

LIBRARY SERVICES FOR RURAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN OYO STATE: A CASE STUDY OF AFRICAN HERITAGE RESEARCH LIBRARY AND CULTURAL CENTRE, OYO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract:

Rural women remain the most underprivileged group of the developing societies because of lack of empowerment. In the recent years, there are diverse government and non-governmental organisations and initiatives aimed at empowering rural women in order to alleviate their sufferings yet a lot of rural women are not empowered. Information is recognized as power, a critical resource and sine-qua non for true empowerment and library is an important store house of information. This paper discusses theoretical roles of libraries to rural dwellers and the importance of information in empowerment. The study adopted a qualitative approach with case study research method. Data was collected from twelve rural women (users) and four members of the management of African Heritage Research Library and Cultural Centre (AHRLC) through interview, focus group and inspection of AHRLC facilities. AHRLC is a private library situated at Adeyipo, a village in Lagelu local government area of Oyo State Nigeria

The findings of the study revealed that library services such as education support services (literacy programme, reading programme, seminars and talks), economic support services (workshops and demonstration farms), culture and recreation support services were available at AHRLC and utilized by rural women at Adeyipo and its environs. Subsequently, AHRLC was perceived by rural women as solution, civilization and all purpose centre. However, lack of funds, electricity, trained manpower and motorable road were major challenges facing AHRLC. Finally, some recommendations were made as way out of the challenges.

Keywords: Library services, Rural women, Women Empowerment, African Heritage Research Library, Nigeria

Introduction

Globally, rural women are recognized as the most uninformed and unpowered group of people especially in the developing societies. The United Nations (2006) declared that poverty affected more women than men as a result of unequal access to economic opportunities, lack of resources and access to education, low participation in decision making process and cultural beliefs. In response to this, there had been policies and initiatives globally towards women empowerment. The world leaders at the Millennium Summit committed themselves to Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in the same vein; African Heads of States met in 2004 and adopted a solemn declaration on Gender equality in Africa and standards on women's human rights in Africa to be operated by different levels of government in Africa.

Upon this backdrop, previous military governments in Nigeria made initiatives and programmes aimed at empowering rural women. For instance, Better Life for Rural Women (1987) by the late first lady, Mrs. Maryam Babangida, and Family Support Programme (1993) by first lady Mrs. Mariam Abacha. In addition, since 1995 when Ministry of Women Affairs was established in Nigeria upon United Nations agreement to establish institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women and women affairs, several efforts were made. Presently, the pet programme of the current first lady, Dame Patience Jonathan is Women for Change Initiative which aims at awakening and empowering the Nigerian woman.

In spite of all efforts made, there seems to be no noticeable difference in the lives of Nigerian rural women like other African countries. These programmes were not able to empower the rural women because the actual rural women were not reached. They were rather programmes to enrich the city women whose husbands were in the government while rural women were in silence and docility. The Economic Commission for Africa (2005) attested to the fact that the commitments made by African governments have not yielded notable impact in the lives of rural women in Africa. African countries are still characterized by poverty, women have limited access to productive resources, they suffer gross violations of their social, cultural and economic rights and insufficient access to social services and they are generally marginalized. Those initiatives could not achieve much because various levels of government have not been able to translate those initiatives into social support programmes that could indeed empower rural women. Therefore, for Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, to meet the goal of halving the population of people living in poverty in 2015, rural women should be empowered.

Information is a vital ingredient for empowerment and library is a storehouse of information. African Heritage Research Library and Cultural Centre (AHRLC) is privately owned and located in Adeyipo, a village in Lagelu Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. It was first established in March 1988 at Ila Orangun, Osun State, Nigeria but later moved to Adeyipo the home village of the founder. AHRLC was established to serve the educational needs of students, researchers, scholars, documentalists, archivists, and for the socio-cultural needs of the local community people; peasant farmers, petty traders, local artisans, craftsmen and women, all of whom the library registers free of charge. It opens to users everyday of the

year including weekends and public holidays. AHRLC has several services packaged to meet the information needs of its diverse clients especially rural women.

In Nigeria, women are said to represent more than half the total population. Nigerian rural women account for over half of the food produced and responsible for family and household chores. (Adekanye, 2004). However, for women to contribute more to the nation's economic, social and political input there is need for more access to information for empowerment (Oyelude and Bamigbola, 2013). It is therefore necessary to empower rural women through access to library services to achieve a great success in reduction of poverty among rural women in the developing countries like Nigeria. Therefore, this study aims to identify AHRLC services towards rural women empowerment, perception of rural women about AHRLC and challenges faced by AHRLC.

Statement of the Problem

Library is a store house of knowledge to serve literate and illiterate, old and young, men and women in the society. In practice, this is not always so especially in developing countries like Nigeria, because rural women do not use library mainly because rural libraries are not available in many of the rural communities and where there is a rural library, the format of information package is not suitable or usable for them. African Heritage Research Library and Cultural Centre have proved that library can play a critical role in rural women empowerment. Thus, this study is an attempt to bring to light success stories of AHRLC in empowering rural women through library services.

Objective of the Study

This study aimed to critically examine various library services for rural women empowerment at African Heritage Research Library and Cultural Centre, Adeyipo, Oyo State Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

- (i) identify library services at AHRLC towards rural women empowerment;
- (ii) find out how rural women perceive AHRLC; and
- (iii) examine challenges faced by AHRLC in serving rural women

Research Questions

To realise the stated objectives the following research questions were framed:

- (i) What types of library services are available at AHRLC to empower rural women?
- (ii) How do rural women perceive AHRLC?
- (iii) What impact has AHRLC brought to rural women?
- (iv) How has AHRLC impacted the community as a whole?
- (v) What challenges are faced by AHRLC?

Literature Review

Empowerment is a process of transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of relative control over one's life, destiny and environment. To achieve this, rural women need social support. Kendall Hunt Incorporation (2011) defined Social support as "a transactional communicative process, including verbal and/or nonverbal communication that aims to improve an individual's feelings of coping, competence, belonging, and/or esteem" (KH, 2011, p. 184). Apparently, social support has five components; emotional, esteem, network, tangible and information support.

Among the different components of social support, information support is the bedrock. Harande (2009) submitted that information hunger resulted in poor living condition, illiteracy and poverty. Mchombu (2006) notes that there cannot be knowledge unless one first gets information and that women need information in all aspects of their life. Library is the bedrock of information acquisition, preservation, dissemination, and is established to give information to the user in a suitable and usable format. Nwalo (2000), stated that libraries are in the vanguard of information generation, acquisition, processing, organization, in institutions and groups, in society, for self development, organizational development as well as for national development. Library is an important store house of information and the onus is upon the library to give information support to rural women in such aspects as education, economy, cultural and recreation. Hence, libraries are agents of change and empowerment in the nation.

Dent and Yannotta (2005) suggests that the rural library has three functions: to provide information to those individuals responsible for rural development programs; support rural education programmes and rural schools, and serve as centers for community education and culture. The rural library can only perform the three functions suggested by Kegan through its translation and repackaging services. Aina (2006) affirmed this in his study of information provision to farmers in Africa noting that information repackaging and disseminating to users in a non-literate setting through displays, meetings and talks is another vital function of rural library. He also viewed a library as a public agency that needs to provide information to all users, regardless of status and to also act as a linkage between the extension agent and the rural dwellers.

A rural library functions as an educational agency through its support for adult literacy in the rural communities and its support for adult literacy is monumental. Onohwakpor (2005) asserted that library services are of paramount importance to the success of the goals of adult literacy education and library services should be incorporated into adult literacy programmes.

Libraries also play a vital role in the cultural support of the rural people, this was reported by Reading (2005) in his speech to members of the Conference of European National Librarians at Luxembourg (CENL) when he highlighted the following as the cultural role of rural libraries: collector and steward of our heritage; organizers of knowledge; making it easy for citizens to come in contact with their own culture and thereby appreciate it; and collection and presentation of the cultural identities of the country. In addition, Siitonen (2003) asserted the belief that information enables women to make informed choices and therefore plays a key role in the enhancement of the status of women. Therefore, investing in library services for rural development is a direct investment for better economy and life of the rural women as library services will aid, accelerate and increase prosperity of the rural women.

In his own contributions to the role of rural libraries, Xu (2000) in his study on the development and role of rural libraries in China reported that the farmers in Jiangsu province and Sichuan province has recognized rural library as an indispensable place for the rural populace to acquire basic education, obtain information on agricultural production techniques and enrich their standard of living. These farmers in two provinces in China utilized the rural libraries to meet their educational, cultural, recreational and information needs.

According to Mchombu and Cadbury (2006) one of the challenges facing rural women development and library services in developing countries is the limited coverage of most library services surveyed because of lack of government investment in library services. Xu

(2000) affirmed that limitations of rural libraries in China are shortage of library collections, poor conditions of library facilities and equipment and a low service level from library staff.

Similarly, Ebiwolate (2010) investigated public libraries services to rural areas in Nigeria, revealed that poor infrastructure, inadequate funding and inadequate human resources were some of challenges inhibiting rural library services. Mutua-Kombo (2001) in his study of Women's groups and information provision in rural Kenya identified factors that affect the provision of information in rural Kenya as the government's limited support of the information sector, male dominance, conflict of interests of information providers, media interest and nepotism.

Methodology

The study adopted qualitative approach with case study method. Data was collected through interview, focus group, analysis of AHRLC holdings and inspection of other resources. Four library personnel and twelve rural women that used AHRLC were interviewed totaling sixteen respondents. The sample size is considered appropriate for a qualitative research. The interview session for rural women was in Yoruba language because 80% of them are not English language literate. The rural women were asked questions such as: how often do you visit AHRLC? What impact has AHRLC brought to your life? How has the library impacted the community as a whole? How do you perceive AHRLC? The founder and chief librarian were also asked questions such as what type of library services are available to rural women? What challenges do AHRLC face in serving the rural community as a whole? The interview sessions were recorded, transcribed, categorized and thematically analysed through an iterative process of identifying and categorizing common themes in accordance with phenomenographic research approach (Bamigbola, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on social support theory (SST). SST has five components of support; emotional, esteem, network, tangible and information support which can bring empowerment to any group of people. Libraries as social agents directly and indirectly give these five components to empower rural women. Literature also pointed out that social support could be viewed from two perspectives: actual support and perceived support (Kendal Hunt Incorporation, 2011). This study looked into the two perspectives by identifying the actual support that AHRLC provides through its services to rural women and on the other hand examined how rural women perceived the services of AHRLC.

Findings

Demographic Data

In all there were sixteen respondents, comprising four AHRLC personnel and twelve rural women. AHRLC personnel consist of the Director/Founder, Chief Librarian and two library assistants. The twelve rural women aged between 25 and 70 are involved in farming, petty trading, soap making and animal husbandry.



Fig.1: Rural women with the researcher (Airen) third from the left at AHRLC during one of the focus group meetings.



Fig.2: The researcher (Alice) at AHRLC during one of the visits

RQ1. What library services are available at AHRLC to empower rural women?

The Director and the Chief Librarian were interviewed while two library officers guided the researchers through different sections of the library. From the interview and inspection of the AHRLC, the following services are available:

1. *Educational and Information Support Services*

- i. Adult education and literacy programme under rural community library section, aimed at empowering the general rural dwellers and especially the rural women of Adeyipo and other 200 villages and hamlets. This service is to give the rural women opportunity to read and write especially their mother language (Yoruba) and empower them to improve their socio-cultural outlook.
- ii. Seminars, workshops and talks are organised periodically for rural women education and enlightenment. The focuses are varied such as: on health, politics and economic activities. For instance Kudirat Initiative for Democracy (KIND) organisation came for grassroots mobilisation of rural women and youth in October, 2010 in preparation for 2011 Nigerian National Election. (Fig.3) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFJniTwdl6c>).



Fig.3: Hafsat Abiola Costello during a grassroots mobilization of rural women and youth organised by Kudirat Initiative for Democracy (KIND) at AHRLC on October, 16, 2010

- iii. Reading Services. The centre organises reading sessions where rural women and men listen to reading of local newspapers, magazines and folklores. AHRLC also loan reading materials to rural women and they return when they finish reading them. Some of them that could not read have their children read for them.



Fig.4:The researcher(Alice) inspecting books in AHRLC.



Fig .5: AHRLC building donated by an eminent Nigerian, Chief Afe Babalola, SAN it houses the rural community library section

- iv Audio Visual Service. There is an audio visual section where rural women also listen to educational audio cassettes translated to their local language



Fig.6: Audio Visual section at AHRLC

II. Economic Support Services

AHRLC has demonstration farms and piggery service to empower the rural women in socio-economic aspect. The centre floats demonstration farms such as banana, plantain, palm tree, mango and pineapple plantations to guide peasant farmers (women and men) in Adeyipo and surrounding villages and hamlets to improve upon their farming techniques (Figures 7-7c). There is also medicinal herbs garden (Tewetegbo) which serves the rural women as first aid treatment to take care of simple health issues.



Fig. 7:From left the founder of AHRLC, Dr. Bayo Adebowale, the researchers(Alice and Airen) and the Chief Librarian, (in front of plantain farm).



Fig.7a: AHRLC Piggery demonstration farm (Alice, the Founder, Chief Librarian and a rural woman



Fig.7b. Alice with a rural woman removing palm seeds at AHRLC Orchard



Fig. 7c. A rural woman with pigs at AHRLC

Piggery



Fig 8: Adeyipo Village View



Fig.8a AHRLC side of Adeyipo Village

III. Cultural and Recreational Support Service

AHRLC caters for cultural and recreational needs of rural women through the provision of music in local dialect. Rural women at Adeyipo and its environs gather at the AHRLC Orchard in the evening after their daily activities to listen to music, dance, sing, chanting called 'rara'. They also watch other traditional poets and story tellers while drinking palm-wine.

RQ2. How do rural women perceive AHRLC? (Perceived Social Support)

- i. How often do they use AHRLC? Nine (75%) visit AHRLC on daily basis for various reasons ranging from listening to the reading of daily local newspapers to inquire about general information on any aspects of life. The remaining 25% said they visit AHRLC at least twice a week. One of them said:

Resp.4.... We come here everyday because we will have something to do...

- ii. Do you think having the library in the community has improved your quality of life?

All the respondents indicated that AHRLC had indeed improved the quality of their lives.

Resp. 6: This centre had made me literate. I can read the local newspaper 'ALAROYE' and am very happy.

Resp. 7: In my own case, I like the way this centre brings doctors to check our blood pressure and also give us medicine and thereby I am strong to work on my farm.

iii. What impact has AHRLC brought to your life?

All the respondents said AHRLC had impacted their lives and their beloved ones positively. AHRLC has improved the lives of individual women in Adeyipo and its environs by empowering them in all the basic needs of mankind.

Resp. 1 Adeyipo Library had changed our destiny and that of our children positively, because the fact that our children use this place everyday for their studies is enough.

Resp. 4:Ha! This library has improved my business tremendously, because the library brings city people and big men to us and they buy our goods when they are going back to city. If the library is not there, I would not have made such sales.

Resp. 2: In fact, this centre made the politicians to come and campaign to us during election, before this centre was built none of them would come. We had also been taught here (AHRLC) not to allow the politicians to buy us with money and we should not allow our children to be thugs for them.

Resp. 8: We also come here to charge our phones when the generator is on because there is no light in our hamlet. At the same time we will hear music and dance at the orchard and when our phones have fully charged, we go back to our hamlet.

iv. How has the library impacted the community as a whole?

All the respondents indicated that AHRLC has revolutionalised the entire community, that is Adeyipo village and about two hundred other hamlets and villages.

Resp.5: This Centre has enlightened our lives.

Resp.4. All of us in this community know that this library is brought to us by God through our Daddy (AHRLC Founder/Director). All the hamlets and villages in this area come here to draw water from the well dug by AHRLC.



Fig. 9. Deep Well at AHRLC for source of water for the community. Fig.10 AHRLC rural community reading section with the local newspaper (ALAROYE) on the table

Resp. 1: AHRLC has united us and we see ourselves as a big community. We meet here and socialize. When we have any ceremony, we support ourselves and live in peace (Figure 11).



Fig. 11: Rural women dancing at AHRLC to the local drummer during a ceremony

Resp.7: The centre is our meeting place in this community.

Resp.9: This centre has changed our perception of life because before this Centre was established, we were living as if we were not part of others in this state because we did not know what our government was doing and we were neglected. Yes!

Resp.11: I can say this Centre is our government that is catering for us. Government is far away from us.

How do you perceive AHRLC? The respondents perceived AHRLC differently.

i. Civilization Centre

AHRLC was perceived as civilization centre by rural women

Resp. 1. This centre has our brought civilization to this community that is all I can say.

Resp. 4. Hmm, I never taught I can come to 'book reading house' (Library) to do anything because I am not literate, but now this has made me civilized.

ii. Solution Centre

AHRLC was also perceived as solution centre

Resp. 3. There is no problem you bring here that you will not get a way out. I said it the other time we come here to be educated and our children too. If there is any quarrel in our hamlet, we come here and our elders will settle it for us. Sometimes church people come here to tell us about God.

Resp.10. The Church people came here to teach us about our health and they checked our blood pressure and our blood sugar level

iii. All purpose Centre

Another name of AHRLC as perceived by rural women is all purpose centre

Resp. 5. All purpose centre 'Gbogbo nise' is what I can call this centre ooo. I remember that there was a time they taught us here how to preserve our foods and since then I do not waste things again.

Resp.12. *AHRLC is our school, hospital, market, church...hmm .. in fact it is our everything.*

Challenges

In meeting the needs of rural women and the entire community, AHRLC is faced with some challenges. One of the major challenges faced by AHRLC is lack of funds to execute their programmes. The centre depends largely on the founder and other volunteers who contribute money from time to time to meet pressing needs. There was an instance when the rural people had to contribute their widow's mite to support the centre to execute a project. Thus, there are many projects abandoned because of lack of funds, for instance AHRLC market (Fig.12). Secondly, lack of electricity is a critical challenge to AHRLC. Presently, there is no electricity and the Centre uses a generating plant and the cost of maintenance is high. The government of Oyo State had erected electricity poles in Adeyipo village for some years but up till now Adeyipo has not been connected to the grid. This handicaps the Centre to use the available information and communication technologies, such as computer system, television and others as often as they would have wanted. Other challenges highlighted during the interview were lack of trained librarians because the centre could not afford to employ and lack of motorable road.



Fig. 12. Uncompleted AHRLC Supermarket

Discussion

AHRLC has been able to fulfill the basic functions of a library by meeting educational, economical, cultural and recreational needs of rural women of Adeyipo and its environs. Besides, the repackaging of its diverse services is in line with Aina (2006) submission that a vital role of a rural library is repackaging and disseminating of information to rural dwellers. Majority of rural women visit AHRLC on daily basis because of its strategic location, the entrance of Adeyipo village and along the only route to other two hundred hamlets and villages in that community.

The Centre has empowered rural women of Adeyipo and its environs. Firstly, economic status of the rural women using AHRLC has been enhanced. The farmers among them testified to the fact that their farm yields have improved through AHRLC demonstration farms and that made them financially buoyant. Besides, AHRLC brings urban people to their village and thereby their farm products are sold to them and this increases sales. The soap makers and those involved in animal husbandry are not left out. New techniques through AHRLC piggery demonstration farm and through seminars on soap making added value to their businesses.

Education wise, rural women in Adeyipo are now enlightened through AHRLC services, some of them can now read and write their dialect through the literacy programme of AHRLC this is in agreement with Onohwakpor (2005). Also, academic performance of their children has improved because of the access to and use of AHRLC facilities.

In the area of politics, rural women are well informed of their rights and obligations. AHRLC has brought recognition to the community as a whole and rural women do participate well in civic rights. In addition, AHRLC as a cultural centre is showcasing the natural talents of the rural women, for instance, the community is now known in the Lagelu local government for their local chatting 'rara', drumming and dancing skills. This concurs with Dent and Yannotta (2005) that submitted that rural library is a centre for community education and culture.

Rural women welfare is catered for by AHRLC. Apparently, the total life of rural women had been touched by AHRLC, through both tangible and information support. Obviously, AHRLC has been perceived rightly by rural women as their 'all purpose centre' because the centre is set out to meet their diverse information needs through emotional, psychological, esteem, tangible and information support. This is in agreement with the findings of Xu (2000) where the rural farmers perceived rural library as an indispensable place where all their needs are met.

However, lack of funds, electricity, trained manpower and motorable road were some of the challenges faced by AHRLC this is in agreement with the findings of Ebiwolate (2010) that revealed that public libraries services to rural areas in Niger Delta States in Nigeria faced with inadequate funding, infrastructure and human resources.

Conclusion

AHRLC is a success story of library services for empowerment of rural illiterate women in African society. Its dynamic services such as educational, economic, cultural and recreational support services had met the varied information needs of rural women thereby empowering them and reducing poverty. Besides, it is obvious that libraries are agents of empowerment as exemplified by AHRLC and the rural women have perceived it as their civilization, solution and all purpose Centre. However, AHRLC is incapacitated by lack of funds, electricity, trained manpower and motorable road.

Implications

Library is meant for literate and illiterate, educated and non-educated, thus, it has strategic role in achieving the MDGs by empowering rural women. It is evidently clear the AHRLC has impacted lives of individual rural women in Adeyipo and its environs. Besides, libraries in Africa, especially in Nigeria have a lot to offer rural dwellers by repackaging their services to suit rural dwellers' information needs in order to halve the population of people living in poverty by 2015.

The Way Out

It is evidently clear that library is a strong agent of empowerment, AHRLC is a success story. AHRLC will go far in supporting rural women and rural dwellers in general in empowerment

if their various challenges are looked into. Based on this study, the following way out are made:

- (i) Nigerian government should support such private initiative like AHRLC by providing funds to this centre;
- (ii) Oyo State government should support this private venture by connecting Adeyipo to the national grid and constructing a motorable road to the Centre;
- (iii) The assistance of individual and corporate donors in Nigeria and abroad is solicited to donate to AHRLC;
- (iv) Nigerian Library Association should solicit support from funders internationally for this Centre;
- (v) Library and Information Science schools in Nigeria should send students on internship to this Centre;
- (vi) Other libraries in Nigeria and other African countries should learn from AHRLC and make their services relevant to rural dwellers in order to improve their total life and thereby alleviate poverty in Africa; and
- (vii) Public libraries should make their services relevant to their diverse users.

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