ABSTRACT
The last three decades has globally, regionally and at country level witnessed a greater visibility and attention on gender issues and women’s empowerment. However the progress in promoting women’s economic empowerment has been hampered by various constraints (Dejene, 2007), such as lack of, inadequate, and or in easy access to funds among others which lead to lower participation of women in micro credit finance. Their contribution to economic growth has been continually underappreciated and under supported. This study therefore aimed at testing the veracity of micro financing by looking at the operations of Nigerian Agricultural Cooperative and Rural Development Bank (NACRDB) and its ability to enhance women economic empowerment. Using convenient sampling, Focus Group interview was conducted with two women groups in Sabon Gari and Giwa Local Government Areas of Kaduna State who benefits from the banks credit scheme. Interview was also made with desk officer (NACRDB) Zaria branch, to elicit information on the bank’s finances to women in the area. The paper found among others that insufficient and untimely disbursement of loan affects the smooth operations of the women. It therefore recommended an improvement towards this; and to provide an avenue where they sell their produce when the price appreciate for them to earn more income.

Keywords: Empowerment, Microfinance, Women group, NARCD, Loan Disbursement

Introduction
It has been considered that the history of technology started with women. According to Williams (1987) women caught the art of textile first and transmitted it to men. The same is true of mat weaving and health technology. Even today women in Nigeria are sees in many and various entrepreneurial activities. They frequent themselves in technical skills and other handworks like: poultry, pottery, knitting, sewing, cookery, dying, mat making fashion design, and many more (Sani, 2001). Yet majority of the world’s poor are women, with certain groups particularly vulnerable to poverty, such as women farmers, women in the informal sector, migrants, women with disabilities and old aged women. Women’s unequal access to financial resources has a negative impact on their wellbeing and that of their families, communities and economic growth and development overall. This is because, as the Food and Agriculture Organisation rightly asserted that even though women are major producers of food crops, in of the world, women lag well behind man in ownership of agricultural land and access to income from land (United Nation Women, 2010). Women make up 49.6% of total population in Nigeria (1991 census).They constitute over 70% of the labour force of National food supply. Yet most of them are informal sector who predominate in micro-enterprises with little or no access to credit, technology and other support required to build capital. If Nigerian women are given the necessary assistance, support and encouragement they will contribute more to the economic growth and development of the Nation. From independence to early 1980 consideration was not geared towards women potentials, contributions, and problems associated to their empowerment. At the World Summit in 2005, Government of Africa and other regions and International Development Organisation reaffirmed their commitment to gender equality and women’s economic empowerment as essential to development, peace and security (Dejene, 2007). Similarly, goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals endorsed by world leaders at United Nation Millennium Summit in year 2000 signifies the affirmative action of global community that focuses on women empowerment (Gender Chapters, 2005). Likewise Nigerian Government and other stakeholders initiated and executed varied empowerment and poverty reduction policies and programmes

Problem Statement
Women play a significant role in African economies, and are highly represented in the micro and small enterprise subsector. The majority of them are engaged in small income generating self employment in agriculture and non agricultural activities with low prospect for growth. Women economic empowerment has been recognized as one of means for economic growth poverty reduction. It seeks to increase women access to the factors of production through special credit facilities and other modes of financial access. As a result this tends to reduce the incidence of poverty among them if, well deployed and managed. This also increases employment and household income thereby leading to sustainable economic development among women. The micro policy target in Nigeria is to among others promote the participation of at least two-thirds of States and Local Governments in micro credit financing by the year 2015. But the rate at which women involved in micro credit finance is not worth reckoning. Their contribution to economic development has been continually underappreciated and under supported, and they are often adversely affected by economic policies and other and development conditions. In the same vein, Abimbola (2004) asserts that the potentials women offer in socio-economic development through uninhibited participation in entrepreneurial activities has not been fully actualized. Added to these is that women are at the receiving end of low quality of life due to socio cultural inhibitions to their entrepreneurial aspiration. It is at this background, the paper aimed to examine the role of Nigerian Agricultural Cooperative and Rural Development Bank (NACRDB) in empowering women through micro credit. It also looked at the impact of credits on the women economic and social lives.

Literature Review
The (OECD, 2004) report finds that women entrepreneurs play an important role in the entrepreneurial economy, both in their ability to create jobs for themselves and to create jobs for others. Maas et al. (2006) opine that the growth in trial number of female entrepreneurs outnumber male entrepreneurs. There is clear evidence shown that enabling women to develop their skills and qualifications and join the labour market boosts incomes and well being throughout society. MENA (2007), report that fostering the growth of women’s entrepreneurship is an effective strategy to create jobs, catalyse economic development, empower women and foster social cohesion. Women’s entrepreneurship, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, is deserving of attention in order to access an underutilised resource and increase economic growth. According to Agu (2007), Women empowerment can be seen as the capacity of women to increase their self-reliant strategies through the inducement of education. The empowerment of women has been recognized as a pre requisite for achieving effective and people – centered development and empowerment strategy. According to Sen (2002) cited in (Makombe, 2006), empowerment means ‘altering relations of power which constrains women’s options and autonomy and adversely affect health and wellbeing’. This definition focuses on women’s ability to make choice so as enhance their wellbeing. World Bank (2001), defines empowerment as the expansion of freedom of choice and actions and increasing one’s authority and control over the resources and decisions that affects one’s life (Dejene, 2007).

The limitation of financial sector in extending credit to the beneficiaries for assuring employment opportunities led to the evolution of the programme of microcredit with the objective of providing the poor a timely and hassle-free credit without demanding any collateral. The limitation of financial institution to reach poor clients in Nigeria necessitated the introduction of micro finance. The CBN paper states that formal financial sector provide services to 35% of the economically active population while friends, relations, credit union money lenders provides the remaining 65%. These 65% clients are considered to be vulnerable whom the majority are women and large number of them live in rural areas where easy access to fund is hardly attained. In December 2005, Microfinance policy, regulatory and supervisory framework was launched to create a sustainable vehicle for the provision of micro finance services to millions of
active poor through empowering them to contribute to rural transformation in the country (CBN, 2005). These active poor are those who do not have access to finance from the formal financial sector. The microfinance banks are expected to provide micro credit to operators of micro-enterprises, such as the poor, peasant farmers, artisans, fishermen, women, senior citizens and the none salary workers in the formal and informal sector. Micro credits/finance is special programme that provide for self employment and other financial and business services to people that have inadequate or no capital venture. It serves as an intervention to alleviate poverty. Todaro et al (2009), has this to say “Microfinance is the supply of credit, saving vehicles and other financial services made available to poor and vulnerable people who might otherwise have no access to them or could borrow only on highly unfavourable terms”. MDGs (2008), asserts micro finance has helped many of the world’s poor to increase their income through self-employment and empowerment. With access to small loans and other financial services such as savings and micro- insurance, micro finance clients, mostly women, have formed micro- enterprises that generate income. Micro credit has lifted up tens of millions of women and their families out of poverty. Today, upwards to eighty to ninety percent of micro borrowers are women. But micro credit, as important as it is, and continues to be, is not enough (MENA, 2009).

Micro credit can be a powerful tool in initiating cyclical process of growth and development. It can improve the access of rural poor to financial services. Beneficiaries of micro credit Facilities tend to inculcate necessary habits for economic independence and self reliance. Appropriate and participatory credit plans by the members of a group can help in social and economic empowerment of women. It is generally accepted that microcredit is the major stimulus for development in the countries of South and it is a powerful instrument for combating poverty. Its strategies have therefore been recognized by national governments, donors, and NGOs as strategies for gender equality, poverty alleviation, community development above all women empowerment. Thus, the growth of micro finance institutions and their impact in helping reduce poverty and improving economic growth has gained worldwide recognition. Microfinance programmes have been noted to make great strides towards financial self sufficiency. Successful programmes often cited to buttress these assertions are the Grammen Bank in Bangladesh, BancoSol in Bolivia operated by ACCION, Bank Rakyat Indonesia’s (BRI) Unit Desa (village bank) programme in Indonesia (Iheduru, 2002). Grameen Bank of Bangladesh is one of the world’s most successful microfinance institutions. From a starting base of 10 members in 1976, Grameen Bank today has over 7.5 million borrowers, 65 per cent of whom have managed to lift themselves out of extreme poverty (MDGs, 2008). Dejene (2007) asserts that by the end of 2003, about 80 million people were accessing microcredit by about 2,900 micro finance institutions. Despite this continued growth, there is considerable gap of unmet credit demand worldwide.

The role of Nigerian Agricultural Co-operative and Rural Development Bank (NARCDB) to Women Economic Empowerment

NARCDDB is a lending institution set up by the Federal Government to provide financial assistance to individuals, firms and co-operative groups. In the past, for a woman to obtain loan from Nigerian Agricultural Co-operative and rural development Bank (NARCD), a bank that is charged with the duty to disburse loan for agricultural promotion, she has to be guaranteed by her husband. The present scenario is witnessed by slight change in the rudiment process of obtaining credit. The bank deals more with its client under the auspices of group co-operative formation or on individual capacity. Loan disbursement to co-operative organisation or groups tends to lesser the burden of payment default. The credit losses incurred by the bank and other licensed banks that disburse agricultural loans are absorbed by Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme Fund (ACGSF). ACGSF is established and managed by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) to encourage banks disburse loan to the Agricultural sector.

The goals of Microfinance Banks (NARCD)

The establishment of microfinance banks has become imperative to serve the following purposes:

I provide diversified, affordable and dependable financial services to the active poor, in a timely and competitive manner that would enable them to undertake and develop long-term, sustainable entrepreneurial activities.

ii Mobilize savings for intermediation;

iii Create employment opportunities and increase the productivity of the active poor in the country, thereby increasing their individual household income and uplifting their standard of living;
IV Enhance organized, systematic and focused participation of the poor in the socio-economic development and resource allocation process;  
V Provide veritable avenues for the administration of the micro credit programmes of government and high net worth individuals on a non-recourse case basis. In particular, this policy ensures that state governments shall dedicate an amount of not less than 1% of their annual budgets for the on-lending activities of microfinance banks in favour of their residents;  
VI Render payment services, such as salaries, gratuities, and pensions for various tiers of government (CBN, 2004).  

Micro credit Model  
This micro credit model of micro finance as represented by Grameen Bank of Bangladesh was developed by Pitt and Khandker (Iheduru, 2002). According to them, microfinance institutions should:  
I lend only to the poor (mostly women);  
Ii deal with creditors in groups;  
Ii require creditors to deposit savings in the bank;  
IV use group peer pressure, arising from social moral force to ensure non-default in loan repayment;  
and  
V requires good credit standing to secure subsequent loans by the group.

This model certainly draws on the informality of the "isusu" or "oha" financial system that has been described as Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) where substantial success has been recorded in Nigeria. Isusu is a common traditional financial system common in rural areas in the southern states of Nigeria (Iheduru, 2002). Likewise the women co-operative group Panladan Aviation also uses this model in its unconventional way of savings and proving credit to its members which also called adashi or isusu. The Grameen Bank model is thus very similar to the adashi model and to some extent the disbursement procedure of NACRDB.  

Methodology  
The paper interviewed the staff in charge of micro credit operation of NACRDB Zaria branch and women groups - Women farmers’ group Unguwar Galadima Shika and women co-operative group Panladan Aviation site 2 through focus group discussion. The two women groups are under Giwa and Sabon Gari Local Governments respectively.  

NARCDB process of loan disbursement  
An individual or co-operative group intending to obtain loan must open an account with the bank; and deposit 10% of the loan amount required. A loan application form is then purchased and therein provides all the required information: - like details of the borrower; financial history of the borrower like the relationship details with the bank- account number, account balance, details of previous borrowing if any. The bank operates micro and macro loan scheme. The micro loan facility is none collateral security that allow a borrower (an individual or group) an access to loan of up to ₦250,000.00. The sum above ₦250,000.00 attracts a provision of collateral security under macro loan facility. The collateral must be a tangible form or in form of 25% cash security of the intended loan amount in the form of savings. The bank arrange an insurance cover with the Nigerian Agricultural Insurance Corporation for the borrower’s agriculture and agro allied activities, and borrower deposit the sum of ₦1,000.00 in respect to that. Another ₦1,000.00 is deposited to cater for court sermon charges when a borrower defaults.

Before the branch manager recommends to the Zonal Office for an approval to disburse the loan, an inspection to the site of the borrower’s activities/business must be conducted in order to confirm its genuine, correct passport photograph and verify the worthiness of borrowers from the guarantors. This is to assess the information provided in the loan application form to the physical site. The result of the assessment will be to approve and disburse the same amount applied for or to reduce it. After the disbursement, continual field visitation is carried out for one – six months. This is to ensure appropriate loan usage by the borrowers. The monitoring also provides ancillary capacity building in areas such as record keeping and small business management. The loan is issued to a group or each group member applies but is given under group name. For the later, two cards (master and small) are opened. The master card is for the group record of repayment, and the small card is for the individual member record of repayment. Payments are for the period of two years depending on how the borrower decides either
instalment or lump sum. In the event of completion a certificate is issued. The bank charges 8% interest. The interest rate increases in the event of default. An individual or groups that settle their loan are eligible for another if they apply. In year 2009, the bank disburse loan to 8 groups. Some repaid and rests are paying.

**Focus Group Interview**

1- Name of the organisation and the year established.
2- Membership.
3- Mission / objectives of the organisation.
4- The activities of organisation.
5- The amount of credit obtained from the NARCDB and the year.
6- Nature of repayment including issue of interest.
7- Use of the loan by the organisations.
8- The benefit derived from the credit.
9- Challenges/obstacles in respect of the credit and their business activities.
10- Advice to NARCDB, Particularly the Government.
11- Advice to women in terms of economic empowerment.
12- Any other advice.

The unguwar Galadima women farmers’ group was established 15 year ago with 37 members. At present the group has 16 members. The group came into being with the aim to boast their agriculture. Each member has arable between one hectare to 5 hectares where they cultivate crops of variety like - maize, corn, rice, soya beans, beans, and groundnut. They engage in animal production, poultry and petty trading. They are in subsistence farming by using harrow, plough and other traditional farm tools. Members assist themselves with farm implements like plough to work on the farm of those that do not have such tool.

The women Co-operative group Panladan, Aviation was established in the year 2000 with 20 members among which 10 are very active. They have Lawyers, Engineers, Teachers who engage in various skills and business apart from their profession. The society was established to assist members with the provision of commodities and goods at the reasonable, with a mode of payment at intervals. The group started with money contribution that is, Adashi in Hausa language, Esusu or Ajo in Yoruba, Isusu or Itu in Igbo. This is an unofficial, informal way of savings and obtaining credit in an association. They contribute money to members for business and other activities that the group and the public benefits. The group members engage in poultry keeping; goat rearing; purchase and sell of farm produce; fish pond keeping; renting of plates and food flask for the public ceremonies; machine groundnut milling and selling the product to hotels, restaurants, canteen and communities; selling grains, soya beans and palm oil to some companies and other petty trading.

**Loan received by focus groups**

In September 2004, Unguwar Galadima Women Group collected ₦30,000.00 each at 8% interest, and the loan was paid in five months. The payment was difficult because the loan was not disburse in time to enable them invest into farm. There was also low price of crops. In the year 2005 and 2009 the loan obtained increased ranging from 50,000.00-150,000.00. When asked of the years before 2009, they replied that they were not able to get. The members use the loan to buy fertilizer, insecticide, land expansion and trading. Individual member collect the loan and repaid. At the end of successful payment, the court sermon fee is returned to the borrower.

Women Co-operative Panladan could not obtain loan the first year they applied. They went to Intercontinental but couldn’t get. They succeeded in getting the loan in 2009. They obtained sum ranging from ₦100,000.00-₦250,000.00, at 8% interest which they viewed it as high. Some members have repaid and waiting for year 2010 disbursement. The loan is used into new venture and for business expansion.

**Challenges in respect of credit and the business**

The 2 focused groups complained that the interest charge is high if is considered the unfavourable fluctuation of food crops. The Panladan women group solicited for reduction of the interest to 4% to especially borrowers who pay regularly and within timeframe.
High cost of production, low yield, lack of market and low market price of products especially crops affect the women activities to the extent that payment of loan becomes difficult. The insufficient and untimely disbursement of loan brings a setback to the women activities. To the women farmers, the loan is obtained towards the raining season end.

Lack of timely access to fertilizer and its high cost resulted to low crop yield. The president, Unguwan Galadima women group affirmed her interest to go into rice farming but high cost coupled with uneasy access to fertilizer prevented her from making the move. They lack easy access to good insecticide such that they buy fake or expired ones in the market. They also complained of in access road that link them to Giwa market for easy conveyance of their farm produce, and this affects their business.

The researcher observed some of the group members are in active leaving others who seemed serious to carry out the group activities.

**Recommendations**

1- Government should reduce interest on loan in order to increase and sustain the level of women participation in economic activities.
2- Government should provide a policy through the bank to offer credit to women farmers after the harvest period, and keep their farm produce for them, till the period the price of farm crop improve, and the bank release the produce for the women to sell and pay the loan.
3- Government should provide farm inputs to the women in form of credit, at the right time and they repay with their agricultural produce.
4- Government should increase the bank’s credit capacity and ensure the timely disbursement of credit.
5- There is need for motor able linkage between the women farmers and the market.
6- There is need for effective coordination of the group by the leader so as to carry members along.
REFERENCE


