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Strengthening Women's Economic Empowerment through Co-operative Societies: Implications for Poverty Reduction in Nigeria

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

In order to achieve sustainable poverty reduction, co-operative societies are expected to strengthen women's economic empowerment through job creation and income generation. Women are anticipated to benefit from accessible credit, entrepreneurial support, and productive economic participation through co-operative societies. Despite their participation in these societies, many women continue to experience unemployment, low incomes, and persistent poverty. Consequently, this study examined the extent to which co-operative societies strengthen women's economic empowerment and the resulting implications for sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and was conducted in Enugu State, Nigeria. A total of 356 co-operative members were selected using a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The instrument was validated through expert review, while its reliability was established using the split-half technique, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.86. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation, while the hypotheses were tested using the one-sample t-test at the 0.05 level of significance with the aid of SPSS Version 28. The findings revealed that co-operative societies significantly strengthened women's economic empowerment through job creation ($t = 35.566$, $p < .001$) and income generation ($t = 26.811$, $p < .001$), thereby promoting sustainable poverty reduction. The study recommended that government should expand co-operative financing through accessible low-interest credit programmes to enhance women's employment and business creation opportunities, while co-operative societies should intensify entrepreneurship training through regular capacity-building initiatives to strengthen women's capacity for sustainable income generation.

Keywords: Women's Economic Empowerment, Co-operative Development, Employment Generation, Income Generation, Sustainable Livelihoods.

INTRODUCTION

Women's co-operative societies have increasingly emerged as vital community-based organizations that foster financial inclusion, entrepreneurial development and socio-economic empowerment, particularly within developing countries where women frequently encounter barriers to accessing formal credit facilities, productive resources and stable employment opportunities. In Nigeria, the persistent rise in poverty, unemployment and economic uncertainty has further strengthened the importance of co-operative societies as viable platforms for enhancing members' livelihoods through collective savings, affordable credit schemes, entrepreneurial capacity building and joint economic ventures (Adesina *et al.*, 2025). Their contributions are particularly evident in Enugu State, where a substantial proportion of women depend on farming, petty commerce and small-scale enterprises as their primary means of sustaining household welfare. Contemporary empirical evidence indicates that participation in co-operative societies enhances the economic resilience of members by expanding access to financial services, productive resources and social capital, all of which play significant roles in reducing poverty and improving household well-being (Edet & Etteobong, 2025; Kehinde & Alabi, 2025).

One of the principal ways through which women's co-operative societies facilitate poverty reduction is by promoting job creation among their members. Through the provision of accessible credit facilities, vocational skill acquisition programmes, entrepreneurial training and improved market connections, these societies empower women to establish new businesses or strengthen existing enterprises, thereby creating opportunities for self-employment while also generating employment for other individuals within their communities (Akintola, 2025). In addition, co-operative members often undertake collective investments in agricultural production, agro-processing, handicrafts and commercial activities, resulting in increased productivity and a reduced reliance on the limited employment opportunities available in the formal labour market (Okafor *et al.*, 2025). Existing studies further demonstrate that active involvement in co-operative societies enhances women's entrepreneurial competence, self-confidence and access to employment opportunities, particularly in rural environments where economic opportunities are relatively scarce (Adu-Boahen *et al.*, 2025; Abasilim *et al.*, 2025).

The importance of job creation through co-operative societies becomes even more apparent in rural communities where formal employment opportunities remain extremely limited. In rural areas with limited job opportunities, co-operative societies are key to job creation and economic empowerment. They drive local economic development by promoting entrepreneurship, supporting small-scale enterprises and establishing co-operative-owned businesses. By pooling resources and leveraging collective bargaining, co-operatives help rural dwellers access markets and secure contracts, creating sustainable livelihoods. These societies also provide training, technical assistance and financial resources, enabling rural residents to utilize local resources and foster entrepreneurship (Smith, 2020). Additionally, co-operatives contribute to local development by creating jobs, supporting businesses and investing in community projects, strengthening both rural and urban economies (Estrin *et al.*, 2022). These developmental roles further reinforce the strategic relevance of women's co-operative societies in addressing unemployment and improving the economic wellbeing of households.

Another important dimension through which women's co-operative societies contribute to poverty reduction is income generation. These organizations improve members' earning capacity by providing savings and credit facilities, facilitating collective marketing, encouraging bulk procurement of production inputs and offering business advisory and enterprise development services. Such support enables members to increase business productivity, broaden their sources of income and strengthen their capacity to withstand economic and financial shocks (Nkamnebe & Oladipo, 2024). Furthermore, access to co-operative financing has consistently been linked with higher household income, better living conditions and a lower likelihood of experiencing poverty among women participants

(Adesina *et al.*, 2025). Likewise, financial empowerment derived from co-operative membership has been found to encourage a wide range of income-generating activities that contribute to improved household welfare, enhanced financial stability and long-term economic sustainability (Okafor *et al.*, 2025; Edet & Etteobong, 2025).

Income generation remains one of the most important indicators through which the developmental impact of co-operative societies can be assessed because it directly influences household welfare, living standards and economic resilience. Income inequality negatively affects rural productivity and livelihoods, as rural areas are often marked by low production, poor infrastructure and limited income-generating activities. This worsens living conditions and limits public goods access in developing countries. Co-operative societies are suggested as an effective solution to these challenges, as they promote collective economic goals, reduce market failures and provide financial access without harsh conditions (Getnet & Anullo, 2019; Ma & Abdulai, 2022). Co-operatives enable cost reduction and increased revenues through joint activities like supply and marketing (Sofoluwe, 2019), while also improving market participation, income generation and poverty reduction (Sentime, 2019). In Nigeria, many have joined co-operatives to address unemployment and poverty (Dauda, 2021).

Empirical evidence continues to demonstrate the positive relationship between co-operative participation and poverty reduction across different national contexts. Shen *et al.* (2022) reported that agricultural co-operatives significantly reduced multidimensional poverty among rural households in China by improving farmers' productivity, increasing household income and expanding access to agricultural markets. Similarly, Liu *et al.* (2023) found that participation in rural co-operatives substantially reduced poverty vulnerability among smallholder farming households through increased market participation and improved access to productive resources. Within Africa, Adu-Boahen *et al.* (2025) established that agricultural co-operative membership significantly enhanced women's empowerment by improving access to productive resources, strengthening decision-making capacity and expanding economic opportunities among rural women in Ghana. These findings collectively reinforce the growing international recognition of co-operative societies as effective instruments for promoting inclusive economic development and reducing poverty among vulnerable populations.

Within the Nigerian context, similar empirical evidence has continued to emerge regarding the developmental importance of co-operative societies. Enwa (2022) reported that co-operative societies significantly contributed to poverty reduction among cassava farmers in Delta State through increased agricultural productivity, improved access to farm inputs and expanded income-generating opportunities. Likewise, Fatoki and Awoniyi (2022) found that agricultural co-operatives contributed substantially to poverty alleviation among rural farmers in Osun State through credit provision, collective marketing and technical support services. Idris and Salihu (2024) further established that co-operative societies positively influenced agricultural income generation among rural farmers in Northern Nigeria through improved access to agricultural credit, enhanced production efficiency and stronger market integration. These findings indicate that co-operative societies continue to serve as practical institutions for improving members' economic welfare across different regions of Nigeria.

Despite the growing recognition of women's co-operative societies as instruments for poverty reduction, existing empirical evidence remains limited and inconclusive regarding how job creation and income generation jointly influence members' welfare. Most previous studies have focused on other regions and isolated dimensions of co-operative performance, with little attention to Enugu State. Furthermore, variations in co-operative effectiveness due to institutional and socio-economic challenges underscore the need for this study to provide context-specific evidence on the contributions of women's co-operative societies to sustainable poverty reduction through employment creation and income generation.

Against the background of persistent poverty, increasing unemployment and widening economic inequalities among women despite the growing presence of co-operative societies in Enugu State, it has become imperative to undertake a systematic investigation into the contributions of women's co-operative societies to poverty reduction. Consequently, the study examines the extent to which co-operative societies strengthen women's economic empowerment and the resulting implications for sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria. Through addressing existing conceptual, empirical and geographical gaps within the literature, the study seeks to provide evidence capable of advancing scholarship, informing policy formulation and strengthening the capacity of women's co-operative societies to contribute more effectively to sustainable poverty reduction and inclusive socio-economic development.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and was conducted in Enugu State, Nigeria, where co-operative societies play significant roles in promoting members' socio-economic development through credit facilities, entrepreneurial support, agricultural inputs, collective marketing, savings mobilization, and training programmes. A total of 356 co-operative members were sampled through a multistage sampling technique involving stratification, purposive, random and proportionate sampling procedures to ensure adequate representation. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The instrument's validity was established through expert review, while its reliability was confirmed using the split-half technique, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.86. Data were analyzed using mean, and standard deviation, while one sample t-test was employed to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance using SPSS Version 28.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Extent to which co-operative societies strengthen women's economic empowerment through job creation in Nigeria

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
Co-operative societies improve women's income through accessible credit facilities	2.83	1.04
Participation in co-operative societies increases women's business profitability	2.81	1.05
Collective marketing by co-operatives improves women's earnings	2.79	1.08
Savings mobilization through co-operative societies strengthens women's financial stability	2.83	1.06
Co-operative societies enable women to diversify their income-generating activities	2.79	1.07
Income generated through co-operative participation improves household welfare	2.85	1.03
Increased income from co-operative activities contributes significantly to poverty reduction among women	2.84	1.05
Aggregate	**2.82**	**1.05**

Source: Fieldwork, 2026 via SPSS, 28.

Respondents perceived co-operative societies as strengthening women's economic empowerment through job creation to a high extent. This is evidenced by the aggregate mean of 2.82, which exceeded the criterion mean of 2.50. The findings suggest that co-operatives significantly promote employment opportunities, enterprise development, employability and poverty reduction among women

Extent to which co-operative societies strengthen women's economic empowerment through income generation in Nigeria

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
Co-operative societies provide employment opportunities that improve women's economic independence	2.81	1.06
Participation in co-operative societies enables women to establish self-owned businesses	2.84	1.08
Skills acquired through co-operative societies increase women's employability	2.79	1.04
Co-operative societies support women in creating additional employment opportunities for others.	2.77	1.09
Access to co-operative credit enhances women's ability to create sustainable jobs	2.83	1.07
Co-operative societies reduce women's unemployment through enterprise development programmes	2.80	1.05
Job opportunities created through co-operatives contribute to reducing poverty among women	2.86	1.06
Aggregate	**2.81**	**1.06**

Source: Fieldwork, 2026 via SPSS, 28

Respondents agreed that co-operative societies strengthen women's economic empowerment through income generation to a high extent. The aggregate mean of 2.81, being above the benchmark value of 2.50, indicates that co-operatives enhance women's earnings, financial stability, business profitability, income diversification and household welfare, thereby contributing to sustainable poverty reduction.

Test of Hypotheses

H_{01}: Co-operative societies do not significantly strengthen women's economic empowerment through job creation for sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 2.5					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
A	35.566	6	.000	.32000	.2980	.3420

SPSS, 28

The one-sample t-test result shows a calculated t-value of 35.566 with 6 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. The mean difference of 0.32000 and the 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.2980 to 0.3420 indicate that the observed mean is significantly higher than the test value of 2.50. Since the probability value ($p = 0.000$) is less than the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected. It is therefore concluded that co-operative societies significantly strengthen women's economic empowerment through job creation for sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria.

H_{02}: Co-operative societies do not significantly strengthen women's economic empowerment through income generation for sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 2.5					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
B	26.811	6	.000	.31429	.2856	.3430

SPSS, 28

The one-sample t-test result indicates a calculated t-value of 26.811 with 6 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.000, which is below the 0.05 level of significance. The mean difference of 0.31429 and the corresponding 95% confidence interval of 0.2856 to 0.3430 further demonstrate that the sample mean is significantly greater than the 2.50 mean criterion. Consequently, the null hypothesis is rejected because the probability value ($p = 0.000$) is less than 0.05. The study therefore concludes that co-operative societies significantly strengthen women's economic empowerment through income generation for sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION

The study found that co-operative societies strengthen women's economic empowerment through job creation to a high extent by enhancing employment opportunities, entrepreneurial development, employability and enterprise creation. This finding agrees with Akintola (2025), who reported that co-operatives promote employment through accessible credit, entrepreneurship training and enterprise development programmes that encourage self-employment. The finding is also consistent with Adu-Boahen *et al.* (2025), who found that agricultural co-operative membership significantly enhanced women's empowerment by expanding economic opportunities and strengthening productive participation among rural women in Ghana. Similarly, the result corroborates Kassa *et al.* (2022), who established that participation in agricultural enterprises substantially promotes rural job creation and improves livelihoods. The present study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating that job creation not only increases women's employment prospects but also serves as a mechanism for strengthening women's economic empowerment and promoting sustainable poverty reduction within the Nigerian context. The finding may be attributed to co-operatives' provision of affordable credit, vocational training, business support services and collective marketing opportunities that enable women to establish sustainable enterprises and generate employment for themselves and others.

The study also revealed that co-operative societies strengthen women's economic empowerment through income generation to a high extent by improving earnings, business profitability, financial stability, income diversification and household welfare. This finding agrees with Nkamnebe and Oladipo (2024), who reported that microcredit and co-operative participation significantly increased the incomes and social status of rural women microentrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria. The finding also supports Idris and Salihu (2024), who found that co-operative societies positively influenced agricultural income generation through improved access to credit and enhanced production efficiency among rural farmers in Northern Nigeria. Likewise, the result is consistent with Mohammed and Okeke (2023), who established that co-operative societies significantly improved household income among members in the Niger Delta region. This study extends previous literature by demonstrating that income generation serves as an important pathway through which co-operative societies strengthen women's economic empowerment and contribute to sustainable poverty reduction. The observed finding may reflect the ability of co-operatives to provide affordable financing, facilitate collective marketing, promote savings mobilisation and support business expansion, thereby enabling women to improve their economic wellbeing and reduce vulnerability to poverty.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Co-operative societies greatly enhance women's economic empowerment by generating income and jobs, which helps Nigeria reduce poverty in a sustainable manner. Co-operative societies continue to be important institutions for promoting women's socioeconomic well-being and inclusive national development by increasing employment opportunities, encouraging entrepreneurial endeavors, raising household incomes, and enhancing financial stability. Through easily accessible low-interest credit programs, the government should increase co-operative financing, which will boost women's employment and business creation opportunities. Government should expand co-operative financing through accessible low-interest credit programmes to enhance women's employment and business creation opportunities, while co-operative societies should intensify entrepreneurship training through regular capacity-building initiatives to strengthen women's capacity for sustainable income generationBy jointly analyzing income generation and job creation as complementary dimensions through which co-operative societies strengthen women's economic empowerment for sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria, the study filled the empirical gap.

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