pose a notable challenge in gender mainstreaming. The lack of gender-disaggregated data makes assessment of the impact of gender mainstreaming difficult (UNDP, 2016). Communicating this complex

development approach to people, especially project beneficiaries, communities, and other actors who are resistant to change, is difficult and requires adoption of non-threatening communication approach which development communication offers. How such development projects are communicated is therefore crucial to their ability to achieve project objectives and goals. It is within this context that Ikpa (2024) argues that the greatest challenge facing gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment is the inability of policymakers, development practitioners, and their partners to effectively communicate the impacts of gender empowerment projects to society. Ikpa (2024) observes that a greater number of people see women empowerment projects as politically motivated, with the elites using them to uplift their ego and brand.

The Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project is a five-year project financed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to improve the business environment for private sector investment in agriculture. It was implemented in 7 states in Nigeria including Kaduna, Niger, Kebbi, Benue, Delta, Ebonyi, and Cross River with gender equality as a core objective focusing on gender mainstreaming. Using (USAID) Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project (2018-2023) as case study, this study examines the role of participatory communication in gender mainstreaming for women empowerment as its objective. The study analysis will provide knowledge to policymakers, researchers and development practitioners on the importance of participatory communication on projects targeted at gender mainstreaming and women empowerment.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on Feminist Communication Theory and Participatory Communication Theory. Since its inception in the 1970s, Feminist Communication Theory has developed over several decades. Feminist Communication Theory seeks to understand how gender shapes communication practices and the

social and political implications of these practices. Kramarae & Spender (2000) posit that feminist communication theory seeks to challenge oppression and discrimination through critical analysis, advocacy, and action. It emphasizes the importance of diverse and inclusive voices in communication and advocates for the empowerment of marginalized groups, particularly women, through increased access to communication resources and opportunities (Gilligan, 2016). This theoretical approach is grounded in the belief that gender is a fundamental organizing principle of society, and that communication is a site of power where gendered inequalities are produced and reproduced. One of the central goals of feminist communication theory is to advocate for women's empowerment by challenging and transforming dominant cultural narratives and communicative practices that reinforce gender hierarchies and inequalities (Kreps, 2014). Feminist communication scholars have critiqued media representations of women that objectify and sexualize them, arguing that such representations reinforce gender stereotypes and contribute to the marginalization of women (Gill, 2007). They have also examined how gendered power dynamics operate in interpersonal communication, such as how women are often expected to perform emotional labor in their relationships with men (Hochschild, 1983). Feminist communication theory aims to empower women by providing them with critical tools to analyze and resist oppressive communicative practices. It also seeks to promote more equitable and inclusive communication practices that allow for diverse voices and perspectives to be heard (Brouwer & Hamilton, 2009). Feminist communication theory challenges patriarchal power structures that have historically marginalized women's voices and experiences (Nagel, 2010; UNDP, 2018). Feminist communication scholars argue that media and communication systems perpetuate and reproduce gender inequality by constructing and reinforcing gendered norms and stereotypes (Grosz, 1994; Salazar, 2019).

Participatory communication theory emerged from the work of Paulo Freire (1973), the theory sees communication beyond the exchange of information from the sender to the recipients. It sees communication as a dialogue and negotiation that facilitates active participation of people in the discussion of issues affecting them through a communication process. It sees communication as process that is not top-down approach or one-way model, but an approach that facilitates and encourages local voices and the active participation of people in decision-making on issues affecting them.

The study adopts Feminine Communication Theory to show how communication processes within the USAID project enabled women's participation and voice. At the same time, to explore how women's experiences of communication and empowerment are shaped not just by gender, but also by factors such as ethnicity, age, and socio-economic status in the Nigerian agribusiness context. On the other hand, the study adopts participatory communication theory to examine how participatory dialogues were deployed in the implementation of gender mainstreaming initiatives within the USAID project.

USAID Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project

The Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project is a five-year project financed by USAID to improve the business environment to encourage private sector investment in agriculture. Also, to include thousands of smallholder farmers and empower them to become high-performing commercial actors in the value chains for rice, maize, soya beans, aquaculture, and cowpeas. The project was implemented in 7 states in Nigeria including Kaduna, Niger, Kebbi, Benue, Delta, Ebonyi, and Cross River. Gender equality is a cardinal objective of the USAID project with a core focus on gender mainstreaming. The project has Gender and Youth Integration Framework that recognizes the disparities between men and women in the agriculture industry: It adopts Gender and Youth Integration Strategy as a tool to advance women's and young people's engagement in the agriculture industry while reducing gender disparities in access to, control over, and benefits from financial

services and investment. To achieve its gender mainstreaming objective, the project implementation ensured regular gender mainstreaming training for both state and non-state actors with particular focus on addressing policy and framework gaps. At the same time, it leveraged social media, group meetings, participatory communication, advocacy and campaign to educate and mobilize women for participation in the project. The project was implemented on 2.5 million hectares of land and 400,000 farmers supported across 7 states of Nigeria (USAID Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project Report, 2023).

Women Empowerment

Women's empowerment can be defined as "the process by which women gain power and control over their lives and achieve equal participation in decision-making processes" (Kabeer, 1999). It involves not only improving women's access to resources and opportunities but also challenging and transforming gender norms and power structures that perpetuate inequality (UN Women, 2015). Kabeer (1999) argues that women's empowerment must involve changes at both the individual and collective levels, with women gaining agency and the ability to make decisions for themselves while also working together to challenge and change broader systems of oppression. This view is supported by research findings that empowering interventions are most effective when they consider the complex ways in which gender norms and power dynamics intersect with other forms of marginalization, such as race, class, and sexuality (Mosedale & Loewe, 2017).

Gender

The American Psychological Association (APA)

defines gender as the social and cultural meanings that are associated with masculinity and femininity, including expectations about how men and women should behave, think, and feel" (APA, 2020). Gender is a complex and multifaceted concept that is influenced by a variety of factors, including biology, culture, and individual experiences. Gender equality refers to the state of equal rights, opportunities, and treatment regardless of one's gender identity or expression (United Nations, 2015).

Materials and Methods

This research employed a qualitative method of data collection using Focused Group Discussion (FGD) to measure and analyse impact of participatory communication in gender mainstreaming for women's empowerment in the USAID Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project (2018–2023). The population of this study is women who participated in USAID project in Makurdi the Benue State capital. The study employed Focused Group Discussion of 11 women participants who are USAID project beneficiaries to gather in-depth information to analyse the role of participatory communication in gender mainstreaming for women's empowerment. The FGD was conducted using questions addressing the research objective as instruments to gather in-depth information from participants.

Study Area

Makurdi is the capital of Benue State, located along the Benue River in the North-Central region. It has an estimated population of 517,342. Most residents are farmers and artisans, while a greater number are civil servants.

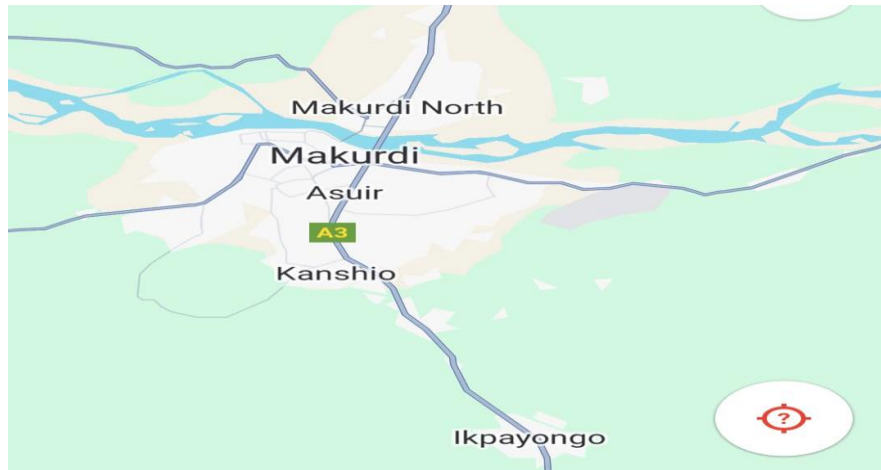


Figure 1: Study Area

Focus Group Discussion Results and Thematic Analysis

This section presents findings from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted with women in Makurdi, Benue State—beneficiaries of the USAID Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project. The analysis is structured thematically, guided by the study's conceptual framework anchored on Feminist Communication Theory and Participatory Communication Theory.

Theme 1: Participatory Communication as a Vehicle for Women's Empowerment

Participants unanimously emphasized the centrality of participatory communication in shaping their empowerment journeys within the USAID project. All participants (100%) reported that their involvement in dialogue-driven training and engagement platforms enhanced their capacity for leadership, decision-making, and assertive participation in agribusiness.

A participant succinctly captured this transformation:

"The financial literacy training by the USAID facilitated women's active participation in a communication process that not only helped us understand issues about empowerment but also made us active decision-makers on issues affecting women."

This theme resonates with Feminist Communication Theory, which argues for the dismantling of hegemonic communication practices that silence women, and instead advocates for inclusive spaces that amplify

female voices. Similarly, Participatory Communication Theory views communication as dialogue and mutual learning—a perspective clearly reflected in participants' testimonies.

Theme 2: Financial Literacy and Grant Management Through Inclusive Engagement

Another recurring narrative was that financial literacy training—delivered using participatory approaches—enhanced women's understanding of financial management and grant utilisation. All participants (100%) affirmed that the training empowered them with the knowledge and skills to manage USAID grants effectively, translating into improved business outcomes and reduced dependence on male counterparts.

"The most outstanding thing about the USAID project is not just the grants given to women, but the participatory communication approach they used. It built our capacity—both financially and intellectually—to handle our businesses and lives better." (FGD Participant)

This theme underscores the practical linkage between communication, empowerment, and development outcomes. The training sessions were not merely instructional but dialogic, enabling women to question, contribute, and co-create solutions.

Theme 3: Participatory Communication as a Mechanism for Building Trust and Legitimacy

A significant proportion of participants (100%) noted that participatory communication practices fostered trust between the beneficiaries and the USAID project team. Women recounted past experiences of being exploited by fraudulent organisations under the guise of women's empowerment. In contrast, the USAID approach was characterized by openness, responsiveness, and opportunities for two-way communication.

"We've been duped before by fake groups claiming to help women. But this project allowed us to ask questions and get answers. That made us trust them and bring in other women."

This narrative highlights the trust-building and transparency-enhancing functions of participatory communication in development interventions. The capacity for open dialogue created a sense of project legitimacy and ownership among the women.

Theme 4: Male and Community Support for Participatory Processes

All participants (100%) affirmed that their husbands and community leaders were supportive of the USAID project because of the clarity and inclusivity embedded in its communication processes. Women reported that once they communicated the objectives and structure of the project to their husbands, the men actively encouraged participation. Some men even expressed interest in joining the FGD, indicating broader community acceptance.

This finding reflects the spillover effect of participatory communication—its ability to influence not just direct beneficiaries but also the wider community, including traditionally gatekeeping stakeholders like men and elders.

Theme 5: Structural Barriers to Participation and Recommendations

While the participatory communication approach was widely praised, participants identified logistical barriers that limited full participation. Chief among these was the cost and inconvenience of transportation to training

and meeting venues. Women recommended that future interventions locate meeting points within or close to communities to foster sustained involvement.

"Projects like this should bring meetings closer to our homes. Transport money is a big issue for many women."

This theme reinforces the argument that accessibility is an essential dimension of effective participatory communication. Without addressing structural constraints, the full potential of inclusive engagement cannot be realized.

Results and Discussions

The findings from the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted with women beneficiaries of the USAID Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project in Makurdi, Benue State, provide empirical evidence on the centrality of participatory communication in facilitating gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment. Anchored on the theoretical foundations of Feminist Communication Theory and Participatory Communication Theory, the findings reveal that participatory communication was not only instrumental in enhancing women's leadership capacities but also in enabling their active engagement in agribusiness and decision-making processes.

All participants (100%) attested to the fact that the USAID project created a communication environment that encouraged dialogue and collaboration, leading to increased confidence and assertiveness among women. Their participation in training and communication platforms allowed them to emerge as active stakeholders rather than passive beneficiaries. This aligns with the Feminist Communication Theory, which challenges patriarchal communicative hierarchies and advocates for inclusive spaces where women's voices are recognized, valued, and empowered. Likewise, the participatory communication framework adopted in the project reflected principles of mutual learning and community engagement, consistent with the positions of scholars such as Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (1998) and Gumucio-Dagron (2001), who emphasize that genuine participation enhances agency and ownership.

A key outcome of the participatory communication strategy was its effectiveness in delivering financial literacy training that equipped women with skills to manage resources independently. All participants confirmed that the interactive nature of the training enabled them to understand business finance and grant utilisation, which in turn reduced their economic dependence and contributed to improved livelihoods. The process was not unidirectional; rather, it fostered co-creation of knowledge and allowed for contextual learning based on women's experiences and realities. Such outcomes reflect the transformative potential of communication when it shifts from instruction to dialogue, thereby enabling sustainable behavioural and attitudinal change.

Another critical insight from the FGDs is the role of participatory communication in fostering trust and legitimacy. Participants recounted previous experiences of being deceived by fraudulent empowerment initiatives. In contrast, the USAID project, through its open and responsive communication structure, created a transparent and trustworthy environment. By allowing women to ask questions and engage in discussions with implementers, the project earned their trust and commitment. This reinforces arguments in the literature that participatory communication fosters accountability and legitimacy, especially in development interventions where trust deficits often exist between project implementers and local communities.

The findings also revealed a positive spillover effect of the participatory communication approach, with male household heads and community leaders expressing strong support for the project. According to participants, their husbands and local leaders actively encouraged their involvement once the project was clearly explained to them. Some men even showed interest in joining the FGDs themselves. This demonstrates how inclusive communication can extend its influence beyond direct beneficiaries to the broader community. It reflects a shift in social norms and validates the argument that participatory processes can help renegotiate gender roles and increase acceptance of women's empowerment in traditionally patriarchal contexts.

Despite these positive outcomes, participants identified structural constraints that limited participation,

especially challenges related to transportation costs to training venues. While the participatory approach was inclusive in intent and design, its effectiveness was partially hindered by socio-economic barriers that particularly affect rural women. This highlights a crucial point in the participatory communication literature: that participation must be accessible in both form and function. Without addressing logistical and structural constraints, even the most well-intentioned communication strategies may fall short of their transformative potential. The participants' recommendation that meetings be held closer to their communities serves as a practical reminder that context-responsive planning is critical to ensuring sustained engagement.

Overall, the discussion of findings confirms that participatory communication is not merely a tool for information dissemination but a dynamic process that fosters agency, builds trust, facilitates learning, and supports sustainable empowerment. The experience of women beneficiaries of the USAID Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project in Makurdi affirms that when women are given the opportunity to actively participate in shaping the communication processes that affect them, they become more confident, independent, and capable of driving change in their own lives and communities. These findings validate the core assumptions of both Feminist and Participatory Communication theories and underscore the need for development interventions to move beyond token participation toward genuinely inclusive and dialogic engagement.

Conclusion

The research findings provide compelling evidence that participatory communication plays a transformative role in promoting women's empowerment and advancing gender mainstreaming within development initiatives. Drawing from the experiences of women beneficiaries of the USAID Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project in Makurdi, the findings demonstrate that when communication is structured to be inclusive, dialogic, and participatory, it fosters women's confidence, enhances their leadership capacities, and enables meaningful engagement in

agribusiness and community decision-making processes.

The findings further illustrate that participatory communication goes beyond information dissemination to become a mechanism for building trust, strengthening accountability, and enabling the co-creation of knowledge. By actively engaging women in financial literacy training and dialogue-driven processes, the project enhanced their understanding of grant management and economic independence, thereby reducing dependence on male counterparts and increasing their influence in both household and community spaces.

The findings highlight that structural and logistical barrier—such as limited access to transportation—can limit women’s participation, even in otherwise inclusive initiatives. It also underscores that participatory communication is not merely a methodological tool but a strategic approach that enhances development effectiveness by empowering women as active stakeholders.

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