



# Potholes and pitfalls: The impact of rural transport on female entrepreneurs in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The role of transport in stimulating economic development in developing countries is well documented. However the specific impact of rural transport policy and provision on female entrepreneurs is less well known. Drawing upon the experiences of a group of growth-focused female entrepreneurs receiving support from a national programme, this research explores how they use transport for their business activities, transport barriers that they are subject to and ways in which these barriers are being surmounted. To this end it uses the findings from telephone surveys, supported by in-depth interviews to generate data about their business and transport behaviours. It identifies that many of the women feel that the current transport situation is having a negative impact on the success of their businesses, and has affected their ability to recruit employees, service customers and deliver goods. Whilst the women had a very poor understanding of transport policy, many of them felt that the main issue is the poor quality of the roads. In the short term initiatives to support the specific needs of women would be highly valuable in helping these entrepreneurs to successfully grow their businesses. In the long term a significant amount of investment is required to improve rural transport to meet the needs of female entrepreneurs.

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## 1. Introduction

Poor rural transport systems have an impact upon a diverse range of people. However, in sub-Saharan Africa women are likely to feel the impact more keenly than men due to gender inequalities (see for example Bryceson and Howe, 1993; Porter, 2002a; Bryceson et al., 2003; Njenga and Davis, 2003; Howe, 2003). Women are often perceived to be transport constrained (Fadare and Morenikeji, 2001), which affects their ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities. The negative effects of poor access to transport are compounded by their gender-related roles, their gender-related financial and economic situation, and their gender-related poor access to transport technologies (Starkey, 2007).

Njenga and Davis (2003) point out that discontent with existing transport policies and patterns of investment has led to the evolution of a body of investigative work whose focal point is issues of social, economic and environmental sustainability and which is related to gender. However Porter (2014) notes that the “knowledge that has been gathered over more than two decades concerning rural women’s transport problems in Africa has not, as yet, induced adequate remedial action” (p. 39). This is reinforced by Odufuwa et al. (2012) who posit that “women’s issues in Nigerian public transport have received little or no attention from transport planners and policy makers, empirical evidence with respect to travel

burdens facing women during spatial interactions is needed” (p. 24). Therefore, in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, a transport system and transport services that are designed to take account of requirements which “vary according to gender relations, mobility needs, roles and access to resources and decision-making process” (Odufuwa et al., 2012, p. 24) are somewhat lacking.

The availability of a high quality, reliable transport network is well documented as a contributory factor in the overall success of a nation and its economy. Whilst in developed countries a well maintained, functioning transport system is seen to be a facilitator of growth (Banister and Berechman, 2001; Eddington, 2006), transport improvements in developing economies have been shown to facilitate increased economic activity (Crafts and Leunig, 2006; Rosewell, 2012).

Much of the expenditure on transport in developing countries takes place in urban areas where the population that will benefit from it is greater. However, the role of transport investment in rural areas should not be underestimated as transport has strong links to increased agricultural productivity in developing countries, which leads to reduced household level poverty (Dorosh et al., 2012; Khandker et al., 2006). As the World Bank states “inadequate transport has long been considered a particular impediment to agricultural growth and poverty reduction in sub-Saharan Africa” (World Bank, 2012, p. 5). Indeed sub-Saharan Africa is particularly disadvantaged in transport terms because many of the countries are small and landlocked. In addition, despite evidence of their effectiveness from other regions, many rural transport interventions remain un-used (World Bank, 2012).

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Whilst improved transport infrastructure and services can clearly benefit the economy in developing countries, the particular barriers experienced by, and needs of, niche sub-groups such as rural female entrepreneurs appear to be relatively poorly understood. This paper contributes to knowledge in this area drawing on research undertaken with female entrepreneurs in rural Nigeria during 2013 and 2014. It explores the transport behaviours of, and transport needs and issues experienced by female entrepreneurs before drawing conclusions regarding future actions.

## 2. Existing knowledge

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is situated in West Africa, bordering Benin, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. It has a total area of 923,768km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 174,507,539 of whom 49.6% live in urban areas (CIA, 2013). It is the most populous country in Africa (CIA, 2013), but while average life expectancy in Nigeria has been rising it is currently only 52, below that of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa (World Development Indicators, 2011). Only 61.3% of the population over the age of 15 can read and write, although the male/female split is uneven since 72.1% of men are able to write, but only 50.4% of women (CIA, 2013). The average number of children per woman is 5.7, although families tend to have more children in rural areas than in urban ones (National Population Commission, 2009).

Around 50.4% of the Nigerian population live in rural areas<sup>1</sup> and agriculture provides the livelihood for around 90% of these people (IFAD, 2010). Two thirds of rural people are classified as “rural poor” and live on less than \$1 (US) per day. Farming remains the main occupation for households in rural areas, although it rarely provides sufficient household income. As a result, most rural households engage in a diverse range of activities and employment. In the villages migratory opportunities are often pursued by male household members, leaving women behind to manage farm and non-farm enterprises, where women make up 60–80% of the agricultural labour force (Odebode, 2012). This leads to feminisation of economic activities as women combine household tasks with income generation in order to maintain the food and welfare requirements of their household.

### 2.1. Rural transport

Improvements to the road network and to transport services play a key role in stimulating the economy and reducing poverty (Starkey, 2007). In rural areas, one of the most effective means to increase income and reduce poverty is to increase the productivity of local activities that households depend on for their livelihoods (Igwe, 2013). However much economic activity depends on access to roads and transport services, as good access can increase the price a trader can get for their goods and help traders to establish new markets (Porter, 2002b; Njenga and Davis, 2003).

The rural transport system in Nigeria consists of a network of roads and tracks of varying degrees of quality. In many rural areas people have poor access to the motorable roads they need to experience socio-economic benefits (Starkey et al., 2013). Many rural roads are in poor condition and few are paved, impacting on the existence and reliability of public transport services. Furthermore, some areas are only accessible during the dry season as heavy rain makes them impassable and increases erosion during the wet season (Igwe et al., 2013).

Whilst roads are an important component of the rural transport network, Starkey and Njenga (2010) suggest that “roads are not enough” (p. 1) and rural transport services are necessary to enable people to access services and livelihoods. They discuss the fact that for the “overall benefits of improved rural transport infrastructure to be realised there is need to encourage the development of a range of complementary and competing transport services, small and large, short distance and long distance,

passengers and freight as appropriate for different rural contexts” (p. 1). This is reiterated by Porter (2007a) who notes that transport planning in sub-Saharan Africa has in the past concentrated on rather narrow engineering issues, and needs to further consider the wider economic, social and political environment in order to create real benefits. This is particularly pertinent since private ownership of motorised transport is relatively uncommon with only 31.3% of rural households owning a motorcycle and 5.7% owning a car (National Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

### 2.2. Gender issues in Nigeria

Nigeria is ranked 118 out of 134 in the Gender Equality index, with women at every educational level earning less than their male counterparts, and being subject to higher levels of tax. Women are also more likely to be illiterate and only 4% of girls complete secondary school in some parts of Nigeria (British Council, 2012).

This means that women tend to be disadvantaged and under-represented in business in comparison to males. Nevertheless, some positive progress has been made towards gender “mainstreaming” and ensuring that policies do not discriminate against women, granting more rights, in some states, to property and access to credit. However there is still some way to go to reach an adequate level of equality (UNECA, 2012). Progress is limited by: poor perception and trivialisation of gender issues by national policy makers and the general public; a lack of awareness of the content of the National Gender Policy; and a lack of funding combined with increasing numbers of disadvantaged women requiring assistance (UNECA, 2012).

Further evidence of inequality is evident in a variety of research reports. Ogunlela and Mukhtar (2009) found that women are grossly under-appreciated and have very little control within the agricultural sector considering the contribution they make to it. They suggested that “the survival and sustenance of agriculture and rural development in Nigeria, as well as in many sub-Saharan Africa countries, rest squarely on the rural women. They therefore deserve to be given due recognition as far as decision-making process in agriculture is concerned” (p. 28). This is reinforced by Odebode (2012) who suggested that, whilst women have been identified as playing a significant role in agriculture, their roles and contributions were largely unacknowledged, leading to a lack of power and ultimately to a decrease in agricultural productivity.

These imbalances have an impact on women's access to transport, a situation which is complicated by other factors, such as culture and religion (Gender and Transport Resource Guide, 2006). Porter discussed the issue of gender and roads extensively in a 2012 paper, which concluded: “Evidence from Ghana and Nigeria suggests that, throughout the last century, the rural poor – particularly poor women resident away from the gradually expanding paved road networks – have faced enormous transport/access hurdles. Access to markets, to services like health and education, to agricultural extension services, banking facilities and credit and, indeed, to centres of power, influence and information, have all been constrained by poor roads and poor transport services”. (p. 11).

Starkey and Njenga (2010) found that, whilst women may have some privileges while travelling, such as access to safer seats, they are disproportionately affected by issues such as unreliability of services. Due to additional responsibilities at home (Diaz Olvera et al., 2013) they may choose not to travel rather than risk being stranded. In addition, women in Nigeria are more likely to experience psychological stress than men when using the transport system (Asinyanbola, 2010; Odufuwa, 2008). Within northern Nigeria, most people are practising Muslims and here due to religion, culture or local laws women may be prohibited from taking public transport vehicles operated by men and being in the same public transport vehicle as men (although this varies by state) (Harnischfeger, 2008). They may also in some localities be prevented from using motorcycle taxis (US Department of State, 2006). As a result, many rural women take to walking and head-carrying. For those who wish to take public transport, they often wait for several hours for the few vehicles that are operated by women. They are also

<sup>1</sup> The Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics defines an urban area as an area with a population over 20,000 (United Nations, 2014)

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