

Re-Evaluating the Empowerment Potential of Women's Paid Work

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Abstract

The assumption that women's employment is the key to their empowerment is a longstanding one. This paper through in-depth interviews conducted in 2012 with fifty-six purposively selected women property owners who lived in urban Ibadan, Nigeria, found out that the link is not as straightforward as it is portrayed. Intra-household dynamics continues to shape women's control over income earned and assets acquired. Even when they have control, it does not necessarily lead to a transformation of their subordinate status. Findings reveals that economic empowerment has not yet translated into equity in decision-making. The paper argues that more than economic power is required to attain equality. Women's agency is still socially moulded by notions of obligations and legitimacy. As such, the capability of defining goals and acting upon them is still also very critical.

Keywords: Gender, women, empowerment, paid work, empowerment potential

1. Introduction

Employment and decent work are central to reducing poverty, boosting self-esteem and pull families out of poverty, achieving the MillenniumDevelopment Goals (MDGs) and fostering equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. However, the current global economic and financial crisis exacerbated pre-existing challenges to the achievement of full employment and decent work in developing and developed countries alike. While unemployment and inequitable labour market outcomes remain high in developed countries, labour markets indeveloping countries continue to be characterized by high levels of underemployment, vulnerable employment and informal work (UNDP/UNDESA/ILO 2012).

Before now, women were seen as "invisible" workers whose labour and skills were considered insignificant compared to those of men. The transformation of society from an agrarian rural economy to an urban industrial society ushered in a new era in roles and definitions of women's work. With the advent of industrialization, many of the products women made at home – clothes, shoes, and candles – gradually moved out of the home and into the factory. The rise of factory production truly separated the home from the work place. With the decline of the household unit as the centre of industrial and economic activity, the importance of women's economic role also declined. Although women continued to perform important tasks inside and outside their homes, male and female spheres of activity became more separated, as did the definition of men's and women's roles. A social transformation of profound proportions has been unfolding as women have turned from household work to wages as the key source of their livelihood. The movement of women out of the domestic sphere and into the labour force has redefined social expectations in both the occupational milieu and the traditionally gender segregated domestic sphere.

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The increasing numbers of women from all age groups in the labour market has not been accompanied by a commensurate change in the gender division of unpaid labour in the care economy, but has only translated to their confinement to the lower paid and more casual segments of the informal economy. The resilience of the gender division of unpaid domestic labour introduces considerable variations in women's labour force participation over their life course, with much lower rates of participation in their reproductive years (UNRISD 2005). In fact, when all work (paid and unpaid) is taken into account, women work longer hours than men (ActionAid 2012). Gender disparities persist in the world of work. Closing these gaps, while working to stimulate job creation more broadly is a prerequisite for ending extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity. Jobs can bring gains for women, their families, businesses, and communities. However, there continues to be a great deal of debate about whether women's entry into paid work represents empowerment or exploitation.

Also, the debate about the relationship between paid work and women's position within the family and society is a long standing one in which the positions taken by different protagonists do not fall neatly into predictable ideological camps (Kabeer, Mahmud and Tasneem 2011). One obvious way for women to have secured themselves against the growing insecurities of the patriarchal contract would have been for them to seek paid employment so that they would have some resources of their own to fall back on should they be widowed, divorced or abandoned. There is also a solid body of evidence to show that access to paid work can increase women's agency in strategic ways (Kabeer 2005). Even though, paid work carried out in the home also has the potential to shift the balance of power within the family (Duflo 2003; Rangel 2005). As a result, women "empowerment" has increasingly become a policy goal, both as an end to itself and as a means to achieving other development goals. The United Nations member states in the year 2000, identified 'women empowerment' as one of the most important development goals. Since then, 'gender equality and women's empowerment' was codified as the third out of eight United Nations' MDGs. The goal 'empowerment' is often used as a justification for policies aiming at the increase of women in wage employment: The International Labour Organization (ILO), for example, argues that '[w]omen's greater access to employment and income underpins efforts to [...] empower women' (ILO 2010).

Using the third indicator for the MDG3, which is the idea of 'increasing women's share of wage employment in the non-agricultural sector [NAS]' (UNDP 2010), this paper will closely examine whether women wage employment² is an instrument to achieve empowerment or an outcome of empowerment. According to this indicator, wage employment opportunities in the NAS are seen as an essential resource to empower women. Female economic activity in general, without the qualification 'in the NAS', is also one of the numbers used for the construction of the Human Development Index (HDI) through the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) and the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which both measure the inequalities between men and women with regard to labour force participation (Parduhn 2011). This suggests that the sole act of taking up paid employment by women is seen as a step towards empowerment (Kabeer 2005).

However, the critical question in this paper therefore is: does the presence of women in paid employment really indicate female empowerment? In order to do this, this paper will first examine the concept of empowerment, the values it embody and the appropriateness of these values in capturing the idea of empowerment. In the second part, the paper will discuss empowerment in the context of gender relations, taking cognizance of intra-household dynamics in terms of gendered division of labour that is household decision-making processes, and drawing on a case from Nigeria. This will demonstrate whether the inclusion of women in the cash economy will or will not necessarily entail a transformation towards empowerment as any change is mediated through power relations, particularly those which unfold within the household. Finally, on the basis of these findings policy implications will be drawn.

The Empowerment Framework

In order to measure and monitor empowerment, it is important to have a clear definition of the concept and to specify a framework that both links empowerment to improved development outcomes and identifies determinants of empowerment itself. Empowerment refers broadly to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life.

² Wage employment in this context is in both formal and informal sectors. Since fixed wages are been paid in both sectors in this regard.

It implies control over 'resources' (including material, human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice) and decisions in the various institutional domains which make up the society, that is family, market and community (Kabeer 1999; 2005; Narayan-Parker 2005; Aluko 2012). For women, that freedom is severely curtailed by their powerlessness in relation to a range of institutions, both formal and informal.

Empowerment is therefore, fundamentally about power to redefine our possibilities and options and to act on them, the power within that enables people to have the courage to do things they never thought themselves to be capable of, and the power that comes from working alongside theirs to claim what is rightfully theirs. One way of thinking about power is in terms of the ability to make choices: to be disempowered, therefore implies to be denied choice. Empowerment is a process that gives power to the disempowered and increases their ability to make strategic choices. Thus, empowerment entails change, since people can be very powerful, but may have never been disempowered in the first place (Kabeer 2005). Central to the ability to decide is the existence of 'alternatives without punishingly high costs' (Kabeer 1999: 460), such that there is a real possibility to have chosen otherwise (Kabeer 1999: 441). In this context, the term 'agency' is often used to describe one's 'ability to define one's goals and act upon them' (Mosedale 2005: 249), including acts of resistance, 'bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation' (Kabeer 1999: 438; Agarwal 1997: 25).

Resources and agency together constitute what Sen (1985) refers to as capabilities: the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of 'being and doing'. He uses the idea of 'functionings' to refer to all possible ways of 'being and doing' which are valued by people in a given context and of 'functioning achievements' to refer to the particular ways of being and doing which are realized by different individuals. Clearly, where the failure to achieve valued ways of 'being and doing' can be traced to laziness, incompetence or individual preferences and priorities, then the issue of power is not relevant. It is only when the failure to achieve one's goals reflects some deep-seated constraints on the ability to choose that it can be taken as a manifestation of disempowerment.

In this paper, as far as empowerment is concerned, we are interested in possible inequalities in people's capacity to make choices (that is, denial of choice) rather than in differences in the choices they make (that is, differences in preferences). One link between wage employment and empowerment consists of control over resources: The assumption is that women's economic position will be enhanced by taking up waged employment, which will in turn result in their empowerment (Elson 1999; Kapadia 2010; Parduhn 2011). Beyond doubt, it is expected that the presence of women in the workforce can be important for improving their material conditions, thus increasing their independence. However, the present paper will put the prevalent underlying assumption into perspective and demonstrate whether 'women's participation in wage employment' necessarily empower them. To what level are working women really free from gendered power inequalities? Has empowerment not been conflated with gender equality and reduced to quantitative parity?

Paid work and women empowerment: dynamics within the household

The debate about the relationship between paid work and women's position within the family and society is a long standing one in which the positions taken by different protagonists do not fall neatly into predictable ideological camps. Liberal and Marxist scholars, including feminists of both persuasions, have argued that women's integration into the market is the key to their empowerment (Blumberg 1991; Kessler-Harris 2001; Bergmann 2005) while dependency theorists as well as many radical and socialist feminists offered more sceptical, often pessimistic, accounts of this relationship (Hartmann 1981; Greenhalgh 1991; Kopinak 1995). These contradictory viewpoints reflect a variety of factors: variations in how empowerment itself is understood, variations in the cultural meanings and social acceptability of paid work for women across different contexts and the nature of the available work opportunities within particular contexts (Kabeer 2008).

Gendered power relations are constructed and maintained differently in different locations and vary over time (Mosedale 2005). However the household is the central site where they unfold and where identities are negotiated and transmitted from one generation to the next. For many years, macroeconomic development discourse treated a household 'as a single decision-making unit with a joint welfare function' (Francis 1998: 93). It was assumed that individuals within one household pool their resources and share the same preferences (Quisumbing 2003).

This assumption that members of a household have equal control over resources often neglects the particular position of women (Moser 1993). Critics of the neo-classical unitary model therefore have advocated a focus on bargaining and conflicts, instead of assuming generosity or harmony (Folbre 1986; Kabeer 1994).

According to Folbre (1986), such so called bargaining models or collective models are more appropriate, due to the fact that they have, in contrast to unitary models, at least 'the potential to offer a truthful understanding of household relations' (Francis 1998: 75). They accommodate the idea of gender asymmetry and recognise the potential for conflicts, without ruling out altruism (Kabeer 1994). The role of women within households is shaped by the gendered division of labour. In general, they are associated with biological reproduction and so called 'reproductive work', namely to care for and to maintain the current and the future workforce, that is male household members and children (Rosaldo 1974; Moser 1993: 29). Additionally, women often account for secondary paid work, often within the informal sector (Moser 1993: 27). Both types of work are most often invisible, neither valued as 'real work', nor captured by statistics (Moser 1993: 30; Kabeer 2003: 27). Conversely, men are often regarded as the primary 'breadwinner' by both researchers and themselves (Moser 1993: 28), being engaged in so called 'productive work' which is generating income in cash or kind (Moser 1993: 31).

The control over income by men on the one hand and the secondary status of women on the other hand account for women's poorer 'breakdown or fall-back position', that is the prospective positions in which they would be if the household did not persist (Francis 1998: 73). This position in turn results in a lower bargaining-position that is the ability to influence intra-household negotiations and decisions in their interest. Even though many studies have indicated that women gained greater independence and increased their power in intra-household decision-making through becoming part of the labour force (van Staveren and Odebode 2007; Aluko 2015). They were furthermore able to widen their social networks and sometimes to escape abusive marriages (Kabeer 2005). However, the link between women's employment and their empowerment, that is greater control over their lives, is not as straightforward as it seems (Odebode 2004; Kabeer 2005; van Staveren and Odebode 2007; Aluko 2015).

Institutional context of gender norms, gendered cultural practices and gendered beliefs have strong impact on women's bargaining power, decision-making, and well-being outcomes (Odebode and van Staveren 2014). When women have access to and control over resources it is expected that they will just turn these resources into empowerment, but some formal and informal gendered institutions (social norms, beliefs and practices) still exert their influence, by constraining women's agency. This implies that resources do not automatically translate into empowerment, but need to be put to work through agency, which may also be constrained by both formal and informal institutions too. Studies have shown that women's earnings do not have impact on bargaining power at all (Khattak 2002). Monetary earnings are important, but not sufficient to bring about a change in gender relations and ideologies. In fact, the higher the women's income, the lower the men's contribution to household expenditures and higher share of income those men spend on their own personal consumption (van Staveren and Odebode 2007).

Theoretical Framework

For a better understanding of this study, the bargaining and capability approaches were adopted as analytical methods.

Bargaining approach

The bargaining approach provides a useful framework for the analysis of gender relations and of how gender asymmetries are constructed and contested. The approach suggests that policies and resources should be directed differently by taking cognizance of the gender of the target group or recipient, insofar as the welfare, efficiency, and equity implications could differ by gender (Agarwal 1997). The household should not be conceived as a unitary entity with convergent interests and altruistic heads of households (Whitehead and Kabeer 2001).

Capability approach

The major constituents of the capability approach are functioning, capabilities, and agency. For Sen, "a functioning is an achievement whereas a capability is the ability to achieve" (1987: 36). Capabilities are possibilities or autonomy. Nussbaum (1988) improves on Sen's account of human capabilities, not only by making them personal traits but also by locating them within the context of other human features: limits, vulnerabilities, and needs.

Nussbaum views capabilities as powers. If capabilities are powers, then they are also, in a sense, actualities that people can do (Crocker 1995). The expansion of women's capabilities not only enhances women's own freedom and well-being, but also has many other effects on the lives of all. Although culture plays a dominant role in socio-emotional development, individuals possess an innate capacity for autonomous choice, which is to some extent independent of culture (Nussbaum 2000).

An integration of bargaining and capability approaches

Following this approach, this study views Yoruba women as enterprising women who are capable, that is, they have agency to evolve strategies to ensure and improve their status. Capability is viewed here as the personal powers these women possess to take decisions on issues pertaining to their lives and to evolve strategies within the limits of the socioeconomic and cultural context in which they live. In particular, these women are perceived as harnessing the "power within", that is, increasing their capacity to resist the power of others (especially over them) to gain more (economic) independence and space and hence become less prone to oppression and exploitation despite the obstacles they may face.

While the bargaining literature seeks to unpack the determinants of intra-household inequality by focusing on alternative types of power and their material and nonmaterial foundations, the capability approach is concerned with evaluating opportunities. If an unequal balance of power affects the intra-household distribution of goods and services (or, in the capability approach, "the means to achieve"), interpersonal comparisons of opportunities must account for this. The decisions and actions of women in and out of the household are shaped by the sociocultural norms and practices that mediate their opportunities in the society. Nevertheless, the women are not perceived as victims so to say, but as people who have agency which they use to evolve strategies aimed at achieving their freedom of choice.

The conceptual framework of this study rests on two premises (see Figure 1). The first premise is that the gap between women's rights to property and their actual ownership of property suggests the significant role social norms, local customs, and discriminatory institutional practices play in limiting women's actual freedom to own property. The second premise is that women's claims to property appear to enjoy little social legitimacy. To ensure women's actual ownership of property, it is necessary to expand their bargaining position vis-à-vis men within and outside the household. The effectiveness of Yoruba women's property rights lies on the relationship of legal structures in Nigeria to the existing dialectical links between gender and ideology, and material reality. The major empowerment indicator for this study relates to women's agency with regard to their well-being and position within the family. The key to assessing the empowerment potential of property acquisition, resulting from the ability to work, is the distinction between access to and control over the property. Control over or freedom to choose what one has reason to value and the ability to define one's goals and act upon them shows more empowerment potential than simply having access. In the context of this study, Yoruba women are capable of working, acquiring and owning properties, but subject to their husband's consent for social acceptance. Ultimately therefore, Yoruba women's autonomy to acquire properties is a function of the item they wish to acquire, which invariably has not translated into equal gender relations.

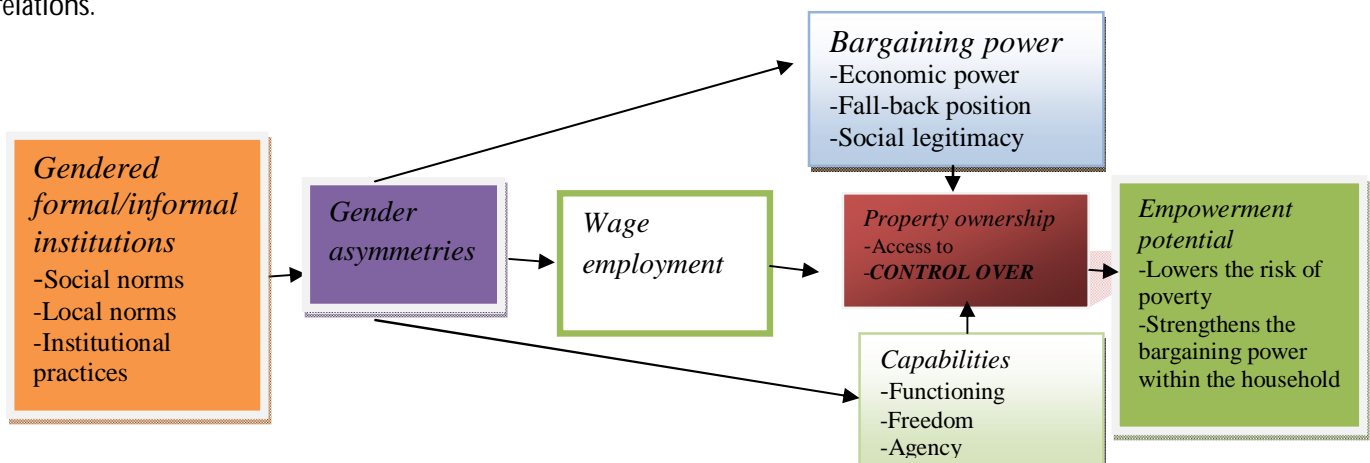


Figure 1: An integration of the bargaining and capability approaches in assessing the empowerment potential of Yoruba women's property acquisition.

Case study: Yoruba women property owners in Ibadan, Nigeria

This case study derives from a previous study on patriarchy and property rights among Yoruba women in Ibadan metropolis, Nigeria³ (Aluko, 2015). In-depth interviews were used to generate qualitative data from the study carried out between March and October, 2012. The study population, which was purposively selected comprises fifty-six (56) women of the Yoruba tribe living in Ibadan metropolis, who owned properties including land, houses, cars, and small-scale businesses. The economic independence and enterprising nature of Yoruba women generally have contributed to making a sizeable number of propertied Yoruba women available for the study.

Nigerian institutions are highly gendered and the family is no exception. This involves strict gender norms on marriage, which are very restrictive for women. However, even though Yoruba society is patriarchal, the general assumption about women staying at home to do housework and care for the children does not hold for Yoruba women. This is because Yoruba women are customarily expected to earn an income of their own from which a substantial proportion of household expenses may be met. They achieve this by engaging in productive and income-generating activities like teaching and/or trading, in either the formal (as waged labor) or informal sectors (Dennis 1995). Yoruba women are particularly noted for their entrepreneurial activities, which have placed them in an economically advantageous position when compared with women in other parts of the country and in other cultural settings who may not be expected or encouraged to engage in paid activities (Alliyu 2004, Odebode 2004, Olutayo 2005, McIntosh 2009).

Yoruba place cultural importance on independence and individual responsibility in economic affairs (Odebode 2004, van Staveren and Odebode 2007). There are two economic norms operating in Yoruba households, both concerned with financial independence: first, partners are each expected to earn an income and to contribute to household expenditures. Second, partners keep direct control over their income by non-pooling. A woman is expected to earn an income from which she supplements what the husband gives for the household needs. Yoruba culture lacks such gender distinctions with both sexes sharing labor roles outside the domestic setting in commerce, production, and the service industry (Oyewumi 1997, Okome 2005, McIntosh 2009).

Also, in an insightful study on women's contributions to household expenditures in Nigeria, Sarah Gammage (1997) shows that Yoruba women have a much higher share of contribution compared to other ethnic groups. Even though, Odebode and van Staveren (2014) have argued that having property rights and economic power among Yoruba women is not sufficient for them to exercise bargaining power in the household. This case study provides some insights into this paradox from the angle of Yoruba women property owners. The study provides answer to the extent to which these women have total control over their resources despite their engagement in productive activities.

A total of 78.6 percent of the respondents have some level of formal education ranging from 25 percent respectively for primary and secondary levels, to 28.6 percent for post-secondary level. Only 21.4 percent of the respondents have no formal education at all. Thus a good proportion of the propertied women⁴ possess basic education. The majority (68 percent) of respondents are Christians, while others (32 percent) are Muslims. On the issue of marital status, about 82 percent of the respondents are married, while 11 percent are widowed, and 7 percent are either separated or divorced. On the issue of productive activities, since sociocultural norms among the Yoruba expect women to contribute to household expenses along with their husbands, all of the respondents are engaged in some form of income-generating activity, in either the formal or, informal sectors, or both. Of the respondents, 18 percent are employed as waged labor in the formal sector as civil servants and professionals, while 21.4 percent are engaged in income-generating activities in the informal sector mainly as traders. There is, however, considerable overlap between the sectors, with a great majority (61 percent) of the women employed in both sectors. The current and prevailing economic crisis has increased women's involvement in income-generating activities more than ever before because it has made it impossible for a man to meet all the needs of the household alone.

³ IAFFE is acknowledged

⁴ Propertied women are women who acquires any of the properties listed above.

In terms of properties owned, four major types of property were identified: land, houses, cars, and SSBs⁵. About 80 percent of the respondent's own all four forms of property, 14 percent own houses, cars, and SSBs only, and 5 percent own cars and viable businesses only. Thus, most of the women own all four of the properties identified in this study. Among all of the four identified properties, land and house ownership are the most cherished cultural acquisitions among the Yoruba.

It is customary for the Yoruba to invest in or equip their children for the future by providing them with these two major means of production such as land in the farming setting and houses in the urban center. This was repeated throughout the interviews:

My children's future is of paramount importance to me. I must plan how their future can be secured by investing in properties, especially land and housing, which can appreciate later and through which they can get more money. I don't want them to suffer like I did (Mrs. Textile dealer).

On pattern of property acquisition, (see figure 2) 68 percent of respondents reported that they inherited their land and housing properties mainly from their fathers and mothers, as against 32 percent who acquired them through personal effort. None of the respondents reported acquiring any property from their husband's family or from the husband. What is established from this is that these women personally owned or had inherited land/houses.

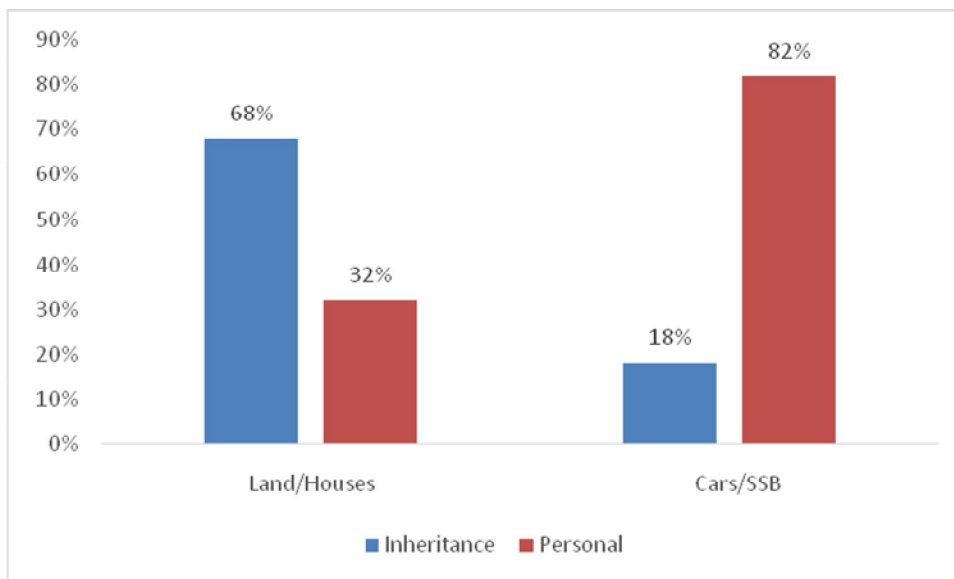


Figure 2: Sources of property among urban Yoruba women

To demonstrate how the women struggles for legitimacy and the strategies employed by them for freedom of choice, the following sections will analyze the gender relations within the household. Taking cognizance of intra-household dynamics that is, gendered division of labour in terms of household decision-making processes. This will be divided into two parts: gendered division of labour and husbands' reaction to wives property ownership.

Household decision-making processes

The research found that 25 percent of the respondents are in polygynous marriages, and the position of wives in such marriages is a determining factor for how women take decisions and act in intra-household relations. While some of the women indicated above that their husbands contributed in some measure to the financing of their businesses, it is likely that these women are in monogamous marriages. Those in polygynous marriages complained like Mrs. Plank seller stated: "[W]hen we ask our husband to give us two things, it will be a struggle for him to give one, so we struggle on our own." Each woman in a polygynous marriage takes care of her own children, which explains why one of the respondents stated: "I can't build a house of my own in my husband's name. Never! I am the person going through all the rigors; moreover I am not the only wife. It must be in my name or any of my children." While a few of these women like Mrs. Tire dealer was of the opinion that:

⁵ SSBs stands for small-scale businesses

A woman who has children – not one or two but many – and waits for the man to meet all her needs and the children's without generating an income herself is finished already. He does not even know about my savings and contributions because we are many wives, and he is not helping me in taking care of the children.

These quotations imply that the women generate income independently, from which they are expected to contribute to meeting household needs. While it may be expected that a woman in a monogamous marriage would have a contrary view, it was surprising when some of these women, too, said they acquired property such as land and built houses without the knowledge of their husbands. They explained this situation largely in terms of the strained relationship between them and their husbands:

I have a husband who never wished me well. He only thinks of himself. All his properties are in his name alone. He got them all without my knowledge. I only found out later. So I don't really know what he is up to. I take care of myself and my children. All he thinks of is carrying around girlfriends and spending lavishly on them instead of on my children and me. So I couldn't have told him. I don't want my children to suffer like me. So that is why I am struggling to acquire all what I have now (Mrs. Administrator)."

Mrs. Lecturer also observed:

If I should wait for my husband, I will never achieve anything in life. He will constantly discourage me from acquiring any property. He will always ask: what do you need it for? Why would I wait for that kind of man?

A number of women also reported that they help their husbands in paying either full or part of the children school fees when the husband does not have the ability, but often when the husband decides not to pay. This shows that the women in both polygynous and monogamous marriages have the capability to take decisions and act on issues that pertain to their lives and children. It also confirms the problems with pooling resources, which is in keeping with Odebode's (2004) finding that argued that a woman is expected to earn income from which she supplements what her husband gives for household needs. Not pooling resources affords the women the opportunity to control the income they earn as stated by Mrs. Administrator: "*What a woman has is for her and her children.*"

Husbands' reaction to wives property ownership

When asked about the husbands' reactions upon discovering the women's accumulated property, respondents mentioned that their husbands expressed a lot of reservation, which has often times resulted in conflict. This therefore corroborates Llyod's (1968) that the degree of jealousy and envy that exists between Yoruba men and women is dependent on two factors, one of which is women's economic dependence. Nadel's (1952) also noted: "the men view women as an obvious threat to their traditional roles as head of the family and to their super-ordinate status." Some in a monogamous setting like Mrs. Lecturer stated:

I got married to my husband with the mind of marrying a man that we will be doing things together and totally open to each other. But a few years into the marriage I found out that my husband was not honest. He bought land in his name alone and started working on it without involving me. Because of this, I got a land too, without telling him, and started work and even completed it before telling him! The trouble began when I told him. He was really annoyed and started calling me names. That I must have gotten the money to build the house from my fleets of boyfriends. Can you imagine! He said I should leave his house and move to my house since I was rich enough to build a house, and that he cannot live with a woman that he cannot control. It took the intervention of family members before he could allow me to stay. But ever since, things have not been the same in the house. Everybody does his or her own thing.

And Mrs. Textile dealer observed that:

A man can take decisions on his own because he is the head of the household. Some men have built a house and completed it before telling their wives. They do not regard us at all. But if it is the other way around, the woman will be accused. Some women have been ejected from their husband's houses because of similar issues in the past.

Yet another Mrs. School principal stated:

Actually some men believe that when a woman is rich it will cause problems in the relationship. So they don't want your progress. Men don't want their women to be richer than them. Because if you do they will be thinking you will be riding them.

From the foregoing it can be deduced that Yoruba women's autonomy to acquire properties is a function of the item to acquire. Among all properties, land and housing properties are esteemed high among the Yoruba as capital projects. These two properties are oftentimes gendered, that is meant to be acquired by men. If at all it must be acquired by women, then men should be involved.

In-depth interviews show that some men feel threatened by the changing status of their wives and the related power shift. The husband's consent is an important cultural norm, irrespective of a woman's educational level or the amount of wealth she has. Sociocultural norms, such as consent, continue to set the limits on and define what issues can be legitimately negotiated over and against those issues that are uncontested and not open to questioning or bargaining. This is corroborated Mrs. Nurse:

I am a nurse, and at the high cadre of my profession. My husband lost his job some time ago, and I have been entirely responsible for the upkeep of the family since then. Along the way, I bought a piece of land and started developing it without my husband's knowledge. My husband later got a very lucrative job, which obviously improved our well-being. He got land and finished building a house, and in a few months we moved in. I then felt I should tell him, which turned out to be the greatest mistake of my life. He was so annoyed he said I should pack and get out of his house. After much pleading from my family members, he said the only condition on which he would take me back is if I allow him to demolish the structure of my uncompleted building. The structure was up to the lintel level! I had to comply because I didn't want to be stigmatized as a divorcee.

This confirms Odebode (2004) and, Odebode and van Staveren (2014) that some sociocultural gender norms prevent Yoruba women from taking the exit option, despite their high level of income, even when the home environment is becoming unpleasant in order to avoid the social stigma attached to exit and divorce. Some women because of their children would accept lower well-being by remaining in the household than what they actually could achieve without their husband in order to care for and secure the future of their children. What this implies is that, ability to earn does not automatically mean the relaxation of patriarchal controls. Monetary earnings are important but not sufficient to bring about a change in gender relations and ideologies. These findings have implications for household bargaining approach, which believes that increased income, savings and assets are regarded as improving women's bargaining position. The results of this research have shown that this is not necessarily so. The evidence suggests that wage work does not necessarily lead to women having access to and control over the income their work generates and the assets they use the income to acquire.

Policy implications

This study's findings have several implications for policies and intervention programs. These involve the influence of sociocultural norms and institutions and women's participation in decision making.

Influence of sociocultural norms and institutions

Improving women's situation is not only about economic empowerment, but also about addressing the gender biases that exist within society. This is because women's ownership and control of resources is essentially a question of changes in the social (gender) relations and institutions. Strategies that focus on capabilities and that acknowledge and challenge the ideologies and institutions by which women are constrained are needed for effectiveness of the change process. Policy advances in gender equality in Nigeria have been futile without concomitant cultural struggle against the visible and invisible dimensions of power and the practices that sustain gender inequalities and oppress women. As a result, encouraging transformative cultural change from within is crucial. Contesting gender inequality and building alliances through using the "culture lens" (understanding the peculiar needs and aspirations of the women) will help to develop the cultural fluency needed for negotiating, persuading, and cultivating cultural acceptance and ownership. Gender equality and women's empowerment cannot be achieved unless they are also rooted in culture. Though the process may be slow, the change should start now. It is not an individual task. It is a collective one approached from a multifaceted perspective.

The three tiers of government in Nigeria, the federal, state, and local governments, the custodians of culture and traditions, the agents of the criminal justice system, NGOs, and men and women are all agents that will be needed in a move for change against the widespread of customary law abuses and in eliminating discriminatory practices against women.

Participation in decision making

To effectively improve women's conditions their voices must be heard in issues that pertain to them. They should not be passive recipients of reforms concerning their status, but full participants in policy formulation and decision making, particularly in areas where crucial resources are allocated.

This will allow women to influence decisions that affect their lives and to realize their potentials as agents of change, bringing their knowledge and commitment to bear at the community level and beyond. At the moment, Nigeria is yet to achieve gender parity in political representation at the national level, let alone meet the target it set in the National Gender Policy of integrating the woman's question into the development agenda in 2006. Men and women tend to allocate resources differently, and women tend to favor a redistributive agenda and to favor more spending on children's education, social services, and health. An increase in the number of women elected into office at different levels changes the way resources are allocated in favor of areas that enhance human development. This is not a simple issue of causality –much of the welfare state theory in capitalist democracies suggests an association between gender representation and social spending.

Conclusions

The foregoing has shown that though the properties acquired by the respondents have enhanced their income and health levels, Yoruba women continue to face certain constraints. The degree of control over the properties acquired by women is still subject to their husband's approval. As such, it can be concluded that among the Yoruba, patriarchy is selective on the type and nature of rights that women enjoy. Property rights are still covertly unequal for the Yoruba woman, and this is laid out in culturally embedded rules and procedures. The dialectical links between gender and ideology, and material reality are strengthened and reinforced by the existing structures instead of providing a structural basis for change. Women's claims to landed property and housing through personal acquisition still enjoy little social legitimacy when compared with when acquired through inheritance.

Yoruba men do not need their wives' properties for economic reasons, since they know that the women use their properties very effectively to contribute to the household's well-being, even when the men refuse to do their part. However, what is critical to the men is to lay claim on women's property for social and cultural reasons: to conform to the social norm of being the woman's crown and to express their masculinity, especially because there are so few other ways to express this in the Yoruba context. Cultural constructions of masculinity enable men to exert male authority on women. The male ego of been able to brag among friends that in spite of the fact that the wife is rich, he as the husband can still control her is critical to them.

Power relations are therefore the glue that holds and molds gender dynamics and underpins both the rationale and the way cultures interact and manifest themselves. Change can only occur if men begin to value women as equal players in the country's social and economic development. Only with intensive educational campaigns can the social ideas concerning male responsibility be modified. At the same time, care must be taken to ensure that such changes will result in a better and healthier way of life for both men and women in the society.

This study's findings also revealed that much more than economic power is required to attain a fair level of gender equality. Women's ability to take decisions, act on issues that pertain to their lives, and challenge existing sociocultural gender relations also depends on their capability to define goals and act upon them. This capability could be used to develop strategies for women, as individuals and groups, to transform the societal norms that have contributed in no small measure to and been the root cause of their long-standing subordination.

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