Communication and Decision Making in Nigerian Family System

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Abstract
Nigeria is culturally a patriarchal society, communication system in the family seems to follow autocratic pattern and decisions are mostly that of the head of the family—the husband and father of the house. This pattern of relationship is also helped by the two most distinct religions (Christianity and Islamic) practiced in the land. Since the man dominates decision-making process, it therefore means the pattern of communication within the family will also be shaped by him. The low or non participation in decision-making at home and in the community by women limits their access to economic resources, information and empowerment leading to high rate of poverty in Nigeria. Women and children are always at the receiving end of all odds in the family system in Nigeria. This paper is therefore interested in looking at the pattern of communication and decision making in the family system in Nigeria and how these have affected the development of the family and empowerment of women.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Family System, communication, Decision making, Women

Introduction
Several studies on spousal communication and decision making in the family have demonstrated that interaction within the family set up is influenced by education, place of residence, spousal age difference, religion, age at marriage, type of union, wife rank (in polygamous marriages) and mate selection (Gage, 1995, Meekers and Oladosu, 1996; Oyediran, 1998). In Nigeria society, traditional norms and practices limit women’s autonomous decisions on issues that affect their lives; men due to the patriarchal influence of the Nigerian society exercise significant influence in the household decision-making processes (Kola, Oyediran and Odu sola, 2004). Kola et al posited that the economic crisis of the early 1980s and the associated worsening poverty have made men’s resources to dwindle in an increasing fashion. To meet the various needs of their household have been extremely difficult. Invariably women’s contributions to the family purse have increased tremendously.

Within an integrated family structure, the strength of the dominant party may be influenced by personal wealth, access to resources of other family members and cultural preferences particularly in patriarchal societies. It is understandable that the focus of household decision–making and the flow of communication are both determined by who controls and allocates economic resources within the family (Kola et al: 7). In Nigeria and in most patriarchal societies it is the man that has the economic power and like the popular saying “he who pays the piper dictates the tunes”. The man dominates decision-making process and this go a long way to shape the pattern of communication within the family.
THE STRUCTURE OF THE FAMILY

People probably have different views and definitions of what constitutes a family. What an individual might consider part of his family might be different to someone else. A family can consist of individuals who have some connectivity whether by science in which genetics are at play, or by giving an individual, animal, or object attributes that will make them part of your family. It is difficult to have a concrete definition of what actually makes a family but it is clear that throughout time many aspects of the family have remained the same. As society becomes more advanced and open the vision of the family has changed and will continue to do so in the future.

The function and structure of the family has changed throughout centuries from conservative and interdependent into a more liberal and independent one. Throughout history the father was the main figure in the family responsible for the education of the children, wellness of the family and economic support. A family can be seen as an organization in which the father is the most important figure responsible for the wellness of the family. Throughout time the role of the father has diminished rapidly in the family. Today it is not only the father that runs and makes decisions for the family; the role of the mother has expanded as she takes control over some of the responsibilities that the father used to have.

There are many factors that explain why the role of the father has diminished in recent decades; one of the major reasons is the increasing economic strength and opportunities available to family members which have led to more independence.

THE ROLE OF THE FATHER IN THE FAMILY

Social scientists often emphasize the role of fathers in the family system, and how their actions affect the entire environment and context in which a child grows. One of the most important ways a father influences that environment is in his interaction with his spouse. This is because the relationships which children observe and experience at an early age influence their own relationships later in life. It is also because family relationships are interrelated—the way the mother and father interact affects the mother-child relationship as well as the father-child relationship. Because of this interrelatedness, parents who have a strong and happy relationship have a head-start to being good parents (Cummings and O’Reilly, 1997).

The man is the head of his family in Nigeria whether in the north which is predominantly Islamic or in the Christian dominated south. His roles in the family is all embracing, his decision in all things is sought by all the members of the family, he may or may not seek the opinion of his wife on issues bothering on the welfare and survival of the family even when he does it does not mean he will follow the spouse’s advice. Even issues that affect the wife reproductive health are left in the hand of the husband, no wonder then women lives are in jeopardy in a patriarchal system like Nigeria.

The women folks are subjugated, disempowered and pauperized. In most societies in Nigeria they are seen as an object that can be owned as a property not as co-owner or as a partner in the progress and survival of the family. The father sees himself in the mirror of his culture that gives him power over everyone in his family; hence he does as he pleases with no one to put him in check whenever his decision runs contrary to that of the majority in his family. His roles in the family which are socially and culturally defined and prescribed are that of caring and providing for all the members of the family in all spheres of life.

The man also sees himself as a protective shield and as a pavilion through which everyone in the family view the outside world. In terms of decision-making in general, women’s inferior status and lack of power limit couple’s communication. When there is lack of free flow of information and when communication is restrictive, there is bound to be fear and trepidation within the family which can lead to a total breakdown. All these practices are very common in Nigerian traditional family system.

In contemporary Nigeria, particularly among the working class, most families rely upon the incomes of both husband and wife. But, fathers still provide the lion’s share of the family income. Husbands are either the sole earners or the main earners in most households. Moreover, fathers’
earnings are uniquely linked to many positive results for children, even when mothers' earnings are taken into consideration.

It is important to note that if the wife can positively count on her husband help with keeping the house clean and in good repair, caring for the children, paying the bills, and planning for the future; she probably will be a happier, more effective and more supportive of her husband, but this is not the case in most Nigerian family set up. The support a woman receives from her husband can even help her be more competent and sensitive during the time she attempts to feed and care for her baby. Mothers seem to gain the most security when they are married and know the father is committed to a lifelong relationship to her and their child (Pleck, 1984; Durrett, Otaki, and Richards, 1984).

In an affectionately warm atmosphere, where the father and the mother have effective and evaluative system of communication, decision making is less autocratic and more democratic, the mother tends to provide more emotional warmth for her husband, children and other relatives alike. The husband provides a strong sense of security for everyone in the family. While children usually depend on their mothers for unconditional love, they often must earn their father's approval. While mothers soothe their children more often, fathers often provide more stimulation. All parents—both mothers and fathers—have important roles in rearing their children. The better the appreciation of where fathers figure fits in the family system the better and happier the family, leading to productive children. Fathers' affection and increased family involvement help promote the wife's and children's social and emotional stability and development.

EFFECTS OF WHO MAKE DECISION IN THE FAMILY

Scholars, like Kola et al have argued that change in income generating capacity of partners precipitates a change in household decision-making prerogatives. They see poverty at the core of household decision-making and communication determinants. An important determinant of poverty, on the other hand, is low women participation in decision-making at home and in the community (UN, 2000), this pattern limits their access to economic resources and empowerment.

This seemingly feminization of poverty has aggravated the gap between women and men caught in the web of cyclical poverty in Nigeria. The scenario has not only increased the clamor for more autonomy and improved status for the women folks, within the household and society, but has increased the desire of women for gainful employment in areas regarded as preserves of men. Nigerian society is patriarchal and the male or husband is the major decision-maker, especially in issues relating to the family matters (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994; Feyisetan, 2000; Oyediran, 2002). Within a patriarchal dominant structure, a woman has virtually no decision-making authority while communication pattern seems to be vertical in nature - a kind of master servant model - the man or husband dictates the flow of communication. His mood dictates the pattern and nature of communication flow within the family. He is the one everybody in the family looks up to for sustenance. The woman receives the least with respect to resource allocation (Oyediran, 1998; Cladwell and Cladwell, 1987).

Nigerian society is heterogeneous but it is at the same time homogenous in according low status to women; and societal norms convey little need for marital partners to communicate their desires to each other (Kola et al, 2004). Because of this, decision-making on family-related issues are prone to external influences (relatives, friends), whereas wives preferences are probably shaped to a large extent, by familial norms and pressures (Cladwell and Cladwell, 1987).

According to WHO (1995) Nigerian couples tend to come under pressures form husbands, mothers or other female relatives into starting or increasing their family. The nuclear family in the present day Nigerian operates outside the traditional extended family control structure, but despite this family life is dominated by the male. Some cultural practices have been restructured as a result of education but the conventional family relationships and gender roles have not been completely overhauled even among the most urbanized and westernized citizens (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994; and Makinwa- Adebusuyi, 1992).
In patriarchal society, women according to Fapohunda and Todaro, (1988) and Feyisetan (2000), are seen as exercising little or no control over their economic or reproductive lives. Nevertheless, the amount of control men have over their wives varied from place to place; this might change over time and could be influenced by several factors.

Literature evidently shows that the Yoruba women of southern Nigerian traditionally generate autonomous incomes from their involvement in such economic activities as petty trading and farming. It is apparent today that women venture in to occupations originally considered the preserve of their male counterparts. This according to Fapohunda and Todaro (1988) and Fayisetan (2000) permits them to assume primary financial responsibility for their children. This situation howbeit avail them the opportunity to take independent decisions on certain issues or participate in decision –making, and initiate effective communication within the family system. It is note worthy that with decision-making in general, women’s inferior status and lack of power limit couple communication.

For many women traditional female gender roles means they have little say in sexual matters and lack the status to influence their partner’s behavior. Even when men and women discuss reproductive health issues, it is usually not unequal terms. Evidently WHO (1995:9) shows that men’s views are more dominant than women views in making family decisions.

Traditional cultures often discourage married women form initiating discussions about contraception, as men may feel there is nothing to discuss or no need to take account of their wives feelings and opinions. Male dominance in countries like Nigeria, India and Kenya is a major obstacle to spousal communication and decision-making concerning family planning. It is not unlikely, that unfaithful if she tries to discuss contraception with the husband (Fort, 1986) the degree of adherence to this position varies form are ethnic group to another. Kritz and Makinwa – Adebusoye (1992) show that adherence is very low among the Yoruba, Ibo and Ijaw.

Literature is still replete with the centrality of the control and allocation of economic resources in spite of the prevalence of cultural factors in domestic communication and decision-making (Fapohunda and Todaro, 1988), changes in income generating capacity of spouses re-directs reproductive decision–making prerogatives. Women with greater control of material and social resources tend to make more inputs into household decision–making (Dixon, 1993).

Poor women participate less in household decisions relative to the non-poor. Communication with their spouses is low because of their low economic status. The patriarchal culture rarely encourages communication between marital couples but to a large extent promotes male dominance in terms of decision-making in various aspect o human lives.

The domineering role of men in decision-making processes principally resulted from their control of resources and their desire to lead in all spheres of the family endeavors. The submissive position of women as well as their relative ‘confinement’ and societal norms that convey little need for interaction between husband and wife are also outcomes of the patriarchal family structure.

However, contact with western culture as well as modernization has tremendously affected every facet of life in the Yoruba speaking areas of Nigeria, including the family. Some aspects of family life affected include familial decision-making process. The reforms that are taking place in Nigeria and most especially among the Yoruba have also been advanced by the rapid spread of universal education as well as participation of women in the former sector of the economy (Oyediran, 2002; 59).

Many women have been empowered to participate in decision-making that affect their family in general and themselves in particular especially on economic, family size, and other planning issues. It is evident in literature that spousal communication about family size and the use of contraceptives for example is rare among substantial proportions of couples in sub-saharan African societies (Salway, 1994; Isiugu-Abanihe, 1997b; Meekers and Oladosu, 1996). The extent and nature of husband-wife interaction has been found according to Oyediran (2002) to vary according to demographic, cultural and socio-economic profiles of individuals and the couple.

Studies have shown that people living in the urban areas are more likely to have access to radio, television and other sources of mass communication, which are more likely to influence or enhance egalitarianism between couples (Meekers and Oladosu, 1996). Others related works have also
shown that communication and decision making on family matters were more common in the cities than in rural areas among the Yoruba of Nigeria (Donovan, 1995; Kritz and Makinwa – Adebusoye, 1995).

The status of women within the household is not only influenced by their ability to procreate, but also by how marital partners are selected as well as the rank of the wife within a marriage (this applies to polygynous unions). The rank of a wife may also determine the influence she wields within a marriage, with the first wife typically having an edge over subsequent wives (Mott and Mott, 1985; Otite, 1991; Entwiste and Coles, 1990).

According to Otite (1991) a senior wife in a polygynous family among the Igbo is usually consulted an important issues affecting the family. In addition the type of marriage may also influence a woman position within marriages, women in polygynous unions are often much younger than their spouse (Mott and Mott, 1995), leading to subordination of the wife and this makes communication and decision-making difficult due to culture of age related difference (Feyisetan, 2000).

In Yoruba culture, the rights to choose a polygynous marriage are the sole prerogative of the husband, and it is often associated with low status of women and inequality within the marriage (Boye, Hill, Isaacs and Cordis, 1991). It is also pertinent to note that in societies where girls marry at early ages (Gage, 1995) leading to a wide age gap between spouses, communication and decision-making processes may be inhibited thus perpetuating a situation of male dominance in the marriage and in the family (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994b). The younger the woman, especially if she is much younger than her husband, the less the potency of her effective communication and her possible involvement in decision-making in the family processes.

Some studies (Gage, 1995; Oyediran, 1998) have suggested that the pattern of mate selection also affect the level of interaction between husband and wife. In traditional African society, women had little freedom of choice in matters pertaining to marriage and role in spouse’s selection. Though, there is a decline in the prevalence of arranged marriages in Nigerian society today (Meekers, 1995; Pilon, 1994; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1995).

Intellectuals have also related religion to communication and decision making within the family. Religion is a system of beliefs and practices, which for its adherents has significant impact on their behavior and position within the family system. The husband largely decides where to worship and the roles the members of the family are to play in a chosen place of worship.

CONCLUSION

In Nigeria even up till now poor women participate less in household decisions relative to the non-poor. Communication with their spouses is low because of their low economic status. The patriarchal culture rarely encourages communication between marital couples but to a large extent promotes male dominance in terms of decision-making in various aspects of human lives.

The domineering role of men in decision-making processes principally resulted from their control of resources and their desire to lead in all spheres of the family endeavors. The submissive position of women as well as their relative ‘confinement’ and societal norms that convey little need for interaction between husband and wife are also outcomes of the patriarchal family structure.

Women in Nigeria need to be empowered educationally and economically to be able to face the various challenges and responsibilities in the family, while husbands must be re-oriented towards care, good and enduring marital relationships with their wives, for proper nurture and upbringing of their children. Gender roles differentials should be replaced with gender mainstreaming in Nigeria social life so as to catch up with global changes in women participation in all spheres of life where men were formerly dominant. Men and women should no longer be regarded as ‘opposites’. The important thing to remember is that mothers and fathers often bring different strengths and styles to their parenting roles. These roles complement each other, and are each necessary for healthy childrearing.
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