

Assessing the Need for Career Orientation as a Precursor to Women and Youth Empowerment Program in Abia State

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Abstract

Empowering women and youth through career orientation strategies not only addresses employment gaps but also promotes personal and community growth. This paper aimed to assess how essential career orientation is in the design and success of women and youth empowerment programs in Abia State. Without such assessment, efforts to enhance empowerment outcomes may continue to lack coherence, strategic alignment, and measurable impact. Using a survey research design, the study's findings collectively confirmed that career orientation before empowerment helps women and youth identify their strengths and interests. The average score of 3.6 indicated that career orientation is vital for the success of empowerment programs. A score of 3.5 showed that the majority (70%) of women and youth are willing to participate in a career orientation program before joining an empowerment initiative. The results also supported the idea that career orientation should be a prerequisite for women and youth before receiving empowerment support (3.5). Regarding whether other women and youth in Abia communities would accept a career orientation program as part of empowerment efforts, data indicated acceptance (3.5). Furthermore, the findings revealed that career orientation should precede skill acquisition or training in empowerment programs (3.4) and that empowerment programs should be postponed until participants have received proper career guidance (3.0). The paper concludes that career orientation is not merely an optional activity but a strategic necessity that influences the long-term success of empowerment programs; therefore, it should be made mandatory before starting any empowerment initiatives.

Keywords: Career Orientation, Youth, Women, Empowerment, Precursor

Introduction

Empowering women and youth remains a core priority, particularly in regions like Abia State, Nigeria, where socio-economic inequalities, unemployment, and limited access to formal employment opportunities persist. One effective intervention that

has gained scholarly attention is career orientation - a structured approach to guiding individuals in identifying, preparing for, and pursuing appropriate career paths. As a precursor to sustainable empowerment, career orientation has been linked to improved employability, enhanced skill

acquisition, and more informed career decision-making (Nwokeji & Amadi, 2021; Oyesola & Akanbi, 2020). Career orientation refers to the process of guiding individuals in making decisions regarding their career paths, based on personal interests, skills, values, and external opportunities. It involves a developmental approach where individuals receive support and resources that help them identify their career goals, assess their abilities, and understand the professional opportunities available in their field. Career orientation can also refer to the attitudes and mindset individuals develop about their work roles, which influence their career choices, professional growth, and job satisfaction (Super, 1990). According to the United Nations Development Programme (2020), Career orientation programs aim to help individuals discover and align their interests, skills, and aspirations with potential career paths.

Career orientation can further be viewed through a psychological lens, where it emphasizes how individuals perceive their capabilities and make career decisions based on self-concept (Ezionye & Ofondu, 2019). Ezionye and Ofondu further explained that in this sense, it underscores the importance of aligning one's self-identity with career aspirations, allowing for greater job satisfaction and career success. In contemporary society, career orientation has become increasingly important due to the changing job market, technological advancements, and the need for adaptability. Today, career orientation includes not only traditional career counseling but also

digital platforms and tools that assist individuals in navigating complex career landscapes. Thus, career orientation as a process, equips individuals, particularly youth, with the information, skills, and guidance needed to make informed career decisions.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of career guidance in empowering youth, particularly in regions like Abia State. According to Eze (2019), career orientation programs play a critical role in shaping the aspirations and career paths of young people, helping them understand various career opportunities available and how to access them. Okeke and Chijioke (2020) add that the orientation programme also assists in developing skills such as decision-making, self-awareness, and goal setting, which are vital for professional success. Nwokeji and Amadi (2021) further established a strong link between career orientation initiatives in secondary schools and local communities and the improved alignment of youths' academic pursuits with the realities of the job market in Abia. Through tailored interventions, such as skills development, mentorship, and internship opportunities, these programs enhanced young people's career decision-making, thereby boosting their employability and bridging the gap between education and workforce demands.

In the same vein, empowerment has become a household name, especially when talking about unequal power relations between people in matters that affect their lives and future endeavour (Madunagu 2005). Empowerment is expected to transform the unequal

power relation to equitable power sharing in favour of the less powerful. This is why phrases such as “women's empowerment”, “convention on the rights of the child,” and “youth empowerment” exist. These phrases point to the reality that some groups in society are at the receiving end of unequal power relations, among which are the women and youths.

The term empowerment refers to the activity of teaching, educating, training and imparting knowledge, ideas, and relevant skills to individuals, both within the formal and informal education system to enable them fully to participate in the development of society. The concept of empowerment is based on consistent tendencies of sustainable support mechanisms. This is the reason why Salami (2013) cited in Ezionye and Ofondu (2019) opined that empowerment is a means of assisting people to overcome obstacles which might prevent them from achieving their potential.

Empowerment as a concept is characterized by a move away from a deficit-oriented towards a more strength-oriented perception. It has increasingly been found in management concepts, as well as in the areas of continuing education and self-help (Adams, 2008). Adams offers a minimal definition of the term: Empowerment as the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize

the quality of their lives'(Adams, 2008).

One definition for the term is "an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of resources gain greater access to and control over those resources" (Zimmerman, 2000). In the opinion of Rappaport's (1984), Empowerment is viewed as a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives. Largely, empowerment involves concerted measures geared towards improving the level of self-reliance and determination in people and in communities in order to enhance their own authority in protecting their common interests in a responsible way. Empowerment as action refers both to the process of self-empowerment and to professional support of people, which enables them to overcome their sense of powerlessness and lack of influence, and to recognize and eventually to use their resources and chance.

The seriousness about women's empowerment assumed a critical dimension from the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (1995). Its Beijing Platform for Action set out a blueprint for advancing the rights of women. Since then, subsequent conferences had continuously stressed the need for the empowerment of women. For example, the Beijing Declaration (2006) stated: "We are convinced that women's empowerment and their full

participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace.

Since 1970, there had been three broad approaches to integrate women in the development process. The first was the Women in Development Approach (WID) of the early 1970s whose purpose or objective was the inclusion of women in development discourses and projects. The key element of WID is welfare which presupposes that; women are passive recipients of development; motherhood is the most important role of women and child bearing is the women's significant responsibility. The second approach was the Women and Development Approach (WAD) of the mid 70's which emerged as a critique of WID approach. The argument of WAD is that the inclusion of women in development is a myth because women had always been part of the development process. The key element of WAD is equity. The approach asserts that women are important economic actors and encourages the reduction of inequalities between men and women by providing women the avenues to earn an income through small-scale projects. The third approach was the Gender and Development Approach (GAD) of the 1980s, which is an improvement over WID. This approach was more holistic as it studied in great detail, the contributing causes of women's subordination; the key element of this approach is the strengthening of women's rights. This approach regards women as agents of

change instead of passive recipients of assistance. Ezionye and Ofondu (2019) expanded the strategic needs of women to cover social, political and economic empowerment.

In Abia State, the social, economic and political status of women viz a viz the men point to an urgent need for empowerment. For example, according to the National Population Commission (2006), women comprise about 51 percent of the population of Abia State but the inequalities in employment, political positions, and membership of decision-making bodies, access to loans and credits are self-evident. In almost all spheres of life in Abia State, the women are subordinate to the men. The only exception being in subsistence farming where women are larger in numbers but invariably work for the men because in Igbo land of which Abia is a part, women do not own titles to farmland. Nevertheless, there exist groups such as Otu Umunwanyi which is in charge of women affairs in the community. There are also women political groups like Council of Women Politicians, Network of Justice, Women in Politics and Policy, Women Rights Collective. These organizations have through seminars, publications and conferences encouraged women to stand for elective posts.

Equally, Madunagu (2005), defines youth empowerment as the process by which youths gain inner power to express and defend their rights and gain greater self-confidence, self-identity, self-esteem and control over their lives, personal and social relationships. Youth empowerment according to Fletcher and Valrus (2006) is an attitudinal,

structural, and cultural process whereby young people gain ability, authority and agency to make decisions, and implement change in their own lives, and the lives of other people, including adults. Olajire and Komolafe stated that youth are empowered when they acknowledge that they have, or can create choice of life, and are aware of the implication of these choices, make an informed decision, and accept responsibility for the consequences of those actions. Muluka (2012) sees youth empowerment as an attitudinal, structural and cultural process whereby young people derive the ability, willingness, readiness and authority to make decisions and implement positive changes in their own lives, and to the intended beneficiaries around them. According to Fletcher (2005), youth empowerment means creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf and on their own terms, rather than in the directions of others. It simply means assisting the youths to overcome the difficulties which might prevent them from achieving their potential.

Tope (2011) explained that youth empowerment can be exercised at homes, in schools, through youth organizations, non-governmental organisations, government policy-making and community organizing campaigns. It ranges from economic empowerment, to social, ideological, educational, technological and political empowerment which leads to manpower development. Consequently, the intersection of youth and women empowerment in Abia State highlights the overlapping

challenges faced by these two groups. In the context of this paper, career orientation programs is critical in ensuring the effectiveness of empowerment programmes. Without a clear understanding of personal strengths, career paths, and market realities, empowerment efforts risk being misdirected or ineffective. This study aims to ascertain the necessity of orientating women and youths and building their individual capacities before engaging them in various empowerment programmes.

Despite the proliferation of empowerment programs aimed at addressing unemployment, poverty, and social inequality among women and youth in Abia State, many of these initiatives have recorded limited long-term success. A major gap in their design and implementation lies in the absence or under-emphasis of career orientation as a foundational component. Empowerment programs often focus on skill acquisition and entrepreneurship without adequately guiding beneficiaries on aligning their personal interests, abilities, and opportunities with sustainable career paths. This lack of career-focused guidance may result in misdirected efforts, skill-job mismatches, and low motivation, thereby undermining the transformative potential of such programs.

Career orientation, which includes career counseling, goal setting, and informed decision-making, plays a critical role in helping individuals understand the world of work and their place in it. For women and youth, particularly in underserved or rural communities of Abia State, structured

career orientation could serve as a vital tool for fostering self-awareness, increasing employability, and enhancing participation in the formal economy. However, little empirical research has been conducted to assess whether stakeholders recognize and integrate career orientation as a necessary precursor to empowerment. This study, therefore, seeks to assess the extent to which career orientation is considered essential in the design and success of women and youth empowerment programs in Abia State. Without such assessment, efforts to improve empowerment outcomes may continue to lack coherence, strategic alignment, and measurable impact.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To assess the level of acceptance of career orientation as a prerequisite to empowerment programs among women and youth in Abia State.
- ii. To examine the opinion of women and youth on the relevance career orientation in relation to empowerment initiatives.
- iii. To ascertain the perception of women and youth on the proper timing of career orientation in relation to empowerment initiatives.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted survey research design, which is appropriate for systematically collecting data from a large population to gain insights into their views, experiences, and acceptance levels. The choice of this design was informed by the need to describe characteristics, attitudes and

opinions of the population as gleaned from a sample and as well assess the effectiveness of programmes or projects. It is suitable for the current study as the opinions and perception of the respondents about career orientation before empowerment are sought.

Population for the study

The population for study consisted of women and youths in Abia State. According to 2016 data from the National Population Commission and National Bureau of Statistics Estimates, the population of women in Abia State is 1,826,400. Similarly, based on the 2019 National Youth Policy, a youth in Nigeria is a person between 18 - 29 years. Hence, data from the National Population Commission indicates that those aged between 18-29 years (male and female) in Abia state constitute a total of 1,181,474. Abia State is comprised of three senatorial districts, Abia North, Abia Central, and Abia South. All the senatorial districts have six local government areas, except Abia North, which has five.

Sample/Sampling technique

Multi-stage sampling was used to select the respondents. The first stage involved using the online calculator to obtain a sample size of 200 respondents, based on a 95% confidence level, and a standard error of 0.05. At the second stage, one local government area (LGA) was selected from each of the three senatorial districts in the state. From Abia North, Bende LGA was selected, Umuahia North from Abia Central, and Aba South from Abia South. These LGAs were selected by balloting with

replacement. The final stage involved a convenient selection of 100 youths and 100 women who were enrolled in empowerment centres in the selected LGAs.

Instrument for Data Collection

A 20-item structured questionnaire was used for data collection. It was developed based on the specific objectives of the study. The questionnaire comprised four sections, with section A consisting of demographic data of the respondents. Section B consisted of items that assessed the level of acceptance of career orientation as a prerequisite to empowerment programs among women and youth in Abia State; section C focused on respondents' opinion on the relevance of career orientation for empowerment initiatives, while Section D examined respondents' viewpoints on the proper timing of career orientation to empowerment initiatives. Each item was measured using a five-point Likert-type scale of Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Undecided (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1).

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

The questionnaire was validated by three university experts, two from the Department of Vocational Education and one from the Measurement and Evaluation Unit of the Department of Psychological Foundations of Abia State University, Uturu. To ascertain the reliability of the questionnaire, the instrument was administered to twenty (20) participants in a faith-based empowerment programme in Umuahia, not involved in this study. It

was carried out to determine if the response would be in line with the expected outcome from the research work. The test-retest technique was used to establish the reliability of the instrument. The reliability correlation coefficient was 0.78. The instrument was thus found to be reliable for the study.

Data Analysis Technique:

The data were analyzed quantitatively using frequency tables and percentages, while the results were analyzed using weighted mean. The benchmark for weighted means is 3.0. This is the grand means of responses that determines acceptance or rejection. It is the criterion mean. All analyses were conducted manually.

Results

The demographic data of the respondents shows that among the youths, 22.5% were male, while the female constituted 34.4%. Considering the declaration of 18 – 29 years as the age for youths in Nigeria, by the National Population Commission, the women respondents were those aged from 30 years and above. Consequently, among the women, those aged between 30 – 35 years were 36.9%, those between 36 – 40 years constituted 42.8%, while those aged 40 and above were 20.2%. Data on the educational level of respondents indicated that 66% had primary and secondary certification respectively; 29.3% had tertiary qualification while 3.3% had no formal education. The employment status showed that 33.3% were employed, 20.9% were unemployed, while 45.7% were self-employed.

Data in Table 1 reveals the extent to which respondents agreed on the necessity of career orientation as a prerequisite to empowerment. From the data, a majority of the respondents reported that they support carrying out career orientation before the empowerment programme ($\bar{x} = 3.6$), they would be willing to participate in career orientation ($\bar{x} = 3.5$), career orientation should be a requirement for

youth and women to receive empowerment support, career orientation is necessary for the success of empowerment programmes ($\bar{x} = 3.3$), and many people in my community would accept career orientation as part of empowerment programmes ($\bar{x} = 3.3$). The grand mean of 3.4 indicates that respondents generally agreed that career orientation should be a prerequisite to empowerment programmes for youth and women.

Table 1: Mean responses on career orientation as a prerequisite to empowerment programs among the respondents

VARIABLES	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Remarks
I support carrying out career orientation before the empowerment programme	57	63	14	30	13	3.6	Accept
Career orientation is necessary for the success of empowerment programs	42	71	9	24	31	3.3	Accept
I would be willing to participate in a career orientation program before joining an empowerment initiative.	55	69	11	6	36	3.5	Accept
Career orientation should be a requirement for women and youth before they receive empowerment support.	56	61	10	16	34	3.5	Accept
Most people in my community would accept a career orientation program as part of empowerment efforts.	39	72		33	25	3.3	Accept

Grand mean = 3.4

SA- Strongly Agree; A- Agree; U- Undecided; D- Disagree; SD- Strongly Disagree

In Table 2, women and youth express their opinions on the relevance of career orientation in empowerment programmes. The table shows that respondents agree that career orientation increases confidence ($\bar{x} = 3.4$), helps beneficiaries choose right (\bar{x}

= 3.5), and helps women and youth make informed decision ($\bar{x} = 3.4$), career orientation is relevant regardless of a person's education or background ($\bar{x} = 3.3$), and empowerment programs without career orientation are often ineffective ($\bar{x} = 3.3$).

Table 2: Opinion of women and youth on the relevance of career orientation in relation to empowerment initiatives

Variables	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Remark
Career orientation helps beneficiaries choose the Right empowerment track.	51	69	7	19	31	3.5	Accept
Career orientation increases the confidence of participants in empowerment programs.	36	78	17	14	32	3.4	Accept
Career guidance helps women and youth make informed career or business decisions.	49	66	11	21	30	3.4	Accept
Empowerment programs without career orientation are often ineffective.	44	53	9	48	23	3.2	Accept
Career orientation is relevant regardless of a person's education or background	59	45	13	27	33	3.3	Accept

Grand mean = 3.3

SA- Strongly Agree; A- Agree; U- Undecided; D- Disagree; SD- Strongly Disagree

Table 3 reveals that women and youths consider the timing of career orientation important. Hence, the mean score of 3.4 shows that women and youth agree to be taken through an orientation programme before being empowered. Data also shows that introducing career orientation after empowerment programme may likely reduce the effectiveness of such an empowerment ($\bar{x} = 3.5$), timing of career orientation

affects how seriously people take empowerment opportunities ($\bar{x} = 3.4$), career orientation should come before skill acquisition or training in empowerment programs ($\bar{x} = 3.4$), early career orientation increases long-term benefits of empowerment programme ($\bar{x} = 3.4$), and empowerment programs should be delayed until participants have received proper career guidance ($\bar{x} = 3.0$).

Table 3: Perception of women and youth on the proper timing of career orientation in relation to empowerment initiatives

VARIABLES	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Remark
Career orientation should come before skill acquisition or training in empowerment programs.	47	66	12	19	33	3.4	Accept
Empowerment programs should be delayed until participants have received proper career guidance.	39	42	9	56	31	3.0	Accept
Introducing career orientation after empowerment activities is less effective.	52	64	11	31	19	3.5	Accept
Early career orientation increases long-term benefits of empowerment programs.	41	73	5	35	23	3.4	Accept
Timing of career orientation affects how seriously people take empowerment opportunities.	57	54	3	41	22	3.4	Accept

Grand mean: = 3.3

SA- Strongly Agree; A- Agree; U- Undecided; D- Disagree; SD- Strongly Disagree

Discussion of Finding

The study sought to assess the level of acceptance of career orientation as a prerequisite to empowerment programs; the findings revealed a high level of agreement among women and youth in the study area. Participants recognized the importance of receiving guidance before engaging in any form of training or support program. Many expressed a willingness to participate in career orientation sessions as a preparatory step, highlighting a shared understanding that such orientation helps clarify individual goals and aligns personal interests with appropriate empowerment opportunities. Similarly, Bello and Musa (2018) reported that many women initially joined empowerment programs unrelated to their long-term goals, but once career guidance was introduced, alignment improved significantly, leading to

better training outcomes and higher chances of employment.

The findings on the perceived relevance of career orientation to empowerment showed that the respondents strongly agreed that career orientation plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of empowerment initiatives. They believe it aids in selecting the most suitable training paths, enhances confidence, and supports more informed decisions regarding career or business ventures. The relevance of career orientation was seen as universal, not limited by educational background or socio-economic status. Ojo and Oyesomi (2020) supported this by finding that women who received early career orientation leveraged social capital more effectively, and sustained empowerment outcomes were linked to career literacy, self-awareness, and confidence-building. Abiola and

Oyebanji (2019) also found that women who underwent career planning achieved greater success in skill acquisition programs. Orientation, in their view, contributed to increased program completion, higher confidence levels, and stronger business development outcomes.

Further findings showed that most participants believed career orientation should precede any skill acquisition or empowerment training. They emphasized that such guidance should be offered as the first step, not an afterthought. Respondents felt that early orientation influences how seriously individuals engage with subsequent empowerment opportunities and increases the likelihood of successful completion and meaningful outcomes. This is supported by Nwokeji and Amadi (2021), whose study showed that early orientation significantly influenced young people's ability to choose vocational training that matched their interests and strengths. Similarly, Obi and Ugwu (2019) emphasized that career guidance serves as both a psychological and informational framework, enabling participants to make informed choices. Their research noted that most participants found their skill acquisition journey more meaningful after career orientation. Likewise, Ojo and Salami (2022) observed that youth who accessed structured guidance before training reported stronger self-efficacy, better outcomes, and higher employment rates. Across these studies, there is consistent evidence that the timing of career orientation plays a decisive role

in enhancing the relevance and success of empowerment initiatives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, career orientation is not merely an optional activity but a strategic necessity that determines the long-term success of empowerment programmes. In Abia State, women and youths are ready and willing to embrace orientation initiatives. Future empowerment efforts must, therefore, be preceded by well-structured career guidance that can properly position the beneficiaries for meaningful socio-economic contributions.

Recommendations

This paper recommends the following:

- i. It is important for empowerment programmes to be evaluated based on the degree of alignment between skills imparted and participants' personal goals and market needs.
- ii. There is a need for career orientation to be made compulsory before initiating any empowerment programme.
- iii. Relevant ministries should collaborate with NGOs, schools, and private consultants to organize periodic career counselling fairs and seminars and create mentorship opportunities linking successful professionals and entrepreneurs with emerging youths and women.

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