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Quality of Life among Rural Nigerian Women: The Role of Information

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Introduction

It appears that the concept of quality of life is fast becoming a popular concept worldwide including Nigeria. At first sight, quality of life is a simple, straightforward construct. Most people have a reasonably clear idea of what sorts of things would enhance their individual quality of life (and probably the quality of life of other individuals too). There is an adage that says, "He who wears the shoe knows where it pinches". The quality of life of a person is what he/she perceives it to be. For example, higher pay; longer holidays; more satisfaction in our working lives; time to pursue enjoyable and satisfying leisure pursuits; emotional fulfillment in relationships; and having a long healthy and happy life – all within a safe, caring and supportive local community are among the things people conceived as what could improve their quality of life.

Quality of life in the rural setting according to Phillips (2006) is a multifaceted phenomenon determined by the cumulative and interactive impacts of numerous and varied factors like housing conditions, infrastructure, access to various amenities, income, standard of living, satisfaction about the physical and social environment. According to this author, the two indicators of quality of life which are subjective and objective are pointing to two different things. Subjective indicator focuses on pleasure as the basic building block of human happiness and satisfaction of quality of life. However, the objective indicator on the other hand, focuses on a radically different perspective. To those who are working with this indicator, the important question to ask at the individual level are whether people are healthy, well fed, appropriately housed, economically secure and well educated or not rather than whether they feel happy.

The fundamental concepts of quality of life according to Adejunmobi and

Odumosu (1998) are values. They play an important role in the experience of qualitative life because they represent the needs, aspirations and goals which are important to individuals and which they seek to fulfill. What quality of life means on a global scale can be distilled from the social indicators identified by major international organizations such as the World Bank, World Health Organizations, United Nations, European System of Social Indicators and Australian Bureau of statistics.

Given the importance of indicators for project monitoring and evaluation in meeting a range of economic, social and environmental goals, the framework for choice of indicators used to assess quality are adopted by the World Bank. Such indicators are : economic growth, earnings growth; the absence of poverty and unemployment; decent housing; health and life expectancy; an educated population; high levels of cultural participation and low rate of crime; equity in social opportunities and the absence of political corruption in the broader context of responsible environmental management (World Development Indicators , 2007).

The satisfaction derived from the various life domains directly contribute to individual quality of life. The domains that are selected as indicators of quality of life for this study are: housing, occupation, income, health, education, neighbourhood/community, family life, government, social status and spiritual life. They were selected because they are considered to be relevant to different regions of structure of well-being in many studies. The judgments and experience such as values and satisfactions derived from them are essential to the overall feelings of qualitative life.

The concern for increasing the quality of life of the rural women in Nigeria can be seen in the general concern to alleviate the socio-economic status of the rural poor household. Many programmes sponsored by either the national government or international agencies have been designed to improve quality of life of the rural women in Nigeria. Worthy to mention is the introduction of the Better life for Rural Women (BLW) in 1987 under late Mariam Babangida, (the then Nigerian first lady) and the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) under Mariam Abacha (the Nigerian first lady in 1993-97) which were planned to play critical role in alleviating the status of rural women in Nigeria, socially and economically. In recognition of the failure of the past government efforts, some non-governmental organizations stepped up efforts also to improve the quality of life among the women folks living in the rural areas. Example is the Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN) which started in Ondo State Nigeria in 1982 (Modupe , 2008). However, most of these programmes have failed to ameliorate the working and living conditions of rural women because women in rural areas for which such programmes were meant lagged behind in terms of socio-economic advancement. The reason according to Momodu, (2002) is that rural women in Nigeria have developed a culture of silence, resignation and docility. This author stressed that rural women in Nigeria are not inherently poor, nor doomed to ignorance and disease. Rather they are blessed with massive fertile land and mineral resources and also a huge and virile labour force, which can be transformed into goods and services. The missing link, however, has been the absence of an effective information system pattern for mobilizing and stimulating them into action with a view to improving their quality of life.

At the Millennium Summit in September 2000, world leaders adopted the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which are the world's time-bound and quantified targets for addressing extreme poverty in its many dimensions – income, poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter, etc (UN Millennium Project, 2005). Many countries including developing countries like Nigeria are on track to achieve at least some of the goals at the appointed deadline of 2015. To achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, many countries need to quickly improve their economic growth, education and

health systems, their management of environmental resources, and their infrastructure for water, sanitation, telecommunication and transportation – all these in place will improve the quality of life of the people (The World Bank, 2007). The role which information could play in achieving these goals cannot be ignored. Information about the Millennium Development Goals will enable stakeholders to plan, control, manage and implement actions that could further enhance the quality of life of these rural women.

Appropriate information empowers people towards actions that can transform lives and allows for a greater sense of independence. Rural women need information of all types to improve the quality of their life and their environment. Proper identification of the rural women information needs will reduce uncertainty and enables them to identify alternative solution to problems, adequate provision of information will also enable them to acquire more knowledge.

Statement of the Problem

Women living in rural areas of Nigeria are generally known to be suffering from general deprivation including access to information resources. Rural women most often fail to access various information resources and services even when such information is available. The reasons may not be unrelated to the socio-economic status of the rural women or the format in which such information is packaged.

In Ekiti State of Nigeria, it was observed that women living in the rural areas are known to be unable to access information which can help to meet the demand of the challenges of daily living. The rural women are still not able to cater adequately for the basic needs of food, clothes, shelter, obligations, lack of gainful employment and skills. They have limited access to social and economic infrastructure such as economic, health, portable water, sanitation and consequently, limited chance of advancing in their quality of life.

The State government and some non-governmental organizations such as Oil Mineral Producing Development Commission (OMPADEC) and National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) had introduced some intervention programmes such as poverty alleviation, health for all and so on which rural women living in the state could benefit from. However, these programme lack information management input which can help translate the programmes to good qualitative life for rural women in Ekiti state. Several studies on quality of life has been carried out in the field of sociology, psychology, medicine, economics but it appears there is lack of emphasis on the manner in which the concept is related to the circumstances of rural women's socio-economic expectations. Informational factors such as information accessibility, requirements, relevance, preference, and use have not been considered as crucial factors that can enhance or affect the quality of life of the rural people. This is the main thrust of this study. The specific objectives of this study were to:

- find out the information needs of the rural women in Ekiti State, Nigeria
- ascertain the level of rural women's access to information in Ekiti State, Nigeria
- ascertain the information sources mostly used by the rural women in Ekiti State, Nigeria
- To find out the level of the quality of life of the rural women in Ekiti state, Nigeria

The Study area: Ekiti State was one of the states created on the 1st of October 1996 alongside five other states in an exercise that brought the number of states in Nigeria to thirty six. The state was carved out of the old Ondo state and covers the former Ekiti zone of the old state. The state has its capital at Ado-Ekiti. There are sixteen local government areas in the state. The state is

bounded in the northwest by Kwara state, in the northeast by Kogi state and in the south by Ondo state (www.ekitistate.com, 2009). By the 2006 census, the population of Ekiti state was two million, three hundred and eighty four thousand, two hundred and twelve (2,384,212) National Population Commission (2006). The people speak a Yoruba language known as Ekiti dialect. Major towns in Ekiti state take a common suffix – Ekiti, after their names.

Methodology: Focus Groups were conducted to establish the information needs of the rural women, whether the information provided are accessible, the level of their quality of life and how the use of information can improve their quality of life. The suitability of this method was based on its appropriateness to a sample lacking reading and writing skills, and knowledge of the English language. This was an exploratory study and it was envisaged that the method would elicit discussions leading to useful information relevant to the issues under investigation. The relevance of the use of the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in library and information services is that it is a principal tool for gathering data on user needs, information-seeking behaviour, perceptions and opinions of both users and non-users (Golding, 1997).

Ten focus groups purposively selected from ten out of the existing sixteen local government areas in Ekiti state, Nigeria were conducted for 100 rural women with the number of participants in each group ranging from eight to ten. Location where group members could talk without observations by others who were not participants was carefully chosen. The discussion lasted for between one and a half to two hours. The discussions conducted in local language were recorded in both audiotapes and notebooks which was subsequently transcribed and translated into English.

Themes of the Discussion

- Information needs of the rural women
- Accessibility to the various sources of information
- Factors affecting the rural women's use of information
- The rural women's' concept of quality of life
- The level of quality of life of rural women in Ekiti state.
- Suggestions on how the quality of life of rural women could be improved

Results of the Focus Group Discussions

The results which resulted from the themes of the discussions are as follows:

- The Information needs of the rural women in Ekiti state

The areas identified as requiring more information that can improve the quality of life of rural women living in Ekiti state were: income generation, best practices in farming, beneficial associations for rural women development, cooperative societies and trade groups, health management (especially on sex education, birth control and current immunization facilities), information about financial institutions, food and nutrition, vocational education for skills and trainings, community development, land rights, local politics and current news and events. This information is needed to eliminate poverty, support women's development activities, to fill the skills and knowledge gaps and to keep them abreast of information.

It was obvious from the discussion that information providers were not always available to identify the rural women's information needs that could improve their quality of life. A story was told by a woman from Ise Ekiti of how an entire community gave cold shoulders to a talk on parenting initiated by a non-government organization. This was because the group just walked into her

village and started calling on the women without prior information from the stakeholders about the benefits from such visit. Parenting certainly was not the priority on their information list of needs at that time.

The control of flow of information in most of the rural communities was said to be determined to a large extent by what the elites both within and outside the community do or pass on. That often times, the elites do not empathize with the local women with whom they either live or direct their communication efforts.

The rural women indicated that their needs were not adequately met mainly as a result of the formats in which information to meet the needs were packaged. Several studies have shown the reasons why information need of the rural women are not met (Atinmo, Darwa and Jimba, 1996, Mchombu,1998, Mchombu, 2000, Okiy, 2003, Momodu, 2002 and Mutual-Kombo,2001). These studies reveal that information needs of rural women are not met because of:

- format and packaging of the information;
- approaches to rural information services;
- language barriers;
- high rate of illiteracy

(ii) Accessibility to information

The participants reported that most rural women fail to exploits the information even when such information is available. This is because the availability of information does not necessarily mean its accessibility. The wealth of information available or inexistence in the world today is tremendous and the sheer volume of it in a myriad formats, makes it impossible for the rural women to have complete access to it. The respondents enumerated the obstacles to information accessibility as:

- Illiteracy;
- Geographical distance;
- poverty;
- lack of awareness of the need for information;
- lack of infrastructure and facilities, (good roads, postal and telecommunication services, information centres);
- poor communications

(iii) Sources of information the rural women used to improve their quality of life

It was quite easy for the researcher to ascertain sources of information the rural women found most useful. Reasons for preferring one source over another appeared to be more related to age, occupation, socio-economic status, literacy level and the availability/affordability of some of the sources in question. From the discussion, the old and middle class spend time listening to local programmes on the radio which they carry around; the civil servants especially, the teachers and local government officials read newspapers (sometimes stale news), use the mobile phones, listen more to programmes on radio or watch television. Whereas, the farmers, artisans etc amongst them have little or no time to listen to radio or any of the media. They get home tired after each day's job. However, the value of information the rural women access from face –to face contact with friends and families and from their mobile phones were most appreciated.

(iv) Factors affecting the rural women's use of the various sources of information

It was not difficult for the researchers to ascertain the factors affecting the rural women's use of the various information sources. The first major

challenge is the sources are transient in nature. The participants reported that extension workers and many other government agents only come and go and are therefore not always available when the villagers want to confirm certain things. Another challenge is that the workload of majority of the rural women who were household heads do not allow for information searching. They make do with information they stumble upon from the familiar sources available. Absence of the major sources is also a barrier. For example, a teacher from one of the secondary schools in Emure who participated in one of the groups stated that...

'because I teach in this rural area, I do not know what the government would want me to do to improve my life. The governments pass on propaganda through the radio and the state television stations and ignored the most important thing that could benefit rural women. You cannot receive letters as a means of communication and you may have to go to the state capital in Ado – Ekiti to source for information that could benefit the students and other rural dwellers. Who told the government that we teachers in the rural setting cannot use computer if given the opportunity to access the internet'.

The cost of access to some of the information sources was not a barrier because most participants felt that the benefits of using any of the familiar sources outweigh the cost when searching for information that would improve their socio-economic status. Most of the participants said they own radio set and mobile telephone (GSM). The cost to them is nothing compared to their favorites programmes which the radio broadcast and access to the quick information the GSM made possible. On the other hand, a good education, knowledge of the information sources, the formats, linguistic and cultural behaviours and the type of occupation they are engaged in are outlined as some of the factors that influence their access to information.

(v) The rural women's concept of quality of life

The participants defined concept of quality of life as what one requires to sustain and make life more comfortable. For example, a woman in her middle age stated that.....

quality of life is seen in terms of having money to spend, housing, good medical facilities, good school, ability to eat three times a day (not just pounded yam but balanced diet) ,ability to afford whatever one requires, for example, land, car, good job etc.

(vi) Level of Quality of Life of the respondents:

The respondent's opinion about their quality of life shows that the rural women experience different sense of fulfillment at the various domains.

Housing

Housing, a basic necessity of life is one of the most important indicators for measuring people's quality of life. Majority of the participants says they do not have adequate and comfortable place to live in. This does not corroborate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 25(1) which stated that:

'Women share the right to a decent housing and standard of living. That housing fulfils physical need by providing security and shelter from weather and climate. It fulfills psychological needs by providing a sense of personal space and privacy. It fulfills social needs by providing a gathering area and communal space for the family which is the basic unit of the society'.
www.un.org (2009).

According to Okello (2007), with access and adequate use of information, rural women can be mobilized to gain access to land, resist

eviction, manage savings and credit or raise fund to build their own house and where to obtain the types of materials to be used to build houses.

Occupation

Occupation, besides serving as a means of earning a living, gives people feeling of having something to do, of having a purpose in life, indeed a sense of worthiness. Majority of the participants were farmers, traders, artisans and civil servants who have the lowest sense of fulfillment in their occupation. Only few claimed to have an interesting job. The majority of the respondents reported they were not successful in their occupation because the necessary tools/ machineries are not available to do their jobs.

Access to and use of information will empower the rural women on a path toward financial stability which would improve their quality of life. Mchombu, (2000) agrees that a small and affordable loan unleashes the entrepreneurial power of the rural poor but ask how the rural women could benefit from such opportunities if they do not access and use information such opportunity provides.

Income

The rural women's response in the income domain is worrisome in spite of the minimum wage increase of N7, 500.00 introduced in the civil service in Nigeria since 1999. This may be due to the inability of the new wages to cope with the country inflation rate. Studies have shown that one of the main problems faced by women worldwide, especially those residing in rural areas, is poverty (Fasoranti, 2008).

From their response, majority of the rural women cannot operate a bank savings and life assurance policy because of their low level of income. Studies have shown that women living in rural areas are poor income earners. Poverty among the rural women limits the amount of capital they can invest in businesses. Okiy (2004) emphasized that rural women are disproportionately concentrated in the lowest employment and casual labour. Hence rural women tend to invest in activities that require very minimal initial investment. Phillips (2006) corroborated this by making assertion that women do not have direct access to income but to the goods and services provided for them by male heads of household. There is no doubt about the need to provide rural women with information that could boost their socio-economic status.

Okiy (2003) says rural women who are low income earners could boost their income level if they could take step to sell their home-grown produce, small livestock and home produced foodstuff to where it is most required. According to the participants, access to and use of information can help rural women to find viable livelihood alternatives either within the rural settings or urban cities and enjoy improved quality of life under this domain.

Health

There is a popular saying that health is wealth. The individual's state of health and the expectation for a healthy life affect the individual's sense of well-being and productivity. Mabawonku (1998) also stressed that health is a complete physical and mental wellbeing and not just the absence of disease or infirmity. Health status of a people has been used as an indicator of development by many International Conferences, some of which include the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Fourth World Conference on Women and World Bank. The response of the

participants under the health domain shows that they do not experience fulfillment in this domain. Majority of the participants says they maintain good health because they enjoy good nourishment. This shows that the rural women maintain good health because of the freshness and richness of their food intake which comes from the farm produce.

In relation to quality of life under the health domain, Okello (2007) says that access to and adequate use of information may prevent the rural women from indiscriminate use of drugs. Besides, the spread of incurable and terminal disease could be avoided if information about the risk gets to the grassroots. Recently, there has been a wake-up call for actions to prevent breast cancer, a killer disease among women. Information about this disease is mostly in the formats (books, newspapers, handbills, internet etc) that rural women cannot use. According to the participants, observational information about the disease to the rural women may stop the spread.

Education

The participants response under this domain shows the low literacy rate in the rural parts of Ekiti State. Majority of the participants said they feel so little because they did not go to school, colleges or adult literacy centers. The Federal Government of Nigeria in her vision for Nigerian Citizens (Vision 2020) encourages education (formal and informal) for all at all levels. This vision is achievable even among rural dwellers. Participants say they had the intention to enroll at any available vocational centers if encouraged, to attain knowledge and skills.

Access to information and subsequent use would lead to attainment of education and skills as women with basic skills and education seem to find opportunities to expand their economic options According to the participants, main reason for lack of improved quality of life is the general lack of supportive institutions particularly (health, information and education services) and the inadequate attention to the improvements of rural infrastructure.

Neighbourhood

The neighbourhood and the entire community where people live exert certain influence on them as well as determine the level of their quality of life.

Neighbourhoods are not restricted to houses rather they are surroundings, areas and space dimensions within which people interact informally. According to Adejumobi and Odumosu (1998), the consideration of whether a neighbourhood is desirable or fulfilling is dependent on some factors, namely, how clean and pleasant it is, how safe it is from violent crime, how cordial is the overall human relationship and how democratic and participatory is the community. These conditions may be negatively or positively perceived by individuals in the neighbourhood based on their level of satisfaction and expectations. The quality of life of the rural women in Ekiti State with reference to their neighbourhood shows that there is instability which affected the participant's aspirations. Majority of the participant's say they do not feel safe in their neighbourhood because it is not safe from corruption and violent crime. The political instability in Ekiti State during the period of this survey could be responsible for this assertion. There were numerous cases of attempted murder and murder of many people during the May 2009 re-run election in Ekiti state, Nigeria. The participants however claimed that the communities in which they live have access to good road network and telephone services.

Okello (2007) reported that access to and use of information has enhanced the quality of life of the rural women in Uganda because of the prompt access to information about water supply, refuse disposal and poverty

eradication action plan in their neighbourhood. In Ekiti state, the presence of Global Systems of Mobile Communication (GSM) of major networks like ZAIN, MTN, GlobaCom, and Visafone are easily felt in the local areas which had made communication easy. The use of this device to access prompt information from urban and their neighbourhood has greatly enhanced the quality of life of the rural women in Ekiti state as thousands earn a living from the use of mobile telephone daily.

Family Life

The family constitutes a basic unit of the society. In Nigerian society, family relationship is held in high esteem, in reality, whatever affects these relationships are of utmost importance. Diso (2006) supported this view and emphasized that access to information about how problems in marriages, childcare and juvenile delinquency could be handle would improve the quality of life of rural dwellers. Only few of the participant's says they have time for relaxation with members of their family after work each day. Nowadays, there is a fight for time available to the individual; the time is to be shared between the work and the family among other things, thus reducing the time and opportunity to share affection with loved ones. The situation is the same among rural women whom Ocholla (2002) said are too busy working on the farm all day, weeding grass, planting and tending the crops and only return home at sunset to cook the evening meal for her family and to carry out other domestic duties. Majority of the participant's says they are not in a position to assist members of their extended family in spite of the family ties because of their financial position.

Government

The government exercises power on behalf of her citizens and exists to promote their welfare. However, the responses of the participants in the government domain show that they have not really felt the impact of the government as it affects their quality of life. This is in agreement with Omotoso and Owolabi (2007) who asserted that the quality of life of the people in Ekiti state is evidently low because the people are unable to have three meals, unable to afford a decent home, unable to have portable water at home for safe drinking unable to afford children fees and even unable to afford medical expenses of the family because government did not provide the adequate infrastructure required. This was in confirmation with the number participants who says they are not enjoying their community because the government does not provide needed infrastructure. The opinion of the participants does not agree with Mooko (2005) who stated that lack of access to information on government policies and programmes and incentives offered by non-governmental organizations that could help boost the socio-economic status of the rural woman is a major challenge to the low quality of life of women living in the rural areas. Any government intervention programmes is not only likely to affect large numbers of people but could also have a multiplying effects. Access to and ultimate use of information can be a powerful tool when implemented as part of larger development plans to improve the quality of life of the rural populace.

Social Status

The extreme between poverty and affluence is represented with the socio-economic status classification. The socio-economic status of an individual could affects the sense of fulfillment such individual derived. The opinion of the participants in the social status domain shows that majority felt their social

status has improved since the availability of mobile telephones in the state. Only few says they have joy because their children are doing well in their chosen careers and so feel fulfilled in this domain because they are well respected in their community.

Spiritual Life

All human societies have spiritual and religious institutions, including Africans. Spiritual life gives meaning to why people aspire to be good and do well within their own powers. The consideration of whether one's spiritual life is fulfilling depends on a number of factors, which include how free is one in choosing and believing in what he/she thinks is worthy of worship, and how relaxed and the peace of mind the person has internally.

Under the spiritual life domain, participants have fulfillment in their spiritual life. They have spiritual values and religious faith with freedom to practice their religion. In this domain, participants enjoy inner harmony and peace of mind because they could access the required information needed for their spiritual development.

(vi) Ways by which access to and use of information can improve the quality of the rural women in Ekiti state.

The participants made the following suggestions:

- That information provision, access, and use when combined or made to function effectively would bridge the gap between the rural women's information needs and government's efforts/programmes and thereby improve the quality of life of rural women.
- Information centers should be available at each local government areas where access to quick information that could improve the rural women quality of life can be obtained.
- These information centers should provide adequate information materials such as audio visual material, handbills, posters, exhibitions and so on to meet the wide range of information needs already identified in this study.
- At the state and local government levels, a lot more advocacies is needed to encourage institutions and non-governmental organizations to incorporate and prioritize access and use of information into development plans to improve the quality of life of the rural women in Ekiti State.
- Information about loans and government projects for rural women should be taken to the grassroots to improve the rural women socio-economic status.
- Post offices should be revived so as to enhance prompt passage of letters which serve as an important source of information to rural women
- Finally, the example of multi-purpose tele-centres already established by UNESCO in some African countries such as Uganda and Mali should be adopted by Nigerian Government for the rural areas

Conclusion and Recommendations

The value of information as important inputs to improve the quality of life of rural women will be appreciated if information providers can make the rural women understand what they can do with information. The provision and organization of information services for rural women in Ekiti State should be a cyclical process that will entail defining the need, establishing the objectives in light of the need, putting in place services to meet the objectives, running them, following up and evaluating, revisiting the objectives and so on. The example of information centres in some African countries like South Africa established to provide quick information should be established in all local government areas in

Ekiti State, Nigeria. Using well trained information facilitators at all these stages will ensure that information accessed and well used correspond in the best possible way to the information needs of the rural women they serve.

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