

EFFECTS OF GENDER BASED DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES ON POVERTY REDUCTION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NGOR –OKPALA AREA OF IMO STATE, NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT: *This study assessed the effect of gender-based discriminatory practices on poverty reduction and women empowerment in Ngor Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. One hundred and twenty (120) female respondents were randomly selected from twelve communities, ten respondents from each of the twelve communities. Questionnaire were used for data collection. Data were analyzed using frequency distribution, percentage and mean. The results showed that most of the respondents were 51-60 years of age and majority of the women were married and mostly secondary school leavers who had farming as their major occupation. The result showed that women are being discriminated upon in decision making, education, inheritance (land), in employment and some of these discriminations are caused by cultural and religious laws which restrict women from fully utilizing their potentials. The result also showed that discrimination of women leads to increased poverty level and psychological effect such as low self esteem and lack of confidence, subsequently affecting poverty reduction and women empowerment negatively. Based on the major findings, the following recommendations were made. Cultural and religious laws should be restructured to suit modern day society, equal educational opportunities should be provided to women, and skill training facilities should be provided to empower women. Also, Government should formulate policies that allows for equal right in inheritance especially land. Women should be given equal right and power in decision making, equal opportunities for women to participate in Various Societal Activities.*

KEYWORDS: Poverty, Gender, Empowerment, Discrimination, Education

INTRODUCTION

Human resources in any economy constitute a significant input in the production process of goods and services. The study of human resources, their quality and problems is of immense use in manpower planning in both developing as well as developed economy (Sreedhar and Kumar, 2012). The agricultural laborers have to work in cold and hot weather from sunrise to sunset. Their wages are low when compared to industrial laborers. They are generally custom bound. They suffer from many social handicaps and majority of these handicaps are interconnected with economic problems which enable them to have low levels of living. The low standard of living further causes social disabilities and malnutrition. This ultimately results in low efficiency of labor leading to low productivity in agriculture. These agricultural laborers are suffering due to unemployment, underemployment and low wages. (Bishnoi, 1996). Due to low employment in agriculture is mostly seasonal and intermittent in character.

The laborers suffer with seasonal unemployment. During the periods of peak, agricultural the off season, they have to face acute unemployment problem. In the areas where multi cropping is practiced, the laborers get employment throughout the year with minimum period of unemployment. (Sreedhar and Kumar, 2012).

The low wages are responsible for their subhuman standard of living. It is highly difficult for an agricultural laborer to make their both ends meet with low wages. In certain occupations women workers are paid lower rates than men. The inevitable result is that they are mostly semi-starved not having sufficient physical strength to perform all agricultural operations in a proper manner. The chronic imbalance between labor supply and complementary resource in fixing up of wages at subsistence levels over large parts of the country.

Despite the fact that women in developing countries provide nearly 70% of the agricultural labor, they continue to account for over 60% of the world's hungry. Lack of gender equality limits a woman farmer's access to agricultural inputs, credit services and a market to sell her products. These constraints lead to lower crop yields, produce sold at lower price and ultimately continued poverty and hunger for her and her children. Gender equal access to these agricultural resources could increase the average women farmers' crop yields by 20-30. Given the opportunity to generate and control an income, women routinely invest significant portion of their income in food, healthcare and education for their families. Unfortunately, at the moment, the majority of women in developing countries lack economic power, resulting in a higher rate of girls kept out of school, minimal access to basic healthcare, increased HIV/AIDS prevalence and higher mortality rates. Yet, women continue to bear almost all responsibility for meeting the basic needs of the family (The Hunger Project, 2011)

A proven way to overcome many systematic barriers to women's success has been through increased participation by women in local, regional and national legislation as empowered change agents. In just 10 years, the amount of women holding seats in house of national parliament in South Asia rose from 7-18%, but the global goal of equal representation is still a long way off, with only one woman for every four men in parliamentary houses. The hunger project (THP) recognizes the global gender imbalance of power and responsibility and empowers women to build their capacity and reliance as a way of overcoming obstacles. The hunger project (THP) firmly believes that empowering women to be key change agents is an essential element to achieving the end of hunger and poverty. This is because of the inherent discriminations against women.

Problem Statement

The concept of human poverty sheds light on the relationship between gender inequalities and poverty: Women are vulnerable to chronic poverty because of gender inequalities in the distribution of income, access to productive inputs such as credit, command over property or control over earned income, as well as gender biases in labor markets. Resource allocation is often gender biased within households as well as in state and market institutions. It is often stated that women do not always have full control over their own labour or in the income they earn. Men forbid their wives to work outside the household or extract labor from women through actual or threatened violence, making it harder for women to transform their capacities into incomes or well being while gender inequalities reproduce poverty of women to the next

level, they also have an impact on growth performance and therefore, have direct and indirect consequences on poverty and poverty alleviation (Alam, 2011).

The women empowerment includes access to available opportunities, information, basic resources of education, decision making authority and ability, and power over one's life. Regardless of improvement in different fields of lives, the females covering 52% of the total population of Nigeria carry on to undergo from a comparative lack of necessary lowest requirements, expertise, options, integrity, justice and egalitarianism. Hence it is very important to examine women empowerment in Nigeria in its financial economic, public and political aspects (GOP, 2004). The women in Nigeria are provided the low and increasing levels of poverty amongst the women and the cases of public and domestic violence against girls and women have been increased. The high levels of poverty and segregation, the incidents of gang rapes and "honor" killings are frequently quoted in Nigerian society. The women have low levels of mobility protection, decision making, independence, paid services and economic empowerment. They have a lack of access to food, security, water, hygiene, energy, land ownership, economic assets and credit. The women have not proper access to justice and enduring low access to usage of social services i.e. essential and reproductive healthcare, necessary useful literacy and primary education remained the major issues of Nigerian women. The broad objective of the study is to ascertain the effects of gender based discriminatory practices (against women only) on poverty reduction and women empowerment. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Describe the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents ,
2. Identify the discriminatory practices and laws against women in the study area,
3. Describe the effects of the practices on poverty reduction and empowerment of women in the study area,
4. Identify various strategies for combating discrimination against women.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Ngor-Okpala L.G.A of Imo State. The local government is one of the largest local government areas in Imo State. It connects Abia and Rivers State of Nigeria. It has an area of 561km² and a population of 160,101 persons (in 2013 projected from 2006 census figure)(NPC, 2006). The study population includes all the women in Ngor- Okpala area of Imo State. Twelve (12) communities were selected for the study. The study employed multi-stage sampling technique in which ten (10) respondents were selected from each of the twelve communities randomly from the sample frame, making a total of 120 respondents. The data for this research were collected from the primary and secondary sources and analysis of data was done using descriptive statistical tools such as percentages, frequency and presented in tabular forms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**Socio-Economic Information of the Respondent**

ATTRIBUTE		FREQUENCY	
PERCENTAGE			
Age			
21-30	17		14.2
31-40	24		20
41-50	24		20
51-60	35		29.2
61 & above	20		16.7
Education			
No formal	9		7.5
Adult education	10		8.5
Primary	15		12.5
Secondary	53		44.2
Tertiary	33		22.5
Occupation			
Farming	57		47.5
Trading	27		22.5
Civil servant	29		24.2
Marital status			
Married	90		25.0
Single	12		10.0
Widow	18		15.0
Membership of Organization			
Yes	99		82
No	21		18
Farming Experience			
Below 5 years	13		10
6-10	11		9.2
11-15	22		18.3
20 & above	58		48.3
Farm size			
0.25-1	36		30
1.5-2	21		17.5
2.5-3	18		23.3
3.5 & above	17		15
None	12		14.2

Table 1 shows that 29.2% of the respondents are within the age group of 51-60 years. Then 20% of the respondents are within the age group of 41-50years, with another 20% within the age group of 31-40years. While 14.2% of the respondents are within the age group of 21-31years. This finding shows or indicates that majority of the women are old and experienced.

Hence they have experienced discrimination in various ways. Again, 7.5% of the women (respondents) had no formal education, 8.3% of the respondents attended adult education, while 12.5% had primary education. The table further revealed 44.2% of the respondents went to secondary school while 27.5% went to tertiary institutions. This findings shows that most of the respondents are educated, though they did not attain the highest level of education. Hence, their understanding of Gender based discriminatory practices. The table also shows that 47.5% of the respondents are farmers, 24.2% are civil servants, 22.5% of the respondents are into trading as their occupation, while 5.8% of the respondents are students and other forms of occupation. This finding indicates that majority of the respondents are farmers. This is due to their low educational background, and lack of employment, so they have no other choice than to work in their husband's farm agricultural laborers which is the major occupation of rural dwellers. Once more, 75% of the respondents are married, 10% of the respondents are single while 15% of the respondents are widows. This indicates that these old women and widows have experienced discrimination. Table 1 also shows that 82% of the respondents belong to social group while 18% of the respondents do not belong to any social group. Again, 48.3% of the respondents have been farming for 20years and above, 18.3% of the respondents have been farming for 11-15years, while 9% of the respondents have farm experience of 5years and 13.3% do not have farm experience. This indicates that the women have been farming a long time ago. Finally, 30% of the respondents have farm size of 0.25-1 hectares, 17.5% of the respondents have 1.5-2 hectares. The table further revealed that 23.3% of the respondents have 2.5-3 hectares, 15% of the respondents have 3.5 hectares and above while 14.2% of the respondents have no farmland at all. This indicates that these women are small scale farmers who produce mainly for family consumption and little sales are made when they are in need of money.

Discriminatory Practices And Laws Against Women

Table 2: Discriminatory practices against women

Practices	Frequency*	Percentage
Lack of power to make decision at home	63	52.5
Denial of education	23	19.2
Early marriage	22	18.3
Rape and sexual harassment	7	5.8
Unequal wage earning and status	2	1.7
Difficulty in labor market	16	13.3
Restriction on freedom of expression and association	55	45.8
Denial of land inheritance to women	72	60
Denial of opportunity to work by husband	18	15
Widowhood practices	18	15
Female circumcision	25	20.8
Verbal abuse of women	15	12.5
Not allowed to present kolanut	76	63.3
Physical attack	3	2.5

*Multiple responses

Source: Field survey 2013

Table 2 above shows the discriminatory practices in the study area. The practices are lack of power to make decision in their homes with 52.5% response. Other discriminatory practices includes denial of education (19.2%), early marriage (18.3% rape and sexual harassment (5.8%), unequal wage payment (1.7%), difficulty in labor market (13.3%), restriction on freedom of expression and association (45.8%) denial of land inheritance (60%), widowhood practices (15%), denial of the opportunity to work by husband (15%), female circumcision (20.8), verbal abuse (12.5%), not allowed to present kolanuts (63%) and physical attack (2.5%).

The above findings are in line with Desai (1994) who observed that parents' reluctance to educate their daughters has its roots in the situation of women. Parents have several incentives for not educating their daughters. Foremost is the view that education of girls brings no returns to parents and that their future roles, being mainly reproductive and perhaps including agricultural labor, require no formal education. Sivakumar, (2008) also indicated that female are facing lots of discrimination against them, some of which are abortion of female gravid with the help of scanning, foeticide (the act of aborting a foetus because it is female), by pressing the face with pillow or by breaking the baby's neck, not giving enough and nutrition's food, denial of education, not giving needy healthcare while in ill health, early marriage, eve teasing, rape and sexual harassment, dowry, divorce, destitution even for silly or without any reason. Predispositions against females carry on several aspects that take account of employment and economic gains Female workers are not given similar wages as male for some labor. Women tend to be concentrated in less prestigious and lower paying occupations that are traditionally considered women's jobs and these are also referred to as pink collar jobs. This is also in line with Mohammed, (2011) who stated that the practice of inheritance in all kinds of movable and immovable parental property is a global practice but some of the traditional societies are characterized by gender discrimination in the form of either total deprivation or partial deprivation.

Causes of Discrimination Against Women

Table 3: causes of discrimination

Option	Frequency*	Percentage
Religious belief	76	63.3
Educational backwardness	80	66.7
Family history	52	43.3
Customs and beliefs	96	80
Family condition	61	50
Weak community sanction	96	80
Attitudes	56	46.7
Low income	51	42.5
Unemployment	40	33.3

*Multiple responses

Source: Field survey 2013

Table 3 above shows the causes of these discriminatory practices against women. some of the factors are religious beliefs which is indicated by 63.3% response, Again, 80% response indicated that customs and beliefs is a major cause of discrimination against women, 50% response agreed that family conditions is another cause of discrimination. Other causes of

discrimination of women include weak community sanctions (80%) response, attitudes indicated by 46.7% response, low income indicated by 42.5% response and unemployment indicated by 33.3% response.

This is in line with the views of Anna-Maria, (2006) who stated that India's population still leads in traditional lives in rural area. Religious laws and traditions still determine the lives of many people particularly women. Even of women are formerly entitled to own land and resources, social and religious factors make many women refrain from this right in order not to cause distortions within the family. This is also in line with Maluleke, (2012) who stated that the traditional and cultural practices reflect the values and beliefs held by the members of a community for periods of often spanning generations. Some of the traditional cultural beliefs are beneficial to members while some are harmful to women. He mentioned some of the practices that are harmful to women to include; early and forced marriages, virginity testing, widow's rituals, female genital mutilation, etc.

Effects of Discrimination on Women

Table 4: Effects of Discrimination

Effects	Frequency*	Percentage
Increased poverty level	86	71.7
Unemployment of women	56	46.7
Lack of confidence in women	76	63.3
Low self esteem	34	28.3
Total dependence on husband	96	80
Personal isolation	11	9.2
Emotional trauma	48	40
Illiteracy	66	55
Infant and maternal mortality	8	6.7
Divorce	5	4.2

*Multiple responses

Source: Field survey 2013

Table 4 above reveals the effects of discrimination of women. Women have increased level of poverty as indicated by 71.7% response. It can also be seen that discrimination leads to unemployment of women as indicated by 46.7% response. Another effect of discrimination of women is lack of confidence in women as revealed by 63.3% response. Other effects of discrimination against women are; total dependence on husband as indicated by 80% response, emotional trauma indicated by 40% response, low self esteem indicated by 28.3% response, personal isolation indicated by 9.2% response, illiteracy by 55% response, infant and maternal mortality indicated by 6.7% response and divorce which is indicated by 4.2% response. This is in line with Amnesty international, (2006) which stated that gender discrimination in education and employment leads to poverty and problems faced in poverty alleviation in the target area. This is also in line with the report of the UNO (2006) which says there is a proven link between a lack of education, underdevelopment and poverty. Early marriage deprives young women of the opportunity to educate and develop themselves. The research also indicates that majority of the girls and the young women that are victims of early marriage are from poor families, their lack of education due to early marriage deepens their poverty and perpetuates the cycle

of poverty. The danger of these harmful traditional practices is that children and adolescents whose rights to personal safety and wellbeing are violated are at increased risk of long life developmental challenges, HIV infections and other physical, emotional and social problems. These outcomes compromise national and international development goals. The traditional and social practices as well as role stereotypes confined women to the home as house wives and children bearers, hence, they were largely economically dependent on their husband, and by implication subservient to them (Ifemeje 2008).

Various Strategies for Combating Discrimination Against Women

Table 5: strategies for combating discrimination against women

Strategies	frequency*	Percentage
Provision of education for both sexes	104	86.7
Equal employment opportunities	92	76.7
Empowerment of women through Skill acquisition programs	100	83.3
Equal wage payment for both gender	75	62.5
Economic independence	22	18.3
Equal access to landed property	86	71.7

*Multiple responses

Source: Field survey 2013

Table 5 shows the various strategies for combating discrimination against women. Provision of education for both sexes is a major strategy as shown by 86.7% response. Provision of equal employment opportunities is another way of combating discrimination as indicated by 76.7% response. Empowering women through skill acquisition programs was indicated by 83.3% response, 62.5% response also revealed that equal wage payment for both gender can stop the discriminatory practices against women. Again, 71.7% response agrees giving access to landed properties to both gender can help solve the problem of discrimination against women. Another way of combating discrimination is through economic independence, indicated by 18.3% response. This is in line with the recommendations of Waqas *et al.*, (2011) in their paper which they said that it is important to educate and sensitize the public in general and males in particular for providing fundamental and equal rights to women through educating and training them. Also, Padmini *et al.*, (2003) stated that empowering women and making them understand that the violence they experience is unacceptable. It's important to educate the communities that women are not chattel or movable property but individuals who need to be valued and abused, also, educating boys from childhood that violence against women is an offence and violation of human rights is an important step in designing preventive strategies (WHO 2008). This is also in line with Ifemeje and Ikpeze (2012) who recommended the following strategies for combating gender discrimination: An urgent review of all gender discriminatory laws in Nigeria, uprooting all obnoxious traditional practices that impede the rights of women, economic empowerment of women, educational empowerment of women to bridge the gender gap in Nigeria, more political appointment for women, overhauling of social institutions and the role of media in creating awareness for gender equality .

CONCLUSION

The result showed that the sample is dominated by respondents between the ages of 51-60 years and majority of the respondents who attended secondary school, who are mainly poor farmers and older married women who have really experienced discrimination. The study further revealed that a good number of women are being discriminated in one way or the other either by their families, husbands or the society. The result in addition shows that discrimination of women leads to increased poverty level, unemployment, lack of confidence, women depending on their husbands, illiteracy, etc. It was further revealed that the major causes of these discriminations against women are religious and cultural beliefs of the people.

The result revealed by the responses as strategies for combating discrimination include equality in access to education, employment opportunities, wage payment and landed properties.

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