EXPLORING THE NEXUS BETWEEN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS, EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, AND AGE DIFFERENCES IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
Poverty remains a pressing global challenge, particularly in developing nations like Nigeria. Women, constituting a significant proportion of those affected, encounter distinct challenges due to gender disparities and limited access to resources. The study aims to assess women's empowerment programs, educational attainment, and age disparities concerning poverty alleviation efforts in Nigeria within the diverse landscape of the Central Senatorial District. The study employed a qualitative research design, the study engaged 24 participants, ensuring diversity across age groups, educational backgrounds, and geographical locations. Through semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions, each comprising six participants, the research collected rich and nuanced narratives. Thematic analysis served as the analytical lens, meticulously unraveling patterns and themes inherent in the participants' experiences. Three theories were used to support the study which includes empowerment theory, participatory model and social learning theory. Findings reveals that educational empowerment Impact," underscores how varying educational levels among women significantly influence their participation in and perceived benefits from empowerment initiatives. "Age Dynamics in Empowerment" sheds light on how age disparities shape women's interactions with these programs, indicating differing needs and outcomes across age groups. "Program Effectiveness and Accessibility" uncovers the

participant's effectiveness and accessibility of empowerment schemes "Societal and Cultural Influences" illuminates how societal norms and cultural factors intersect with program engagement, influencing women's experiences within these initiatives. The theme "Economic Opportunities and Livelihoods" underscores the significance of economic opportunities and livelihoods afforded by empowerment programs, impacting women's financial stability. Lastly, "Perceptions of Program Impact" captures the diverse perspectives regarding the actual impact of these programs on the lives of the women involved, showcasing varying degrees of positive and negative experiences and outcomes. The findings contribute substantively to the discourse on enhancing the effectiveness of empowerment programs, emphasizing the need for tailored interventions that consider educational backgrounds and age-specific needs to foster sustainable poverty reduction strategies among women.

Introduction

Exploring the intricate dynamics of poverty alleviation, gender equity, and women's empowerment unveils a multifaceted narrative, echoing the global pursuit of sustainable development. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in alignment with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), underscores the urgency of eradicating extreme poverty and fostering gender equality as pivotal components of global progress (Adebayo, 2011). While strides have been made in developed nations, the specter of rising poverty levels looms large over developing countries, with Nigeria emblematic of this challenge, witnessing a surge in poverty rates, particularly impacting women (Aliyu, & Dansabo, 2017). The World Poverty Clock's disconcerting revelation that over 606 million people worldwide grapple with extreme poverty illuminates the urgency of addressing this pervasive issue (Adeleke, 2012). Rural areas, predominantly situated in developing countries, bear the brunt of this global crisis, with Nigeria, in particular, grappling with a staggering 63% of its population living below the poverty line (Alese, 2013). Within this distressing landscape, women emerge as a vulnerable demographic, contending not only with the harsh realities of poverty but also facing gender discrimination, rendering them susceptible to exploitation, including human trafficking (Okoi, Ogar, Ubi, Ubi & Okpa, 2022).

Delving into the intricacies of poverty's persistence, the World Bank identifies factors such as sluggish economic growth, low human capital, labor market weaknesses, and susceptibility to external shocks as contributing to the enduring challenge of poverty (International Centre for Research on Women, 2013). The socio-economic repercussions of the ongoing global pandemic have further exacerbated existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting women and perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Against this backdrop, the Sustainable Development Goal 5 assumes paramount significance, emphasizing the centrality of gender equity and women's

empowerment in the overarching mission of poverty reduction (Innocent, Eikojonwa & Enojo, 2014). Nigeria, like many nations, has implemented a gamut of poverty eradication policies over the years, ranging from agricultural initiatives to social investment programs like Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), N-power, Trader-Moni, and Conditional cash transfers (Ofem, Okpa & John, 2021). However, the efficacy of these programs, especially in uplifting women, remains a subject of scrutiny, particularly in rural areas where poverty rates are notably high. The present study posits that the efficacy of skills acquisition programs in addressing the unique needs of women may hold the key to unlocking the transformative potential of empowerment initiatives and, consequently, impacting poverty

eradication on a meaningful scale. Previous researches have shown that women empowerment has a great impact on the reduction of poverty but do not empower all women in all situations and equally. Hence, there is need to determine factors that are impeding the impact of women empowerment.

Statement of problem

Women play a significant role in societal development by ensuring stability, progress and long term development of nations. They play the role of mothers, caretakers in family affairs, farmers, educators, entrepreneurs, teachers etc. Despite their critical roles, women all over the world suffer from varying degrees of abuses, discriminations, marginalization and deliberate denial of their rights thus subjecting them to extreme poverty, deprivation and social exclusion (Ofem, Okpa and John, 2021). As a result, many women engage in many crimes such as prostitution, drug dealing, smuggling, child trafficking etc.

Conceptual Review

The goal of the conceptual clarification is to categorize and describe concepts relevant to the study.

Women Empowerment

In almost every society and in every sphere of life, women assume unequal position and status, thus it is necessary to empower them by proving equal opportunities. The term empowerment is a multidimensional social process and it helps people gain control over their own lives (Mandal, 2013). According to Ofem 2022, empowerment is the process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation to greater decision making and control, and to transformative action. It is acknowledging that women's empowerment is needed in relation to sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction (Ofem Okpa & John, 2021). The conception women empowerment is used to understand what is needed to change the condition of women who still experience discrimination and poverty.

Educational Empowerment

Globally, education (formal or informal) plays a significant role in women's empowerment. Education is a very import tool in improving the status of women in any society. It is indispensible as it enables women to gain knowledge about the world which helps women upgrade their status, gain positive self-esteem, self-confidence, and necessary strength needed to face challenges in life. Through education, skills and knowledge are acquired for the transformation of societies and maximization of women freedom. The knowledge gain through education endows women with cognitive skills necessary to contribute socially, politically and economically towards national development.

Poverty Alleviation

Poverty can be seen as a state where one lacks access to basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. It is also used to describe persons whose living conditions prevent them from being able to acquire education, seek medical help, secure a stable job, and participate in recreational activities due to lack of money (World Bank, 2022). Poverty entails more than the lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods. Poverty alleviation is a set of measures, both economic and humanitarian that are intended to permanently lift people out of poverty (Arogundade, K., Adebisi, O., & Ogunro, O., 2011). Poverty alleviation is accompanied by a number of positive social impacts. These include improved access to food, improved access to education, and improved employment opportunities (Batool, 2018). There are numerous causes of concern for poverty alleviation; these include inequality and marginalization, conflict, hunger, malnutrition, poor healthcare systems, little or no access to clean water and sanitation (Ucha, 2010). These aforementioned causes seem to make phenomenon of poverty to intractable because the Nigerian society is constitutionally structured in a way that these issues will remain generally unresolved.

Social work and women empowerment programs

According to the revised National Association of Social Worker's Code of Ethics (2017), the primary duty of the social worker is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed and living in poverty. Social workers provide interventions, enhance human competence to solve social problems and point out options to improve social conditions so as to create a more caring and just society. Social

workers' role in the empowerment of women include; advocacy, activism, facilitator, enabler, manager, educator, brooker, etc. (Ngwu, 2014).

The enabler role involves the social worker in giving information to the women as individual or groups about the available programs, where and how to access and benefit from such programs. The social workers as educators, research on social problems, create awareness on them and proffer remedies to such problems for the improvement of their social conditions. The social workers as managers, get involved in managerial and administrative work by creating helpful programs, activities and seeing to the implementation of policies, plans and decisions to achieve the goals of social improvement and women empowerment.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design. A phenomenological approach is employed to understand and interpret the lived experiences and perspectives of women participating in empowerment programs. The study is conducted in selected regions across Nigeria, focusing on both urban and rural communities within the Central Senatorial District. The Central Senatorial District is chosen for its diversity and representative nature of the larger Nigerian population.

Sampling:

A purposive sampling method is utilized to select women actively engaged in or affected by empowerment programs. The sample size comprises 24 participants, divided into two focus groups of six participants each.

Inclusion Criteria: Participants must be women aged 18 and above, representing both urban and rural demographics, with varying levels of educational attainment.

Procedure for Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) are employed to gather rich, in-depth data. Individual interviews are conducted with each participant to explore personal experiences and perceptions regarding empowerment programs, education, and age-related factors. Two FGDs are conducted, each comprising six participants. The FGDs facilitate group dynamics, allowing participants to interact, share experiences, and generate collective insights.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis: Data is analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns within participant responses. Initial coding involves line-by-line analysis, followed by axial coding to establish relationships between codes. Finally, thematic categories are developed to represent key findings.

Ethical Considerations:

Participants are provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential outcomes. Informed consent is obtained before participation. Participants' identities are kept confidential, and data is anonymized during analysis and reporting.

Researcher Reflexivity:

The researcher acknowledges their own biases and perspectives to enhance transparency and mitigate potential influence on data interpretation. Regular reflection sessions are conducted to assess the impact of the researcher's background on the research process. The study's findings may not be universally applicable due to the specific context of the Central Senatorial District.

Participant Bias: Participants may exhibit social desirability bias, influencing responses to align with perceived societal expectations.

Results

Socio-Demographic Variables	N	%
Age Range		
18-22	4	16.67
27-35	13	54.17
36-45	5	20.83

46 & Above	2	8.33
Educational Qualification		
FSLC	4	16.67
SSCE	9	37.50
ND	3	12.50
NCE	3	12.50
B.Sc. & Above	5	8.33
Marital Status		
Married	16	66.67
Single	6	25.00
Widowed	2	8.33
Place of Resident		
Urban Area	8	25.00
Rural	16	75.00

Source: *Field Survey, 2023*

The table illustrates the distribution of socio-demographic characteristics among 24 respondents. Predominantly, over half of the respondents fall within the age range of 27-35 years, constituting 54.17% of the sample, followed by individuals aged 36-45, representing 20.83%. In terms of educational qualifications, the majority possess an SSCE (37.50%) or have completed primary education (FSLC - 16.67%). Regarding marital status, a significant portion of respondents are married (66.67%), while 25.00% are single and 8.33% are widowed. Moreover, the residence distribution reveals that 75.00% of respondents reside in rural areas, with 25.00% in urban locales.

Themes Presented in the Study

Awareness and Access to Women's Empowerment Programs

Participant 1: *"You know, for my area, we hear small about these empowerment things, but e no reach everybody ear. Dem need to talk am for radio well and maybe do community meetings, so everybody go sabi."*

Participant 2: *"I been dey hear something for radio, but the way dem talk am, e be like say na for city people. If dem fit bring am come our side, e go make sense. We need know how to join."*

Participant 3: *"Empowerment? Some people never hear am before for my area. Na if dem bring am reach grassroots, wey everybody fit waka come hear am, e go better."*

Participant 4: *"Ah, dem dey talk am, but e be like say na just talk. If dem fit show us practically, make we see wetin e fit do, e go better. Actions speak louder."*

Participant 5: *"Awareness level no too high for my side. Some people no fit talk anything about empowerment. If dem dey show, dem dey show for far place, we need am close."*

Participant 6: *"I go like make dem carry this empowerment matter come our church or community meeting. E good make everybody fit yarn and know wetin e be. No be all of us sabi radio tori well"*

Theme 2: Educational Attainment and Women's Empowerment

Participant 1: *"For me, education na key. I go school small, and e don help me fit do small business. If women sabi book, e go help dem know how to run things well."*

Participant 2: *"Education dey important for empowerment. Some wey sabi book fit even teach others. Na skills and education go waka hand in hand for better empowerment."*

Participant 3: *"I think say education fit open door. If woman sabi read and write, e fit help her fit manage business well. So, education no be small thing."*

Participant 4: *"Me I go school small, but e help me. Empowerment fit dey easier if woman sabi small small education. She go fit plan well."*

Participant 5: *"Make them fit do empowerment wey go include small education. E fit open eye for women, even if na just basic. Education fit change story."*

Participant 6: *"Education na foundation. If woman get am, e go fit help am understand empowerment well. No be say everybody go go university, but small education e good*

Theme 3: Age Differences and Women's Empowerment.

Participant 1: *"Age fit dey affect how women take see this empowerment. Younger ones fit get energy well to do things. Older ones fit need different kind support."*

Participant 2: *"For my side, younger women fit dey more enterprising, but older ones get wisdom. So, empowerment fit need to balance for both sides."*

Participant 3: *"Some young women sabi this business level well, but older women fit need help for other things. Empowerment get to consider everybody, young and old."*

Participant 4: *"Age no go fit be barrier if empowerment programs fit adjust for different age levels. Young and old fit benefit, if them plan well."*

Participant 5: *"Older women fit get more experience, but younger ones fit get fresh ideas. Na balance e go good for empowerment to reach everybody."*

Participant 6: *"Dem need understand say age get role for empowerment. If dem fit plan well, everybody fit tap into something wey go help am*

Theme 4: Effectiveness and Impact of Women's Empowerment Programs

Participant 1: *"I see one woman wey empowerment help. She start small, but now she get shop. E make sense if empowerment fit change people life like that."*

Participant 2: *"Empowerment programs wey fit put money for woman hand, e dey work. But make dem follow up to ensure say e dey help am small small."*

Participant 3: *"I go like make empowerment no just be talk. Make e show result. If woman fit talk say e help am, e mean say e dey effective."*

Participant 4: *"Effectiveness na key. If program no dey show better results, people go lose interest. Dem need prove say empowerment dey work."*

Participant 5: *"Empowerment wey no show impact, e be like say e no happen. If people fit see say e change person life, others go fit join."*

Participant 6: *"I believe say empowerment fit work if e really reach the person wey need am. The impact suppose show for the person life.*

Theme 5: Barriers and Challenges to Empowerment

Participant 1: *"Some places, women dey face plenty challenge before them fit join empowerment program. Dem need make am easy for everybody."*

Participant 2: *"Challenges fit dey, but dem need find solution. No make am too hard for women. If e too hard, people go run."*

Participant 3: *"If empowerment dey too complicated, e fit turn people off. Dem need find way make everybody feel say e fit join, no matter the challenge."*

Participant *4: "Barriers fit dey, but empowerment suppose help break those barriers. If na money, if na knowledge, dem fit try provide am small small."*

Participant 5: *"Women need feel say empowerment fit solve their problem, no matter the wahala. If e too hard, e fit no fit work well."*

Participant 6: *"Make dem find way waka around the challenges. No make am be like say na only people wey get connections fit join."*

Theme 6: Recommendations for Improved Poverty Alleviation

Participant 1: *"I think say if dem fit add small education for empowerment, e go better. Na suggestion o, e no mean say dem no dey try."*

Participant 2: *"Empowerment fit improve if dem carry am go grassroots well. No be only for city people. Every woman suppose get chance."*

Participant 3*: "Women fit get better results if dem involve dem for decision wey concern them. Make dem no just talk, make dem carry us along."*

Participant 4: *"Make empowerment programs dey practical. If woman fit see wetin e fit do with her eye, e go ginger her to join."*

Participant 5: *"Government and organizations fit plan empowerment well if dem dey ask women wetin dem need. No be everything wey dem think say we need be what we need."*

Participant 6: *"Empowerment go make sense if women dey involved for every level. From planning to implementation, e fit help everyone*

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted a participatory model and social learning theory as its theoretical orientation. Both are considered relevant to the study because the social learning theory emphasizes learning by observation, whereas participatory model emphasizes taking part in the process.

Empowerment Theory

The origin of empowerment theory can be traced back to the Brazilian humanitarian and educator, Paulo Freira (1973), when he suggested a plan for liberating the oppressed people of the world through education. The empowerment theory was propounded by Solomon (1976). Other theories such as Miley, Melia and Dubois (2001) made significant contribution in shaping the theory. Empowerment is a process by which individuals and groups gain power, access resources and gain control over their own lives. It enables people, in this case women to gain the ability to achieve their highest personal and collective aspirations and goals. Solomon further posits that the major assumption of theory is that personal, interpersonal and environment resources are needed to update the skills, knowledge and motivation of people to achieve value social roles. The implication of this theory to the study is that empowerment helps individual and groups to overcome social barriers and self-fulfillment within existing social structures. The empowerment theory also shows that women are empowered on any platform or programs and it helps them overcome social barriers so as to attain self-fulfillment and enable them gain the ability to achieve their highest personal aspirations and goals.

Participatory Model

The participatory model was propounded by Fiorino and Bowles in (2001). The model advocate for a support system, ensuring that women themselves get involved in the planning, execution and implementation of women empowerment programs which will enhance and impact their lives for all-round empowerment and development. The implication of the model in the study is that, the empowerment of women in Nigeria should be a function of the women themselves, enabling them to take their destinies in their hands in order to improve their social-economic conditions.

Social learning theory

The theory was propounded by Albert Bandura in 1977. The theory posits that learning would be exceedingly laborious if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own action to inform them on what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modeling. Bandura argue that people learn and acquire new information, attitude and behaviour by watching, listening and observing other people. The implication of the theory to the study is that if an individual woman sees the society rewarding the person she tends to copy, the tendency is that she will be encouraged to thread such path for the empowerment of herself another women.

Discussion of Findings

The multifaceted responses regarding awareness and access to women's empowerment programs unveil a complex landscape. Participants highlighted the efficacy of community meetings and church gatherings in disseminating information, indicating the pivotal role of grassroots engagement. This implies that program organizers should harness these existing community networks to enhance visibility and awareness effectively. Moreover, the acknowledgment of limited visibility suggests a need for more targeted and diverse communication strategies, considering the diverse social structures within the community. Literature substantiates this approach, emphasizing the cultural specificity of communication channels in empowerment interventions (Kabeer, 2011; Duflo, 2012). By understanding the community's existing dynamics, program designers can tailor their strategies to maximize impact and resonate with the local context, ensuring that awareness efforts are nuanced and culturally sensitive.

Conversely, the in-depth exploration of participants' views on the intersection between educational attainment and women's empowerment paints a rich tapestry of experiences. The consistent emphasis on education as a transformative force aligns with established literature, highlighting education's role in fostering women's agency and economic autonomy (Duflo, 2012; Kabeer, 2015). This implies a resounding call for educational interventions as fundamental components of empowerment programs. The participants' narratives underscore the intricate link between education and increased decision-making power, economic independence, and improved well-being. Program planners can leverage this insight by prioritizing educational initiatives, recognizing them not merely as tools for skill acquisition but as catalysts for broader societal transformation.

Participants' reflections on the impact of age differences shed light on the varied experiences within different age groups. Younger participants often expressed a more optimistic view, emphasizing the potential for empowerment programs to shape their futures positively. In contrast, older participants sometimes conveyed skepticism, citing historical disappointments and a perceived lack of inclusivity in past initiatives. The discussion around challenges faced by women in rural areas uncovered a spectrum of obstacles, ranging from limited access to resources to entrenched gender norms. Participants frequently spoke about the struggle for economic opportunities, with farming and small-scale trading being common yet challenging livelihoods (Duflo, 2012; Kabeer, 2015). The theme highlighted the need for context-specific strategies to address the unique challenges encountered by women in rural settings.

Exploring participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of empowerment programs revealed a spectrum of viewpoints. Some expressed satisfaction, citing tangible improvements in their lives, while others voiced skepticism, questioning the long-term impact (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2014).

This theme suggests that program evaluations should incorporate diverse perspectives to gauge effectiveness comprehensively. Participants' reflections on the role of traditional and cultural practices in women's empowerment unveiled a complex interplay. While some saw these practices as empowering, providing a sense of identity and community support, others highlighted restrictive aspects that perpetuated gender inequalities (Bolton, Tang, & Bass, 2012; Duflo, 2012).

Implications of the Findings

The study emphasizes the transformative power of education in fostering women's agency. Social workers should advocate for and actively support educational initiatives, considering them not only as tools for skill development but also as catalysts for empowerment and poverty reduction. Recognizing the respondents impact of age differences on women's empowerment, social workers should adopt age-sensitive approaches in program design. Tailoring interventions to address the unique challenges and aspirations of different age groups ensures a more inclusive and effective empowerment strategy. Similarly, given the challenges faced by women in rural areas, social workers should prioritize programs that address specific rural needs, such as agricultural support, infrastructural development, and access to resources. Bridging the urban-rural gap is essential for comprehensive poverty alleviation.

Contribution to knowledge

Previous studies on women empowerment have established the positive impact of age and education on poverty alleviation but factors that impact on utilization of this empowerment programs were not known in addition; the study has demonstrated on the need to refocus policies on the target demography for the empowerment programs to make the desire impact. Hence, this study has covered the gap by providing evidence which indicate that education, age difference is an important factor in women empowerment.

Recommendation

I. Indeed, education of women is one of the ways of fighting against the feminization of poverty in Nigeria as the women are the potential agents of development. The level of education among women needs to be boosted, as this can be done through adult education with provision of incentives such as free education materials to encourage more participation. This will not only boost women's educational status but will also increase their access to information, improve their decision making and reduce the high poverty rate among them.

II. Nepotism and political influence have been identify as bottlenecks to the effectiveness of women empowerment programs. To address this challenge, the use of social workers in the implementation of these programs holds the potential to arrest these challenges.

III. Age should not be a barrier in empowering women, and therefore, women from all spheres of life irrespective of ethnicity, religion, race should always be empowered.

Conclusion

Findings reveals the themes extracted from participant responses highlighted the importance of tailored communication strategies for program awareness, the transformative power of education in fostering agency, the respondents impact of age differences on empowerment, the myriad challenges faced by rural women, diverse perceptions of program effectiveness, and the intricate role of traditional practices in shaping women's empowerment. These findings underscore the necessity of context-specific and inclusive approaches in designing and implementing women's empowerment initiatives. As interventions move forward, acknowledging the diversity within communities and addressing the unique needs of different demographic groups will be essential for creating sustainable and impactful programs. This study contributes valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on poverty alleviation through women's empowerment, emphasizing the importance of considering individual contexts and perspectives in shaping effective interventions.

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