

Skill Acquisition for Rural Women: Pivotal to Enhancing Family Financial Status in the Era of COVID -19 in Abia State

¹Alozie, Elsie Nkemdilim
& ²Bassey E. Anam

¹Department of Home
Sciences/Hospitality Management
and Tourism,

Michael Okpara University of
Agriculture Umudike, Abia State

²Institute of Public Policy and
Administration,
University of Calabar, Calabar

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Corresponding Author:

Alozie, Elsie Nkemdilim

Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis experienced worldwide has affected economies, harming millions of business people, entrepreneurs, and households. Beyond the tragic health hazards and human consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic uncertainties, and disruptions that have resulted come at a significant cost to the global economy, health, education, social and economic sectors. Accordingly, skills acquisition has been described as the recipe for wealth creation. This paper, therefore, considered skill acquisition as pivotal to enhancing family financial status in the era of COVID -19 in Abia state. The objective was to determine the impact of women's skill acquisition on family income. Using a survey research design, the study collected data from 200 respondents drawn from four Local Government Areas of Abia state. Data were analysed using simple statistical tools of frequency counts, percentages, and means. Findings demonstrate that respondents agreed that skill acquisition makes women independent (3.3), employers of labour (3.3), and increases family income (3.4). It further enhances family wellbeing (3.1), presents opportunities for women to become self-employed (3.1), and to cater their personal needs (3.2). Hence, the study concluded that skill acquisition is essential in enhancing family income. The paper, therefore, recommended the federal, state, and local governments should ensure the availability of funds for trainees to be able to set themselves up after acquiring profitable skills, as this will enable them to become entrepreneurs, and so lead to job creation and economic development.

Background to the Study

The world was thrown into a state of anxiety, when the first cases of COVID-19 emerged in the city of Wuhan, China, around December 2019. This virus spread quickly across the globe, and on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation declared it a pandemic (WHO, 2020). This led to unprecedented socio-economic and financial crises as most countries were caught unprepared and had to put emergency measures in place to curb the spread of the virus, considering the high number of deaths that followed. The spread of COVID-19 led to the closure of large social and economic sectors, creating global pressures in all sectors, and affecting economies (Kuckertz et al., 2020). The world has experienced several crises that have had major impacts on businesses, such as the great depression of the 1930s, the financial crisis of the early 2000s, and, more recently, the global crisis of COVID-19 (Tsilika et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 contingency experienced worldwide has affected economies and production chains, harming millions of business people and entrepreneurs (IDB, 2020); however, the difference between previous crises and the economic and financial crisis caused by COVID-19 is that, while the financial crisis caused the terrible recession, with several countries witnessing reductions in the gross domestic product (GDP), increased unemployment rates and severe fiscal pressure, leading to the implementation of austerity policies (Greenglass et al., 2014); the COVID-19 crisis occurs simultaneously with a public health crisis, with tremendous impact on society in general (Remuzzi and Remuzzi, 2020) and a predominant feeling of financial uncertainty (Godinic, Obrenovic, and Khudaykulov, 2020). This means that the confinement measures implemented, and the consequent social isolation, have changed the lives of individuals and families, leading to financial, social, and emotional costs affecting their well-being (Rashid and McGrath, 2020). Thus, families' well-being has been seriously affected by the pandemic (Rashid and McGrath, 2020), which has caused more unemployment (Coibion et al., 2020) and a permanent or temporary reduction in income through the furlough system (ILO, 2020), with the impacts on individuals and families lives varying according to the duration of the lockdown imposed (Smit et al., 2020).

Lockdown was the COVID-19 control measure introduced in all the states in Nigeria. This significantly restricted movement of goods and services. The negative impact of such measures on a family's income, food preparation, distribution, purchase, food access, and consumption were unparalleled (Leone et al., 2020); an indication that COVID-19 wreaked, and is still wreaking havoc on nations all over the world. In Nigeria, Alani and Olanrewaju (2020) examined the socioeconomic implications of lockdown as a preventive strategy against COVID-19 on Nigerians. They analyzed documents on social and economic events on the lockdown strategy as an effort to fight against the spread of COVID-19. They found that COVID-19 brought to the limelight the creative potentials of Nigerians as a gain, but the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown measure have increased worsening security challenges, poverty, corruption, and hunger as pain on Nigerians. Although socio-economic problems such as poverty, unemployment, low income, inequality, poor housing, ineffective health facilities, epileptic power supply, etc. have far back being in existence in developing countries, especially Nigeria, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic may further confound socio-

economic livelihood in Nigeria where more than half of the population lives below the international poverty line of US \$1.25 a day (Awofeso and Irabor, 2020). Thus, the need to acquire skills that can be monetized to support families' upkeep, and improve their financial status becomes vital.

Skill is the ability to do something well, usually gained through training or experience that is needed, while acquisition is the act of getting new knowledge, skill, etc. This skill can be obtained through education, training, or experience that will inculcate into the individual how to carry out or discharge his / her responsibilities very well with the new knowledge. Fadere (2004) cited in Inalegwu, (2016) defines skill as expertness, aptitude, and competencies appropriate for a particular job; it has to do with expert knowledge and creative reasoning to a level of mastery. To attain these skills, the individual needs to acquire basic training or knowledge levels related to the task to be performed, whether through formal, informal, or combination of the two. Boytziz (2010) defined skill as the ability to demonstrate a system and sequence of behavior that is functionally related to attaining a goal. Skill acquisition is one among other policies embarked upon in Nigeria with the sole aim to alleviate poverty, youth restiveness, sophisticated crimes and corruption rates, rural-urban drift, unemployment, and other social vices by providing technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development (NPE, 2013). Skill acquisition encourages and enhances effective resource mobilization of skills, enables wealth creation, and increased GDP. It leads to the development of entrepreneurs and as a result serves as a source of income to the nation through the payment of taxes generated from their businesses. These taxes are in turn used by the government for development purposes.

Similarly, being self-employed serves as a major source of income for the individual, and results in improved financial status and standard of living. Nbina (2011) noted that low skills perpetuate poverty and inequality. Hence, skills development can reduce unemployment, improve the standard of living, less dependency, and increase family income. In Abia state, women engage in different forms of business. More women, especially those in rural areas can be encouraged to acquire skills that can help them recover from the economic hardship they are experiencing as a result of COVID-19. These skills can be monetized for the benefit of their families; for that reason, this paper aims to examine how skill acquisition can enhance family financial status after the COVID-19 era.

Statement of the Problem

The relationship between skill acquisition and employment generation for the welfare of citizens in Nigeria is so significant that all states in the country take the issue of building skill acquisition centers as a major priority. The reason many skilled workers earn more than some university graduates is that they acquire more practical skills which can enable them to find jobs easily. Skill acquisition is the art of learning to do something to earn a living and or to survive. In line with this, women that have acquired different skills can engage in economic activities which will impact their lives and households' income. The COVID-19 crisis has left so many in dire economic needs, increasing the level of poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity, and worsening the financial status of many families.

Accordingly, the acquisition of skills as a coping strategy for survival to sustain their children and other family members is critical. Also, the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of the population caused by isolation and social estrangement, coupled with the financial detriment caused by the crisis, shows up in stress, anxiety, depression, and increased suicide rates, and fracture of the family environment (UN, 2020). According to Brooks et al. (2020), the financial losses caused by having to stop professional activities without planning, and the loss of social interaction become risk factors for symptoms of psychological disorders and anxiety. Therefore, actions are required to help mitigate these effects.

Research Objectives

The following objectives guided this work:

1. To examine the types of skills acquired by women in Abia state.
2. To ascertain the level of income earned by women through their acquired skills.
3. To determine the impact of women's skill acquisition on family income.

Research Questions

1. What are the types of skills acquired by women in Abia state?
2. What is the level of income earned by women through acquired skills?
3. What is the impact of women's skill acquisition on family income?

Methodology

Research Design

This paper employed the survey method.

The Population of the Study

The study population is made up of 200 respondents drawn from four local government areas in Abia state, comprising Umuahia North, Ossisioma-Ngwa, Aba North, and Aba South.

Sampling Technique

The sampling technique adopted is the multi-stage sampling technique. In the first stage, out of 17 local government areas, four local governments were selected. The local government areas were: Umuahia North, Ossisioma-Ngwa, Aba North, and Aba South. In the second stage, two autonomous communities were randomly selected from each of the selected local government areas. In the third stage, two villages were randomly selected from each of the communities, making it a total of eight villages. In the fourth stage, 25 women were selected from each village, totaling 200 respondents.

Method of Data Collection

A structured questionnaire, designed based on the research objectives was used to elicit responses from the participants. The data collected comprised the age of the respondents, the type of skill they have acquired, as well as the contribution of their skills to the incomes and financial status of their households. The women were interviewed at their places of business.

Validity of the Instrument

The instrument for this study was developed by the researcher and underwent content validation by other researchers in the department. After undergoing a series of corrections through the addition of relevant information to the questionnaire, the researcher proceeded to administer the instrument to the respondents.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using descriptive methods. The descriptive statistics adopted by the study include frequencies, percentages, and weighted mean. The results were presented and analyzed using the four-point Likert Scale option. The benchmark for weighted mean was 3.0 with a grand mean that determined acceptance or rejection.

Results

Table 1 show that a large proportion (38%) of the respondents was within the age bracket of 35-44 years, while those within the age limit of 25 – 34 years constituted the lowest (16%). This implies that there is a need to encourage younger women, both educated and non-educated, to acquire skills that can facilitate their self-independence.

Table 1: Age distribution of respondents

Age	Frequency	Percent
25- 34	32	16%
35 - 44	76	38%
45 - 54	53	26.5%
55 and above	39	19.5%
Total	400	100%

The various skills owned by the respondents in the study area are presented in Table 2. The table indicates that poultry farmers (17.5%) were the majority, followed by caterers and mobile food sellers (16.5%). Other skills include fashion designing (11%), Craft making (7.5%), make-up/beauty artists (10%), fish farming (2.5%), Shoe making/revamping (4.5%), event planning (9%), hair making (13%), as well as detergents/cosmetics making (8.5%).

Table 2: Distribution of sampled respondents in different enterprises

S/N	Skill Acquired	Freq.	%
1	Fashion design	22	11%
2	Crafts	15	7.5%
3	Makeup/beauty	20	10%
4	Fishery	5	2.5%
5	Poultry	35	17.5%
6	Shoe making/revamping	9	4.5%
7	Event planning	18	9%
8	Catering/cooks	33	16.5%
9	Detergent/cosmetics	17	8.5%
10	Hair making	26	13%
	Total	200	100%

Table 3 shows that fish farming, poultry and event planning earn high income (between N7000 – N10, 000) daily. This is followed by fashion designing, make-up artists, and catering (N4000 – N8, 000). Those who are into crafts, hair making as well as detergents/cosmetics earn between N2000 to N5000 daily.

Table 3: Average daily income earned from businesses

S/N	Skills	Daily Income (₦)	Average Daily Income
1	Fashion design	5000 - 7000	6000
2	Poultry	4000 – 8000	6000
3	Makeup/beauty artists	4000 – 7000	5500
4	Fishery	6000 – 10,000	8000
5	Crafts	3000 - 5000	4000
6	Shoe making/revamping	2000 – 5000	3500
7	Event planning	5000 – 8,000	6500
8	Catering/food sellers	5000 - 7000	6000
9	Detergent/cosmetics	2000 – 3000	2500
10	Hair making	3000 – 5000	4000
	Total	200	100%

Data in table 4 reveals that respondents agree that skill acquisition makes women independent (3.3), employers of labour (3.3) and increase family income (3.4). It further enhances family wellbeing (3.1), presents opportunities for women to become self-employed (3.1), and to cater for their personal needs (3.2).

Table 4:

S/N	Item	4 SA	3 A	2 SD	1 D	Total	Mean
1	Skill acquisition increases family income through profit making	116 (58%)	58 (29%)	17 (8.5%)	9 (4.5%)	200	3.4
2	Skill acquisition allows women to become employers of labour	102 (51%)	57 (28.5%)	23 (11.5%)	18 (9%)	200	3.3
3	Skill acquisition enables women to become self-independent	110 (55%)	61 (30.5%)	17 (8.5%)	12 (6%)	200	3.3
4	Skill acquisition enable women to cater for their personal needs	106 (53%)	54 (27%)	22 (11%)	18 (9%)	200	3.2
5	Skill acquisition provides women the opportunity to cater for their family wellbeing	101 (50.5%)	47 (23.5%)	31 (15.5%)	21 (10.5%)	200	3.1
6	Skill acquisition provides women the prospect of becoming self-employed	91 (45.5%)	65 (32.5%)	29 (14.5%)	15 (7.5%)	200	3.1
Total number of respondents = 200. Grand Mean = 3.2							

Discussion of Findings

Based on research objective one, the study found that women in this clime had skills ranging from poultry farming (17.5%), catering and mobile food sales (16.5%), fashion designing (11%), Craft making (7.5%), make-up/beauty artistry (10%), fishery (2.5%), Shoe making/revamping (4.5%), event planning (9%), hair making (13%), as well as detergents/cosmetics production (8.5%). This finding seems suitable in view of the fact that Abia is one of the states that experiences a lot of commercial activities. Aba happens to be the business hub of the state and is often referred to as the “Japan of Africa” due to the entrepreneurial spirit of the people who are engaged in all kinds of trade. Also, aside from oil exploration, farming also assumes the main occupation of the people (Ariwodor and Agwu, 2016).

Similarly, the study found that fish farming, poultry, and event planning attract higher income rates (between ₦7000 – ₦10, 000) daily. This is followed by fashion designing, make-up artist, and catering (₦4000 – ₦8, 000). Those who are into crafts, hair making as well as detergents/cosmetics production earn between ₦2000 to ₦5000 daily. Accordingly, Lami (2017) observes that many young Nigerians have acquired training as chefs and have been able to build popular and successful food brands that have earned them both money and fame, some of them operate from the comforts of their home with the help of social media and the internet. In addition, food service is an in-demand vocational skill that enjoys a healthy

outlook and anyone with food service skills can definitely find a job if they are not yet ready to run their own business.

Equally, hair styling, like makeup is a trendy skill that is high in demand especially bridal hair styling (Lami, 2017). Individuals generally want to feel and look good and beauticians can help them achieve that. This industry has grown and is still growing with good opportunities, especially for people who are and desire to be self-employed. Likewise, the fashion industry is another industry with a very high demand rate that has provided an escape from unemployment and poverty for the Nigerian youth (Lami, 2017). In the same vein, findings show that respondents agree that skill acquisition makes women independent (3.3), employers of labour (3.3), and increase family income (3.4). It further enhances family wellbeing (3.1), presents opportunities for women to become self-employed (3.1), and to cater their personal needs (3.2).

These results are consistent with the position of Idoko (2014) who states that the purpose of skill acquisition programmes is to prepare and equip individuals that can be beneficial to society. He maintained that skill acquisition is capable of ensuring value re-orientation and transforming individuals into creators of wealth and employment instead of job seekers. These findings further confirm the observations of Altan-Olcay (2015) that skill acquisition can help women generate additional income that can be used for the sustenance of their families and improve their households' welfare status. Kimhi (2010) adds that female skill acquisition is essential for several reasons, including women empowerment, social inclusion, economic freedom, contribution toward household income, sense of accomplishment, reducing inequalities, and poverty alleviation (Gu and Nie, 2021), while Moshood (2018) sees skill acquisition as aggressive catalysts for change, especially for individuals who desire to make profits.

Conclusion/ Recommendation

This paper looked at the types of skills acquired by women in Abia state. The study found poultry farming (17.5%), catering/mobile food sales (16.5%), fashion designing (11%), Craft making (7.5%), make-up/beauty artistry (10%), fish farming (2.5%), Shoe making/revamping (4.5%), event planning (9%), hair making (13%), as well as detergents/cosmetics production (8.5%), were among the skills possessed by women in the state. The study also found that the various skills possessed by the women fetched income ranging from ₦2000 to ₦10, 000 daily. Likewise, findings show that respondents agreed that skill acquisition makes women independent (3.3), employers of labour (3.3), and increase family income (3.4). The acquisition of skills further enhances family wellbeing (3.1) and affords women the opportunity to become self-employed (3.1), and to cater to their personal needs. Thus, skill acquisition is essential in enhancing family income.

Consequently, this paper recommends as follows:

1. Skill acquisition has the capacity to generate small and medium-scale enterprises, which is known to be a driver of a healthy economy. Hence, the federal, state, and local

- government should ensure the availability of funds for trainees to be able to set themselves up after acquiring profitable skills, as this will enable them to become entrepreneurs, and so lead to job creation and economic development
2. The federal and state government should pay adequate attention to skill acquisition centers, especially in informal settings. Tailors, hair makers, food sellers, poultry farmers, and shoemakers, among many others, offer training but on an informal and smaller scale. As such, the government should give these forms of apprenticeship a facelift, and integrate them into larger schemes where they can accommodate more learners.
 3. Parents, spouses, and other stakeholders should encourage their children, wives, husbands, and youths in general to acquire profitable skills that can enhance their employability, independence, and resilience, especially at this time of COVID-19 crisis.

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