

## EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITIES OF GENDER ROLES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING IN FARM-FAMILIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION, MANAGEMENT AND RESEARCH

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### ABSTRACT

*Premised on the recognition that psychological wellbeing is a vital component of optimal productivity, and the need for agricultural extension to enhance farmers' welfare, the study was motivated by a dearth of research on the construction and determinants of psychological wellbeing and gender roles in farm-families. The intention was to gain insight and understanding of the farmers' life experiences, peculiar needs, problems and aspirations, in their unique socio-historical and cultural contexts. The study explored the complexities of the socio-cultural construction of gender roles and psychological wellbeing in farm-families of Ogun state Nigeria. The study is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing from and contributing to the bodies of knowledge in gender-based research, social psychology, family studies, and agricultural extension. Findings reveal a need for the development of gender-sensitive and culture-specific strategies in the agricultural extension system, aimed at improving psychological wellbeing and livelihood security of farm-families and ultimately enhancing sustainable agricultural and national development.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Agriculture is the mainstay of rural economy in Nigeria. The nation largely depends on the agricultural sector for national development and the provision of nutritional needs. Unlike in developed countries, farmers in Nigeria are still faced with hardships and drudgery in the performance of their agricultural activities, having to use local and

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traditional implements for their on- and off-farm activities. Other problems alongside that of unmechanized farming and unmechanized processing of food crops include: inadequate access to agricultural inputs (for example, seeds and seedlings, fertilizers, and agrochemicals), marketing difficulties associated with middle-men problems and transportation difficulties, lack of access to credit facilities, poor waste-disposal methods, and inadequate access to basic social amenities, for example, health, electricity, and drinkable water. Despite the attempt by Nigerian government to stimulate agriculture through large irrigation schemes, an expansion of credit, the use of high-yielding seeds, and incentives to foreign business, food production has failed to keep up with population growth, which is increasing at 3% each year (Nigerian Databank, 2002).

Farming in Nigeria is largely a family-operated activity, and in contrast to most other occupations, it provides the physical, economic, and social conditions that influence the needs, interests, and biological processes of the family. Farm families are confronted with many problems, while gender dynamics within the family set-ups and the psychological wellbeing of members are fraught with a series of complexities. Many patterns characterize farm-family life in southwest Nigeria. These include, large families living together, polygamy, strong parental authority, family care and respect for elders, co-operation between relatives, lack of assistance from the husband in domestic work, involvement of parents in the choice of spouse, little privacy, importance of children, importance of the extended family beyond the nuclear family, large numbers of agents of socialization, fostering of children amongst members of the extended family, dependence of family members on husband and father for provision of basic needs, and dependence on wife and mother for care and nurturing. Farm-families are also gendered institutions with peculiar needs, problems and aspirations. Holmes (2000) observes that although women in Africa produce 80% of the food, they own 1% of the land; receive 7% of the agricultural extension services, and less than 10% of the credit given to small-scale farmers. Instead of the African woman being recognized and supported for her extraordinary contribution to the African continent, she has the lowest socio-economic status in all of African society. She further observes that when policies are formulated, programs developed, budgets drawn, decisions made about her life, she

is simply not present. Women, the key producers on the continent have been almost entirely bypassed by development.

From the above premise, the study set out to explore the complexities of the socio-cultural constructions of gender roles and psychological wellbeing in farm-families in Southwest Nigeria. Previous studies on farm-families in the agricultural extension discipline have concentrated on social and economic wellbeing aspects of agricultural extension. Our argument in this paper is that social and economic wellbeing contribute to farm-families' psychological wellbeing, and that psychological wellbeing is a pre-requisite for adequate participation in development.

## **2. SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDER ROLES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING**

The social construction of gender surpasses biologically determined categories. The use of the term 'sex' is limited to the considerations of biological mechanisms, whereas, the use of the term 'gender' broadens the focus. In the context of this study, "gender" includes sexuality and reproduction, sexual difference, the social construction of male, female, masculinity and femininity. The construction of gender identities is to a very large extent dependent on the agents of socialization, which include family, religion, school and society. Social and cultural representations are central to the socio-cultural constructions of gender. Whereas individuals are born sexed but not gendered, for the individual, gender construction starts with assignment to a sex category on the basis of what the genitals look like at birth.

In Africa, girls have been historically and culturally socialized into becoming submissive women both to older women and male figures in the family and society (Besha, 2001). Stereotypic assumptions about girls and women include, femininity rather than masculinity is inferior, passive and a less valued form of identity; a "good" woman is expected to conform to certain self-sacrificing, non-assertive, passive patterns of behaviour; girls and women are expected to be more domesticated than boys and men; women are biologically inferior to men, and thus have lesser human potential. Women's gender-role socialization is such that while nurturing qualities are reinforced, other qualities that make for healthy adulthood, such as independence, autonomy, assertiveness, and

the development of instrumental competencies are actively discouraged.

The masculine mystique and value system as identified by O'Neil (1981) comprises a complex set of values and beliefs that define optimal masculinity in society. These values and beliefs are learned during early socialisation and are based on rigid gender role stereotypes and beliefs about men and masculinity. Boys, for instance, are supposed to be tough and hide pain, be fighters and defenders of self, sister and property; compete with and be better than girls and other boys; do the physical work and heavy duties; be in control, in authority positions; do well academically and pursue 'manly' careers and occupations; drink alcohol and smoke; and prove masculinity (Horowitz, 1997). A significant aspect of male gender identity is that of being the provider. A high commitment to the breadwinner role can be a source of strain for men, and in particular, the poor farmers in the project area. Men experience shame at their failure to protect and provide for their families and depression is high among unemployed men (Ahmad, 1998).

The above stereotypes and many others persist in most social settings as strong and even decisive influences in the values of both men and women. Tensions, stress, strain and emotional complexes are inherent within family relationship; and even more so, are inevitable where polarized stereotypic masculine and feminine gender roles are demanded. Tolson (1977) observes that these polarizations are divisive and a potential source of friction. Rigid gender socialization into narrow roles is not in the best interest of individuals (O'Neil, 1981). Males and females have been restricted to certain roles as prescribed by society, "acting" assigned roles, many times under compulsion, tension and pressure, trying to satisfy societal expectations. This is the origin of gender role strain and conflicts, and has serious implications for the psychological well being of men and women.

Like gender, psychological wellbeing is also both socially and culturally constructed, and there is growing evidence that these socio-cultural factors can directly affect health and wellbeing (Eckersley, 2002). Psychological wellbeing implies an internal balance amongst several factors, which include: responsibility, the ability to accept burdens and serious disappointments of life, and the capacity to positively cope with

the varied demands of life (Sokoya, 1998). The Yoruba concept for the 'human being' is '*eniyan*' and '*eniyan*' is conceived as having the structural components of '*ara* (body - the physico-material component of the human being)', '*ori*' (head/brain), '*emi*' (spirit) and '*okan*' (soul). It is believed by the Yorubas that, these four components work in harmony, to make an individual optimally healthy and rational. Thoughts mean *ero* in Yoruba and it is believed to be a function controlled by both the *okan* (mind) and the *opolo* (brain), just like the mind and brain are construed as controlling thoughts and emotions in the Western context. Gbadegesin noted that, in the usage of the mentalistic '*okan*' the emotional states of *eniyan* are taken as the functions of the mind.

The philosophical relevance of the Yoruba terms for the body components involved in the subjective appreciation of psychological provided the basis for our adoption of '*ilera-okan*' in this study as the Yoruba equivalent for psychological wellbeing. Gbadegesin also identified the functions of '*okan*' (mind) and '*opolo*' (brain) as being connected with '*ero*' (thoughts). *Ilera okan* or *alaafia okan* thus literally translates as 'a condition of healthy living of the soul', and connotes a situation where an individual has a 'settled mind', or enjoys 'peace of mind', while the antonym for psychological, which is psychological illbeing in English, translates as *ailera-okan*. Other correlates of *ailera-okan* are: *aibale-okan*, which connotes stress, and *iporuuru-ati pakaleke okan*, which connote emotional disturbance. The conceptualization of psychological wellbeing in the Yoruba context is similar with its conceptualization in Western context. Psychological wellbeing is thus a universal concept. This is evident in Veenhoven's conceptualization of psychological wellbeing, and its synonyms. Veenhoven (1984) likened psychological wellbeing to the subjective 'appreciation of life', 'happiness' and 'life satisfaction'.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The social constructivist framework adopted in the study, and draws from the social representations theory, feminist poststructuralist, feminist anthropological and African feminist theories. A social representation according to Moscovici (1988) is understood as a collective elaboration of a social object by the community, for the purpose of behaving and communicating. The theory postulates that

social representations are systems of ideas, attitudes, values and practices. Feminist poststructuralist theory begins with the observation that patriarchy is a fundamental organizing principle in the past and present human communities (Weedon, 1987). Although 'psychological wellbeing' is a difficult construct to define because of its complexity and high subjectivity, adopting the social representations' framework, the constructions, meanings and determinants of psychological wellbeing and gender roles were allowed to emerge from the participants, within their peculiar socio-historical and cultural contexts.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

The study is qualitative in design and multiple methods of data collection were employed. These include life history methodology, in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, interactive observation techniques, and multiple case designs. Multiple methods of data collection have been acclaimed to provide rich opportunities for cross-validation and cross-fertilization of research findings (Brewer and Hunter, 1989). The purposive sampling method was adopted for the selection of communities and participants. Twenty-six families comprising of forty adults (17 men, 23 women) and thirty-one children (17boys, 14 girls) participated in the study.

All data from life histories, in-depth interviews and observation were reduced to text and personally word-processed and edited. The analytic procedures for processing qualitative data proposed by Rossman and Rallis (1998) were adopted in this study. The approach of analysis by themes was adopted in the study, and data systematization was achieved by constructing coding frames for each of the datasets that emerged. In addition, the analytic scheme proposed by Mandelbaum (1973) for the analysis and interpretation of life history data was adopted for in-depth analyses of the selected life histories out of those collected from the forty adult participants in the study. The analytical scheme uses three concepts - dimensions, turnings and adaptations of an individual life, for the analysis.

## **5. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION, MANAGEMENT AND RESEARCH**

Findings of the study have several implications for agricultural extension, management, and research. It is revealed that the farm-families have inherent potentials, in the form of strengths and opportunities, which development interventions could address, in order to enhance their psychological wellbeing. We believe that adequate psychological wellbeing within farm families would enhance their efficiency and productivity in farm-families. It is imperative that when family members have adequate psychological wellbeing, they will enjoy good health, experience good interpersonal relations within and outside the family, and be able to contribute meaningfully to development at individual, family and societal levels.

Gender roles in farm-families are discovered to include: breadwinner roles, domestic, marital, natal, parenting, occupational (on-farm and off-farm activities), self-regulatory and community roles. From the participants' constructions and determinants of psychological wellbeing and the socio-cultural constructions of gender, vis-à-vis the patterns of gender roles in farm families, the study established several links between gender roles and the psychological wellbeing of male and female members of farm families. There is evidence that traditional gender roles have changed significantly from what they used to be in the past. It was discovered, for example, that mothers in the study have taken on additional responsibilities. In addition to their traditional roles of nurturing, childcare, provision of emotional support and performance of domestic chores, the women now contribute substantially to family financing, and in particular, children's education and skill development (that is, breadwinner roles). The picture portrays the men as being relieved and the women as being overburdened. However, although the men do not feel pressured by their breadwinner roles and children's educational needs due to their wives' readiness to support, their emotional attachment to the fulfilment of these roles is still reflected in their constructions of, and determinants of psychological wellbeing.

Constructions of gender identities and gender role socialization of boys and girls are observed to be interdependent. Early gender-role

socialization influences gender identity construction, while gender identity construction also predicts gender role orientation. However, despite this resistance and ambivalence towards the sustenance of rigid stereotypic gender roles, all the participating boys and girls aspire to acquire good education, which they perceive as the key to their future survival and gender role fulfilment. Factors identified as influencing psychological well-being include: ability/inability to fulfil gender roles, rest, relaxation and leisure, women's multiple role involvement, family health, children's well-being and success, financial well-being, availability of food in the home, marital stability, spousal support, and spouse's success, social connectedness, goal achievement and fulfilled aspirations, and divine providence. Both the male and female participants also agree that, without *ifokanbale* (peace of mind) and *ilera-okan* or *alaafia-okan* (psychological well-being), nobody can accomplish anything worthwhile (*ko si enikeni t'o le se nkankan ti o ni laari*).

If gender-role fulfillment is closely related to good psychological well-being as discovered in the study, it then implies that social transformation role-reorientation could be achieved through agricultural extension and education. Recognizing the vital role being played by the socialization of farm-children (family, schools, religious bodies and society), and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, all agencies concerned with the socialization of children need to be sensitized to the need for social transformation and prevention of trans-generational perpetuation of gender stereotyping. There is need to empower agricultural extension personnel and other community development personnel with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes, to enable them cope with the development and transformation needs of the beneficiaries of their services. The school in particular has a major role to play in children's identity construction, and the transformation of the larger society, by working directly through the teachers, and indirectly through the parents. It is also recommended that the curriculum of institutions where these personnel are trained be reviewed to accommodate courses pertaining to the general well-being, psycho-social well-being and gender relations in rural families.

The study further reveals that marital stability is identified as a key determinant of children and parents' psychological well-being. Communication, mutual dependence, and complementarity, are



revealed in the study, as anchors of good family relationships. Effective communication in farm-families fosters marital well-being, and resultantly enhances participants' psychological well-being. Participants' stories also reveal that length of marriage and experience improves understanding and communication patterns and the psychological well-being of its members. Findings show how every member of the family, and the children in particular, are sensitive to dynamics within the family. Mothers' presence in the family is revealed as enhancing children's emotional development, while a father's presence enhances children's amenability to discipline.

Patterns of decision-making in farm-families show ideological representations of power and domination, confirming that patriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual differences. However, findings reveal that decision-making in farm-families is not often a site of friction, and thus, is not perceived as constituting a threat to the psychological well-being of male and female farmers. The wives do not perceive their husbands' role in decision-making as oppressive. They accept their level of involvement as adequate and perceive these social representations as the norm within their socio-cultural contexts. The men have internalised domination and male superiority, while the women on the other hand have internalised subserviency. These internalisations emanate from ideological social representations of gender and gender roles.

If the problems of women-subordination vis-à-vis male-domination have their roots in the socio-cultural constructions of gender, gender roles, and the ideological representations of gender roles, there is a need to develop feminist approaches and methodologies that are acceptable to all concerned, and are able to stand the test of time. It is very crucial that the origins and foundations be addressed if the lived experiences and present situation of male and female farmers is to be turned around for the better. There is a need to develop appropriate strategies aimed at promoting egalitarian gender relations in farm-families in view of the peculiarities of the African and Yoruba traditions, as different from the Western culture. From the findings of this study, it is obvious that strategies that worked for the Western women cannot work in farming communities in the study. For example, Western feminists often see the family as a prime site for female oppression, while men are perceived as the perpetrators of patriarchy. Contrary to this, the family is the most

valued institution in Yorubaland, and motherhood is perceived as the fulfilment of womanhood in Africa. Nnaemeka (1998) identified six areas of resistance of African feminists to Western feminism. These include: resistance against radical feminism, resistance against Western feminists' stridency against motherhood, resistance against the Western feminists choice of language in feminist struggles and academic engagements, resistance to Western feminists' inordinate and unrelenting emphasis on human sexuality, disagreement on priorities and areas of oppression, and exclusion of men from women's issues.

In addressing the complexities and problems arising from the socio-cultural constructions of gender roles and psychological wellbeing in farm-families, the 'what's the problem approach', is adopted. The 'what's the problem approach' is a policy development approach proposed by Bacchi (1999) for addressing gender-related issues. The adoption and adaptation of this approach to the findings of this study is very useful and relevant. This approach calls for a deeper reflection on the root causes of ideological gender role representations. This approach accepts that there are numerous troubling conditions, but states that we cannot talk about them outside of their representations, hence, their representations become what is important. The approach aims at strengthening the identified farm-families' strengths and opportunities, on one hand, and limiting the weaknesses and threats, from a poststructuralist's perspective.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the findings of this study, the authors are of the opinion that all stakeholders in the rural development sector, viz: the government, the extension delivery system, researchers, and farm-families have crucial roles to play towards alleviating the various complexities and numerous problems influencing the socio-cultural and gendered construction of psychological well-being in farm-families. The following strategies are hereby put forward.

### **6.1 Need for improved funding of agricultural extension and services**

Resource-poor farmers often face uncertainty on many fronts. In addition to variations in weather, problems associated with sourcing

and procurement of agricultural inputs, inequitable pricing of agricultural products, personal and family health needs, influence their productivity. Furthermore, the farmers usually have problems coping with risk, not because they are essentially conservative, but more because they are poor. As revealed in this study, they have few assets, hence little or no access to credit facilities. Agricultural extension being an educational process that aims at assisting a targeted “less-informed” people to acquire and effectively utilize the required knowledge, skills and attitudes aimed at improving their quality of life; could therefore play a crucial role in alleviating these problems; and improving the socio-economic status of the farm-families. Based on the participants’ experiences and contributions, it is further recommended that:

- The University of Agriculture (UNAAB) should intensify efforts at improving the status of the University’s model extension villages and make them real ‘models’ as the name implies.
- Funds should be made available for the development of sustainable capital and capacity building projects for farm-families in the extension villages.
- Women farmers in particular, need to be empowered economically through provision of micro-credit facilities, as it has been discovered that economic empowerment of African women food farmers can unlock Africa’s great agricultural potential (Holmes, 2000).
- The University should collaborate with relevant agencies and the government to improve rural infrastructures (for example, provision of good road networks, water, and electricity) and ensure that the living conditions of the farm-families are improved.
- The Agricultural Media Resources and Extension Centre (AMREC-UNAAB), and the Women-In-Development (WID) programme, in particular, should be strengthened, and adequately funded in order to be able to perform their extension responsibilities effectively. For example, the Centre (AMREC), and the various programmes should be provided with functional vehicles, audio-visual equipment, health-care monitoring equipment and adequate funds for effective extension activities.

- Further research on farm-families aimed at improving their general and psychological well-being should also be encouraged and funded.

## **6.2 Capacity-building**

Capacity building aims at improving the effectiveness, skills and knowledge of individuals, organizations and institutions in an attempt to achieve self-reliance and sustainable livelihoods. Farm-families will benefit from capacity-building programmes based on the findings of this study. Capacity building is expected to serve two purposes in this instance. First, it is desirable that findings of this study be communicated to the participants, who are the primary sources of data, and also shared with other farm-families in south western Nigeria the mandate area of UNAAB, with a view to generating participatory strategies for strengthening the identified areas of strengths and opportunities in farm-families, and proffering long-lasting solutions to the identified weaknesses and threats. This is a challenge for the Women-In-Development programme of the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria.

## **6.3 Need for improved rural infrastructures**

Governments at the local, state and federal levels have unique responsibilities toward the enhancement of the general well-being of the rural populace in general, and the psychological well-being of farm-families in particular. A major responsibility in this regard is the need for improved funding of the agricultural sector in general, and agricultural extension in particular. It is particularly recommended that the Federal Government of Nigeria should further strengthen the Universities of Agriculture in the country in order to enhance the fulfilment of their extension mandate. Other inclusive broad actions desirable from the governments at all levels include: provision of basic infrastructure (for example, potable water, good road network and electricity), provision of educational opportunities for rural children and adults, and the provision of health facilities and quality control aimed at stopping the exploitation of farm-families by 'quacks' and 'medicine hawkers'. Focussed actions include, provision of credit facilities and micro-financing opportunities for farmers, and making needed agricultural inputs available and affordable for the farmers.

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