

Our Lives are in Your Hands: Survival Strategies of Elderly Women Heads Households in Rural Nigeria

Eboiyehi, Friday Asiazobor
Centre for Gender and Social Policy Studies
Obafemi Awolowo University
Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Abstract

Though many studies have been conducted on elderly women in Nigeria, these studies have neglected elderly women heads of household. The neglect is attributed to the general belief that the well-being of elderly women is the responsibilities of their extended families which has consequently contributed to poor policy response to their wellbeing. Motivated by the increasing deterioration of their living arrangements as well as their inability to meet their daily needs and those of their household members, the paper investigates the problems confronting elderly women heads of household and their survival strategies in purposively selected rural communities in Nigeria. Primary data were obtained using qualitative methods. Eighteen focus group discussions (FGDs) and 48 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted among women heads of households aged 60 years or older across the six geopolitical zones. Yawi in Bornu State (North East); Ungogo in Kano State (North West); Jarawa-kogi in Plateau State (North Central); Awo Mbieri in Imo State (South East); Urohi in Edo State (South-south) and Ikoyi in Osun State (South West) were purposively selected from these geo-political zones taking into consideration the number of households headed by elderly women. Data were analyzed using ethnographic technique. Providing care for orphaned children, lack of regular income, constant ill health, struggling to procure food, poor access to basic healthcare, loneliness, isolation, abandonment, poor nutrition and poverty were the major problems identified by the interviewees. Consequently, they engaged in all kinds of odds jobs such as trading, farming, alms-begging and reliance on family and community support as economic survival strategies. The policy implications of the paper are also discussed.

Key Words: Elderly women, survival strategies, household heads, rural Nigeria.

Introduction

In every human society, the household is one of the most important and an intrinsic part of people's lives. Primarily, it is the unit of society where individuals cooperate and compete for resources, confront and reproduce societal norms, values, power, authority and privilege. Put differently, it is a source of social power and self worth. The term, head of household refers to the key economic provider, the major decision maker and the person assigned by others as their head. The headship of the household therefore, is usually identified with the person who has the greatest authority in the household. The Holy Bible¹ recognizes the man (husband) as the head of the wife (woman) and thus he is both the head of the wife and the household. Similarly, the definition of head of household from the African perspective also reflects the stereotype of a man in the household as the person in authority and the breadwinner (Hedman et al, 1996:64). Thus, in traditional African societies, males are assumed to be heads of household irrespective of the status of their spouses (Chant and Brydon, 1989). Illo (1989) also establishes that while females are recognized as potential household heads, in reality, men are most often assigned the headship position - a practice that subscribes to the patriarchal view that men provides for the family while the women nurtures it. As in most African societies, Nigerian culture is deeply patriarchal. It thus, follows an African patriarchal social system in which older men were the principal authority figures both in their households and in the wider community.

¹ Ephesians Chapter 5 verses 22 & 23 King (James version) commands thus: wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

The traditional Nigerian society, considers a woman as part of the household property which is expected to be seen and not heard, protected and provided for by a man - the head. Among the Esan of south-south Nigeria for instance, the husband is the *ebianlenmen* (the head or the owner of his wife) and the wife is the *okhanonsemen* (my little child). As the head, he has absolute authority over his wives (his little children) without being questioned. He is the leader and manager of his household irrespective of his position. As in many African cultures, the patriarchal nature of Esan society requires that an elderly woman (whether she is widowed, separated or deserted by her husband) will not be left completely on her own: a support system is put in place which ensures that on the demise of her husband, she either returns to her natal home, be taken in by in-laws, adult children or supported by her relatives while they are ostensibly heading their own separate houses. On the death of the husband, the elderly woman is usually inherited and integrated into the family of her late husband's kinsman, often his brother. This practice serves in relative proportions as a social protection for the elderly widow as it is believed that an elderly widow who lives alone may lack the necessary social capital and networks to survive in rural informal settlements (Ezeh, Chepngeno, Kasiira, and Woubalem (2006). Correspondingly, the elderly women play significant role in the new household to the younger members of the family as midwives, pediatricians, baby sitters and informal teachers for their grandchildren and offer important advice in the family (Udegbe, 1990). At this age they are well respected, held in high esteem and enjoyed high status positions in the family in which they are integrated (Fajemilehin, Jinadu, Ojo and Feyisetan, 1996).

However, recent decades have witnessed the emergence of new form of households in which women and elderly women are the heads. A plethora of research studies in which a woman leads and manages as the *de jure* or *de facto* head of the household in the absence of eligible male in the family system in the patriarchal culture have been documented (Habib, 2010, Hamid, 1992). Many reasons have been attributed to the creation of female household head. Among these reasons are male migration, the death of males, divorce and family disruption (Zarhani, 2011). The rapid social change and the transition to democratic government are transforming family relations including the increasing intergenerational tensions and adaptations of the patriarchal structures in family and community life (Eboiyehi, 2008; Fajemilehin, Jinadu, Ojo, and Feyisetan, 1996; Togonu–Bickersteth, 1989; Togonu – Bickersteth; Akinnawo and Ayeni 1996).

Although elderly women household heads are rapidly increasing, studies on this segment of the population in Nigeria are a rarity. It is more pathetic when one considers the fact that the majority of the households are headed by elderly women with no male resident contributing to household resources. This state of affairs may have economic burden on elderly women who assume the responsibility of maintaining such households under the dwindling economic environment in countries like Nigeria where there is no social welfare system for the elderly. Arguing along this line, Zarhani (2011) affirms that when households are headed by women, it is generally hypothesized that such households are more likely to be economically deprived. In his studies, Chant (1997) also asserts that a high proportion of households headed by elderly women suffer poverty and that they are among the poorest of the poor. It is obvious from the above that majority of the elderly women become heads of the household without sufficient resources. This leads to difficulties in maintaining their family. The feminization of poverty is key concept for describing elderly women heads of household social and economic level. It is process whereby poverty becomes more concentrated among individuals living in female-headed households (Zarhani, 2011; Asgary & Pagan, 2004).

It is clear that the increasing number of elderly women headed–households is becoming more and more important considering the fact that most of these households are headed by elderly widows without familial support. Thus, as the study of the survival strategies of elderly women heads of households is becoming critically imperative and the fact that it also gives fairly new emphasis among women's issues, it is our convictions that focus in this area be given special priority and concern. This paper is intended as a modest step in the direction of addressing some of these issues.

Statement of Problem

Since the adoption of the International Plan of Action at the first World Assembly in Vienna, Austria in 1982, there has been a universal concern about the well being of ageing women. In its resolution 1983/23 of May 1982 entitled “Elderly Women and the World Assembly on Aging”, the Economic and Social Council accentuated that globally, elderly women had suffered from past discrimination and lack of opportunity and that in many cases their economic plight was becoming more serious.

It recommended that the special problems confronting the older women such as income security, education, employment, housing and health and community support services be given explicit and full attention by the assembly. These concerns were reiterated in General Assembly Resolution 38/27 of 1983 in which it was recognized that women had a longer life expectancy than men and that they would increasingly constitute the majority of the older population. Governments and nongovernmental organizations were consequently urged in the ensuing Plan of Action to develop social services and other policy measures to safeguard the special needs of older women. Older women were also specifically mentioned in the Beijing Platform for Action with regard to their poverty, health, violence against women, obstacle they face in entering the labour market, discrimination at work and as a civilian group particularly, those affected by armed conflict. While these efforts have made significant impact on improving the welfare of older women, there was complete omission of the situation of elderly women heads of households hence; they were not a major target for government, researchers and funding agencies in countries like Nigeria.

Until recently, female headship of households (FHHs) particularly those headed by elderly women, was low or non-existence (United Nations (2002; Codjo, 2009). However, recent studies have shown that in the developing world, households headed by elderly women are increasing day-by-day and that such heads of households are over represented among the poor (United Nations, 2000). Data from United Nations (2011) on current status of their social situation also indicates that on average; around two thirds of elderly women in developing countries are either heads of the household or the spouses of the head. Recent estimate has further shown that elderly women heads of household constitute 13 per cent in Middle East and North Africa, 22 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa, 16 per cent in Asia, 35 per cent in the Caribbean and 24 per cent in Latin America (United Nations, 2002). In Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2009) showed that 16.5% of households in Nigeria are headed by women majority of who are elderly women. These findings have indicated that generally, the social conditions of elderly women heads of households present a perplexing paradox in Nigeria where the gap between women and men heads of households caught in the cycle of poverty has continued to widen in the past decade (Okoya, 2011). It is sad that in spite of a robust endowment in natural and human resources, the level of poverty among her people stands in contrast to the country's enormous wealth. This situation is compounded by the protracted and deep-rooted economic downturn which has prevailed in Nigeria since the mid 1980s and has resulted in an increase in the proportion of individuals and households living below the poverty line and those mostly affected are families headed by elderly women compared with those headed by men (Okoya, 2011).

The resultant effects of high death tolls resulting from HIV/AIDS in many rural communities which have reduced male populations and forced many elderly women to take up the position of heads of households thus assuming the responsibility of catering for young family members including grand children orphaned by the disease (Eboiyehi, 2008b) without financial support from other relatives. This situation has placed undue burden on the elderly women heads of households.

Unfortunately, these problems are compounded by the ineffectiveness and unreliability of traditional safety net of the extended family as the elderly women become the principal breadwinners and caregivers of orphans who have lost either one or both parents. Incidentally, the emergence of elderly women heads of households is occurring at a period the traditional familial care and support for the elderly are declining among family members (Eboiyehi, 2008). Over the years, the disintegration in the structure and functions of the family in process of modernization, urbanization as well as industrialization has been enormous. Migration, individualism and deepening poverty in much of the rural communities have eroded the traditional systems of solidarity and community support. This factor has not only impacted immensely on family structure and inter-generational social support that was common in rural communities. Unfortunately, Nigerian government is ill equipped for the rising challenge of the increasing number of the elderly women headed households. A very important factor, which has contributed to the neglect of the issue of ageing, is the long held tradition and belief in the community or family-based care giving and support which has obscured the true picture of the problems of the elderly women headed households and the needs to solve them. Thus ageing issue is ranked very low in government's priority and developmental agenda (Help Age International, 2002). Unlike in the developed countries where social security for the elderly is a priority, there are no policy or government support systems for this segment of the population in Nigeria (Eboiyehi, 2008b). Furthermore, the discriminations elderly women heads of household suffered earlier in life compound their situations as they had less access to property and inheritance, basic healthcare, education, work experience, public assistance, investments, savings and other private income.

Besides, the fact that their economic activities are concentrated in the informal sectors and at homes makes them more vulnerable in old age: the social security created for the benefit of wage earners often, does not recognize the value of informal sector, household work and childbearing (Udegbe, 1990). The result is their inability to support themselves and their families when they are too old or weak to work. This unfortunate situation has led many of them to delve into unimaginable areas such as begging, destitution and even criminal activities to mention but a few (Togonu-Bickersteth, 1997).

In spite of the problems confronting elderly women heads of household, they are not a major target for government, researchers and funding agencies in Nigeria. Hence, these segments of elderly population are less documented in the literature. Thus, the socio-economic fate of the elderly women-headed households poses a persistent question as to how they survive in the face of the harsh Nigeria's socio-economic climate as they bear the burden of poverty, gender discrimination, lack of social support and problem of old age. It is against this background that this study seeks to address these four basic questions:

1. What are the socio-demographic characteristics of rural elderly women heads of households in the study area?
2. What are the problems confronting them as household heads?
3. What strategies do they employ to ensure survival?
4. What could be done to improve their living conditions?

Conceptual Clarification

The following concepts are defined within the context of this paper.

Survival Strategies: These include various mechanisms employed by the aged women to cope with problems arising from being heads of households.

Elderly women: The term elderly women as used in this paper imply those women aged 60 years or older. In this paper the terms "elderly", "aged", and "older women" are used simultaneously.

Elderly Woman Headed Household: For the purpose of this paper, this refers to household headship that revolves around an elderly woman as the main economic provider and overall decision maker when an adult male is not available to play such roles.

Household: In this study, a household implies a family unit constituted by group of people living together and maintaining a unique eating arrangement.

Female Household Heads: Female household heads in this study refers to the de-facto head especially in the absence of eligible male in the family system and who is responsible for the daily needs of a household

Rural areas: For the purpose of this paper, rural areas refer to the countryside with low population density or a sparsely populated or agricultural community.

Methods

Taking into consideration the socio-cultural and environmental diversity in the Nigeria, the study drew a sample that covered all the six geo-political zones of the country. It was conducted among women heads of rural household aged 60 years or older in purposively selected rural communities in these zones. In all, six rural communities namely Yawi- Bornu State (North East); Ungogo – Kano State (North West); Jarawa-kogi - Plateau State (North Central); Awo Mbieri - Imo State (South East); Urohi – Edo State (South-south) and Ikoyi – Osun State (South West) were purposively selected. Feminist methodology encourages qualitative methods of data collection as a means of understanding women's images and preferences. This study has therefore relied primarily on data obtained through the aid of a well designed focus group discussion (FGD) and in-depth interview (IDI) guides to answer the research questions. Data collected through IDIs and FGDs were in respect of the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, the problems confronting them as household heads, and the strategies they employed to ensure heir survival. In all, eighteen focus group discussions (FGDs) and 48 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted among elderly women heads of household. These methods complemented each other as well as providing ethnographic details. The in-depth interview featured two systems of interview. These were unstructured interview and participant observational methods. Forty-eight (48) in-depth interviews (8 per geo-political zone) were conducted among women heads of households aged 60 years or older. Participants were selected in a non-probabilistic random fashion from various neighbourhoods or settlements to ensure a broad range of experiences within each group. There was no rigid sampling process. Interviews were conducted as the aged heads of household were found and consented to participating in the study.

The study also utilized the snowball sampling approach, whereby an interviewee volunteered information leading to the identification of other household heads. Furthermore, the intention of using IDIs was to serve as a vital data collection tool to gather crucial, in-depth and firsthand knowledge on survival strategies of elderly women heads of household in the selected rural communities. In all, eighteen FGDs (three per geo-political zone) were conducted. The selection of the discussants followed the under listed socio-economic characteristics: (i) age, (ii) marital status, (iii) occupational status, (iv) educational level, (v) income level and (vi) religious affiliation. The FGD was to validate the information generated from in-depth interview. Each FGD was facilitated by a trained indigenous moderator, assisted by a recorder who monitored the tapes and note-takers who jotted down the responses of participants. All of them were postgraduate students of humanity-based disciplines from nearest University in each of the zones and were trained in FGD methodology. Each session of FGD involved eight participants whose consents were sought (*a priori*) before inviting them for the discussion. Both the FGDs and IDIs were conducted in a very relaxed, unrushed atmosphere and relevant notes were taken by the interviewers.

The data used in this study were collected between February and July, 2012 from survey in the six aforementioned geo-political zones. The study was a community based cross-sectional research. The choice of these rural communities was ideal for the study due large number of households headed by elderly women. Analysis of the data followed two approaches, namely ethnographic summary and a systematic coding via content analysis to accommodate verbatim quotations.

Results

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of aged women heads of households

Variables	N	%
Age		
60-65	14	29.2
66-70	13	27.1
71-75	12	25.0
76-80	9	18.75
80 and above		
Religious Affiliation		
Christianity	23	47.9
African Traditional Religion	15	31.3
Islam	10	20.8
Marital status		
Widowed	20	41.7
Separated	5	10.4
Deserted	15	21.2
Absent	8	16.7
Level of education		
No education	30	62.5
Primary school	10	20.8
Secondary school drop-out	8	16.7
Occupation		
Farming	20	41.7
Petty trading	22	45.8
Retiree	6	12.5
Level of Income		
N0 – N20,000	5	10.4
N21,000 – N40,000	10	20.8
N41,000 – N60,000	16	33.3
N61,000 –N80,000	10	20.8
N81,000 –N100,000	5	10.4
Above N100,000	2	4.2
Number of co-residence children/living arrangement		
1-2	12	25.0
3-4	18	37.5
4-6	12	25.0
7-8	6	12.5
Above 8		

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristic of In-depth Interviewees.

Age

Interviewees consisted of women heads of households aged 60 years or older. As indicated in Table1, the majority 14 (29.2%) are between the ages of 60 and 65 years. This is followed by those who fall within the age cohort of 66 and 70 years 13 (27.1%), while 12 (25.0%) are within the 71 and 75 age category. Only 9 (18.8%) of them are 80 years or above. The low frequency rate found in this age category is traced to the fact that only a few of them are likely to be alive and more likely to be economically less independent at 80 years and above.

Marital Status

The results showed that out of the 48 elderly women heads of households, the majority 20 (41.7%) are widows, 15 (21.2%) are deserted by their spouses, 8 (16.7%) said their husbands were absent while 5(10.4%) are separated.

Number of co-residing children/ living arrangement

The results indicate that majority 18 (37.5%) are living with between 3 and 4 children including grandchildren. One quarter 12(25.0%) are living with between 1 and 2 children and between 7 and 8 children respectively. Only 6 (12.5%) are living with more than 8 children. Although age of housing is not necessarily an index of physical condition, it does not bear a relationship to functional obsolescence and ease of maintenance. A fair number 20 (41.7%) of the interviewees live in dilapidated houses, which, at first impression, require maintenance work. Some of them 5 (10.5%) live in rented apartments. Over half of them 25 (52.1%) were either living in houses belonging to their spouses or other family members. Other relatives who live in the same households with them include children, grandchildren and occasionally their sisters' children (nieces). It was observed that the interviewees were actively involved in caring and nurturing of these grandchildren. In return, the children and grandchildren assisted in daily household activities such as cleaning, washing, laundry and running of errands. They also assisted in farming.

Occupation

Occupation as a socio-economic variable refers to economic activities from which one earns a living. The findings indicate that a good number of the interviewees 22(48.8%) are petty traders (who sell their wares in front of their doorsteps), 20 (41.7%) are subsistence farmers while 6 (12.5%) are retirees. In addition, some of them 5 (10.4%) work for other people or engage in all kinds of odd jobs including alms begging. All those begging for alms 5(10.4%) were found in North East, North West and North Central geo-political zones where alms begging is the norm.

Level of Education

Educational attainment is perhaps the most important characteristic of household members. The access to acquisition of formal education has been a major determinant of life chances in the modern world. Women's lack of access to education is cited by the Second World Assembly on Aging as contributing to their poverty in old age, presumably in comparison to men (United Nations, 2002). Low level of education was found to be one of the major causes of vulnerability of aged women heads of households in the study area. The results show that 30 (62.5%) of the in-depth interviewees did not go to school. Out of this figure, majority 28 (93.3%) are from Yawi, Ungogo and Jarawa-kogi of North-east, North-west and North central respectively. Only 10(20.8%) of the interviewees attended primary school while 8 (16.7%) are secondary school drop outs. The above indicates that the level of illiteracy among the aged women heads of households is very high in the north compared southern states. This finding is linked to their perception and orientation with regards to formal education. The majority 32 (66.7%) did not see the need for formal education to succeed in life. In the words of a focus group participant in Yawi village (Bornu State, North East) aged 70 years:

Our orientation with regard to formal education is responsible for low literacy rates among us. We did not see the need for education to succeed during our time. When the white men came with their western education, our parents saw it as a way of discouraging children from helping them on the farm. They also saw western education as a way of discouraging our cultural practices. Looking at the situation today, one might be tempted to say that our parents were right. The so-called western education is responsible for our plight today. It has taken all our children away from us. In our days, things were not as bad as this. The education the white man brought a long time ago has really altered our culture.

Although most of them did not see formal education as a leeway to success, the study has however, linked vulnerability in old age in the study area to lack of formal education. A woman head of household aged 72 years Ikoyi village, Osun State of South West corroborated this during in-depth interview

We are suffering today because we did not go to school the way you (the young ones) are now attending school. We all know where those of us that attended school are today. For example, those of us that do not have anybody to depend on are at least depending on their monthly pensions.

Religious Affiliation

Religious affiliations of the interviewees reveal that close to half of them 23 (47.9%) are Christians, 15 (31.3%) are Muslims while only 10 (20.8%) practice African Traditional Religion (ATR). While Christianity is a dominant religion in the south, Islam is strong factor in the north and those who subscribe to it are mainly Hausas and the Fulanis in three of the geo-political zones. The higher prevalence of Christians in the south was traceable to the history of Christianity introduced by the Missionaries in early twentieth century and the first to come to the area was Catholic Mission. The dominant religious influence is likely to have remarkable implication for care and support systems for the aged women heads of households.

Level of Income

The level of income is a determining factor of wellbeing in old age and the ability of aged women heads of households to cater for those living under their roof. The results show that interviewees' level of income is extremely low. The majority of them 41 (83.4%) received less than one hundred thousand Naira per annum. The breakdown indicates that the majority of them 16 (33.3%) earn between N41, 000 and 60,000 per annum. This is followed by those earning between N21, 000 and N40, 000 and between N61, 000 and 80,000 10(20.8%) respectively. Five 5(10.4%) of the interviewees earn between N0.00 and N20, 000 and between N81, 000 and N100, 000 respectively. Only 2(4.2%) of the interviewees (pensioners) earn above N100, 000. The low income level of the interviewees is traced to the patriarchal nature of the study area, their educational background, few material resources and sparse human capital, like access to property inheritance and right to property ownership.

Problems confronting aged women heads of households

During the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, interviewees and focus group participants were asked to mention the problems they face as heads of households. The findings indicate that the challenges facing the aged stem from the current economic crisis and migration of young people to cities which have often left the aged unsupported or eroded their economic independence. Children's absence was found to have left many of the elderly women heads of households without emotional, financial and physical support. Specific problems identified include constant illness (12), poor access to basic healthcare (18), loneliness (8 cases), isolation (4 cases), abandonment (16 cases), poor nutrition and poverty (12 cases). It was observed that feeding on carbohydrates without nutritional values was a common feature among the aged heads of households. Those mostly affected by this shift are the childless that has nobody to cater for them. Childlessness was also identified by the participants as a major cause of their problem. The study found that the cultural practice whereby every member of the extended family rallied round a childless widow was declining due to urbanization, modernization and social change. A childless widow during FGD at Jarawa village of Plateau State (North Central) aged 78 years stated thus with deep sorrow:

My son, I have no father, I have no mother and neither do I have children of my own to take care of me or support me. This is the eleventh year since my husband died. His family members threw me out of his house because I did not have children for him. They call me a witch because I don't have a child. I am a poor widow who has no child to rely on. If not for my step grandchildren who live with me to assist me with food, money and clothes me, I would have since died.

Similarly, another childless widow aged 75 years added:

Old age is a serious problem at least to those of us who do not have children. How to feed and pay for house rent is a problem. At my age, I am supposed to depend on my children for food and other support. But thank God that two of my sister's children are living with me

Yet another woman aged 72 years affirmed:

Government still thinks that it is the responsibility of the family to take care of the aged. It is no longer so. Things have changed particularly when there is no husband. The children our husbands left with us don't even want to stay in the village any longer to help us. They feel they don't belong here. They no longer assist us in the farms because they feel farm work is meant for old people. They don't care whether we will survive or not. We are suffering! Some of us are dying! The so-called western education has changed the ways we used to do things in this community.

Similarly a woman aged 65 during the in-depth interview at Urohi village stated as follows:

Struggling to procure food and to feed myself and children is major challenge. You can see for yourself that I am walking a tight rope between survival and starvation.

Although some of the aged visit one another, loneliness was found to be a prominent problem of the aged during the study at least at the home stead. A retired Police Officer of Urohi village in Edo State of South-South) affirmed:

I lost my husband four years ago. Since then life has never been the same with me. As you can see, I am the only one living in this big house with these little children. The eldest is just eleven years. Their mother died three years ago. I have no option than to bring them in. My problem is how to enroll them in school.

Virtually all the in-depth interviewees and FGD participants consistently mentioned that ill health and lack of basic income as their problem have prevented them from playing a proper role as heads of household. It was found that the aged women heads of households suffer more from health and financial problems than their male counterparts due to discrimination they suffer of earlier in life. According to an 82 years old female interviewee at Awo Mbieri village, Imo State of South Eastern Nigeria):

My major problem is ill health. I need money to buy medication, food and take care of myself and my children (grandchildren). But the money is not there. How can we survive in this kind of situation?

Another female interviewee aged 68 years (Urohi village) remarked thus:

Lack of regular income is my major problem. This is affecting my ill health as I do not have money for regular medical checkup or to eat properly. I do not have anybody to look after myself and my grandchildren. I have no husband. My major worry is where to get money to take care of my grandchildren and train them as well. You can see that I have five of them left behind by my late first son who died by a motor accident. Since his death, things have been so difficult for us. When my grandchildren need what I don't have, I lose my sleep. My only worry is what will happen to these children when I die. Because of this, I develop high blood pressure.

The study reveals that care giving has negative impact on sociability of aged women heads of households. Hence, some of them complained that their relationship with friends was sometimes adversely affected. It was also observed that there was no time for this set of interviewees to attend to some important social activities or engage in income-generating activities when a child is ill. A woman aged 63 years (in Jarawa-kogi village) echoed these sentiments saying:

Caring for my sick child is time consuming. I am unable to regularly tend to my farm, carry out other income generating activities and not to talk of attending other social functions.

Providing care for an ill child especially an orphan can adversely affect the aged women's emotional, physical and financial well being. Psychological burdens may arise when they are unable to continue to take care of ill child with rapidly degenerating health, the result being one or more of hopelessness, despair, anger, and a resorting to a feeling of being unable to cope with the suffering of the child. In addition, other kin may hold the aged woman responsible for the current condition of the child, creating pressures that make them lose confidence or become mentally exhausted. A woman aged 67 years (Yawi village) elaborated further:

My main problem is grandson's refusal to take medication or go to hospital when he is ill. My fear is that if he dies, people will not take it that way. My other relatives will hold me responsible for his death. This is very worrisome.

Strategies Employed to Ensure Survival

The study found that survival among the elderly women heads of households is a difficult process in which coping strategy is very demanding. Although the findings indicate that some of the elderly heads of household still depend on their kin for sustenance, it was found that meeting their critical needs poses a lot of strains on them. For instance, in the face of economic downturn in Nigeria, high inflation, unemployment, out-migration of offspring and widowhood, the living arrangements of elderly women heads of households was found to be very difficult. It was therefore not surprising that they employed various coping mechanisms to mitigate their problems. In this study the major identified coping strategies employed by the interviewees include petty trading (22 cases), subsistence farming (20 cases), daily or weekly contribution (5 cases) and engaging in menial jobs and alms begging (6 cases) and support from offspring and members of religious group (10 cases). In the words of an in-depth interviewee aged 76 years in Ikoyi village:

My family is of immense assistance to me. My children support me according to their ability although some of them are trying to survive in a situation of high unemployment and scarce resources. They are really trying their best for me. Nobody can blame anybody nowadays because the country is hard. I am a farmer though on a small scale. I sell vegetables, yams, and cassava from my farm. Occasionally, I sell domestic animals and fruits from my economic trees.

An FGD participant aged 62 years at Awo Mbieri village of Imo State, South East) remarked thus:

Our lives are in your hands. Whether we will live or die depends on you in government. Some of us may choose the latter. As for me, I want those of you in government to help us. I work in other people's farms for food or money. Any person who does not want to die of hunger will have to take it as part of his or her responsibility to engage in one thing or the other no matter how small it may be. Most of the women you see around here are into farming, the traditional domain of men. They plant crops that were traditionally planted by men. But these cannot sustain us and our children. Please help us, our lives are in your hands.

Another FGD participant aged 63 years added:

I wash other people's clothes in exchange for food. I also engage in petty trading of kerosene, pepper, tobacco and akara (bean cake).

Yet, another woman aged 65 years added:

If not because of my church members who send me food, clothes and assist us financially, we would have since died.

In some cases, some of aged them sell their personal belongings as a survival strategy. For instance during an in-depth a woman at Jarawa-kogi village) sorrowfully affirmed:

Since I do not have any food to eat, I have to sell some of my clothes and kitchen utensils. Who am I keeping them for? Some members of my church have been assisting when they see that the suffering is getting too much. Apart from their regular visitation, they always bring food, money and clothes for us.

The fact that majority of them did not work in the formal sector is a major contributory factor to the vulnerability in old age. Hence, they have limited income opportunities to survive on. It was observed that some of them were forced by economic and family circumstances to work well beyond the age of 70 years because of the need to take care for the young. A female in-depth interviewee remarked:

I depend on proceeds from my farm to feed two of my grandchildren whose mother died when they were very small. I am over 70 years of age and still manage because I do not want them to die of hunger. I did not go to school and as such, I am not expecting anything from the government. Since I do not have a husband and any surviving children there is nobody to rely on for our daily food.

Although begging is not a common phenomenon especially in the rural area, the study indicates that this phenomenon is gradually emerging in the rural areas. About 5% of the aged widow heads of household with step grandchildren to cater for beg for alms as a survival strategy. A childless widow aged 70 years (Ikoyi village) remarked:

Suffering leads to frustration. When you do not have food to eat and no money to spend and one has children to cater for, one will become restive. An average human being will like to survive. In trying to do so in the midst of this economic hardship and there is no child to lean on and especially when family members are not willing to assist, one would have no option than to beg. I do not want to die, so I beg to survive.

Although, there is diminishing of extended family system of care and support for the aged and social distance between the aged and the caregivers, it was found that part of the coping strategies of the interviewees initiated is reliance on community members. In the study area the spirit of communalism still exists although minimally. Ten out of the 48 interviewees rely on support from community members for food, water and clothing. According to an in-depth interviewee aged 66 years at Yawi village:

Good Samaritans in this community are really assisting us by giving us drugs, money, foodstuff and clothes. By the grace of God, we are not suffering like others who have no such support. At least we take our three square meals

Discussion

In this study, problems of elderly women heads of households, factors responsible for these problems and strategies employed to mitigate these problems were identified and discussed. Results presented above indicate that aged women heads of households are passing through difficulties in providing daily needs for themselves and their household members. There is no doubt that the absence of a spouse or adult children has impacted negatively on the ability of an aged head of a household to perform effectively her role as a head of household. Other socio-economic characteristics such as marital status, educational background, occupation, diminishing health, disintegration of extended family support and those associated with occupation and level of income were the major factors found to have affected aged women heads of households in the study area.

To this extent, it would be correct to state that illiteracy, marital status, low occupational status and poverty were the limiting factors for aged women heads of households. Whereas, in the past it was the responsibility of the extended family members to integrate the aged widows into the family of the late husband or her kin, the impact of urbanization was obvious and was indeed responsible for the rural-urban migration and western lifestyle of young adults and their inability to assume their roles as heads of households. Hence, the majority of aged women provide for their household members in the midst of poverty and ill health. This finding was found to have negative impacts in meeting the economic needs of their family members. The poverty situation of the study area (rural areas) was so severe that it drives majority of them to innovate means of survival. Hence, engaging in subsistence farming, petty trading, public alms begging, selling of personal belongs and engaging in menial jobs were some of the identified means of coping strategies adopted by the aged. These activities were found to be detrimental to their health and living conditions. Ill- health in old age was prevalent, and if not properly handled may generate to a hindering environment for the aged women heads of households to provide the daily needs of their household members effectively.

What is to be done?

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proffered:

- For elderly women heads of households to live a happy and healthy later life with their families, priority should be given to them in all the intervention programmes;
- Government should introduce a welfare programme for aged women heads of household and take it as part of its responsibilities to provide employment opportunities for their adult children. This will to enable them to provide support for their poor aged mothers.
- There is need to domesticate women's human rights instruments and include those of aged women heads of households. Federal, State and Local Governments should continue to play and lead advocacy roles at the national, state and local levels so as to ensure the ratification, domestication, implementations (as the case may be) of instruments that attends to the concerns of aged women heads of households.

- For adult children to be able to support their aged mother effectively, government should make rural areas more attractive by establishing industries where the young family members could work. In this way, they will stay in the rural areas to assist their aged mothers;
- Enabling environment should be created by government to aged women heads of households to enable them actively participate in every phase of development in their area;
- Pensions and gratuities of the retired aged women heads of households should be paid as at when due. This will enable them to provide for themselves and their family members;
- Aged widow heads of households should be given legal security against all forms of discriminations particularly those that have to do with property inheritance of their spouses.

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