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Information Needs and Information Seeking Behavior of Rural Women in Borno State, Nigeria

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Introduction

The 2006 National Census puts Nigeria's population close to 150 million. Fifty two percent of which are women and about 45% of them live in the rural areas, the highest percentage of which are in the Northern part of the Country. As a developing country, the features that characterized the rural population in Nigeria include illiteracy, poverty, hunger, disease, and general absence of basic infrastructure such as roads, schools, electricity, etc. These coupled with peculiar problems of rural women such as early marriages, lack of income, withdrawal of girls from school, Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF), and pregnancy related deaths, has created apathy and indolence towards any form of developmental efforts. A recent UNESCO report revealed that the level of poverty in the country is increasing at an alarming rate and the situation is worst in the Northern part, particularly the North East where Borno is situated.

Despite these problems, rural women are very resourceful and contribute to the sustainability of the family and society. Specifically, the rural woman engages in domestic chores such as cooking, fetching water and firewood, raising children, animal husbandry, etc. This is an indication that rural women have potentials, which, properly harnessed, can provide the impetus needed for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and the plans of the Federal Government to becoming among the 20 Great Economies of the World in the year 2020. Momodu (2002) observed that "the rural dwellers in Nigeria are not inherently poor nor are they doomed to ignorance and disease, rather they are blessed with massive fertile land and mineral resources and also huge and virile labor force which can be transformed into goods and services." She further lamented that "the missing link ….. has been the absence of an effective mechanism for mobilization and stimulating them into action with a view to addressing their problems. That missing link is the lack of information in

the right quantity and format."

Studies on information behavior in Africa are generally fewer than the developed world despite the high level of interest generated by the field in the last decade. In Nigeria the available few with the exception of Aboyode (1984), Momodu (2002), and Njoku (2004), have concentrated on professional groups mostly within institutions and in urban settlements. In a recent review of studies on the information needs and seeking behavior of indigenous people of several developing Countries, Dutta (2009) reported that "there is relatively small number of studies done on the information behavior of the citizens of developing countries", and that, "the few concentrated on the educated individuals and the urban population located in the large cities than on citizens who live in the rural areas." This study is therefore not only an attempt to bridge this gap but to also answer such questions as what are the information needs of rural women in Nigeria? How do they satisfy these needs? and What are the sources of their Information?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives which the study aimed to achieve are as follows:-

- To identify the information needs of rural women
- To identify their sources of information
- To examine their information seeking behavior

Methodology

Survey method was used. Questionnaire was the main instrument used for data collection while oral interview was used to clarify some aspects of the questionnaire found unclear.

The population of the study is made up of all the 27 Local Government Areas of Borno State. However the sampled population is drawn from eight Local Government Areas (Abadam, Gubio, Kaga, Kukawa, Magumeri, Marte, Monguno, and Nganzai) making up the Northern Senatorial Zone. The choice of this zone is hinge on the fact that of all the three Senatorial Zones, it is the most neglected and backward in terms of education, healthcare, roads, potable water, and other basic infrastructure. The population is also homogeneous with close cultural and historic ties. This made it easy to develop a reliable questionnaire which resulted in 71% response rate.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations encountered includes inability to fill in the questionnaire without assistance either from literate relations or interpreters which might be subjective; difficulty in tracking down the respondents who are busy most of the time either at home, farm, or doing other household choirs; general apathy towards the study itself; and resources available to the researcher.

These limitations were however contained to the barest minimum in order not to affect the outcome of the study, as attested to by the high response rate recorded.

Data Presentation

The method of analysis which is adapted from Momodu (2002) is purely descriptive and devoid of tables or graphs for easy assimilation.

Information Needs

Although the population of Northern Borno is homogeneous, the information needs of the rural women vary. It ranged from information needs of farmers to sawing, weaving, midwifery, animal husbandry etc. The needs are categorized into the following:

- Agriculture 53%,
- Education 12%,
- Economy 11%,
- Health 20%,
- Political 03%, and
- Others 01%.

Agricultural Information

The highest percentage recorded by agricultural information needs is not surprising bearing in mind the large span of fertile land in the area and of course all are farmers even though at subsistence level. The information required in this area include where to get farm inputs and implements such as fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, improved variety seeds, tractors etc. free or at highly subsidized rate; and how to apply them. Others are information on animal husbandry such as breeds, feeds, animal diseases, period of fattening, available market etc.

Educational Information

Educational information needs came third with 12%. This again is not a surprise because it has been stated earlier that this area is the most neglected and backward compared to others in the State. The information required in this area is first of all awareness on the importance of education in the development of the individual and the society, and most especially girl child education.

The few who send their children to school need information regarding school calendar, when examinations organized by external bodies such as JAMB, SSCE, GCE, are conducted, and what is expected of parents. They are also interested in information regarding government incentives such as scholarships and automatic employment towards girl-child education.

Economic Information

Because the women are engaged in petty activities that generate little income such as sawing, animal husbandry, etc. they are interested in knowing where to get cheap raw materials for their trade, access to interest-free loans and market for their finished products at reasonable price. Others include how to better or improve their cognitive skill in order to enhance their earnings.

Health Information

The most paramount health information required is ante-natal and post-natal care, immunizations especially on the six childhood killer diseases, how to prevent and manage Vascular Virginal Fistula (VVF), how to safely deliver pregnancy. The rural women also need information on how to prevent and control epidemics especially cholera and meningitis which are rampant in the area.

Perhaps the health information required by rural women generally is

hinged on hygiene, good food, family planning and clean environment. These are in fact necessary for the well being of the community and the society at large.

Political information

At the moment the rural women in Northern Borno are not politically conscious. They are not aware of their responsibilities to government neither are they aware of their rights as citizens. The presence of government is only felt at the time of electioneering campaign where promises are made and not fulfilled. They need to know what governance is, their rights as citizens, their powers as electorates and how to use these powers wisely.

The women also require information on the political parties and their manifestos to be able to participate and take decision to cast their votes independently, against the present situation where they align simply to where their husband or relation is.

Information Sources and Channels

There are basically five sources through which the rural women satisfy their information needs. These are:

- Government and its agents,
- Elite groups,
- Relatives and friends,
- Market women, and
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

It can be seen from the above that with the exception of Government and its agents, all the other sources are informal. This is an indication that either formal sources are lacking or the rural women prefer informal sources.

The channels of information available to them are both formal and informal. The formal channels include radio and television, Local Government information office, agricultural extension workers, primary health care workers, and the only Public Library in the zone situated in Monguno. The informal channels on the other hand constitute Village or Ward Heads, the School Headmaster, The Imams (Religious Leaders) and other elite group in the community. Friends and relatives, market women, as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) particularly The Kanem Women, have been cited as important informal channels of information.

Information Seeking Behavior

It is very clear from the sources and channels of information used by the rural women, that their Information seeking behavior is mainly informal. They align more to information gotten from friends, relatives, husbands, sons and daughters, and market women. This according to Mommoh (2002) is because “those sources to them are more reliable and authentic”. It can also be seen to be in conformation of Zipf’s (1949) ‘Principle of Least Effort’ in human behavior.

The rural woman hardly seeks information in a formal way through formal sources or channels. Watching television or listening to radio where available, is seen as luxury only men can afford.

Barriers to Information Needs

The barriers to information needs of rural women are identified as follows:-

- High rate of illiteracy
- Inability to access formal channels of information due to poverty
- Lack of adequate and efficient information delivery mechanism
- Ignorance of governments responsibilities to its citizens
- Skepticism of the rural woman towards government and its information agencies
- Attitude of extension workers towards effective rural information service
- Inaccessibility of the rural areas by NGOs

Conclusion

Women constitute the highest percentage of rural dwellers in Nigeria, variously distributed with the Northern part of the country accounting for the majority. They are a hard working and resourceful group which if properly harnessed can provide the impetus required by government to achieve its Intergrated Rural Development Programme. To achieve this however, there is need to develop the information consciousness of the rural women by the provision of efficient, effective and reliable formal information delivery mechanisms.

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