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WOMEN'S KNOWLEDGE PRESERVATION: EMPOWERING TRADITION AND LEGACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The role of women in Knowledge preservation in West Africa, cannot be overstressed. Despite the patriarchal nature of the West African society, women are without doubt, pronounced the first teachers, keepers of oral history, caregivers, and their tripartite nature role, have contributed significantly to the transmission of cultural values and wisdom, across generation. In view of the above, this work aimed to explore the vital contribution of women in preserving traditional knowledge and cultural heritages of the West African people. It focused on the rich and diverse experiences within Nigeria. Generally, women have been proven as the guardian of cultural practices, oral traditions and indigenous wisdom, contributing significantly to the preservation of their communities' heritage. Their contributions, however, have frequently been neglected or undervalued, which is the premise of this article. Nonetheless, considering the explanatory nature of this study, qualitative research method, was employed to gather rich context-specific data. The study adopted the Feminist theory idea, to drive home points. The article recommends that women should be equipped through education and other activities that would make them function effectively in the society, to grow into the companions of men, instead of encumbering the progress of West African society by denying women the prerequisite opportunity to explore. In conclusion, the research emphasized the relevance of traditional legacy in West Africa, and issues a call to action for supporting and empowering women in their vivacious character as custodians of cultural knowledge.

Keywords: Women, Knowledge Preservation, Empowerment, Tradition, Legacy

Introduction

Long before the advancement of technology, written texts, and other modern development, Nigeria women already have peculiar means of knowledge preservation and cultural transmission. They played and still playing vital roles in the preservation of cultural heritages and indigenous knowledge, humans enjoy today. Greiner (1998), posits that indigenous knowledge is the exceptional, traditional, indigenous knowledge prevailing within and developed specific conditions of women to a particular geographical area. According Guterres (2022), women are guardians of traditional food and medicines, champion the safeguarding of indigenous languages and cultures. They also preserve the environment and indigenous people's human right through the use of indigenous knowledge. Patrick (2022), affirms that managing indigenous knowledge is an important and valuable input in the management of sustainable development. Women play prominent role in leveraging and organising knowledge aimed at improving people's experiences, competencies, talents, ideas, practices, skills and wisdom capabilities. The preservation of traditional knowledge and cultural continuity is of key importance, because it helps in the propagation of the Nigerian society. In accordance, Lemke (1994), supports that knowledge is the strategic resources, often used to refer to a body of facts and principles accumulated by mankind in the course of time.

Despite the enormous contributions of women in the development and preservation of the cultural heritages of the Nigerian people, they are still categorized as second class citizens of the nation. Women in this part of the world often have limited access to education, healthcare and economic activities. The average Nigerian woman is stereotyped with the idea that “a woman’s place ends in the kitchen. Even the former president of Nigeria, Muhammed Buhari, made a demeaning statement in this 21st century that a woman’s place is “in the kitchen and the other room”. Which according to his position confines a woman into a cook and baby making machine, not worthy of prominent positions in the global world. Contrary to the above position, antecedents have proven that women are the key repositories of knowledge and also making laudable impacts in diverse industries and institutions, in Nigeria, West Africa, and the world, at large. According to Achebe and Margret (2018), women played important parts in the society, religious, political, social and economic sphere; exhibiting control over key aspects therein.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this article is to show the pivotal contribution of women as custodians and transmitters of indigenous wisdom. Also, the work shall examine the challenges encountered by women in their discharge of duties as knowledge preservers and the gender disparities that persist in this part of the world. It further aims at raising awareness about these challenges, including limited access to education and resources, cultural constraint and societal biases. Furthermore, the article shall advocate for empowerment of women in knowledge preservation, by exploring strategies, initiatives and best practices that can help empower women to continue their vital works in safeguarding cultural heritages. Finally, the work shall contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between gender, tradition and knowledge preservation in West Africa, while also serving as a call to action for recognizing and supporting the invaluable contributions of women in this crucial domain.

Methodology

The methodology applied in this study is the qualitative research method. This approach involved examining and explaining the major source of data, which is the secondary source. This includes both hardcopy material and online sources. The study employed feminist theory approach, propounded by Mary Wollstonecraft, (1759-1797), which emerged as result of the struggle for women’s right. Wollstonecraft, notes that “the idea that women are created simply to be ministers to the amusement, enjoyment, and gratification of men, was closely associated to the idea that peasant and worker men exist solely for the satisfaction of the wants and pleasures of the aristocratic classes. This theory opposed the traditional dominance of men over the women, by insisting on equal treatment. Finally, the researcher applied the information gathered to the writing of the article, and this aided the successful completion of this study.

Roles of Women in Preservation of Knowledge

In Nigeria, as in every other African country, women are not only regarded as producers of life, but also the sources of knowledge preservation. Through their contribution to the reproduction of human life, women play vital role in the continuity of human society. Todd (1999), asserts that the central focus of knowledge preservation is in sharing what people

know. The indigenous women of Africa, viz-a-viz Nigeria, are blessed with vast wealth of knowledge and experiences, that represent significant resource in the growth of the society. Hence, the following will be discussed as means used by Nigerian women in the preservation of knowledge;

Cultural Guardians: Women as cultural guardians apply to their role in the preservation, protection and promotion of the cultural heritages of the Nigerian people. They are dedicated to safeguarding and passing down the traditions, customs, knowledge and artistic expressions of the community or society, to their children through socialisation. Parson in Haralambos and Holborn (2013), state that socialization is the process by which individuals become self-aware and learn the culture of their community. In learning this culture, Lugira (2009), observes that it is effortlessly done through oral traditions, passed on in a variety of forms such as myths, legends, stories, and proverbs. Stories generally say something about life in order to educate and entertain the community. For instance, among the people of Ikwerre, Rivers State Nigeria, female children between the ages of 8 and above, are mostly gathered to form dancing groups. Some of these cultural groups are *Eri idudu*, *Eri ogada*, among others. The essence of this gathering is to pass down the dance step of the people to the younger generation, for it not to go extinct. Also, women teach their children on how to cook the traditional cuisines of the community, by making them stay in the kitchen anytime they are to cook for the family. In most cases, when the children have grown up to certain age. they allow them do the cooking, while the mother sit around to direct on the coking process.

Women also play active role in the transmission of intangible culture, and this cannot be overemphasized in the world today. According to Haralambos and Holborn (2013), culture has to do with the norms, values, sense of art and lifestyle of a people. Consequent to the changing nature of culture, most of its essential fabrics could be believed to have waned as result of modernity. But on the contrary, African culture has retained its essential ingredients because of the proper propagation mechanism employed by the women. Women work to protect all these and other cultural heritages, historical sites, artefacts, languages and traditional practices, from erosion, destruction or exploitations.

Preservation of Traditional Medicine: Traditional medicine practitioners, according to Quacoopome (1987), are called the traditional doctors, healers or herbalists, because they have power and control over herbs. Mothers (women), are the first doctors, healers or herbalist in every home. When any sickness is at the lowest level, Itavyar (1990), observes that the women takes care of it. Through the use of herbs and other traditional healing method, a woman sustains the health of her household and preserves knowledge. According to Olademo, in Ogunbile (2015), West African traditions ascribe to women the principle ability to heal. He notes that healing power belongs to women, owing to their spiritualities in indigenous African Religion.

Howbeit, the contribution of women is multifaceted and deeply intertwined with cultural and social fabric of the region. Mbiti (1975), observes that medicine women are the greatest gift to Africans, and the most useful source of health. Using the knowledge of plants, herbs and remedies, women treat various diseases and health issues. They have been the custodians of medicinal plants, passing it down to the next generations. Kanu (2014), supports that among the Igbo people of Nigeria, complicated cases such as bewitchment are

treated in shrines, pools, isolated hills, thick forests, river deltas, road junctions and other places. In most cases, the healers are women, who function as *Ezenwanyi* (priestesses).

Likewise, Traditional midwives or birth attendants, are predominantly women. They play essential role in maternal and child health using traditional methods and remedies to facilitate safe childbirth and postpartum care. Women also serve as cultural knowledge keepers, preserving the healing traditions and rituals associated with traditional medicine. Women are frequently involved in spiritual and ritual practices associated with traditional medicine. They act as intermediaries between the physical the physical and spiritual realms, using their spiritual knowledge to heal and protect their communities.

Preservers of Agricultural Wisdom: the role of women in the preservation of agricultural produce, is most times underestimated. Ezeanya (2019), explains that during the precolonial and colonial era, British missionaries and later colonial masters came with a supposedly superior knowledge of farming techniques, with the aim of trying to impress the Nigerian farmers to change their age long method of farming. The woman through their indigenous knowledge retained the agricultural wisdom of the old by saving and preserving seeds of traditional crop varieties. Through this process, they were able to salvage the traditional crops of the people from eruption. Also, the women help the men or community in retention of lands in dispute, this they achieve by consistently farming o the farmlands. Among the people of Ikwerre in Rivers State, Nigeria, women organise themselves to form a group known as *Ngweta*. According to Wotogbe-Weneka (2020), *ogba Ngwetaa*, is a system of cooperative farming whereby there exists a reciprocal exchange of labour visit to help one another in the farm from time to time, until the farming season is over. This process as observed, helps the women finish individual farm before time. It is also believed to help in ensuring that these agricultural practices are not lost in the sand of time.

Women historically passed down traditional farming techniques, such as crop rotation, intercropping, and terracing, which are essential for maintaining soil fertility and preventing soil erosion. Their knowledge of which seeds to select and how to store them has been vital in maintaining crop diversity and adaptability to local conditions. Therefore, recognizing and supporting the pivotal role that women play in preserving agricultural wisdom is crucial for sustainable agriculture and food security. Efforts to empower women in agriculture, provide access to education and resources, and promote gender equality are essential for preserving and enhancing traditional agricultural knowledge for future generations.

Women as preservers of craftsmanship and artistry: the art of adorning and making beautiful different piece of art with one's hand is a divine gift bestowed on women from the beginning of time. Women have been integral preservers of craftsmanship and artistry across various cultures and traditions throughout history. Their contributions encompass a wide range of artistic and craft forms, from textiles and pottery to intricate handiwork and fine arts. For instance, Ladi Kwali, is a woman whose craft has imprinted her name in the sand of time, as she is venerated as a national ancestor on Twenty naira (#20), Nigeria currency. As a girl child, she learnt the art of pottery from her aunt (yet another woman). Ladi, became her trademark and her pots were noted for their beauty of form and decoration, and she started to gain prominence as a talented and distinguished potter. Obviously, women have been the keepers of textile traditions, including weaving,

spinning, and dyeing. They pass down techniques and designs for creating intricate fabrics, clothing, and decorative items. In many cultures, women have been responsible for crafting pottery and ceramics, preserving techniques for shaping, firing, and glazing clay into functional and artistic pieces. Women are often skilled in intricate embroidery and needlework, creating textiles with intricate patterns, motifs, and designs that reflect cultural heritage. Women have a significant role in crafting traditional jewellery, using techniques passed down through generations to create culturally significant ornaments. Women have preserved the art of basketry and wickerwork, creating functional and decorative items such as baskets, mats, and furniture from natural materials.

Women have been painters and visual artists, contributing to the creation of traditional paintings, murals, and sculptures that convey cultural stories and beliefs. Women often create ceremonial and ritual objects, such as masks, costumes, and religious artefacts, that play essential roles in cultural and spiritual practices. Women may use artistic expression as a means of preserving their native language by creating literature, poetry, and songs in their mother tongue.

The role of women as preservers of craftsmanship and artistry is a testament to their creativity, dedication, and cultural stewardship. Their contributions help maintain cultural identity, promote artistic diversity, and ensure that traditional craftsmanship and artistry continue to thrive and evolve in a changing world.

Challenges Encountered by the Women

Cultural Constraints and Gender Inequality: Despite the success recorded by Nigeria Women in the preservation of traditional knowledge, research has exposed different challenges experienced in their efforts to safeguarding and transmitting the people's cultural heritage. According to Bergh (2019), cultural concerns such as established traditions and inflexible views dominate; because most women in rural communities are bound to a particular way of life, they rarely get first-hand knowledge from beyond their locality. Similarly, women's responsibilities and participation in knowledge preservation activities are frequently limited by cultural norms and traditions, particularly in circumstances where some acts are considered the holy province of men. Women were not permitted to attend these sacred traditional sites because they were regarded as potential sources of danger due to the belief in the polluting nature of blood, particularly monthly blood and birthing blood. Women are thus viewed as abnormal beings, intimately associated with societal well-being through their life-giving traits while yet posing a serious threat to life through their polluting qualities (Horton, in Wilson, 1976). This traditional African religious belief, hence, stresses the domestic orientation of women's lives, affirming their reproductive role as a way of maintaining existence, while disdaining other aspects of their sexuality.

Gender Disparities: Again, as a result of gender disparities, Nigeria women had limited access to education, resources, and decision-making power. This inequality impeded their ability to engage effectively in knowledge preservation efforts.

Loss of Traditional Knowledge Rapid Urbanization, Globalization, and the Influence of Modernization Can Lead to the Erosion of Traditional Knowledge and Practices: owing to infiltration of western culture and the quest for white-collar job, women now find it challenging to transmit knowledge to younger generations who are increasingly

disconnected from their cultural roots. Traditional knowledge is often transmitted through local languages. The decline of these languages now pose as obstacle to knowledge preservation efforts.

Limited Access to Resources: Women currently have less access to the resources needed to preserve knowledge, such as land, finance, or supplies for traditional crafts or farming practices. According to the researcher, most Nigerian women no longer have the necessary platform to convey to their children the basic traditional agricultural value due to modernism, sales, and government control of lands. With a few exceptions, it is no longer news that Nigerian society has been defined in terms of masculinity. As a result, women had no right to inherit land or other necessary items that could help them in their daily lives. Given the foregoing, women interested in traditional knowledge preservation are frequently confronted with economic obstacles. Their contributions underrated, and they struggle to earn a livelihood from their efforts and their voices could not be heard in decision-making processes related to cultural preservation.

Health and Well-being: Women may face health challenges due to the physical demands of traditional practices. Lack of access to healthcare and support systems can affect their ability to continue their work.

Empowering Women in Knowledge Preservation

Empowering women in knowledge preservation involves providing them with the tools, opportunities, and support needed to continue their crucial roles in safeguarding cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. Some of the empowerment mechanism includes:

Education and Training: Promote access to education for girls and women, ensuring they have the skills and knowledge needed to preserve and transmit traditional practices. Provide training programs and workshops that enhance their expertise in areas such as traditional medicine, craftsmanship, storytelling, and agricultural practices. Again, advocate for gender-sensitive policies and initiatives that address the specific needs and challenges faced by women in knowledge preservation.

Access to Resources: Ensure equitable access to resources such as land, materials, and funding for women engaged in knowledge preservation activities. Establish microcredit programs or cooperative initiatives to support women in starting or expanding their traditional businesses and crafts. Promote economic empowerment through income-generating activities related to traditional knowledge and practices. Encourage the marketing and sale of traditional crafts, products, and services to generate income for women.

Recognition and Valuation: Raise awareness about the valuable contributions of women in knowledge preservation and challenge gender stereotypes that devalue their work. Encourage the recognition of their expertise through awards, honours, and inclusion in decision-making processes.

Cultural Revitalization: Support efforts to revitalize and promote traditional knowledge and practices within communities. Encourage intergenerational learning by facilitating the transmission of knowledge from older women to younger generations. Empower women to advocate for their rights and interests in cultural preservation, both at the community and policy levels. Foster collaboration among women engaged in knowledge preservation efforts, enabling them to learn from one another and share best practices. Facilitate networking opportunities with organizations, experts, and institutions involved in cultural preservation. Support the documentation and digitization of traditional knowledge and practices, enabling women to share their expertise with a wider audience. Ensure that women have access to digital tools and platforms for knowledge preservation.

Healthcare and Well-being: Ensure access to healthcare services and support for women engaged in physically demanding traditional practices. Promote their overall well-being and work-life balance.

Empowering women in knowledge preservation is not only essential for preserving cultural heritage but also for advancing gender equality and promoting the sustainability of traditional practices in a rapidly changing world. These means of empowerment can help women continue their vital work and ensure the continuity of cultural traditions for future generations.

Relevance of the Study

The study on women's knowledge preservation and empowerment in the context of traditional practices in West Africa, particularly Nigeria, holds significant relevance to society in several ways:

Preservation of Cultural Heritage: Traditional knowledge and practices are integral components of a society's cultural heritage and identity. This study helps preserve and document these traditions, ensuring that they are not lost to future generations. Also, it supports communities maintain their unique identities and repel homogenization in a globalized world.

Empowerment of Women: By highlighting the roles of women in knowledge preservation, the study empowers women in their communities. It recognizes and validates their contributions, leading to greater gender equality. By empowering women in traditional knowledge preservation, it can create economic opportunities for them, such as through the marketing of traditional crafts and products

Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Conservation: Traditional agricultural practices and ecological knowledge are vital for sustainable food production and environmental conservation. This study can contribute to the promotion of sustainable practices.

Community Resilience: Traditional knowledge often includes practices for coping with environmental changes and natural disasters. Documenting and preserving this knowledge can enhance community resilience.

Interdisciplinary Learning: Research on this topic encourages interdisciplinary learning by bridging cultural, sociological, environmental, and gender studies. It fosters a holistic understanding of societies. The study can also lead to increased education and awareness about the importance of traditional knowledge and the role of women in preserving it, both locally and globally

Recommendations

Based on the study on women's knowledge preservation and empowerment in Nigeria, here are some recommendations for actions and strategies that can enhance the preservation of traditional knowledge and empower women in this context:

1. **Promotion of Gender-Inclusive Education:** Educational opportunities that provide equal access to girls and women, including training in traditional knowledge preservation, should be encouraged. Also, gender bias should be eschewed as both men and women have distinct values to impart for the growth of the society.
2. **Recognize and Value Women's Contributions:** women are like the hub of the society, their roles in the society should be adequately recognized. Awareness should be created about the important roles women play in knowledge preservation.
3. **Include Traditional Knowledge in Policy Development:** Ensure that traditional knowledge and the contributions of women are considered in the development of cultural preservation and gender-inclusive policies. Invest in efforts to document and digitize traditional knowledge, making it accessible to a wider audience and future generations.
4. **Promote Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Conservation:** Highlight the relevance of traditional agricultural practices in sustainable food production and environmental conservation. Develop initiatives that enable women to generate income from their traditional knowledge, such as marketing traditional crafts and products. Provide Access to Resources by ensuring equitable access to resources such as land, materials, and funding for women engaged in traditional knowledge preservation.
5. **Provide Healthcare and Well-being Support:** Address the healthcare needs and well-being of women engaged in physically demanding traditional practices. These recommendations aim to create an enabling environment where women can actively participate in preserving and transmitting traditional knowledge while benefiting from their expertise. Empowering women in this context not only enriches cultural diversity but also contributes to gender equality and sustainable development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the preservation of traditional knowledge in Nigerian, is intricately linked with the invaluable roles that women play in this endeavour. Women have historically served as the custodians, transmitters, and practitioners of traditional knowledge, spanning a wide array of domains, from agriculture and craftsmanship to healing practices and cultural preservation. Their contributions are deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of their communities and are instrumental in safeguarding and passing down these rich traditions to future generations. However, the study highlights that women involved in knowledge preservation face numerous challenges, including gender inequality, limited access to resources, and the erosion of traditional practices in the face of modernization and

environmental changes. Despite these challenges, the study underscores the resilience, dedication, and cultural stewardship of women who continue to be at the forefront of preserving their cultural heritage.

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