

Rural community-based organizations and cycle of harmful cultural practices against women and girls: Exploring gender-based violence and women liberation potentials

Organizações comunitárias rurais e o ciclo de práticas culturais nocivas contra mulheres e meninas: Explorando a violência de gênero e os potenciais de libertação feminina

Organizaciones comunitarias rurales y el ciclo de prácticas culturales nocivas contra mujeres y niñas: Exploración de la violencia de género y el potencial de liberación de las mujeres

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Abstract

Harmful cultural practices against women and girls in the developing nations have some resilience against many eradication strategies by governmental and nongovernmental organizations. This challenge has been fluidly connected with unseen institutionalized structures and women institution in the rural communities. This article aims to present a study on rural community organizations and the cycle of harmful cultural practices against women and girls. This study was carried out in southeast Nigeria among rural women associations using quantitative and qualitative research methods. The study was guided by Anthony Giddens' Structuration theory. The study involved 1098 respondents for questionnaire administration and 44 participants for Focused Group Discussion and In-Depth Interviews. Data were collected with pretested interviewer designed questionnaire developed from the elements of *Social Norms and Beliefs*

About GBV Scale and Quantitative measurement of gendered social norms as well as interview guide. The collected data were analysed using inferential statistics and thematic approach to the qualitative data. The study finds a negative correlation between engagement with community-based association and vulnerability to harmful cultural practices against women and girls in rural southeast Nigeria ($\rho = -0.454, P = 0.000$). Vulnerability to harmful cultural practices against women and girls is predicted by education, age, average monthly income in Naira, residential, early marriage and family history of gender-based violence ($R = 0.784$ (61.5%), $F = 62.791, P = 0.05$).

Keywords: Harmful cultural practices against women and girls; Rural community-based women associations; Gender-based violence; Women health; Adult education; Sustainable development.

Resumo

Práticas culturais prejudiciais contra mulheres e meninas em países em desenvolvimento apresentam certa resistência a muitas estratégias de erradicação por organizações governamentais e não governamentais. Esse desafio tem sido de forma contínua associado a estruturas institucionalizadas invisíveis e à instituição das mulheres nas comunidades rurais. Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar um estudo sobre organizações comunitárias rurais e o ciclo de práticas culturais prejudiciais contra mulheres e meninas. Este estudo foi realizado no sudeste da Nigéria, entre associações de mulheres rurais, utilizando métodos de pesquisa quantitativos e qualitativos. O estudo foi orientado pela teoria da estruturação de Anthony Giddens. A pesquisa envolveu 1098 respondentes para a aplicação de questionários e 44 participantes para Discussão em Grupo Focal e Entrevistas em Profundidade. Os dados foram coletados por meio de questionário elaborado pelo entrevistador e previamente testado, desenvolvido a partir dos elementos da Escala de Normas Sociais e Crenças sobre VBG e da Medição Quantitativa de Normas Sociais de Gênero, bem como do guia de entrevista. Os dados coletados foram analisados usando estatísticas inferenciais e abordagem temática para os dados qualitativos. O estudo encontrou uma correlação negativa entre o engajamento com associações comunitárias e a vulnerabilidade a práticas culturais nocivas contra mulheres e meninas em áreas rurais do sudeste da Nigéria ($\rho = -0,454, P = 0,000$). A vulnerabilidade a práticas culturais nocivas contra mulheres e meninas é prevista por educação, idade, renda média mensal em Naira, residência, casamento precoce e histórico familiar de violência de gênero ($R = 0,784$ (61,5%), $F = 62,791, P = 0,05$).

Palavras-chave: Práticas culturais nocivas contra mulheres e meninas; Associações comunitárias de mulheres em áreas rurais; Violência de gênero; Saúde da mulher; Educação de adultos; Desenvolvimento sustentável.

Resumen

Las prácticas culturales perjudiciales contra las mujeres y las niñas en los países en desarrollo presentan cierta resistencia a muchas estrategias de erradicación por parte de organizaciones gubernamentales y no gubernamentales. Este desafío se ha asociado continuamente con estructuras institucionalizadas invisibles y la institucionalización de las mujeres en las comunidades rurales. Este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar un estudio sobre las organizaciones comunitarias rurales y el ciclo de prácticas culturales perjudiciales contra las mujeres y las niñas. Este estudio se realizó en el sureste de Nigeria, entre asociaciones de mujeres rurales, utilizando métodos de investigación cuantitativos y cualitativos. El estudio se guió por la teoría de la estructuración de Anthony Giddens. La investigación involucró a 1098 personas que respondieron un cuestionario y a 44 participantes que participaron en grupos focales y entrevistas en profundidad. Los datos se recopilaron mediante un cuestionario desarrollado por el entrevistador y previamente validado, basado en elementos de la Escala de Normas y Creencias Sociales sobre Violencia de Género y la Medición Cuantitativa de las Normas Sociales de Género, así como una guía de entrevista. Los datos recopilados se analizaron utilizando estadística inferencial y un enfoque temático para datos cualitativos. El estudio halló una correlación negativa entre la participación en asociaciones comunitarias y la vulnerabilidad a prácticas culturales nocivas contra mujeres y niñas en zonas rurales del sureste de Nigeria ($\rho = -0,454, P = 0,000$). La vulnerabilidad a prácticas culturales nocivas contra mujeres y niñas se predice por la educación, la edad, el ingreso mensual promedio en nairas, el lugar de residencia, el matrimonio precoz y los antecedentes familiares de violencia de género ($R = 0,784$ (61,5%), $F = 62,791, P = 0,05$).

Palabras clave: Prácticas culturales nocivas contra mujeres y niñas; Asociaciones comunitarias de mujeres rurales; Violencia de género; Salud de la mujer; Educación de adultos; Desarrollo sostenible.

1. Introduction

Gender inequality and gender-based violence against women have continued to thrive in developing nations such as Nigeria. While these problems are embedded in the behavioural exchange system obtainable among the developed nations, the practices have been constantly reinforced by cultural practices covertly sustained in the rural communities. Harmful cultural practices against women and girls among the developing nations have continued to exist despite numerous efforts to eradicate them by the global community (Gebre et al., 2020; Glover, Liebling & Barrett, 2018; Ikeaba et al., 2022). The indicators of harmful cultural practices include early/forced marriage, female genital mutilation, massage of the clitoris, lips plates, food

taboo, force-feeding, breast ironing, kidnapping/abduction, domestic violence against women, sexual exclusion of wives, sororate and levirate, dry sexual intercourse, trokosi, widowhood rites and other practices against women and girls (WHO, 2009). Harmful cultural practices are all age-long practices with impacts on the overall wellbeing of women and girls (Omoniyi, 2020; Khosla et al., 2017). For instance, these practices in their different dimensions have been connected to different challenges to women such as spread of infection, malnourishment of affected pregnant women [with dire consequences to their health and that of their babies], foeticide/infanticide, sex-selection/unhealthy abortion [resulting to complications during and after pregnancies], domestic and gender-based violence as well as other physical and psychological health challenges (Jimoh et al., 2018; Abebe, Beyene & Mulat, 2021).

Globally, according to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (2020), there were about 81000 deaths of women and girls, which are connected to harmful practices against women; the report further showed that 47000 (58%) of these deaths occurred within the family circle. The aforementioned report is giving a relative picture of little out of huge complications facing women and girls. This is in view of the fact that the available report is from some developed and emerging economies with relative freedom of expression for women, which allow them to report their experiences. However, more of this type of deaths and similar crisis for women are hidden in the developing nations such as sub-Saharan Africa where data on humanitarian crises are scarce. However, a number of studies have traced women and girls' deaths in the hands of the families, partners as well as communities, due to gender-based harmful cultural practices culminating into violence against women (Benebo, Schumann & Vaezghasemi, 2018; Kaur & Garg, 2008; Ali, Yassin & Omer, 2014). According to UNICEF (2022), more than 130 million girls and women have experienced forced/early marriage, nearly 140 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation, while over 40 million women and girls have experienced other harmful cultural practices with significant threats to their lives in sub-Saharan Africa. Harmful cultural practices are basically instrument of depriving women of their basic human right, wellbeing and general comfort in the society. As a gender-based violence against women, harmful cultural practices negate some components of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals such as ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing for all at all ages [goal-3], and achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls [goal-5] (United Nations Assembly, 2015).

Harmful cultural practices against women over the years have been consistently observed in certain parts of the globe such as the developing nations located mostly in Africa, Asia, Middle East, etc. (USAID, 2020; UNICEF, 2016; 2018; 2019; Tesfaye et al., 2022). However, while the persistence of these practices is suspected to be connected to the problem of underdevelopment, some startling evidences are pointing to other unseen and empirically unexplored factors associated with the issue among developing nations. Some studies have given attention to the socioeconomic factors affecting gender-based harmful traditional practices, making some important findings pointing to educational status, residential location (urban or rural), family history as well as economic factors (Tefaye et al., 2022; Gebrekirstos, Abebe & Fantahun, 2014; Abebe, Beyene & Mulat, 2021). Nevertheless, other scholars have focused on understanding the control mechanisms that support the persistence of harmful traditional practices against women and girls. The findings of such studies have implicated religious belief, culture, traditions, social pressure, as well as patriarchy (Udoh, Folarin & Isumonah, 2020; Osezua & Agholor, 2019; Wüthrich-Grossenbacher et al., 2023). Other scholars have focused on understanding the factors facilitating resistance to harmful traditional practices against women. Findings from studies of this pedigree have demonstrated how the impacts of these practices such as negative health impacts and truncated women autonomy in turn trigger consciousness to women liberation (Achalu & Mboho, 2017; Boyden, Pankhurst & Tafere, 2012). The synthesis of the available studies so far point to some evidences of persistence of the problem of gender-based harmful cultural practices in some developing nations. By implication, the available literatures so far are yet to address the underlying factors to the resilience of harmful cultural practices against women and the possible counter measures in the developing nations. Important factor such as the role of rural

community-based women associations in the reoccurring cycle of gender-based harmful cultural practices against women in the developing nations has not been empirically addressed. This is more crucial in sub-Saharan Africa where rural communities generate vulnerabilities and threat to women autonomy and gender equality. Also, the available studies have not addressed the potentials of rural community-based women associations in confronting the problem in developing nations. In southeast Nigeria, there are interconnecting community-based women organisations, which relatively absorb married women across rural communities. These organisations are quasi institutions technically connected to the communal governance structure to capture the interest of women in their communities of origin as well as their communities of marriage. These organisations in their postures function as trajectory to reach women as well as policy suggestion to extant leadership authorities such as government and nongovernmental institutions. By implication, these community-based organisations are potentially and strategically located to change a course for the ongoing culturally-induced gender-based violence against women in the region.

Popular discuss on women experience in the society mostly in the developing nations is tailored to the perceived dependent nature of women (Udoh et al., 2020). However, there is yet to be a study exploring the unseen impacts of women actions via collective force of community-based association on harmful cultural practices against women. More importantly the contribution of the community-based associations to the recurring or otherwise of harmful traditional practices in the rural communities is yet to be empirically explored. In the lens of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, which dwells on the reoccurring cycle of behaviours in the society, their origins and sustaining factors, human action or inaction contribute to the survival or otherwise of social and cultural phenomenon (Giddens, 1977). The above unexplored issues informed this study in southeast Nigeria where women are consciously and unconsciously playing significant roles in the reoccurrences or otherwise of harmful cultural practices against women and girls.

In southeast Nigeria, the indicators of harmful cultural practices such as early/forced marriage, female genital mutilation, massage of the clitoris, lips plates, food taboo, force-feeding, breast ironing, domestic violence against women, sexual exclusion of wives, sororate and levirate, widowhood rites, etc. are still ongoing (WHO, 2018; Onah et al., 2023). This can be attributed to women passivity and ignorance of the latent power of social cohesion in the rural communities. For instance, there are numerous platforms such as community-based women organizations where women are relatively in-charge of their destiny in the community. These associations in their capacities make extant decisions affecting families, women and the rural communities (Chika & Umejiaku, 2014). Through these associations and platforms, leadership of various rural communities and extant government institutions are indirectly guided on how best to manage issues affecting women. In some cases, government relies on these associations' recommendations in approaching gender-sensitive issues. These associations are encompassing and economically viable that they attract married women across communities, local councils as well as regional circle in southeast Nigeria. Despite the novelty of these associations and their potentials in strategic decision making, Southeast Nigeria is still among the regions of the world with numerous cases of gender-based violence and other gender inequality crises traceable to harmful traditional practices domicile with the rural population (WHO, 2018). The potentials of community-based women associations in the region seem to be undermined by some factors yet to be empirically explored as the present study seeks to unravel. As an issue of scholarly concern, researches over the years by different scholars from different regions of the globe are yet to explore the factors behind the reoccurrences of harmful cultural practices especially with regard to women participation in relevant associations in the rural areas. This article aims to present a study on rural community organizations and the cycle of harmful cultural practices against women and girls. This is more appealing in developing regions like in rural southeast Nigeria where the case of harmful cultural practices have shown resilience with disturbing impacts. In view of the observed gap in literature, the present study situated in rural southeast Nigeria, explored the

factors to reoccurring cycle of gender-based harmful traditional practices against women in southeast Nigeria. The following research questions guided the study:

Research questions

- a. What is the relationship between women engagement with rural community-based associations and vulnerability to harmful cultural practices in southeast Nigeria?
- b. What are the predicting factors to recurring harmful cultural practices in rural southeast Nigeria?
- c. What are the predicting factors to women resilience against recurring harmful cultural practices in rural southeast Nigeria?

2. Theoretical Orientation for the Study (Structuration Theory by Anthony Giddens)

The society is structured and sustained in a distinct way that make things more institutionalized than people will ordinarily see from the surface. And this invariably makes phenomenon to fall in line with the extant practices that capture human behavioural dispositions in the society. Structuration theory by Giddens is one of the foremost theories capturing the existence of human society as an ongoing process in a particular pattern with sustaining factors within it. According to Giddens (1977), the human society is structured in a dual pattern such that action and the social structure functioned to maintain the super structure called society in the mind of the members of the society. While human action is the ingredients to uphold the tenets of the society, the society in itself as a social structure creates atmosphere of maintaining the actions capable of sustaining the society itself in a process, which Giddens called *the duality of structure*. Capturing the problem of harmful cultural practices against women in the society, harmful cultural practices have been supported by human actions retaining the practices across different societies (Belete & Atlaw, 2018; Achen, Atekyereza & Rwabukwali, 2021).

Harmful cultural practices are embedded in the sub consciousness of the members of the society and not as a cultural artefact designed and regulated anywhere (Ortner, 1974; Cookson, Fuentes & Bitterly, 2023). As observed by Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr (2011), and Fleischer (1981), the recurrences of cultural practices only find their way through the thought, imaginations and belief of the members of the society. According to Giddens, when the members of the society refuse to take actions in line with the rules that sustain a particular practice in the society, the practice over time will go into disuse. Using linguistic analogy, Giddens maintained that ordinary English grammar remains relevant because individuals are making use of English grammar in different places, contexts and their daily lives. However, if the English grammar is avoided in a particular society by the members of such society, the language will gradually fall into disuse. Giddens used this analogy to bring us to the concepts of *rule and resources* as well as *agency and reproduction*. For Giddens, a structure is maintained by rules and resources, which are represented by the definite pattern laid down to actualize the intension of the structure itself as well as the material elements for actualizing this (Giddens, 1984; Giddens, 1991). In any case as observed by Chatterjee, Kunwar and den Hond (2019), Jones & Karsten (2008), the societal system is an institution running on the invisible networks of authorities and resources, which invariably supports the intension of the structure as a system.

In connection with the problems of harmful cultural practices, the unconscious and unwritten rules guiding the women and men activities across societies do compel the women to harmful cultural practices because they have unconsciously come to believe the practices as part of the ongoing society. They are unconsciously keeping the traditions and practices handed over to them from generations in the past. In this manner, they become the resources in maintaining these rules, which ought to have died in the absence of human practices (Okafor, 2020). For instance in southeast Nigeria, women in some capacities unconsciously implement and supervise what constitute harmful cultural practices against other women. This takes the form of age-long traditional practices maintained by the elderly women against the younger ones as part of discipline and sacred

practices. Practices such as early/forced marriage, female genital mutilation, food taboo, force-feeding, widowhood rites, etc. in southeast Nigeria are indirectly initiated and supervised by the elderly women in the rural communities. They do these as age-long traditional practices, preserving the culture as they were made to understand during their childhood and early years of marriage. By doing so, the women unconsciously act as the resources as well as the agency in giving life to the supposedly lifeless phenomenon. For instance, Giddens opined that societal structure is maintained by human beings as agents in the process of reproducing what the structure has created over the years. Giddens was of the view that the human agents in the system are the ones who reproduce what is obtainable in the system through their action or inaction. This according to Bandura (2006), Laslett and Brenner (1989) create an overarching system that sustains repetition of behavioural tendencies.

Harmful cultural practices have lived for generations among different societies due to the unconscious translation of the phenomenon into daily routine through socialization. Among women, they unconsciously train their female and even male wards into seeing these practices as part of their daily lives hence the practices survive into the next generation and continue as such. According to Davis et al. (2015) every element of cultural practices in the society followed the process of socialization to retain itself in the system. As opined by Welzel & Inglehart (2010), Jackson and Williams (2021), these socializations are the products of daily teaching and learning exchanging hands in the primary and secondary socialization processes in the society.

In the concepts of agency and transformation, Giddens maintained that in the absence of individuals taking responsibility in changing the system, the system will continue to impose on members of the society, what has been created in the past whether they are useful or harmful. This is connected to the concluding concepts by Giddens to his social structural thesis- *determinism and voluntarism*. According to Giddens, the members of the society are not permanently compelled to behave in a particular pattern, but are presented with different options of manners to live in the system. However, the determination to follow any particular manner to act and react to the activities in the ongoing society is definitely by the members of the society. Nonetheless, determination and voluntary actions are dependent on the knowledge of the system and the appropriate measure to adopt. Harmful cultural practices are the products of the society through human agency. As such, it will be rolled back through human agency.

3. Research Methods

A social research was conducted using interviews and questions through a Likert scale to quantify qualitative results (Pereira et al., 2018), and for the treatment of the results, simple descriptive statistics were used with data classes, e.g., by age group, and values of relative percentage frequency (Shitsuka et al., 2014). Statistical analysis was also used (Costa Neto & Bekman, 2009).

The study was carried out in southeast Nigeria among some community-based women organizations in the rural areas. These organizations relatively involve majority of women living in the rural areas owing to these organizations having interconnectivity with the socioeconomic needs of the members of these communities. By implication, every married woman in the affected community belonged to at least one of these organizations. Of special interest about these organizations is that they function as recruitment platform for the married women into the community life of the affected communities. More importantly, these organizations serve as reference point in the management of cases involving traditional practices that involve women and women responsibilities in the family and the society at large.

The study used both qualitative and survey research methods. The survey method involved 1,098 women from community-based rural women organizations, while the qualitative method involved 44 participants selected from among the community-based organizations. The study randomly selected 65 out of 162 registered community-based associations specializing in different socioeconomic and community development activities, using simple random sampling (balloting) technique. Although there are many community-based organisations in the region, the ones officially registered with the

government institutions are usually chosen as the basis of recognizing community-based associations in the area. This is in view of the rate of organisational fraud, which has affected the trust and integrity of some community based associations. The study applied for the list of the registered community based associations in order to maintain appropriate guide to the study in terms of sampling units and strategy. The study utilized 40.1% of the entire sampling frame, which is the 65 out of 162 confirmed registered community based women association. After randomization, which ensured proper representation of the registered associations, the study introduced purposive sampling technique to consider the uniqueness of the different community based women associations, which are relatively heterogeneous in nature. The associations have unique characteristics in terms of population, locations and other socio-demographic markers. Applying purposive sampling, the study selected at least, 16 respondents from each of the randomly selected 65 community-based associations specializing in different socioeconomic and community development activities. This was guided by such criteria as how many years the women have been in the association, how many years they have been in marriage, how many years they have lived in the rural community, etc. Choosing at least 16 respondents from each of the selected associations was on the basis that for registration of each of the associations, one of the criteria by the government agency managing these associations is that they must be up to 35 members before they will qualify for registration as a recognized association. Nonetheless, in selecting the 16 respondents from each of the associations included in the study, the study considered 4 critical factors to the study such as leadership experience in the association, years in marriage, evidence of present or past experience of harmful cultural practices and active participation in social activities in the community. The study applied both purposive sampling and snowball techniques in locating the desired category of individuals in these associations for the administration of the instrument. These organizations were with rich cultural heritage and accumulated experiences as most of these organizations have existed for at least 20 years as at the time of the study. Equally, these organizations were selected based on the history of management activities related to harmful cultural practices in the area.

The quantitative data was collected with pretested interviewer designed questionnaire. Exposure to traditional harmful practices against women as a variable in the study was measured with 5-point Likert-type, and 4 subscales [exposure to traditional harmful practices against women scale-ETHPAW] developed by the researchers. The scale asked the participants about their frequency of exposure to the social indicators of harmful cultural practices in the last 12 months [from 'not at all' to 'often times']. These indicators included widowhood practices, sexual exclusion of wives, food taboos, and domestic violence against wives. The scale was tested for validation through pilot study; the researchers conducted pilot study among 156 women randomly selected from across the community-based organisations. The overall content validity index of the questionnaire was calculated as 0.79 (N = 136), the overall consistency of the questionnaire items in the scale was 0.79.

Focused Group Discussion and In-Depth Interview were adopted to collect qualitative data for the study. The study conducted four FGDs involving at least 7 participants each, and 11 In-Depth Interviews with 11 key informants from the study area. In total, 44 participants were selected, these included 11 participants with leadership positions both in the community-based organizations and their clan/communities (these were for IDI), 16 participants with various leadership positions among the community based organizations and 17 floor members of the community based organizations. While the FGD participants' selection focused on the core and experienced members of the community-based organizations who are at least married for about 10 years, the IDI participants' selection focused on the experienced leaders of these organizations having other community leadership positions in their respective communities and clans. Interview guide containing unstructured questions focussing on the objectives of the study was used in the IDI and also in the FGD with little modification.

The collected quantitative data was analysed with descriptive and inferential statistics, while the qualitative data was thematically analysed after translation from the local language (Igbo) and proper coding of the data to support the findings of the quantitative data. At the first stage of the analysis, the socio-demographic data of the respondents and other substantive

issues to the study were presented in percentages (%). This was followed by the correlation analyses of the relationship of substantive variables to answer the research questions guiding the study. This was executed with Spearman's rho Correlations with a P. value of 0.01 and 1-tail, focusing on the effect size. The third stage of the analysis to answer the question on predicting factors to women resilience against recurring harmful cultural practices in rural southeast Nigeria and associated factors was carried out with Linear regression, which explored the relationship of the key variables on this, with more focus on the direction of the relationship between the selected variables. A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted using the enter method in SPSS, inputting all independent variables into the regression equation simultaneously, allowing the software to assess each variable's unique contribution to predicting the dependent variable.

The combination of descriptive inferential statistics as well as thematic analysis was to actualize the major interest of the study. The coding of the qualitative data helped in streamlining and grouping the data and identifying the emerging themes in line with the logic of the data and the specific research questions guiding the study (Kothari, 2004; Lewis, 2015; Williams & Moser, 2019). This eventually enabled the study for thematic analysis in answering the research questions.

4. Results

The analysis was based on the 1098 questionnaire properly filled and returned from the field. While Descriptive, correlation and regression analyses were applied to probe and put the quantitative data in perspectives, the qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis to support the quantitative findings in answering the research questions. The study involved 1098 respondents of which 62.6% are Christians, 5.9% are Muslims, while 31.1% are adherents to African Traditional religion. Majority of the respondents (47.4%) holds high school qualification, 10.3% holds Diploma, while 26.7% holds Higher National Diploma and Degree. Only 10.7% of the respondents are below 24 years, 26.3% of the respondents are in the age category of 24-29 years, 15.9% are in the age category of 30-35 years and 42-47 years respectively. 20.8% of the respondents are in the age category of 48-53 years, while 10.4% are in the age category of 54 years and above. The mean age of the respondents is 36.7 years (Std Div. .830). 15.9% of the respondents have been in marriage between one and five years, 26.3% have been in marriage for more than five but not more than ten years, 37.0% have been in marriage between 11 and 15 years while 20.8% have been in marriage for 16 years and more.

Meanwhile the following themes emerged from the study and supported analysis and discussion: the resilience of family-related harmful cultural practices, sustainability of harmful cultural practices through women institutions, the cycle of revenge among women as a tool for sustaining harmful cultural practices, ignorance and poverty as a sustainable force to intergenerational cycle of harmful cultural practices, adult and continuing education as a panacea to the resilience of harmful cultural practices among the rural women in southeast Nigeria.

Table 1 - Correlations coefficients of Engagement with community-based associations and Vulnerability to harmful cultural practices against women.

			Engagement with community-based associations	Vulnerability to harmful cultural practices against women
Spearman's rho	Engagement with community-based association	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.454**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	1098	1098
	victim to harmful cultural practices against women	Correlation Coefficient	-.454**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	1098	1098

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The above Table1 showed the correlation between engagement with community-based association and vulnerability to harmful cultural practices against women in rural southeast Nigeria. According to the findings on the table, there is a negative correlation between engagement with community-based association and vulnerability to harmful cultural practices against women in rural southeast Nigeria ($\rho = -.454, P. 000$). Furthermore from the finding, engagement with the community based association among the women explains about 20.6% variancesin vulnerability to harmful cultural practices against the women among the population.

Harmful traditional practices among the women understudy seems to be building around the traditional women institutions in the area such as umuada, umuokpu, and similar groups, which are made up of women who are born in a particular community but are married to other communities. These women and their groups are in most cases, the ones who pull the strings of oppression against other women married to their families of birth, while trying to maintain the so called traditional honourin their fathers' households and families.However, from the findings of the study, there is evidence that the women institutions are becoming instrument of counteringharmful cultural practices at least, in the communitieswhere they are married to. According to one of the IDI participants, *the problem of son preference is stronger among the umuada circle, where women do fight for the names of their families of birth and assuch, use their influence to compel the married women in their families of birth to succumb to unwholesome practices* (IDI key informant).

Female circumcision in my family of marriage cannot be avoided because of the compelling influence of my sister in-laws who supervise the activity for every single girl born in our family. Even though we feel like stopping the activity, because of her presence and the constant threat that we will face the music by umuada if we dare to stop it, we have no other choice than to play along (FGD participant).

Although in the current historical epoch, women seem to be fighting the common enemy, which is the harmful cultural practices, there is steal some level of crises needed to be reconciled in the context of community-based women associations. This is evidence in the present study as commitment to community-based association among the women understudy seems to be cushioning the effect by giving the married women in the community the ground to resist. For instance, the study finding showed a strong negative correlation between commitment to community-based association and vulnerability to reoccurring harmful cultural practices againstwomen,demonstrating that as the women get committed to community-based women associations, they become resistant to the elements of harmful cultural practices against women in their communities of marriage.

Table 2 - Coefficients of Women vulnerability to reoccurring harmful cultural practices against women.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-.249	.278		-.896	.371
Age	-.151	.061	-.129	-2.473	.014
Education	-.357	.037	-.392	-9.668	.000
Early marriage	.110	.060	.118	1.828	.001
Residential location	-.534	.059	-.411	-9.074	.000
Average monthly income (in Naira)	-.012	.032	-.013	-.366	.005
Family history of GBV	.083	.068	.065	1.226	.001

a. Dependent Variable: Women vulnerability to reoccurring harmful cultural practices against women

$R = 0.784 (61.5\%), F = 62.791, P = .05$

Source: Research data (2026).

The above Table2 displayed the predicting factors to women vulnerability to reoccurring harmful cultural practices against women and girls in rural southeast Nigeria; while the explanatory power of the model is commendable as the model explained 61.5% of the dependent variables in the model. All the included variables were significant; however, education (b.-357; t.-9.668), age (b.-.151; t.-2.473), average monthly income in Naira (b.-.012; t.-.366) and residential location (b.-.0534; t.-9.074) negatively predicted vulnerability to reoccurring harmful cultural practices against women and girls in rural southeast Nigeria. Furthermore, the aforementioned factors counter women vulnerability to reoccurring harmful cultural practices against women in rural southeast Nigeria. Meanwhile, the factors that positively predicted vulnerability to harmful cultural practices against women in rural southeast Nigeria included early marriage (b.110; t.1.828) and family history of gender-based violence (b.083; t.1.226); these factors promote women vulnerability to reoccurring harmful cultural practices against women in rural southeast Nigeria.

Harmful traditional practices among the rural population understudy are built around ignorance and illiteracy as well as poverty from the evidences gathered in the study. The women who are victims of these problems seem to be unconsciously reinforcing the practices as a result of socioeconomic challenges. For instance, some of the participants indicated that early and forced marriages among their children are connected to the ignorance and the most cherished family honour. *Our children due to poverty are sometimes made vulnerable to unwanted pregnancy, which in most cases will definitely lead to forced marriage. Of course, in my own local community, having been impregnated by a man, you must go and live with that man to save the family from the shame* (FGD participant):

Another participant adds, *if such a situation takes place, the family especially the mother will not be interested in checking whether such marriage will lead to abuse or not, provided she exonerate herself from the shame from her co wives who always see unwanted pregnancy as evidence of poor training and failed motherhood* (FGD participant).

Female genital mutilation is still in practice because of the erroneous believe that it helps in controlling sexual promiscuity even after the observation of the rampant sexual promiscuities among the supposedly circumcised girls across communities.

We were told that when you circumcise your female child, it helps in keeping them away from premarital sex and preserve their virginity until marriage. Over the years we have practiced it and it has been an intergenerational transfer of tradition and practices preserved by every woman born and married among us even now (FGD participant).

Among the population, girl child education is still interrupted or rather not encouraged resulting to the constant cycle of illiteracy on which harmful cultural practices feed on,resulting to itsrecurrence. According to one of the FGD participants,

The education of our female children is not supported by most of our husbands who see the female children as article for commercial values. Since most of the women are themselves struggling with poverty and only our husbands have a say on who should go to school or not, we watch helplessly as our children end up in most cases as illiterates like us. This in particular has encouraged early marriage and forced marriage resulting from unwanted pregnancies among our children (FGD participant).

Table 3 - Coefficients of women resilience against reoccurring harmful traditional practices against women and girls.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.090	.349		3.126	.002
Age	.024	.077	.020	.315	.753
Educational	.120	.046	.125	2.577	.000
Average monthly income (in Naira)	.271	.075	.276	3.598	.000
Economic independence	.088	.074	.064	1.194	.001
Residential location	.294	.040	.319	7.395	.000
Engagement with community-based associations	.089	.085	.066	1.047	.005

a. Dependent Variable: **women resilience against reoccurring harmful traditional practices against women and girls**

R= 0.834 (69.6%), F= 18.104, P= .05

Source: Research data (2026).

The above Table3 displayed the predicting factors to women resilience against reoccurring harmful traditional practices against women in rural southeast Nigeria; while the explanatory power of the model is commendable as the model explained 69.6% of the dependent variable in the model. All the included variables were significant except age; however, all the included variables such as education (b.120; t.2.577), average monthly income in Naira (b.271; t.3.598), residential location (b.294; t1.194), economic dependence (b.088; t7.395), engagement with community-based women association (b.089; t1.047) positively predicted women resilience against reoccurring harmful traditional practices against women in rural southeast Nigeria. Furthermore, these factors promote women resilience against recurring harmful traditional practices against women in rural southeast Nigeria.

With the cycle of illiteracy and other factors among women in rural southeast Nigeria, there is the need for educational intervention, which in this case adult and continuing education can properly fit in. from the discussions and interactions with the women, there are some evidences that the major problem among these women is poor or lack of enlightenment about the dimensions of harmful cultural practices against women, their manifestations, the women right and wellbeing as well as how to overcome these challenges.

Some of us here are not legally married; we were in what could be classified as imposed marriages, which were as a result of one circumstance or the other relating to traditional practices in our various communities. Due to so many circumstances, some, if not most of us did not go to school and as such, are simply the properties of our husbands and families who prefer using us at will (FGD participant).

Equally, there are evidences that the women are ready for education platforms that could help enlighten and empower them to overcome the challenges.

We are indeed, passing through so many challenges due to traditions and culture in our various communities. However, we seem to be helpless due to lack of information and empowerment to face the challenges and help ourselves. But, we are ready for any help that will come from other women and organizations willing to assist women in this area to overcome the age-long painful traditions against women (FGD participant).

The major challenge of women in this area in confronting the age long cultural practices affecting their lives is education, which is empowerment in itself. Many women in these communities did not go to school and are not likely to find their ways into school anymore because of family orientations and poverty. However, they are ready to learn from any other means of education that can help to enlighten them about the problem of cultural practices that affect women and how to overcome them (IDI key informant).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Women vulnerability to gender-based harmful cultural practices is related to the community-based associations in the rural communities as demonstrated by this study. However, this is connected to other factors such as education age, family history, residential location etc. While education point to the relevance of individual and community enlightenment in this context, age exposes the essence of experience in the system and resistance due to impacts of these practices. As other studies have proven, education is a key to women liberation as it becomes the empowerment nexus in the absence of collective force in confronting gender-based violence (Brahmapurkar, 2017). While the family history in this context projects the negative impact of age long gender-based violence as family practices, the vulnerability of women due to family history of domestic violence against women also can be linked to education and enlightenment among the women. Education among the women is a sort of empowerment, which can be effective even in self decision making and liberation. Similarly, residential location among the women is connected to the chances of vulnerability to harmful cultural practices among the rural women. This is predicated on the fact that the more the distance of the communities from the nearby urban centres, the more likely they can be vulnerable to harmful cultural practices. As other studies have shown, the urban communities have some ways of sloughing off the elements of harmful cultural practices owing to the presence of development and modern organizational structures capable of checkmating and exposing gender-based violence (Tesfaye et al., 2022; Gebrekirstos, Abebe& Fantahun, 2014; Abebe, Beyene & Mulat, 2021).The rural communities are the most difficult areas to implement certain laws and policies in Nigeria. The reason in some cases is that there is always a big gap between the urban communities that house the government seat of power and the rural communities. Also, the implementation of whatever government policy and order are not easily respected as the communities are mostly run by the traditional institutions (Zadawa & Omran, 2020; Daka & Tamira, 2019). This equally shows the reason why most of the women and feminist movements in Nigeria are relatively ineffective owing to the fact that they are mainly concentrated in the urban areas. Due to the dominance of the traditional institutions in the rural communities, which are patriarchally designed, there is always difficulty for women to present traditionally contraband cases such as harmful practices against women and girls before appropriate authorities (Olusegun & Oyelade, 2022).

Harmful cultural practices against women in the developing nations such as Nigeria are still thriving in the rural communities where little or no effort is made to track and eradicate the problem. The problem as the present study focused to explore, is more of self regenerating among the women in the rural communities. Among other things, the problem of harmful cultural practices among the rural population is thriving on the structure of family institution such as what has been classified in this study as endogenous traditional practices connected to family history of gender-based violence. In any case, some of the observed harmful cultural practices among the population, which seems to be silent at the public sphere, are now heavily practiced within the family circle. More importantly, these practices at the family level are sustained by the cycle of women training, which the mothers in the families do and maintain with their female wards. This confirms Giddens thesis of cultural reincarnation, which he termed duality of the structure and agency. The structure of the operation and practices of these cultural antics against women's wellbeing is established unconsciously through some age long practices confirming the duality thesis and the finding of recent studies (Giddens, 1977; Dahal, Joshi & Swahnberg, 2022). The study by Madiba and Ngwenya (2017) and Akama (1985) pointed out similar situations where women cult among the Mpumalanga, and Isoko people came to be translated as institutional framework to unconsciously reinforce gender-based cultural practices against women and girls.

Previously, much attention in understanding harmful cultural practices among the rural population has been focused on the men involvement in the implementation of the practices; however, as this study has demonstrated, there is a connective cycle among the women, as implementation of harmful cultural practices in any society cannot be successful without the collaboration of women. For instance, female genital mutilation is done by women. This applies to similar elements of harmful

cultural practices in which women play some significant roles. The finding here corroborates the studies by (Kaplan et al, 2016; Dekel, Abrahams & Andipatin, 2019) showing how women unconsciously promote some aspects of harmful cultural practices in the system for one reason or the other.

Ignorance and poverty among the women have been shown by other researchers as impactful on the cycle of harmful cultural practices among the rural population especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Brahmapurkar, 2017; Wadesango, Rembe & Chabaya, 2011; Okongwu, 2021). While these are seen at the surface as common socioeconomic problem, in this study, their deep sustainability impact on the cycle of harmful cultural practices against women among the rural population has been revealed. The cyclical interaction between poverty, illiteracy and harmful cultural practices against women among the rural population can be understood through the way poverty impairs the opportunity of girl child education and eventually create a breeding ground for early marriage and women vulnerability to the system they lack knowledge and power to change. Without women empowerment through education, illiteracy and poverty will continue to place women in a susceptible condition before the men-dominated system where harmful cultural practices against women are the order of the day. In a similar understanding, the studies by Ajala (2016) among Nigerian women, Dahal, Joshi and Swahnberg (2022) among Nepalese women, and Elmusharaf, Byrne and O'Donovan (2017) among Renks in south Sudan showed that poverty and illiteracy are still relevant in the chronic disease of harmful cultural practices against women among rural communities the developing nations. In Giddens theoretical legacy, there are the concepts of agency and transformation as well as determinism and voluntarism. These concepts find manifestation among these women and equally chances of fulfilment. In Giddens thesis, when the agent in the system takes responsibility, they can transform the system to suit their survival after all they are the ones giving the structure and the system life. Equally, these can be realized when there are some elements of determination and voluntary actions. In the present situation, the women are the ones giving some of the elements of harmful cultural practices against women life in the families and the communities at large. However, these elements of harmful cultural practices can be gradually phased out with the women determination to do so. As was discovered in this study, the women are willing to confront the problem and this can be actualized with the help of adult education. As one of the core agenda of adult education, education without a border, which captures the out of the school population is designed to inculcate the knowledge and values needed for survival in the society especially among the adult population that could not partake in the early stage education with their peers. As such, the implication of the nature and dimensions of harmful cultural practices against women observed among this local population is that the adult and continue education is much in need among the population as a panacea to the cycle of harmful cultural practices against women, which are feeding on illiteracy, poverty and powerlessness of the women in these rural communities.

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