

Women in Pandemics and Sustainability of African Rural Communities

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Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic mitigation measures in the global South, particularly African developing countries like Nigeria were inadequate to alleviate socioeconomic effects of the pandemic on the livelihood and survival of rural communities. Rural women dominate the informal sector and have been active in agriculture, food security, health, nutrition, home management, traditional elderly care, and micro and small-scale enterprises. Whilst the effects of the pandemic on Nigerian rural women have been measured, the contribution of rural women to the sustainability of agrarian rural communities in the country have not been studied. This paper explored the role of women in supporting their families and communities for the sustainability of rural communities and challenges they faced as they serve as buffers for the survival of their families and sustenance of livelihood in rural communities during the pandemic. The paper adopted qualitative phenomenological research design. A sample of 30 rural women were drawn from Gbara Village, an agrarian rural community in Sagamu Local Government, Ogun State, Nigeria through convenience sampling and purposive sampling techniques. Semi-structured Interviews, focus group meetings, and documents were used as data sources and descriptive analysis was used to analyse the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The qualitative results were analyzed through content analysis and eight themes emerged. There were responses on contributions of rural women to the sustainability of Gbara Village during the pandemic in agriculture and food security value chain, health and nutrition, home management, traditional elderly care, and rural entrepreneurship. The paper also found that rural women were confronted with socio-economic challenges of gender inequalities, illiteracy, and limited access to technology to enhance their role

as change agents in rural communities during the pandemic. The study suggested that the government, organized private sector, development agencies, non-governmental organizations, research institutions, and civil society organizations should priorities and fast-track the attainment of gender equality and women education to empower rural women and increase their capacity for socio-economic transformation of rural communities in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Covid-19 Pandemic, African Rural Communities, Rural Women, Gender Equality and Women Education, Sustainability*

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic that ravaged the entire world in 2020 has caused significant changes in almost every aspect of human life, exacting a heavy toll on individuals, families, communities, and societies worldwide. Daily lives have been drastically altered, economies have entered a slump, and many of the traditional social, economic, and public health safety nets on which many people rely in times of adversity have been put under unprecedented strain ([Omokhabi, 2021](#)). The pandemic and efforts to control it have threatened livelihoods, introduced new risks and made unstable work relationships even more precarious in communities, especially for women. The Covid-19 pandemic, which has plunged the world economy into a recession, has been adding to the globe's stress since March 2020. Globally, the Sustainable Development Goals'

advancement over the past few years has either stopped or reversed ([Macht, Chapman and Fitzgerald, 2020](#); [United Nations, 2021](#)). In African developing countries like Nigeria, Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent restraint measures are driving the rural communities toward socioeconomic crises where not only health and nutrition but all spheres of life including agriculture, food security, and enterprises are affected. The Nigerian economy is driven by micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in the informal sector and the rural women are active in commercial and subsistence agriculture production for food security. Despite this, even before the pandemic, there has been multidimensional poverty across the six-geopolitical zones of the country and many households in the rural communities were food insecure ([National Bureau of Statistics, 2022](#)). The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI)

reported 828 million people were hungry in 2021 which was an increase of 150 million as a result of Covid-19 pandemic. In West Africa, 27 million people suffer from hunger with an additional 11 million facing the likelihood of going hungry ([Oxfam, 2022](#)).

In Nigeria, women in the rural communities are traditionally resourceful homemakers, entrepreneurial and they play a critical role in agriculture representing 70% out of the 95% smallholder feeding the nation ([Rahman, 2008](#); [Oladejo, Olawuyi, and Anjorin, 2011](#); [John-Mensah, 2018](#), [Kupar, 2019](#); [Udegbumam, 2021](#)). Women are generally responsible partly or entirely for food production, distribution, and utilization ([Doss, Njuki & Mika, 2020](#)). The restrictive measures put in place to reduce the risk of transmission of the Covid-19 virus have increased the food insecurity of many individuals ([Vasseur, VanVolkenburg, Vandeplass, Touré, Sanfo & Baldé, 2021](#)). Women may have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic in terms of food security because of their important involvement in agriculture and food security. The gender disparity in the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity rose throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, and

women were 10% more likely to be in this situation than males in 2020 as opposed to 6% in 2019 ([FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2021](#)). Women in rural areas have had to shoulder more burdens due to caring for others, performing unpaid work, and playing roles in the food chain ([Power, 2020](#)). Due to pandemic pressures, in addition to food security, other gender inequities, like gender-based violence, have gotten worse ([Breakfast & Nomarwayi, 2021](#); [Maula, 2021](#)).

Studies carried in both developed and developing countries had focused more on the impacts of Covid-19, strategies for its prevention and vaccination with little on the roles that rural women played during pandemics to sustain the communities. In order to steer the future logically and wisely in situations of this sort, it is crucial to understand how rural women were affected by the numerous government tactics enforced to stop the virus' spread. Additionally, it would be helpful to understand how these actions affected how daily responsibilities and obligations were carried out. Simply put, how did they respond to or manage the Covid-19 pandemic's effects on their life, particularly their social and economic circumstances, thereby promoting the sustainability of their

communities? This question is significant in terms of economic justice for rural women, who are considered underprivileged and vulnerable despite playing critical roles as homemakers and breadwinners in rural communities.

Literature Review

Covid-19 Pandemic and Its Effects

The disease COVID-19 was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020 ([World Health Organization \[WHO\], 2020](#)). Since the pandemic's start in Wuhan, China, it has posed a serious threat to human existence. It is a virus that neither respects national boundaries nor recognizes any boundaries between people. It confirms that globalization and its discontents impact all people, nations, and economies ([Stiglitz, 2002](#)). According to [Narendra, Saurabh, and Arun \(2020\)](#), it is an infectious condition brought on by the coronavirus that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome.

The virus has a five-day incubation period and spreads from person to person, primarily by respiratory droplets, body contact, coming into contact with contaminated objects, and body parts, including hands, faces, eyes,

noses, and mouths. Covid-19 is extremely contagious and can spread through contact with asymptomatic people as well. It quickly spread to practically every country in the world and had major health repercussions for everyone, especially the elderly and those with pre-existing comorbidities. The best course of action was to treat the accompanying illnesses and symptoms as there was no treatment in sight. Attempts to create a vaccination against the illness were also made ([Moronkola, Iyanda, Moronkola, & Omokhabi, 2020](#)). Life has changed significantly since the Covid-19 epidemic first broke out. The pandemic has had an impact on every aspect of life, including how individuals eat and how communities can survive, especially in rural places. In the public sphere, it has an impact on the economy, health, society, politics, and humanity; however, little is known about how it influences people's feeding (eating) behaviors and household food security.

The pandemic's impact studies showed that its lead to violence against children and women as investigated by [Pereira, et al \(2020\)](#) and [Peterman, Potts, Megan, Thompson, Shah, Oertelt-Prigione, & van Gelder \(2020\)](#), on health by [Berger, Nicholas, Alexandra, and Ross \(2020\)](#), [United Nations \(2020\)](#) and [World](#)

[Health Organization \(2020\)](#), on economy by [Eichenbaum, Rebelo and Trabandt \(2020\)](#) and [Piguillem and Shi \(2020\)](#), on education by [United Nations \(2020\)](#), and on human safety by [Lattouf \(2020\)](#) and [National Domestic Violence Hotline \(2020\)](#). Other studies have also pointed out the implications of the novel virus for food insecurity according to [Guterres \(2020\)](#), [United Nations Standing System Committee on Nutrition \(2020\)](#) and [World Food Programme \(2020\)](#). Hunger, sex-for-food, violence against women and girls, unhealthy coping mechanisms, and other effects are listed by the [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(2020\)](#). Because of the lockdown's disastrous effects on Nigerian households (including food shortages, poor disposable income, rape, sex-for-food, and skipping meals, among other things), mankind and peaceful coexistence worldwide are at risk ([Laetitia, 2020](#); [Laura, 2020](#); [Nigeria Centre for Disease Control \(NCDC\), 2020](#); [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2020](#); [United Nations, 2020](#); [World Health Organization, 2020](#)). Besides, it is a threat to household security, especially the safety and adequate nourishment of women and children.

Rural Women in African Rural Communities

According to the [UNDESA \(2019\)](#), about 3.4 billion people still reside in rural regions in low- and middle-income countries, and the majority depend to varied degrees on agricultural and food systems for a living. Most of this rural population is critically extremely and moderately poor and/or malnourished ([UNDESA, 2021](#)). Most low- and middle-income countries will continue to have substantial or growing rural populations despite significant urbanization for the foreseeable future. Addressing the links between rural people's well-being and food systems will be necessary to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG One (Poverty) and SDG Two (Hunger), as well as a longer-term agenda of leaving no one behind ([FAO, 2017](#)).

The improvement of justice, nutrition, environmental sustainability, and resilience in food systems is necessary for the future well-being of billions of rural residents. Women tend to dominate subsistence agriculture, non-timber forest products enterprises, conservation, and agri-food marketing, while women have a wide range of roles in agriculture depending on area, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class ([FAO](#)

[& African Union, 2018](#)). Women participate in all phases and steps of food processing and are universally in charge of preparing food for their family. In many cultures and nations, women are primarily in charge of providing food for their families. Given that they are responsible for providing their families with essentials like food, fuel, and water, women have a strong stake in environmental protection and deterioration. Rural women play a significant role in development. They serve as a catalyst for the seismic shifts in the economy, the environment, and society needed for sustainable growth. The difficulties they encounter, however, include having limited access to credit, healthcare, and education. The difficulties of illiteracy and a lack of access to technology have a detrimental effect on the roles of women in the growth of rural communities ([Rathgeber, 2011](#); [Mbah, 2015](#); [Wang and Zhang, 2022](#)). The world food and economic crises, as well as climate change, intensify these. Given the significant proportion of women working in agriculture around the world, empowering them is essential for the wellbeing of each person, their families, and rural communities as well as for overall economic production.

In Nigeria, women play a significant role in agriculture. Women make up between 70 and 80 percent of the agricultural labor force among the Jukun people, nomadic Fulfulde women, and Kulka women farmers, according to several studies conducted in the country's north. Additionally, a survey of rural agricultural women in the area showed that they take part in income-generating activities, particularly the processing of agricultural produce. Similarly, 90% of the women in a similar survey of food processing and cottage industries in three Zaria villages participated in at least one food processing activity ([Baba, Zain, Idris, & Sanni, 2015](#)). The scholars cited several sources to confirm that the role of women in Nigerian agriculture has gotten more attention over the years. While women have taken over the production and processing of arable crops in some states, they are also responsible for up to 80% of the nation's staple food production. Even though they are responsible for food crops, their activities have significantly contributed to national agricultural production and food security. Several studies have been conducted over the years to identify the barriers to women's participation in agricultural activities. The most visible of these impediments is gender inequality, which

women face in all aspects of life. Systemic gender biases may exist in the form of customs, beliefs, and attitudes that confine women primarily to the domestic sphere, women's economic and domestic workloads that place significant time demands on them, and laws and customs that restrict women's access to credit, production inputs, employment, education, or medical care ([Baba, et al, 2015](#)).

Gbara Village, a Typical African Rural Community

The study area, Gbara Village is an agrarian rural community situated north of Simawa, east of Sotubo, and west of Likosi in Sagamu Local Government, Ogun State. Gbara Village is Yoruba and has served as the farmland of the Ijagba people from Ijagba in Sagamu. The village has a migratory population of 350 people and out of these adult women are 220 which is 63% of the total population of the rural community. The Igede people from Benue State are in sizeable number in the village and the women are also farmers. There is a growing population of youth who reside in the village and are not Yorubas of Ogun State origin but from different parts of the country, particularly

Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Akwa-Ibom, Benue, Cross River, and Imo States to seek employment in the steel manufacturing companies around the community.

Like most Nigerian rural settlements, basic contemporary infrastructure and amenities are lacking in the village. However, it is primarily an agricultural village. Along with the cultivation of crops like vegetables, it also keeps animals. Poultry, pigs, and fisheries are some of the species that are raised. The village generates a comparatively high crop of cassava each year, which benefits its economy. For some of the rural women, the yields are a significant source of cash and are sufficient for processing. Gbara Village is primarily a rural community in terms of physical development, with land use supporting subsistence agriculture and a community school to provide the educational needs of the children. However, there are some contemporary components in the nearby communities such as private schools, hospitals, a police station, and a market. There are more smallholder farmers and petty traders among the women.

The adult women are aged between 35 years and 53 years old. These women are mainly self-employed smallholder farmers, and

homemakers who are largely responsible for catering for their families and children. Their level of literacy is very low, and most of them do not have basic functional literacy but they are able to follow news through listening to radio and getting updates from their visiting family members and children who have access to social media. They have forum for gathering at community levels in the churches and a mosque (religious centers) in the village. These women have limited access to the internet. There is electricity in the community, and it is largely unreliable. There is no portable water, and the women depend on water from the river that courses through the village from adjoining communities for their drinking water, cooking, bathing, and washing. The women are homemakers and self-employed. Those working in scrap iron and steel companies in the neighboring communities do not have to take public transport facilities but walk to and from their places of work.

Methodology

The study adopted qualitative phenomenological research design to enable the participants to describe their lived experiences as related to the objectives of the

study. The sample of the population comprised 30 rural women who were drawn from Gbara Village, an agrarian rural community in Sagamu Local Government, Ogun State, Nigeria through convenience sampling and purposive sampling techniques. The self-designed instrument is a guide sheet with three sections comprising Section A with 5 items for demographic characteristics of the respondents, Section B with 10 items for thematic analysis of respondents' lived experiences in the pandemic, and Section C with 5 items for respondents' socio-economic challenges during the pandemic.

The self-designed instrument measured themes of agriculture and food security value chain, health and nutrition, home management, traditional elderly care, and rural entrepreneurship with 10 open-ended questions whilst socio-economic challenges of gender inequalities, illiteracy, and limited access to technology were measured with 5 open-ended questions. The study obtained data for the demographic characteristics of the respondents through used minutes of monthly community meeting documents and personal questions. The 10 open-ended questions were collated through semi-structured interviews while the 5

open-ended questions were collated through 2 focus meetings in the village square.

The study conducted a pilot of 10 rural women in Gbodomu, a neighboring farm settlement with Gbara Village selected through purposive sampling techniques to ascertain the content validity of the instrument. An expert in Social Welfare in the Department of Adult Education in the University of Ibadan analyzed contents of the instrument and sequenced the themes to reflect objectives of the study. The data collected for Section A were analyzed through descriptive statistics using frequency counts and percentages, and Section B and Section C were punctiliously transcribed into English from notes taken during the oral interviews and focus group meetings which were conducted in Yoruba language,

manually coded and categorized using MSOffice applications with themes to measure agriculture and food security value chain, health and nutrition, home management, traditional elderly care, and rural entrepreneurship as well as socio-economic challenges of gender inequalities, illiteracy, and limited access to technology respectively.

Results

Section A: Descriptive Analysis of Quantitative Data

The study used descriptive statistics to analyse the demographic characteristics of respondents with simple frequency counts and percentage scores as follows:

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Full-time Housewife (FTW)	2	6.7%	6.7%	6.7%
Smallholder Farmer (SF)	14	46.7%	46.7%	53.4%
Entrepreneur/micro business owner (EMBO)	4	13.3%	13.3%	66.7%
Entrepreneur/Petty Trader (EPT)	6	20.0%	20.0%	86.7%
Factory worker/Housekeeper (FWH)	4	13.3%	13.3%	100.0%

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Total	30	100.0%	100.0%	
Income	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Below N15,000.00 per month (Level 1)	2	6.7%	6.7%	6.7%
N15,000.00 – N24,999.00 per month (Level 2)	3	10.0%	10.0%	16.7%
N25,000.00 – N34,999.00 per month (Level 3)	9	30.0%	30.0%	46.7%
N35,000.00 – N44,999.00 per month (Level 4)	12	40.0%	40.0%	86.7%
Above N45,000.00 per month (Level 5)	4	13.3%	13.3%	100.0%
Total	30	100.0%	100.0%	
Educational Background	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Formal education up to primary school without certificate (FEUTPSWC)	9	30.0%	30.0%	30.0%
Formal education up to secondary school without certificate (FEUTOSSWC)	6	20.0%	20.0%	50.0%
No formal education (NFE)	2	6.7%	6.7%	56.7%
Islamic education (IE)	4	13.3%	13.3%	70.0%

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC)	5	16.7%	16.7%	86.7%
West Africa School Certificate Examination (WASCE/SSSCE)	3	10.0%	10.0%	96.7%
Post-secondary school certificate (PSSC)	1	3.3%	3.3%	100.0%
Total	30	100.0%	100.0%	
Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Married (M)	18	60.0%	60.0%	60.0%
Unmarried (U)	2	6.7%	6.7%	66.7%
Divorced (D)	3	10.0%	10.0%	76.7%
Widowed (W)	4	13.3%	13.3%	90.0%
Single Parent (SP)	3	10.0%	10.0%	100.0%
Total	30	100.0%	100.0%	
Age	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
18 – 25 years old (AGE-1)	2	6.7%	6.7%	6.7%
26 – 35 years old (AGE-2)	4	13.3%	13.3%	20.0%
36 – 45 years old (AGE-3)	14	46.7%	46.7%	66.7%
46 – 55 years old (AGE-4)	7	23.3%	23.3%	90.0%
Above 55 years old (AGE-5)	3	10.0%	10.0%	100.0%
Total	30	100.0%	100.0%	

The respondents were full-time housewives (n = 2; 6.7%), smallholder farmers (n=14, 46.7%), entrepreneurs/micro business owners (n=4, 13.3%), entrepreneurs/petty traders (n=6,

20.0%), and factory workers/housekeepers (n=4, 13.3%). Two (6.7%) of these women earn below N15,000.00 per month, 3(10.0%) earn N15,000 – N24,999.00 per month, 9(30.0%) earn N25,000 – N34,999.00 per month, 12(40.0%) earn N35,000.00 – N44,999.00 per month, and 4(13.3%) earn above N45,000.00 per month. Whilst (n=1, 3.3%) has post-secondary school certificate, (n=2, 6.7%) have no formal education. There were (n=4, 13.3%) with Islamic education whilst (n=5, 16.7%) and (n=3, 10.0%) have First School Leaving Certificate and West Africa School Certificate Examination (WASCE/SSCE) respectively. There were (n=9, 30.0%) who had formal education up to primary school without certificate and (n=6, 20.0%) with formal education up to secondary school without certificate. The respondents who were married (n=18, 60.0%), unmarried (n=2, 6.7%), divorced (n=3, 10.0%), widowed (n=4, 13.3%) and single parent (n=3, 10.0%) were aged 18-25

years old (n=2, 6.7%), 26-35 years old (n=4, 13.3%), 36-45 years old (n=14, 46.7%), 46-55 years old (n=7, 23.3%) and above 55 years old (n=3, 10.0%).

Section B: Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

The findings of the study showed respondents’ contributions to the sustainability of African rural communities in pandemic. These results were presented under five themes namely agriculture and food security value chain, health and nutrition, home management, traditional elderly care, and rural entrepreneurship.

Theme 1: Agriculture and Food Security Value Chain

Table 2: *Summary of Respondents’ Views on Women’s Contribution to Agriculture and Food Security Value Chain for Sustainability of Gbara Village during the Pandemic.*

Theme 1.1: Views on the pandemic affecting rural women’s ability to farm, harvest, and sell their crops					
Theme 1.2: Views on rural women mitigating effects of pandemic on agriculture and food security value chain in your rural community					
Occupation	Income	Educational	Marital Status	Age	Respondent’s Reaction

Smallholder Farmer 1	LEVEL 5	FEUTPS WC	M	AGE- 3	Our farming activities did not stop during the pandemic. Rather, we cultivated food crops around the house areas and fetched water from the stream to grow basic crops to feed the family.
Smallholder Farmer 7	LEVEL 5	IE	M	AGE- 3	I followed my husband to the farm during the pandemic and offered support to grow food crops to feed the family. We were able to sell our produce in the community market and move some to the city although some of the produces were destroyed because of the restriction in movement. We obeyed Covid-19 precautions as we used local clothes to make nose masks and wore while going to farm and during sales of farm produces
Entrepreneur/micro business owner 1	LEVEL 5	FEUTPS WC	U	AGE- 3	I became a middle-woman for the smallholder farmers during the pandemic and used my experience in logistics to arrange transportation to move farm produce from the village to the city. We were able to observe all the Covid-19 protocols and there was no incidence of the outbreak of the pandemic in the village.

Smallholder Farmer 9	LEVEL 4	FEUTPS WC	M	AGE- 5	<p>Women group collaborated with the church and attracted buyers for our farm produce to get them to the city markets in Sagamu and Ikorodu. We harvested sacks of pineapples which the women group assisted us to get to designated markets to avoid wastage because we did not have a storage system for the produce.</p>
Smallholder Farmer 10	LEVEL 4	FEUTPS WC	M	AGE- 4	<p>We continued to farm despite the pandemic. Our children were not going to school so they followed us to the farm and we got more hands to work because we were mainly involved in subsistence farming. This increased our harvest and we got more money to feed our families. Our husbands were hesitant to go to the farms but we braved the odds because we did not want our children to go hungry.</p> <p>We made use of locally made soap to wash our hands regularly and impoverished empty keg of oil as our source of washing hands.</p>

Smallholder Farmer 14	LEVEL 4	WASCE / SSSCE	SP	AGE- 3	The pandemic limited our ability to increase our farm production for obvious reasons but we were able to sell the little we harvested and made money to feed our families. Our customer patronage dropped although we still made sales through the women group and church logistics to get our produce to the market.
Entrepreneur/micro business owner 4	LEVEL 3	FSLC	M	AGE- 2	My stall in the village could not serve the needs of the people during the lockdown because of restriction in movement. However, I was able to get stocks from neighboring communities at a premium and sell to those who could afford them. I continued to serve the needs of the community and we traded by barter for those who could not pay cash for the goods to they needed to feed their families.

The results of the study showed that respondents considered their courage to continue to go to farm as smallholder farmers to enable them feed and fend for their families in spite of the lockdown and the realities of job loss experienced by some of their husbands. There were restrictions in

movement, but respondents found a way around the constraint without breaching the Covid-19 prevention protocols using locally made nose masks, locally produced soap for washing and observing social distancing and were able to harvest their crops and sell their produce in the market so that they could get money to take care

of their families. The additional hands they got from their school-age children who were affected by the pandemic boosted their production and sales. The rural women formed themselves into a collaborative group and teamed up with the community church to organise logistics to get buyers for their produce and avoided loss of sales and harvest wastages. Respondents submitted that they beat the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown and were able to continue their farming and

small-scale businesses without breaching the statutory laws in order to feed their families and provide agriculture produce for consumption in the cities.

Theme 2: Health and Nutrition

Table 3: *Summary of Respondents’ Views on Women’s Contribution to Health and Nutrition for Sustainability of Gbara Village during the Pandemic.*

Theme 2.1: Views on the pandemic affecting health and nutrition of the family in the rural community					
Theme 2.2: Views on rural women mitigating effects of the pandemic on the health and nutrition of the family					
Occupation	Income	Education	Marital Status	Age	Respondent’s Reaction
Smallholder Farmer 2	LEVEL 2	IE	M	AGE-3	We cannot find food easily for our children. But we have to continue to go to farm and cultivate food to feed our family.
Smallholder Farmer 3	LEVEL 3	NFE	M	AGE-3	The government palliatives did not really get to us. We only heard about it and were not fortunate to receive anything from the government. The church in the village shared palliatives for their members. Despite the restrictions in movement, we still have to get

					our produce from the farm and improvise to set up stall in front of our houses to sell our produce to get money to buy drug and feed the family.
Fulltime Housewife 1	LEVEL 1	IE	M	AGE-3	We were affected by the restrictions but have to work through the informal women groups to exchange what we have such as foods and money for drugs and provisions for the family.
Fulltime Housewife 2	LEVEL 1	IE	M	AGE-5	We were at home throughout the lockdown. I had to farm around the house and fetch water from the well to nurture the plants to grow so that we can feed the family, and provide basic health care for the children, and our husband.

The results of the study showed that the rural women confirmed that the pandemic negatively impacted the health and nutrition of their children and families in the rural community. Respondents could not find food and medicine for their households and did not get any government palliatives throughout the pandemic. Respondents had to engage in farming and trading to get money to provide

food and basic health care for their children and households.

Theme 3: Home Management

Table 4: *Summary of Respondents’ Views on Women’s Contribution to Home Management for Sustainability of Gbara Village during the Pandemic.*

Theme 3.1: Views on the pandemic affecting home management in the rural community Theme 3.2: Views on how rural women mitigated effects of the pandemic on home management in the family					
Occupation	Income	Education	Marital Status	Age	Respondent's Reaction
Smallholder Farmer 4	LEVEL 3	FEUTOSSWC	M	AGE-3	My husband could not go to work and this was a lot of stress for the family. I had to step up to tidy up things around the house and ensure that the children comport themselves to not irritate their father. It was really frustrating
Entrepreneur/ Microbusiness Owner 2	LEVEL 4	FEUTOSSWC	SP	AGE-4	It was difficult combining home keeping with running my small-scale business during the lockdown. The fear of contracting the disease was palpable. I had to ensure that the home was always clean (sweeping, cleaning and washing) and everybody complied with the Covid-19 pandemic prevention measures.
Entrepreneur/Petty Trader 2	LEVEL 5	WASCE/ SSSCE	W	AGE-4	Going around to sell my wares during the pandemic was difficult. I had to make

					sure that the home front always observed the Covid-19 prevention measures and nobody was sick.
Entrepreneur/Petty Trader 4	LEVEL 3	FSLC	M	AGE-4	Although there was no incidence of Covid-19 infection in the village through the pandemic, the fear of the pandemic affected sales and I had to work with the women groups to sell my goods and get money to take care of the home because my husband lost his job during the pandemic.

The results of the study revealed that rural women were multitasked by staying at home to take care of their children, husbands, and vulnerable people in the community whilst working as smallholder farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs to make money to support their families. Despite the lack of medical facilities and health centre in the village, the women mobilized themselves and

ensured cleanliness and hygiene such that there were no records of Covid-19-related sickness in the community throughout the pandemic.

Theme 4: Traditional Elderly Care

Table 5: *Summary of Respondents’ Views on Women’s Contribution to Traditional Elderly Care for Sustainability of Gbara Village during the Pandemic.*

Theme 4.1: Views on the pandemic affecting the traditional elderly care in the rural community

Theme 4.2: Views on rural women mitigating effects of the pandemic on traditional elderly care in the family					
Occupation	Income	Educational	Marital Status	Age	Respondent's Reaction
Smallholder Farmer 5	LEVEL 3	FEUTPS WC	M	AGE-3	The nurse that used to come to the village to attend to the health care of the elderly could not come because of the pandemic. We formed a women care group to pool resources together to take care of the elderly in the community. I was responsible for ensuring the cleanliness of the community common areas and mobilized the children and youth to sweep and clean the areas on regular basis.
Smallholder Farmer 6	LEVEL 4	FEUTPS WC	M	AGE-3	We found it difficult to get drugs for the elderly during the pandemic. The church and private individuals carried out free medical outreach to assist the elderly in the village.
Smallholder Farmer 8	LEVEL 4	FEUTPS WC	M	AGE-3	We were not able to persuade the elderly that the Covid-19 pandemic was real until the women care group collaborated with the church in the village and brought in medical team to sensitize the people about how to protect themselves from the pandemic.

Entrepreneur/ Petty Trader 5	LEVEL 3	FEUTPS WC	W	AGE-4	The elderly did not get palliative care during the pandemic. We had to resort to traditional medicinal care to attend to the health and well-being of the elderly in the village.
Entrepreneur/ Petty Trader 6	LEVEL 3	FSLC	W	AGE-3	The excessive usage of firewood and limited access to other means of cooking (like gas and kerosine) because of the pandemic affected the health of the elderly in the village. There were no kitchens and everybody cooked in the open. We could only offer informal support through traditional herbal care and could not access orthodox medicine because of restrictions in movement. We were there to cheer up the elderly without which their mortality rate would have been high.

The results of the study revealed that the care of the elderly in the community suffered a setback because of the pandemic and the rural women resorted to traditional health care to attend to the elderly in the village. Respondents got support from the church in the community and pool their resources together to get drugs and free medical outreaches to the elderly in the village.

Respondents tried to create an environment that enhanced the health and wellbeing of the elderly to reduce their exposure to smoke and elements that could complicate their health and spike mortality rate in the village.

Theme 5: Rural Entrepreneurship

Table 6: *Summary of Respondents' Views on Women's Contribution to Rural*

*Entrepreneurship for Sustainability of Gbara
Village during the Pandemic.*

Theme 5.1: Views on the pandemic affecting rural entrepreneurship in the rural community					
Theme 5.2: Views on rural women mitigating effects of pandemic on rural entrepreneurship for sustainability of the family and community					
Occupation	Income	Education	Marital Status	Age	Respondent's Reaction
Smallholder Farmer 11	LEVEL 4	FEUTOSSWC	M	AGE-4	There were restrictions on movements but we were brave and courageous in carryout out our businesses taking into consideration the preventive measures to protect ourselves from contracting the disease. It helped us provide for our families.
Smallholder Farmer 12	LEVEL 4	PSSC	W	AGE-5	Our children were at home and could not go to school. They ate more and were always hungry. We had to go and get more food for them. The option of not going to farm was not there otherwise our families would starve.

Entrepreneur/ Microbusiness Owner 3	LEVEL 4	FLSC	M	AGE- 3	My business experienced a boom during the lockdown because I traded in food supplies. Although many bought on credit but I was able to get money to take care of the family.
Entrepreneur/Petty Trader 1	LEVEL 4	FLSC	M	AGE- 2	My husband was fired and left me with the children because of the pandemic. I was left alone to fend for our five children and make money to feed the family. It was initially difficult because the money was not enough but I got support from the church in the village and we survived the pandemic.
Entrepreneur/ Petty Trader 3	LEVEL 3	FSLC	D	AGE- 4	I continued to carry out my petty trade during the pandemic although the restriction in movement slowed down my sales. However, I could make enough money to get by and feed my family.

Whilst most businesses were shut down as a result of the pandemic, the results of the study showed that the rural women continued to farm and engage in their small-scale trading primarily to provide food for their families and contribute to the food security value chain in the larger society. Respondents observed all the Covid-19 pandemic prevention measures but farmed and traded to support their families. In spite of the constraints of logistics and distribution channels, respondents were able to sell their

produce in the market and make marginal profits to fend for their families.

Section C: Socio-economic Challenges of African Rural Women in Pandemic

Theme 6: Socio-economic Challenge 1: Gender Inequalities

Table 7: *Summary of Respondents’ Views on Socio-economic Challenge of Gender Inequalities against Rural Women during the Pandemic.*

Item 6: Views of rural women on the pandemic contributing to gender inequalities in the rural communities					
Occupation	Income	Education	Marital Status	Age	Respondent’s Reaction
Field Worker 1	LEVEL 3	FEUTOSSWC	M	AGE-2	I was not paid the same amount as men in the factory although we performed the same tasks. When we complained, we were harassed to go and marry rather than trying to compete with men in the factory.
Field Worker 2	LEVEL 2	FEUTOSSWC	D	AGE-2	Men often made advances at me at work and it was difficult to complain because the supervisor was not better because of the things I have

					heard about him. I had not been personally harassed by him before but the advances from co-workers were disturbing.
Field Worker 3	LEVEL 3	FEUTOSSWC	D	AGE- 1	I heard that incidences of sexual assaults were rampant in our village and neighboring villages but no girl was bold enough to come out to report their experiences for fear of stigmatization. Two of my friends were abused by their close relations and trusted friends during the pandemic. Another two were raped and impregnated by co-workers who ran away after the incidence.
Field Worker 4	LEVEL 2	NFE	U	AGE- 1	I stayed with my uncle and was subjected to gender-based violence during the pandemic. I had to move away from his apartment to live with a friend in the village for the sake of my mental health and wellness.

Smallholder Farmer 12	LEVEL 4	PSSC	W	AGE- 5	Women had low representation in the community hierarchy and the role of market women leader has not been accorded the rightful recognition in coordinating the activities of smallholder farmers in the community.
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The results of the study showed that women experienced wage discrimination, sexual assaults, workplace harassment, gender-based violence and low representation in the community hierarchy during the pandemic. According to respondents, perpetrators of the gender-based violence against rural women in the village were able to get away from

justice because of restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Theme 7: Socio-economic Challenge 2: Illiteracy

Table 8: *Summary of Respondents’ Views on Socio-economic Challenge of Illiteracy of Rural Women during the Pandemic.*

Item 7.1: Views on illiteracy affecting the rural women during the pandemic					
Item 7.2: Views on adult literacy enhancing the contribution of women to the sustainability of the community during the pandemic					
Occupation	Income	Education	Marital Status	Age	Respondent’s Reaction
Smallholder Farmer 3	LEVEL 3	NFE	M	AGE- 3	We could not get information in time regarding the pandemic and its health consequences. Women would have been better informed and

					prepared to help the children, older women and the elderly if they are exposed to adult literacy programmes
Field Worker 4	LEVEL 2	NFE	U	AGE-1	Our inability to read and write mean that we have to depend on radio programmes and television to inform us about developments in the city but because we do not have reliable electricity supply, this was difficult. We get information through word of mouth and most times this information is distorted. We need adult literacy programme so that we can read and write and be able to know how to use our phones to get timely information.
Fulltime Housewife 1	LEVEL 1	IE	M	AGE-3	Our low level of literacy affected our health care and hygiene in the village. Let government help us with adult literacy centers so that we can know the right ways to improve our living standard and take care of our children and families.

Fulltime Housewife 2	LEVEL 1	IE	M	AGE- 5	Our inability to read and write limits the types of opportunities we get. I want to work, and I do not want to be a fulltime housewife again. We suffered constraints during the pandemic. If I were educated, I could have done more to cater to the needs of my children and family.
Field Worker 3	LEVEL 3	FEUTOSSWC	D	AGE- 1	I could not get a good job because of my low level of education. I want the government and well-meaning Nigerians to help us with adult literacy classes so that we can read and write and improve our living conditions.

The results of the study showed that illiteracy hampered rural women access to information on health care, socio-economic resources, and market intelligence to promote their effectiveness as smallholder farmers and housekeepers who wanted the best health care and sustainability for their families and communities. The ability of the respondents to read and write limited their access to opportunities to decent work, equitable

remuneration, quality of life, and standard of living. The respondents perceived that adult literacy would expose them to information to promote the quality of their agriculture, enhance their access to good Medicare, and improve their standard of living in the rural community.

Theme 8: Socio-economic Challenge 3: Limited Access to Technology

Table 9: *Summary of Respondents' Views on Women's Limited Access to Technology during Socio-economic Challenge of Rural the Pandemic.*

Item 8.1: Views on limited access to technology affecting the rural women during the pandemic					
Item 8.2: Views on access to technology enhancing the contribution of women in the sustainability of the community during the pandemic					
Occupation	Income	Education	Marital Status	Age	Respondent's Reaction
Smallholder Farmer 2	LEVEL 2	IE	M	AGE-3	Internet network is poor in our village. It is not all the phone networks that work well. We do not get information on time through the social media and this could have helped us to get our produce to the market on time and reduce dependence on middlemen.
Smallholder Farmer 3	LEVEL 3	NFE	M	AGE-3	Most of the smallholder farmers do not have smartphones and depended on their young adult children in the communities to call and update them about development regarding the pandemic. Access to technology would have reduced the fears and panic and give people real time information and help them

					cope with the realities of living through the pandemic.
Smallholder Farmer 4	LEVEL 4	FEUTOSSWC	M	AGE-3	I think that access to technology could have helped our farm business during the pandemic. We were constrained and had to rely on our native intelligence to push our produce to the local and city markets to survive.
Entrepreneur/ Microbusiness Owner 4	LEVEL 3	WASCE/ SSSCE	M	AGE-2	I used my analogue phone to contact my customers and sometimes I could not communicate effectively with them because I did not have a smartphone. I know there are cheaper smartphones that I could afford but I need someone to assist me to learn the functions on it so that I can use it very well.
Entrepreneur/ Petty Trader 1	LEVEL 4	FSLC	M	AGE-2	I was told that there is so much we could do with technology but I was afraid my data and private information could be stolen if I give third parties to help me navigate the features of the phone. I will need training on how to use the phone to do my business well

The results of the study showed that limited access to technology constrained rural women's ability to increase their access to market to sell their produce during the pandemic. Respondents could not promptly access information because of limited telecommunications network in the rural community. Respondents perceived that if they had improved access to technology through smartphones and social media, they would have coordinated their businesses better, and access information about the pandemic to enable them to educate their households and vulnerable ones on how to care for themselves during the lockdown.

Discussions

The phenomenological study has shown the role played by women in the sustainability of the rural community during the pandemic around five thematic areas of agriculture and food security value chain, health and nutrition, home management, traditional elderly care, and rural entrepreneurship and also explored the socio-economic challenges of gender inequalities, illiteracy, and limited access to technology that rural women faced during the pandemic. The results of the study which showed that women were actively

engaged in agriculture and food security value chain during the pandemic were corroborated by [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and African Union \(2018\)](#) and [Baba, et al \(2015\)](#) which highlighted the role of women in agriculture as these women dominated the subsistence agriculture sector in Africa and were involved in value chain of food production and processing. Women worked to provide health and nutrition for their households in the rural communities in the pandemic and the studies of [Berger et al \(2020\)](#), [Lattouf \(2020\)](#) and [World Health Organization \(2020\)](#) asserted that the pandemic affected rural health and human safety.

[Kupar \(2019\)](#) corroborated the results of the study and emphasized the role of rural women in the management of household responsibilities which included child development, health care and well-being, diet and nutrition, cleanliness, and maintenance which help the community to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and survival of the rural community during the pandemic. The study of [Despotovic, Joksimovic, and Jovanovic \(2019\)](#) related that rural women were involved in traditional elderly care in the community and this agreed with the results of the study that women were resourceful in

providing traditional elderly care for the aged in the rural community during the pandemic. The study of [Eichenbaum, Rebelo, and Trabandt \(2020\)](#) related the impact of the pandemic on the economy and rural entrepreneurship to concur about the importance of women in rural entrepreneurship during the pandemic according to the results of the study.

The studies of [Pereira, et al \(2020\)](#) and [Peterman, et al \(2020\)](#) concurred that the Covid-19 pandemic increased gender-based violence against women corroborating the study that rural women were exposed to gender inequalities in the community during the pandemic. [Breakfast and Nomarwayi \(2021\)](#) asserted that there was an increase in gender-based violence caused by Covid-19 pandemic stressors. The results of the study were corroborated by the assertion and findings of [Mbah \(2015\)](#) that Nigerian women are impoverished because of illiteracy which limited their ability to contribute meaningful to agriculture and economic development in the rural community. [Rathgeber \(2011\)](#) and [Wang and Zhang \(2022\)](#) have advocated the need for improved access to technology for rural women for domestic and productive work in

the community to enhance their participation in community development and this corroborated the results of the study that women were constrained by limited access to technology in the rural community during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The phenomenological study has explored the contributions of rural women to the sustainability. Therefore, the study has drawn the following conclusions:

- Rural women were involved in agriculture and food security value chain during the pandemic by engaging in farming activities and small-scale enterprises in the community and beyond the frontiers of their rural community without breaching the Covid-19 pandemic preventive measures instituted by the government.
- Rural women had to engage in farming and trading to get money to provide food and basic health care for their children and households to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on the health and nutrition of their families in the rural community.
- Rural women multitasked by working to support their families as well as staying at home to care for their children, husbands, and vulnerable people in the community hence

there were no records of Covid-19-related sickness in the community throughout the pandemic.

- Rural women created an environment that promoted the health and wellness of the elderly in the community through traditional elderly care in spite of the constraints and setback experienced in elderly care in the community as a result of the pandemic.
- Rural women engaged in active rural entrepreneurship during the pandemic despite constraints of logistics and distribution channels to provide food for their families and contributed to the food security value chain in the society.
- Rural women experienced gender inequalities during the lockdown and the perpetrators escaped justice because of the complications of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Rural women were hampered by illiteracy which limited their access to information that would have enhanced their opportunities to decent work, equitable remuneration, quality of life, and standard of living.
- Rural women had limited access to technology and were neither able to get online real-time information about the Covid-

19 nor coordinate their businesses effectively during the pandemic.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made based on the findings of the phenomenological study:

- The government at the state and local government level should priorities adult literacy among women in the rural communities through their respective agencies and in partnership with relevant tertiary institutions offering Adult Education and Community Development to enable rural women read, write and put the knowledge into the occupations
- The government should improve Agriculture Extension and Community Development programmes in the rural communities to empower smallholder farmers and increase their capacity to contribute to agriculture and food security value chain in rural communities in Southern Nigeria.
- The community leadership and community development association (CDA) should partner with the local government councils and organizations to implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes on adult literacy and access to technology as well as provide infrastructure to

enable rural women use technology to improve their lives, families, and businesses.

- The relevant agencies of government should strengthen social justice system in the rural community to combat gender-based violence against women and create deterrence through regular training of community dwellers on the consequences of crimes against women in the society.
- The government should improve the healthcare facilities in the rural areas, particularly health care programmes for the elderly and children in the community so that rural women can focus on agriculture and small-scale enterprises to contribute to food security in the country.
- The relevant agencies of government should embark on engender-based training for rural community dwellers (including men and children) to sensitize them on gender-based violence (GBV) against women and gender equalities to reduce incidences of GBV during crises such as the pandemic.
- The state and local government should build a community center within the rural community equipped with all the necessary internet enabled multimedia facilities, library, and educators to serve as information center where rural women can

use to access information about their families, businesses, and development in the society.

- The community leadership and community development association (CDA) should collaborate with relevant agencies of government and the organized private sector to set up microcredit and soft loans for rural women for smallholder agriculture and small-scale enterprises to increase their capacity to trade and compete in the market.

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