

THE ROLE OF BICYCLE IN RURAL TRANSPORTATION IN ISIALA NGWA COMMUNITY OF ABIA STATE 1991– 2024

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Bicycle transportation in Isiala Ngwa Community of Abia State, 1991 – 2024. The women of Isiala Ngwa Community face difficulties transporting their agricultural products from the point of production to the point of sale. Hence, this study investigates the gap that could be bridged between producers and consumers if there were effective, efficient transport infrastructure and facilities to assist women in rural Ngwa Land. The Isiala Ngwa Community comprises about 70% of women whose occupations are essentially farming and trading. They are known for their economic status and potential in the community. They are producers and distributors of food from one community to another. The women minimise food spoilage and waste. They promote food security in the Ngwa land and Abia State. This study concludes that the role of women in rural transportation has not been recognised or appreciated in the Transport sector or in the Transport policy planning body of Abia State. The study employs a historical methodology, drawing on both primary and secondary data. An oral interview was conducted in Isiala Ngwa, focusing on rural women who transport goods. Information was derived through existential observation. Secondary data were accessed through extensive use of books, journals, unpublished works, theses, and dissertations.

Keywords: Bicycle, Rural, Transportation, Ngwa, Abia State.

Introduction

This study focuses on the role of women in bicycle transportation in Isiala Ngwa Community of Abia State, 1991 – 2024. Although women in Abia State have economic potential, the majority face difficulties in farming and trading due to the poor transport system, particularly women whose livelihoods depend on agriculture and trading in the Ngwa community. Ngwa Land is one of the clans that make up the Igbo-speaking people of Abia State in the South–Eastern Nigeria. Over 60% of people involved in conveying goods from one location to another in Abia State are

women. The women in the Isiala Ngwa community farm their family's communal lands. They harvest their farm crops for both personal consumption and economic gains. Various villages in Abia State are known for the unique farm products they cultivate and sell in the market. The Ngwa people are known for cultivating corn and producing large quantities of palm oil. Women engage in many activities, ranging from Agricultural and non-agricultural. Women in the Isiala Ngwa Community engage in raft-making, broom-making, basket-making, weaving, pottery, yarn-making, salt-making, and palm oil production and trade. Women are also known for care, giving and they rely on public transport more than men.

Philip and Charles F, in Marketing Principles define transportation from the market point of view as:

“The need to move goods from one point of production to point of sale and consumption in the quantities required or needed at a reasonable cost. Transportation arises from the desire of the individual to move from one place to another to satisfy some needs, whether connected into business. Social cultural, recreational or political interest.”¹

In accordance with the ITF GLOBAL REPORT, in Latin America, over 50% of the passengers are women.² Even in Nigeria, it is more than 50%, women are the ones transporting farm products from to the markets. In Isiala Ngwa Community of Abia State, women are the stakeholders in farming and trading. They cultivate the lands, plant both seeds and tubers, they weed and tend their farms. They transport these products from the farm to the house and from the house to the markets for sale.

A.D Ali, in his Doctoral research at the University of Lagos, 2010, wrote “Transportation is the movement of man and materials from one place to another. It has always been an important activity of man from the primitive to the most advanced states”³

Bicycles became crucial during the colonial era, particularly in Eastern Nigeria, as a means of transporting palm produce and other goods to market during times of motor vehicle scarcity. Colonial officials, missionaries, and the local population for daily needs adopted the bicycle. It also fostered economic activity by creating a class of bicycle repairers and facilitating cash flow within families.⁴

Bicycles became the vehicle to transport farm products home for processing before moving them to the market. For example, palm fruits, cassava and rice. These cash crops go through days of processing and preparation before their final movement to the point of sale. Women in Isiala Ngwa Community load the farm products on the bicycles for sale according to the markets operated in various markets within the village that make up Ngwa Land. Some sell on four days or five days, namely, Orie, Eke, Afo, and Nkwo Market days. Women used bicycles to transport their goods to long-distance markets, namely, Ariara market, and Ahia ohuru at Aba town and nearby villages.

Trade and transport go together. Trade cannot take place without transport. Scholars are of the opinion that the gap between the producer and the consumer can be bridged by transport. By bridging the gap, transport determines not only the extent of the market but also the intensity of specialisation of allocation of factors of production and the volume of production.⁵ Transport is a problem that calls for

attention, and it will require the best brains of the community to find a satisfactory solution. The solution will be in some way connected with political enactment in which every individual on the voters' list will be directly concerned

In the past, women in Isiala Ngwa Community transport their agricultural products by human portorage, but with the introduction of modern mode of transportation, Isiala Ngwa women transport goods from one place to another using bicycle, motorcycle, tricycle car etc. They also hire vehicles to transport their goods to the market. Bicycles remain the widely used vehicle by the women in Isiala Ngwa community.

This paper argued that much work has been done as dictum to the contributions of women in rural transportation and the impact of women in the transport sector. However, despite the contributions of women in Rural Transportation in Ngwa Community, not much scholarly attention has been given to the role of Bicycle, which is why this paper intends to explore its role in rural transportation in Isiala Ngwa Community. It should therefore be noted that transportation goes beyond movement of goods and people from one place to another. It also includes exchange of ideas and other factors that facilitate transportation. The women in Isiala Ngwa Community suffer difficulty in transporting their goods from point of production to the point of sale. But they enhance transportation by hiring drivers and buying trucks. Scholars opined that the gap between the producer and the consumer can only be bridged by transport. Ngwa women have economic status and potential, they invest in agricultural and trading businesses, adding value to transportation, which is the only way to gain access to consumers and make money. Bicycle is the cheapest and reliable mode of transport in Isiala Ngwa Community. Women use bicycles to transport their goods from the farm to the market. Ngwa women invest in purchasing bicycles to enhance transportation.

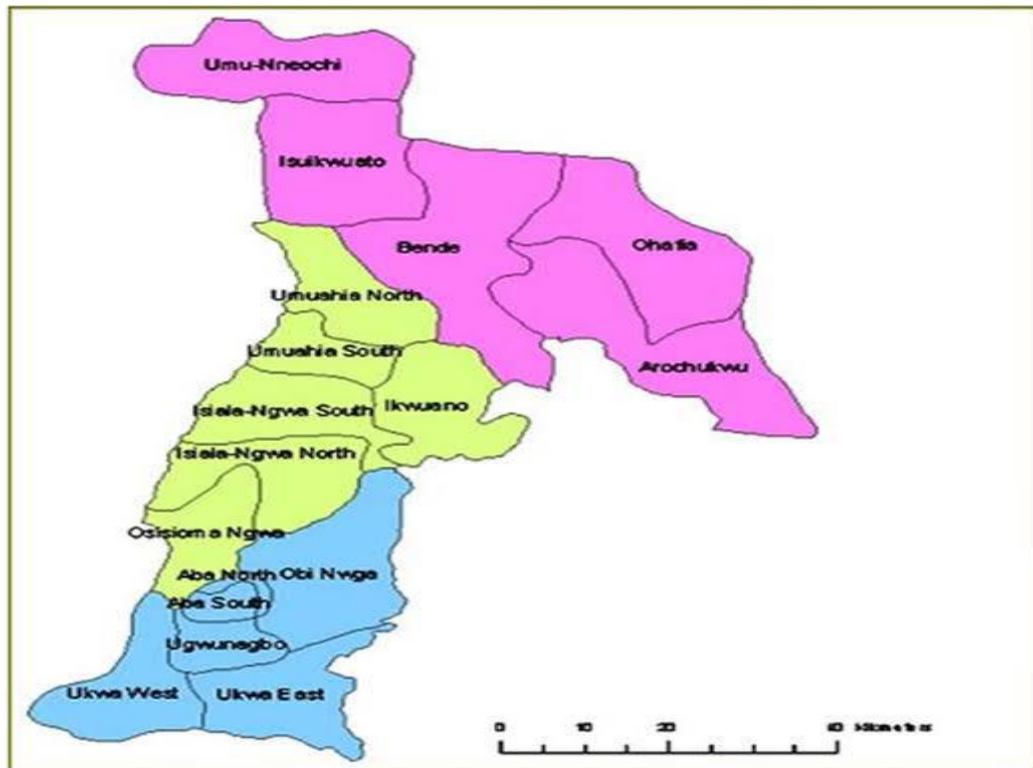
The History and Location of Isiala Ngwa Community

The Ngwa Community is one of the clans that make up the present-day Abia State. The Ngwa people constitute one of the largest homogenous cultural and dialect groups in Igbo Land.⁹ They occupy the major portion of the territory known as Aba district Ngwa land, in the palm belt zone lying between the Imo River in the west and the Ibibio in the east, is a rich agricultural belt which fully justified the adopted name Ngwa m “the lucky ones.”¹⁰ Ngwa land is one of the rain forest of the Southern Igbo plain in Abia State. The area is bounded on the north by the present-day Umuahia zone, on the west by Owerri and Mbaise, on the east by Ikot Ekpene and Abak and on the south by Ukwa.

When States were created in 1991, Aba Zone, Umuahia Zone, and Afikpo Zone formed Abia State, with Umuahia as the Capital—the Aba Zone bis asically the Ngwa territory. Today, Ngwa Land comprises seven Local Government Areas in Abia State, namely, Aba South, Isialangwa North, Isialangwa South, Obingwa, Osisioma Ngwa, and Ugwunagbo. This was done by the government for administrative convenience.¹¹ Colonial rule was established in Ngwa Land when British invaders conquered the Akwaete area in the old Aba division, and in 1982, it officially became an administrative unit. With the imposition of colonial rule, Aba, a

very commercial and industrial centre on the Eastern Railway with a network of roads radiating to all parts of the Eastern States, became the Divisional Headquarters of the British.¹²

Map 2: Map of Ngwa, Land showing Ngwa Communities.



Source: Okwuonu Ikechukwu Pdg work (2015)

Data Source OSGOF 2011

Occupation of Isiala Ngwa Community

The two prominent local government,s namely Isialangwa South and Isialangwa North of Isiala Ngwa Community, engage in various occupations, including farming, trading and civil service. The economy is primarily agrarian, with agriculture being the mainstay. The fertile land supports the cultivation of a variety of crops, including yams, cassava, maize, and vegetables. They have local markets which play a crucial role in the economy, facilitating trade and commerce. Small-scale industries and artisan activities also contributed to the economy in Ngwa Land, providing employment and boosting commerce. The landscape of Isialangwa South is characterised by its high green fields, gentle hills, and numerous rivers and streams. This natural environment supports agriculture and offers scenic beauty, making it conducive for both farming and potential eco-tourism.¹³ The Isialangwa North's economy has been largely based on agriculture, with palm oil and other crops being

primary sources of income. The construction of the Eastern Railway also had a significant impact on the Ngwa Land, fostering trade and market development. Aba, a significant city in the region was founded by the Ngwa clan as a market town. Later, it became a crucial collection point for agricultural products after the Eastern Railway was built.¹⁴

The Eastern Railway has a transformative impact, connecting Ngwa Land to other regions and fostering trade and development. The economy of Isiala Ngwa Community is primarily based on agriculture, with palm oil, cassava and other crops being key sources of income. The British colonial period brought about changes in the Ngwa Land, including resistance to British conquest and the exploitation of palm oil. Okpuala Ngwa, the headquarters of Isiala Ngwa North, was the first settlement and headquarters of the Ngwa people.¹⁵ 'Isusu,' a form of banking institution aiding in raising money for business or marriage in pre-colonial Ngwa – This form of banking is still practised in present Ngwa Land ¹⁶

Historical Overview of Bicycle Transportation in Isiala Ngwa Community.

Bicycles were first used in Eastern Nigeria in the 1920s and came into commercial operation in the 1930s. Before this period, the dominant modes of transport were the steamship and canoe, which plied the numerous waterways of the region, and the railway, which came into use after the opening of the eastern arm of the Nigerian rail line in 1916. However, their dominance was broken in the 1920s, when light motor vehicles made their appearance and began to attract more and more traders and travellers, particularly those who lived far away from railway stations and river ports. By 1927, for instance, Weeks Transport Company was providing a motor transport service covering much of the Eastern Region ¹⁷

Bicycle transport grew in response to the adverse economic conditions of the 1930s. As long as trade was good, the African traders and producers were prepared to utilise the services of the motor lorries. But following the depression of 1930s, the price of produce was so low that it could not bear the expense of mechanical transport from the outlying stations. Producers and traders thus began to look for a cheaper means of transporting their produce to the ports, and they found the bicycle a good substitute for the lorry. Bicycle parts were usually imported and assembled locally. The machines were fitted with a carrier at the rear, and on it traders began carrying four-gallon tins of oil. Sometimes, up to three of these tins were carried by a single cyclist.¹⁸ Bicycles, because of their light weight, put less wear and tear on roads than motorised vehicles, and this translates into low road maintenance and repair costs. Another advantage is the zero emissions level, which is mostly encouraged globally.¹⁹

A. Nwabughuogu, quoted J. H Farrington in his study, "The Role of Bicycle Transport in the Economic Development of Eastern Nigeria, 1930-45." that,

"Bicycle transport in the area grew in response to economic conditions of the 1930s and fall in the price of produce. The bicycle became a substitute for the lorry being able to use rough track, and cheap to maintain. Bicycle transport facilitated movement at the most critical period of Eastern Nigerian history. It also led to the flow of cash in almost every family. It encouraged self-help among population and



to the emergence of an artisan class, bicycle repairers. At the end of the war, rises in product prices helped the railway and motor lorry to carry more traffic. The bicycle remains significant, especially among the peasant population”²⁰

The primary targets of Bicycle importers were Africans employed in colonial service men. They used bicycles to commute to work as the government offices pay allowances for the purchase and maintenance of these devices. The Forestry department's failure to pay bicycle allowances to African Staff became an issue of contention in 1946 and received significant press coverage. Bicycles were used for social life or leisure activities like going to church or taking a wife to see a plane.²¹ The ownership of bicycles not only conferred prestige but had significant economic advantages; producers were induced by such attraction to increase productivity to earn enough cash for their purchase. The colonial government encouraged the mass importation of bicycles across all the provinces of the Lower Niger. The bicycles were imported in large quantities from Europe directly by users through the port of Warri.²² Increasing numbers of bicycles were imported and used on the dusty roads.²³ Bicycle, which had been in use since the beginning of the century, was still the major innovation in the transportation of palm oil and kernels.²⁴

A.D. Ali, in *Trade and Transport in the Lower Niger {1830-2011}* noted:

“The use of bicycles gained more patronage as it was required for transporting produce from the farm. A bicycle could carry produce amounting to cwt. Bicycles were used by persons travelling from one destination to the other. The bicycles facilitated communication, collection and delivery of goods. The sub-agents owned bicycles by which they went around crops producing areas. Increasingly the bicycle was used by petty traders for carrying goods to the markets. Bicycle was one of the articles of general merchandise which stimulated incentive for greater production.”²⁵ Bicycle merchants, for an extension, tended to emphasise certain features of their products. There were four types of bicycles imported into Nigeria, for example, Raleigh, Rudge, Hercules, and Birmingham Small Arms{BSA). Raleigh, for example, enticed prospective customers with the strength and perfection of their all-steel bicycles. Rudge emphasises the reliability of the engineering. Hercules brand celebrated its heritage of making vehicles with precision, and the BSA projected the design and sleekness of their products. The tyres are made of Dunlop. It is a bicycle

with a status symbol and is predominant in urban areas. A legal framework required to obtain a license to operate a bicycle includes the need to ensure the safety of riders, it was forbidden to carry more than one passenger in a bicycle and to prevent theft.²⁶

Okechukwu Onuoha gave a brief history of the advent of the Bicycle in Ngwa Land. "He noted, that before the introduction of bicycle, Ngwa people carry their loads on their shoulders not the head, because the head is considered or seen as holy. He stated the bicycle came with the British colonial activities. The British officers referred to as 'court men' notably called by Igbo people as 'kotima' were the ones riding bicycles, dressed in shirt, long tie, short, stocks and shoes on their legs appearing neat and smartly dressed. The court men were recruited to work under judiciary at the court. The duty of the court men was to enforce law for the colonial masters. The British later recruited indigenes to handle the duties, the court men arrest law breakers, interpret and enforce laws for the British in Ngwa Land. These court men were the ones who introduce bicycles in Ngwa Land. When the British left, the Ngwa people started importing bicycle parts, assembled them for transporting themselves and their loads from one place to another. They used bicycle to transport farm crops to the farm during the planting season, and during harvest season, they used bicycle to transport agricultural products to the house for consumption and the markets for sale."²⁷

In addition, Okechukwu noted, "there were four types of bicycle introduced in Ngwa Land during the colonial era. The Ngwa people started importing such bicycles as Raleigh, Rudge, Hercules and Birmingham Small Arms {BSA}. He noted that BSA, which they nicknamed "Whitehorse" was purchased by the wealthy in the community. He qualified the BSA bicycle as having a Mercedes Benz car of this present time."

Nwosu Patrick, noted:

"The BSA was for prestige and pleasure and not for carrying loads, it was higher in height than the other types of bicycle, it makes one to be at a cruising height. It attracts respect to the person that owns it in the community. The owners used them for occasions, and it was driven by traditional rulers, {the Ezes, Chiefs, and prominent people in the community} he noted, BSA was expensive, driven by the wealthy in the community."²⁸

The introduction of bicycles in Ngwa Land brought about a tremendous change in the transportation system in Isiala Ngwa Community. The women were the ones who enjoyed the positive impact of the bicycle as a means of transportation.

Nnamere Daniel, he noted:

"It is a thing of pride for every Ngwa woman to own a bicycle, whether it belong to her or her husband. He stated that women owning a bicycle makes life easy for them. The Ngwa women engage the use of bicycle to carry out a lot of activities. Women drive bicycle more than men because majority of women engage in farming and trading businesses. Bicycle is profitable to the women because of the flat land and terrain of Ngwa land, and even little children are trained to drive bicycles to assist in family activities."²⁹

Pictures of Ngwa women carrying loads on their Bicycles.



Photograph taken by the Researcher April 24, 2025
{Researcher's fieldwork}

Role of Bicycle in Isiala Ngwa Community

In accordance with a study on Gender Disparity and the Role of Women in Agriculture in South-Eastern Nigeria, women play a significant role in production and food security on agricultural enterprises. The study found that women contribute about 50% of total agricultural labour in the South-east region of Nigeria.³⁰ The finding implies that women in Isiala Ngwa Community of Abia State depend heavily on rural transportation to convey their agricultural products from the farms to the markets and urban areas. One objective of this study is to examine the role of women in transportation. The role of women in Isiala Ngwa Community cannot be overemphasised. The Isiala Ngwa women are known for their Bicycle Transportation. A bicycle is a household vehicle in Ngwa Land. Both women and men ride bicycles, bicycles with simple carriers are widely and increasingly used for personal transport and some load carrying. The role of women using bicycles in Isiala Ngwa Community can be explored in the following ways:

Mobility

The use of bicycles in the Isiala Ngwa community by the womenfolk enhances easy mobility. Bicycles enhance the movement of women from one place to another. Isiala Ngwa women embrace the use of bicycles because bicycle solves the problem of

difficulty in movement over long distances on foot. The flat land and terrain of the Ngwa land added to the easy ride of bicycles by the women. Women are responsible for transporting household members to health care centres, markets, farms, schools and a place of worship. The arduous tasks of human portage and trekking long distances to farms, markets, health centres, streams, and bushes to fetch firewood were reduced for the rural women in Isiala Ngwa Community. The use of bicycles helps them to achieve the multi-tasking chores women engage in on a daily basis. Bicycles can be especially beneficial to women, who perform triple roles as income earners, homemakers and community managers. Rural women's responsibility for water and fuelwood collection is carried out much more effectively by bicycle.³¹ Cycling is a form of exercise that improves health and well-being.

Transportation of farm tools and agricultural products

Isiala Ngwa women are mainly farmers, they use their bicycles to transport farm tools, seedlings, cassava stems and tubers of yams, water yams and coco yams to the farms during the planting season, and also transport food crops and cash crops such as plantain, banana, vegetables, palm oil, garri etc, during the harvesting period to the markets. The bicycles have carriers where loads are tied, and they are driven to markets on various market days within and outside the neighbouring villages. By using bicycles for transportation, women in Isiala Ngwa Community participate more actively in economic activities, such as trading and farming. Bicycle transportation helps rural women to increase their income, which can contribute to their economic stability and overall well-being.

Fetching water and Firewood

Women in Isiala Ngwa Community rely heavily on bicycle transportation for accessing household chores such as fetching water and firewood. The most time-consuming domestic activities are the collection of water and firewood. Water carrying tasks fall mainly on women and children, as do firewood collecting tasks, where women provide nearly 90% of the wood that is consumed by the household, but only 70% of the wood collected for sale.³² Bicycles can provide an affordable and efficient means of transportation, enhancing their mobility and independence, allowing them to travel freely and participate in various activities without relying on others. Travel time for water collection, excluding the time spent queuing at the source, lies between 2-4 hours per day, with a significant increase in the number of trips for water collection in the wet season. This may be a result of households curtailing their water consumption when its procurement involves unacceptably high amounts of time and effort.³³

In an interview with Madam Juliana Ololo, she noted, "Ngwa people experience problem of water, since pipe-borne water or bore hole are not readily available in most villages, most women from villages such as Umukpenyi, Umunevo, and the neighbouring villages travel with their kegs and containers tied to their bicycle carriers to streams and lakes, namely, Iyi – Umuakwa, Iyi – Amaiyi, or Ife – Amaiyi to fetch water for their family chores. The women use their bicycles to carry

firewood for cooking, thereby reducing the ancient method of carrying bulk of firewood on their heads trekking long distance from the farms to the homes.”³⁴

Firewood is vital for meeting energy demands in rural areas, as it is used for cooking, heating, and food processing. Other energy sources are often too expensive or unavailable to rural households. The transport task involved with collecting firewood is rapidly becoming more arduous and time-consuming as a result of the depletion of firewood through deforestation. The transport burden of firewood collection also depends on the location of the source, where firewood collection in the vicinity of cultivated fields can be combined with trips for agricultural purposes. Firewood tends to be transported by head loading, and is collected a few times a week, making it a regular activity throughout the year. The transport constraints are further exacerbated when firewood sources close to the village become depleted over time, and therefore cause women, as principal firewood collectors, to travel further.³⁵ A consequent reduction in trips frequently due to an increase in time and distance, also impacts negatively on nutrition and health, especially when fewer cooked meals are had. In an attempt to substitute traditional wood sources with agricultural residues such as cow dung and cassava stalk, cultivatable land is being denied valuable fertiliser, hence reducing the potential for surplus crop production.³⁶

Food Processing and Preparation

Food processing and preparation, including all activities between acquisition and consumption, involve high labour and transport burdens which principally fall upon women. Women in Isiala Ngwa Community load their bicycles with palm fruits and cassava to oil mills and cassava processing centres for processing and preparation. Women can travel two to three trips to the processing centres with the help of a bicycle. Bicycles help to minimise trips to the grinding mill or hammer mill to process maize, cassava, wheat, and millet, which are usually undertaken on foot. Distance to the hammer mills tends to be somewhat further than to grinding mills, which can sometimes be found within the village. The finished products are loaded onto bicycles and transported to the market for sale.

Food Production and Food Distribution

Women farmers in Isiala Ngwa Community produce food in large quantities and food is easily accessible for humans. Rural communities depend on agriculture for food, and they contribute more than urban communities. The women help to transport food items from the interior to the urban areas, connecting farmers and buyers from various communities for the exchange of goods, ideas and information that will enhance agricultural productivity. It is a source of income and development for rural people. Farmers also engage in fruit production and vegetable production, which helps to improve the nutrition of the society.³⁷ Agricultural products are transported from the farm to the market on various days such as Orié Ukwu, Orié Nvosi and Amayi Ntigha. The crops usually transported are cassava, yams, palm oil, plantain and vegetables.

Food security

Women in the Isiala Ngwa Community are responsible for transporting agricultural products from farms to markets, which are essential for food security. By ensuring efficient transportation of agricultural products, women help to reduce food waste and increase food availability, thereby enhancing food security. The women also help to reduce post-harvest losses and play a food security role, which includes farming, food processing, marketing and ensuring household consumption and nutrition. Women play a crucial role in food security, both as primary producers of food and as primary caretakers of the household. Women are essential contributors to different activities that support agricultural development. According to World Bank data, women in developing countries produce 60-80% of household food. In developing countries, for instance, women account for more than 43% of the labour force {UN 2012}, much of which they are poorly or not at all compensated for.³⁸

Economic Empowerment

By participating in bicycle transportation, women in Isiala Ngwa Community engage in the transportation business. The bicycles are used to transport passengers for an exchange of transport fare. Women earn income and gain economic independence, contributing to their empowerment. Women use income generated from the sale of their agricultural products to improve their children's and family's nutrition, health and education. The women also improved the nutritional value and sustainable food systems. UN Report notes, women, "when more income is put into the hands of women, child nutrition, health and education improve." It is estimated that at least 90% of women's income is reinvested back into their households and families. Women largely depend on agricultural food supply chains for their livelihood.³⁹

Schooling

The women engage in the use of bicycles in transporting their children to and from schools. The female teachers use bicycles to carry themselves and children to school. A bicycle can carry at least two people. The children are also trained to ride bicycles. They use a bicycle to go for errands. The bicycles are used to convey students to examination centres.

Age-grade meeting and Caregiving

The women attend age-grade meetings using their bicycles from one village to another. They also use their bicycle to carry sick relatives to health care centres. The pregnant women are assisted with the aid of bicycles. Isiala Ngwa women also make economic gains by carrying passengers; they charge passengers from one village to another, to junctions and markets.

Conclusion

The role of women in rural transportation in Isiala Ngwa Community cannot be overemphasised. The use of Bicycles contributed immensely to Rural Transportation

in Isiala Ngwa Community, ensuring the transportation of people and goods within communities, linking people from the interior to the urban centres. They also contributed to the distribution of food production and the reduction of food spoilage and waste. Isiala Ngwa Community women contributed in the area of food security, ensuring food is transported to the right place, and at the right time. Bicycles enhance easy mobility and the reduction of the arduous task of head loading and walking long distances in Ngwa Land. The womenfolk improved on their economic status and assisted their families in settling financial bills, for example, paying off school fees and settling hospital bills. It is important to note that the bicycle is still widely used in Isiala Ngwa Community in the present day, Abia State.

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