

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Empowerment of Rural Women in Cross River State, Nigeria: Implications for Counseling

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Abstract

This study examined indigenous knowledge systems and empowerment of rural women in Nigeria. Using descriptive survey design, a multi stage sampling technique was adopted to select three hundred (300) rural women from a sampling frame of six hundred women generated through house listing from six villages from the three senatorial zones in Cross River State, Nigeria. Two villages were selected from each zone with a sample of fifty women from each village. Three research questions were proposed to guide this study. Data were collected using a twenty item structured questionnaire tagged Indigenous Knowledge System and Empowerment of Rural Women Questionnaire (IKSERWQ) and analyzed using simple percentages and mean scores. Results from this study revealed that culture still has a stronger influence on women's access to productive resources. Based on findings from this study, several recommendations were made, some of which included the bottom up approach of increasingly involving the rural woman in a participatory fashion, where they can provide inputs into the way a project is being designed and implemented instead of simply giving community projects and programs that will involve women.

Keywords: *Rural Women, Indigenous Knowledge, Systems, Empowerment, Counselling*

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Background to the Study

Indigenous knowledge has shown itself to be an important and effective resource in the life of rural African communities not only in the area of science, agriculture and medicine but also in other areas as education and cultural affairs. The rural woman is greatly endowed with this special knowledge with which activities are carried out as mother and wife to ensure the survival of the family and community. Their domestic activity essentially contributes to the maintenance of the local economy. (Ugboma, 2014). As in other cultures, women in Nigeria are the main custodians of indigenous knowledge and have used it to improve their livelihood and contribute to the development of their families, communities and society at large in the area of traditional care, medicine family care, breeding of food crops/livestock domestication and use of wild edible plants (Olalokun & Ayimbode, 2009).

Women are the backbone of development of rural and national economies as they represent 43% of the global agricultural labour force and in Africa, 80% of the agricultural production comes from small scale farmers who are mostly rural women. In Nigeria, women constitute a substantial proportion of the country's farming population and provide about 60-80% of the rural labor input; performing multiple roles for the survival of their families but they do not have access and control over all land and productive resources. (Mucavele & MuGede, 2015), (Adelakan, 1988).

Despite their valuable contributions to development, rural women still face inequality in a number of areas such as inheritance of land and other property, access to credit, capital markets and other economic resources, educational and employment opportunities and health care services, access to information, freedom of choice, freedom of association and lack of access to decision making processes and institutions (Damisa & Yohanna 2007). In addition, the adverse conditions of rural people in general have kept the vast majority of rural women politically disenfranchised, more insecure economically, physically more vulnerable and emotionally more strained (Valdivia & Gillis, 2003).

Access to productive resources is a crucial factor in rural development the world over. Rural household negotiate their livelihoods by obtaining access to productive resources which lead to enhanced family well-being. Productive resources can be both tangible as in capital, land, labour and raw materials and intangible as knowledge, ideas and market. Access to such resources is a major issue in the discourse of gender empowerment especially in developing countries. This study therefore seeks to investigate aspects of indigenous knowledge systems that have continued to hinder women empowerment in the 21st century, examine the effects of such constraints on women and recommend strategies for empowering the rural women. This study also has several implications for Guidance and Counselling.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to examine indigenous knowledge systems and empowerment of rural women in Nigeria.

Theoretical Background

This study is hinged on few feminist theories. Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields. The aim of feminist theory is to understand gender inequality and focus on gender politics, power relations and

promotion of women's rights and interests. (Wikipedia, 2015). Feminist theory is one of the major contemporary sociological theories which analyse the status of men and women in the society with the purpose of using that knowledge to better women's lives. It is most concerned with the giving of voice to women and highlighting the various ways women have contributed to society. From the ongoing assertions of African feminism, it is obvious that African critics see the feminist theory as a struggle of women against all forms of oppression, dehumanization and self-degradation imposed on them by patriarchal society. In the African society, it is believed that it is the man's world and that women are there to meet their husbands' needs. (Wikipedia)

The feminist theory is therefore a theory that cuts across a variety of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, etc. the aim is to showcase feminist struggle against oppression and male domination in the socio-political, economic and even religious backgrounds. It is also aimed at promoting women's rights, interests and wishes.

Three of these theories include the gender difference, gender inequality and the gender oppression theory.

- a. **Gender Difference Theory:** This theory focusses on how a woman's location and experiences of social situations differ from men. For instance, feminist examine the different values associated with womanhood as a reason why men and women experience the social world differently. The existential and phenomenological feminist examine how women have been marginalized and defined as then “other” by the male counterparts. Women are regarded as “objects and dependants” and are subjected to various social injustice in the society. Female subjugation has become a contemporary issue. The Nigerian women are regarded as second class citizens by their male counterparts even when both the male and female attain the same educational level, the female are still looked upon as inferior (Wikipedia).
- b. **Gender Inequality Theory:** This theory sees the woman's location and experiences as different and unequal to the men. The liberal feminist believes that women have the same capacity for the moral reasoning and agency as their male counterparts, but due to patriarchal patterning of division of labour, women are denied the opportunity to express and practice this reasoning. Women are not allowed to partake in the public sphere but have been relegated to the private sphere of household duties and child rearing. The liberal feminist also focusses on marriage and gender inequality and asserts that women do not benefit from being married as their male counterparts do. They observe that married women are more subjected to higher level of stress than unmarried women and married men. The society also places preference to the male child than the female. To give birth to only girls in a particular society such as ours spells doom for the woman. Also, childlessness is often blamed on the woman (Wikipedia).
- c. **Gender Oppression Theory:** This theory argues that the society sees the women as unequal to men and are actively oppressed, subordinated and even abused by men. This theory consist of psychoanalytic feminism and radical feminism. Psychoanalytic feminism explains disparity in power relations between men and women as it affects human emotion and childhood development. Radical feminism identifies physical violence against women by men as the base of patriarchal society. They call on all women to brace up and recognize their own value and strength, establish a sisterhood of trust with other women, confront

oppression critically and form a female separatist network in the private and public sectors (Wikipedia).

These theories are relevant to this present work because they highlight the gender differences, inequality and oppression faced by women as a result of the gendered nature of the indigenous knowledge systems.

Literature Review

Okonya and Kroshe (2014) reported that gender differences in access and use of selected productive resources exist among sweet potato farmers in Uganda, Krishna and Aisha (2003) observed that gender disparity in access to productive resources is largely due to the gendered nature of indigenous knowledge systems in Africa which has often been overlooked, marginalized and neglected. They further stated that in developing countries information especially indigenous knowledge related tends to be viewed, perceived and acted upon differently by the different genders and that as a result of this gender differentiation and specialization, indigenous knowledge held by men often differ from those held by women thereby affecting patterns of access, use and control, while resulting in different perceptions for the innovations of indigenous knowledge. It also imparts on the way indigenous knowledge is disseminated, documented and passed on to future generations. This gendered nature of indigenous knowledge impacts negatively on women empowerment.

Indigenous knowledge is traditional knowledge associated with African tradition or culture, passed down from one generation to another orally through folk tales, songs folklores etc. (Gouche, LeGuine & Walton 1988). Issues embedded in culture are deeply rooted in the traditions of the people which govern their indigenous knowledge system with wide applications to their livelihood pursuits. (Mathews & Nwaogwugwu, 2014).

Ogunmike (2001) stated that culture and religion moderate the role and livelihood of women in most parts of Nigeria as well as their access to productive resources. Culture therefore structures and determines the way social institutions shape life as well as cultivated and imposed behavior communally transmitted from one generation to another. Several studies have been conducted to establish the constraints facing rural women farmers and many variables have been isolated using literature through quantitative and statistical inferences stating that cultural factors such as gender biases, patriarchal system of rural discourse, land ownership practices, social customs, lack of collateral and lack of access to decision making, illiteracy and poverty among other factor have limiting effect on women's access to productive resources. Ogunmike (2001), (World Bank, 2001) Damisa & Yohanna, (2007).

Other studies revealed that decision making on sales of productive resources is by gender across cultures. This is because males are culturally believed to be in charge of productive resources (Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2012). The low participation of women in decision making is a typical aspect of gender inequality. In general, women in Africa are considered severe handicaps. The land ownership, access to other productive resources and the organization of agricultural products are influenced by cultural practices and tradition. For instance, rules of land inheritance (by lineage, gender or other culturally determined characteristics) are core determinants of effective access. Fafchamps and Quinsumbing

(2005) indicated that control over sale and proceeds from livestock and livestock products is generally gender differentiated with women tending to market small livestock and products while the sale of large livestock and products is for the most times in the male domain. They further noted that gendered division of agricultural activities has constrained women access to extension services.

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (2000) stated that cultural perception of women in most cultures implies that with marriage, all that belongs to the women including herself revert to the ownership of the man, such that the women loses her traditional rights to land and ownership of other productive resources thereby continuing the vicious circle of poverty. Confirming this, Dela-Ray (2005) noted that women are treated as assets and that rural women in most cases have no right to inherit land or other ancestral property or wealth and that women often forfeit their right to land and natural resources to their male counterparts and that custodians of property, even liquid assets are the male members of the family and women have to seek permission and guidance to invest their earnings in business ventures, in education or to buy goods.

It is important for societies to empower their women psychologically, emotionally, politically and economically, so that they can become creative, active in decision making as well as gaining a sense of worth in the society. Empowerment is a multidimensional social process that helps people gain access over their lives. It is a process that fosters power (i.e. capacity to implement) on people for use in their own lives, communities and society (Bailey, 1992). Empowerment increases the assets and capabilities of individuals or groups to make purposive choices and transform their choices. Women empowerment therefore connotes giving opportunities to women who were originally excluded from participation in matters that impact on their welfare. This entails enabling women to perceive themselves as having the capacity and the right to influence their decision making area.

Statement of the Problem

The improved participation of women in development opportunities has continued to be a challenge facing many rural communities in Nigeria today. Although as custodians of indigenous knowledge, women play a pivotal role in the development of their families and communities. Researches have shown that majority of women across the globe rely on the informal sector for their income and thus represent most of the world's poor and marginalized population in society (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2010).

Women have continued to have a poorer command over a range of productive resources including land, education, information and financial resources. Moreover, economic extension and other public institutions in most developing countries are gender – biased in that the needs of women are often ignored and overlooked. These constraints put the woman at a high disadvantage especially with regards to bargaining power. Social customs limit women participation and exposure to economic opportunities that arise thus increasing the level of inequality vis-à-vis their partners' (FAO, 2011).

In spite of various policies and programmes aimed at women empowerment in Nigeria, little success have been achieved. The gendered nature of indigenous knowledge systems

impacts negatively on the empowerment of women. It is against this background that this study seeks to investigate those aspects of indigenous knowledge that hinders empowerment of women, the effects of such constraints on the women and how the rural women can overcome such constraints and build capacities in their communities and regions.

Research Questions

Three research questions were formulated to guide this study.

1. What aspects of the indigenous knowledge systems hinder rural women empowerment?
2. To what extent does indigenous knowledge system affect rural women empowerment?
3. How can rural women gain recognition and be empowered to build capacity within their own communities and regions?

Methods

The researcher adopted the descriptive survey design. A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select three hundred (300) rural women from a sampling frame through house listing from six villages from the three senatorial districts in Cross River State. Two villages were selected from each zone with a sample of fifty women from each selected village. To generate a sampling frame, the researcher conducted a house listing of six villages from the three senatorial districts in Cross River States. The villages were Ukpah and Okuku from the northern senatorial zone (200 households), Okuni and Iyamoyong from the central (200 households) and Okurikang and Ikot Nakanda (200) from the south to obtain a total of 600 households out of which a sample of three hundred women were drawn, with one hundred from each zone using the hat and draw method.

Data for the study were collected using a twenty item structured questionnaires tagged Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Empowerment of Rural Women Questionnaire (IKSERWQ). The questionnaire had two sections A and B. Section A of the questionnaire sought respondents' demographic data on occupation, literacy level, educational level and ownership of productive resources. Section B contained twenty items in two parts. Part A had ten items on the aspects of indigenous knowledge that hinder women empowerment while the part B had ten items on the effects of such constraints on women empowerment. A four point likert scale of strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) was adopted. The validity of the instrument was established using the face and content validity. The instrument was further subjected to series of scrutiny by experts in measurement and evaluation. Reliability of the instrument was ensured using the Cronbach Alpha reliability test and a value of 0.68 was obtained, therefore, the instrument was accepted as reliable and suitable for the study.

Due to the low literacy of majority of the rural women, the questionnaire was interviewer administered. Data were summarized using simple percentages and mean scores.

Result

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Demographic Information of Respondents

(1)	Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
	Petty trading	30	10%
	Farming	205	67.4%
	Tailoring	20	6.2%
	Food processing	27	9%
	Total	300	
(2)	Literacy level		
	Can neither read nor write	216	72%
	Can only read	47	15.2%
	Able to read and write	37	12.1%
	Total	300	
(3)	Educational qualification		
	No formal education	216	72%
	Primary education	46	15.1%
	SSCE	25	8.1%
	Post secondary	13	4.1%
	Total	300	
(4)	Ownership of productive resources		
	Lands (pieces/plots)	34	11.1%
	Large livestock/business	23	7.2%
	Small livestock/business	186	62%
	Farm equipments (mechanized)	30	10%
	Access to credit facilities	27	9%
	Total	300	

Table one above is on the demographic characteristics of the respondents and reveals that the major occupation among rural women and the highest percentage was farming 205 (67.4%) followed by petty trading 30 (10%), food processing 27 (9%), tailoring 20 (6.2%) and hair dressing 18 (6%). This shows that majority of the respondents were farmers. On the literacy level of the respondents, 216 (72%) can neither read nor write, 47 (15.2%) can only read while 37 (12.1%) can read and write in English language. On the level of education, a very large proportion of the respondent 216 (72%) had no formal education, only a small proportion of the population 13 (4.1%) had post secondary education and 25 (8.1%) had completed secondary education and 46 (15.1%) of them had only completed primary education. Correlating with the high illiteracy level. On ownership of productive resources, only 34 respondent (11.1%) owned plots of land, 23 (7.8%) had large livestock/business, 186 (62%) owned small livestock/businesses, 30 (10%) had access to mechanized farm equipment and only 27 (9%) had access to credit facilities which show the high level of poverty among the rural women.

Table 2: Mean scores on Responses of women on aspects of Indigenous knowledge systems that hinder women Empowerment.

S/N	Item	N	\bar{X} Score	Decision
1.	Patriarchal nature of rural discourse	300	3.80	A
2.	Exclusion of women from key decision making prices	300	3.30	A
3.	Gender preference by parents	300	3.25	A
4.	Dependent status of women	300	3.42	A
5.	Stereotype attitude towards women	300	3.08	A
6.	INHERITANCE LAWS	300	3.40	A
7.	Early marriage	300	2.96	A
8.	Gender biases in opportunities	300	3.10	A
9.	Widowhood practices	300	2.48	A
10.	Female genital mutilation	300	2.50	A

Data presented in table 2 revealed that all the items rated positive. In all, item on rated highest 3.80 which indicate that patriarchal nature of rural discourse is a big hindrance to rural empowerment. However, widowhood practice had the lowest mean score of 2.48.

**Table 3
Mean Scores on Responses of women on the effects of Indigenous knowledge Systems on women Empowerment**

S/N	Item	N	\bar{X} Score	Decision
1.	Low investment power	300	3.55	A
2.	Low market access	300	3.45	A
3.	Limitation of choices	300	3.50	A
4.	Poor political representation	300	3.45	A
5.	Poverty	300	3.50	A
6.	Lack of access to quality health/education	300	3.10	A
7.	Insecurity	300	2.88	A
8.	School drop out	300	2.75	A
9.	Gender based violence	300	3.00	A
10.	Poor self concept	300	2.95	A

Table 3 above shows that all noted item were accepted by respondents as effects of indigenous knowledge systems on women empowerment. The mean score responses on all items were above the mean score of 2.50 indicating that all these effects still persist today.

Discussion of Findings

The study found out that certain aspects of indigenous knowledge systems still hinder rural women empowerment even in the 21st century Nigeria. Such aspects as cultural beliefs and traditions, patriarchal nature of the rural discourse, exclusion of women for key decision making process, inheritance laws, gender biases in opportunities, dependent status of women, early marriage and stereotyped attitude towards women to mention but a few. This is in agreement with the studies of Ogwumike (2001). Damisa &Yohanna (2007), Fafchamps & Quisumbing, 2005) who noted that cultural and institutional factors often limit women access to land ownership, labour and capital and that women cannot provide collateral for credit facilities because they do not have legal ownership to tangible assets.

In the same vein, the study agreed with finding of the FAO (2011) who through qualitative and statistical inferences stated that cultural factors affect women access to and control over productive resources. They observed too, that the moderating effect of culture bring to fore how much of women in accessibility and lack of control over productive resources is due to gender biases or cultural interferences. Moreso, Thamaga-Chitja and Morojele (2014) stated that the patriarchal nature of rural discourse which regards women as minors under the authority of men as heads of household denies women direct access productive resources.

Findings from this study also revealed several hindering effects of indigenous knowledge systems on rural women empowerment to include; low investment power, low market access, limitation of choices, poor political representation, poverty, insecurity, gender-based violence, school dropout, poor self-concept and lack of access to quality health services and education. This is in line with the studies of Okonya and Kroshe, (2011). World Bank, (2001), Ibrahim & Ibrahim (2012) and Dela-Ray, (2005) who noted that low market access and low investment were major effects of lack of access to information and are among the several effects of culture on women access to productive resources.

Implications for Counseling

Counseling is a life-long process that is quite challenging. Women empowerment is a key to national development especially in developing countries where women constitute majority of overall population. A judicious implementation of counseling programmes for women empowerment should focus on health, vocational skills, agriculture, education and leadership training for self-reliance and self-actualization. Counseling should serve as a viable tool for women empowerment through the application of different strategies such as entrepreneurial counseling at all levels, and embarking on programmes of enlightenment and orientation of parents, teachers, students and the government to develop positive attitudes towards education of women right from the primary to tertiary institution.

Conclusion

It is clear from the foregoing that several aspects of the indigenous knowledge system constrain rural women empowerment. Implications of this include the need for gender sensitive programmes as well as developmental planning focusing on women rather than making gender issues as appendage to the generalized development plans; mainstreaming and transformation of gender issues into actions to improve women access and control over productive resources. More programmes should be introduced to enhance women and increasing the implementation of existing programmes to empower women.

Recommendations

Based on the finding of this study, the following recommendations were made

1. Aspects of indigenous knowledge systems such as values, norms, traditions, customary laws and practices should be strengthened, redefined and even reinterpreted to not only ensure equality but to also include rural women in development policies and practices.
2. Discrimination and exclusionary policies and practices faced by rural women should be eliminated so that the rural women will feel secure in entering the work force. The work place environment for rural women should be improved to

facilitate the involvement of rural women in gainful activities that contribute to economic growth and efficiency.

3. Problems specific to rural women and the source of their powerlessness be identified and appropriate measures adopted to redress the issues of gender inequality, injustice and oppression.
4. Rural women access to key information should be increased along with the motivation to adopt appropriate technologies to improve the quality of their lives, families and communities.
5. The health and nutritional status of rural women should be improved along with recognition of their important roles in resource management and environmental conservation.
6. Access to education should be expanded and improved for rural girls and women, through the reform of education systems in order to allow women take advantage of training and employment opportunities.
7. Efforts should be made to increase the literacy level of the rural women through adult education programmes.
Measures should be adopted to enhance women participation in development process. This could be done through using the bottom-up approach. Where women can provide inputs into the way a project is being designed and implemented instead of simply giving communities projects and programs that will help them involve women.
8. Moreso, indigenous knowledge must be mainstreamed into development initiatives and rural women who are the custodians of this knowledge recognized and encouraged.
9. The government should develop frameworks backed by necessary laws to enforce their applications.
10. The ongoing land reforms in Nigeria should be properly implemented to enhance women access to productive resources.

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