A Cultural-Institutional Perspective on Widows' Empowerment in Rural Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the empowerment of widows in the context of how they can use provisions from indigenous groups to address challenges facing them in their rural communities. In advancing a cultural-institutional analysis of widows' empowerment in rural Nigeria, the paper argues that poor widows can solicit the support of indigenous groups to address their life challenges. In this paper, indigenous support groups (ISGs) refer to various local channels of support widows can utilise to enhance their wellbeing in Nigerian rural communities. An exploratory approach was employed in this study, and data were gathered through observation and semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 48 widows in rural communities in Abia State Nigeria. The study revealed various ways the widows negotiated their empowerment by relying on supports from indigenous groups in their communities. The study also uncovered social capital characteristics in the supports provided by the indigenous support groups, which contributed original data to women's development literature. The paper concludes that for more effective initiatives in widows' empowerment, the indigenous groups should work in collaboration with other development agencies, as they have a better understanding of the widows' vulnerabilities and empowerment at the grassroots level.

Introduction

There is a growing consensus that the empowerment of women, especially widows, can lead to considerable benefits including enhancing their control of relevant resources,

strengthening their self-esteem and improving individual skills and knowledge (Young 2006). The empowerment of widows has been a conspicuous topic in human development scholarship; however, the current empowerment discourse seems to primarily investigate the contribution of aid organisations to the success of women's development in most developing countries (Fisher1998). The understanding of how widows experience support from indigenous support groups (or what some literature may refer to as community-based organisations) has received minimal attention (Swidler 2009). The continued focus on aid organisations in contemporary discourse appears to overshadow other actors that can be relevant in widows' empowerment. Furthermore, it is arguable that the empowerment literature is Western-centric and as such has made little attempt to investigate the contribution of traditional groups and societies in advancing the empowerment of widows in recent times.

In Nigeria, as well as other developing countries, widows tend to encounter different challenges due to contextual differences related to culture and norms (Ezeakor 2011). Nigerian rural areas comprise cultural institutions and social repertoires that offer important benefits to the wellbeing of widows. These include clan and kinship networks, women associations and the ever-growing presence of religious groups in development initiatives (Berger 2003). It is important to evaluate how widows can use these cultural repertoires for empowerment. Moreover, since most challenges affecting rural widows emerge from their culture, it is pragmatic to contextualise their empowerment from the cultural dimension.

Against this background, this paper aims to contribute to the body of knowledge by investigating how widows negotiate empowerment within their sociocultural environment. In furthering knowledge of widows' empowerment, the paper argues that indigenous supports, much like economic resources (utilities), are valuable in the empowerment of women, especially those at the grassroots. This perspective is used to contextualise the widows' experiences, thereby unfolding institutional, cultural and normative systems in Nigerian rural communities that sustain widows' empowerment and agency. Specifically, this study examines the meanings widows attach to their experiences of support provided by indigenous sources in their communities. This is expected to shed light on how widows' interpretation of their experiences constitutes and constructs their conception of empowerment. For the larger goals of the paper, it is expected that the realities of the widows' constituted meanings would eventually be employed in affecting needed policy shifts in the empowerment strategies.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows: the second section presents the economic and sociocultural context of widows in Nigeria. The third section provides a review of the literature on utility and cultural-institutional theories of women empowerment. The fourth section discusses the methodology adopted. The fifth covers the findings of the study and discussion, while the final section draws a conclusion and discusses the policy implications of the study.

Economic and Sociocultural Factors That Affect Widows in Nigeria

Despite its wealth in natural resources and human capital, poverty is still widespread in Nigeria. Women (especially widows) in rural areas are more vulnerable to poverty (Alese 2013). This is because women are more likely than men to be unemployed and have fewer means of generating an income (Nwokoro and Chima 2017). Men also have the capacity to migrate from the villages in pursuit of work in the cities, while cultural norms, including being responsible for caring for children and the home, make this nearly impossible for women. Due to poor infrastructural development and productivity, and limited access to financial institutions, education and information technology, rural widows find it difficult to gain access to the labour markets. Most poor rural widows are compelled to resort to local or menial jobs, which do not provide enough income to support themselves and their households. In most remote rural communities, a lack of good roads and transportation affects access to city employment and markets. The absence of financial institutions (banks) where women can loan or save their money has been noted as one of the challenges that they face in accessing credit facilities. Despite significant effort by the government to introduce economic reforms, the economy is still perceived to be characterised by uncertainty, high unemployment levels, inequitable income distribution, rising external debts and large fiscal budget deficits (Nwokoro and Chima 2017).

A key cultural factor that affects widows in Nigeria is gender role stereotypes. Nigeria is a patriarchal society and there are traditional differentiations of gender roles. These gendered role differentiations subjugate the women and place them below the men. This cultural orientation is more prevalent in the rural areas (Nwokoro and Chima 2017). The highly patriarchal orientation in rural settings tends to give men control over women's productive and reproductive abilities. In this way, women become men's subjects for life. Being subjected to a second place in life could also impede women's entitlement to rural assets like land and livestock, which constitute essentials of their livelihood. In some parts of Nigeria (especially in Southeast Nigeria), if a woman's husband dies and she didn't produce a male child, her deceased husband's properties are taken by the kinsmen, leaving her with nothing (Jackson 2003). Widowhood tends to limit women's entitlement to family or kinship property in most parts of Nigeria (Ezeakor 2011). With the death of their partners, widows could lack proper social recognition and respect (Jackson 2003; Moore 1988). In some cases, widows are forced to remarry within the kinship group in order to retain their husbands' property. In some parts of Southeast Nigeria, women can only access landed property through a male proxy such as a brother-in-law or adult son (if she has one) (Nwankwo 2001). If she doesn't have any male child or supportive male in-law, it may be practically impossible to get access to needed assets or support. The hegemonic nature of patriarchal cultures compels widows to accept their conditions and live with the constraints (Korieh 1996). Women are affected by the harsh effects of widowhood due to deprivations of required social services and legal rights (Falana 2010; IFAD 2010; Jega 2006; Nchuchuwe and Adejuwon 2012; Sossou 2002).

Aid Organisations and Widows' Empowerment in Rural Nigeria

Given the poverty of rural women (as pointed out above) in Nigeria, various empowerment programmes have been initiated to alleviate this condition. According to Awojobi and Bein (2011, 17), these programmes include the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), the Better Life for Rural Women programme, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (NEEDS), the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP). To date, none of these programmes have been successful (Adegoroye and Adegoroye 2008; Awojobi and Bein 2011). With the continued precariousness of government intervention programmes, corruption and high level of poverty in the country, attention was shifted to aid organisations, which were charged with the responsibility of dispensing charity and relief to impoverished rural women. In particular, the most referred to in these development discourses are the faith-based and secular aid organisations (secular non-governmental organisations) (Berger 2003; Davis et al. 2011; James 2009). However, despite the support of these humanitarian agencies, there are still an outstanding proportion of widows who are living in abject poverty, hardship and vulnerability in rural communities in Nigeria (Amakom 2008).

To this end, this study as its primary aim investigates alternative sources that widows can use to alleviate hardships facing them within their sociocultural environment. This is especially necessary as Chambers (2008) noted that the best way of evaluating any form of service delivery is through the voice of beneficiaries. They can offer more honest and genuine information because of their lived experiences.

Theoretical Framework: The Cultural-Institutional Perspective of Empowerment

As this paper aims to examine how widows negotiate their empowerment within their social environment, the evaluation of their empowerment is construed from the cultural-institutional perspective. The cultural-institutional perspective is a fairly new approach, and has not received as much attention as the opportunity structure approach in empowerment discourse (Lamont 2009). The opportunity structure or utility theory which dominates extant literature, whereby social wellbeing is judged by some utility-based criteria, was pioneered by traditional welfare economic propositions (Alkire 2002; Robeyns 2003). The main message championed by this school of thought is that wellbeing is linked to economic improvement (especially as poverty was considered a growing global issue), which should thus be the focus of upcoming development actors (Robeyns 2003). The standard approach was the provision of monetary support and other utilities to assist pro-poor development in the underdeveloped parts of the world (Alkire 2002). This perspective also champions the effectiveness of development agencies or aid organisations to respond to the needs of their beneficiaries through their pro-poor development services (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2005; Jejeeboy 2000; Malhotra and Schuler 2005; Narayan 2002; 2005; Samman and Santos 2009).

Although the utility perspective has received much empirical support, there is justifiable need for the inclusion of other perspectives in examining the empowerment of widows, especially in rural areas. Scholars (Anggadwita et al. 2017; Evans 2009; Hall and Lamont 2009; Hall and Taylor 2009) argue that development literature fails to acknowledge the cultural-institutional dimension of empowerment and the various ways women may enhance their capability through support from indigenous groups (ISGs). This observation points to a gap of knowledge, one which would require an assessment of how cultural institutions of support offer alternative sources widows at the grassroots can use to empower themselves. This gap is especially conspicuous because, in the developing world, cultural institutions such as axial religious groups, kinship and women's social networks are readily available sources of empowerment (Swidler 2009).

The cultural-institutional perspective developed by Hall and Lamont (2009) and Hall and Taylor (2009) opines that since most of the vulnerabilities of people are framed within their cultural settings, it is important to assess their empowerment from the context of how they can use support from their cultural institutions to enhance their wellbeing (Hall and Taylor 2009). This is because it is arguable that these cultural institutions or indigenous support groups have a better understanding of the vulnerabilities faced by traditional women (Swidler 2009). This approach assesses how widows can resolve their challenges using their social networks which can be derived from their immediate social environment. The communal nature of most African societies can enable social relations and networks that are beneficial to the wellbeing of people, which include kinship, clan and axial religious groups (Swidler 2013). The ever-present nature of these indigenous groups ensures opportunities for receiving timely support for the poor (Evans 2009). People's culture inculcates in them civic values such as communal living, compassion, justice and fairness (Swidler 2009). Hall and Taylor (2009) stress that there are many dimensions of social relations that constitute social resources (much like economic resources) which disempowered women can harness in traditional societies.

Moreover, the discussion of the contributions of indigenous groups uncovers the issue of social capital these groups can bring to the widows' empowerment thesis. Putnam (2000), Bourdieu (1986 [2011]), Kilpatrick, Field, and Falk (2003), Gilchrist (2004) and Woolcock (2001) argue for the huge source of solidarity and trust (social capital) in cultural institutions of support. Trust in particular can enable one to receive cooperation from others in addressing life problems. Trust and solidarity are norms of reciprocity that enable individuals to develop motivation, commitment and reactiveness to others' problems (Kilpatrick, Field, and Falk 2003). These norms of reciprocity and collective imaginaries are internalised from culture and society, and allow people to engage in civic responsibilities (Inglehart 1999; Putnam 2000). The communal lifestyle of the people encourages solidarity, love, and a mutual and collective response to the needs of members of the community. Extant literature confirms that social relationships could provide resources (much like economic resources) for coping with life challenges (Evans 2009; Gilchrist 2004; Hall and Lamont 2009; Hall and Taylor 2009; Kilpatrick,

Field, and Falk 2003; Putnam 2000; Swidler 2009; 2013). In particular, people can derive support from their social groups by virtue of their membership and mutual values inculcated in members that lead to engagement in civic responsibilities (Norris and Inglehart 2011; Putnam 2000).

Hence, in this theoretical framework two major points are highlighted. First, despite the interest in women's empowerment and the insights offered by extant literature, important questions about widows' experiences of empowerment from the context of their cultural institutions remain unanswered. Second, since the provision of economic resources prevails in the extant literature, it is relevant to evaluate the lived experiences of the widows regarding how they negotiate their empowerment by using supports offered by cultural institutions. This will shed light on the contributions of ISGs to the widows' empowerment at the grassroots.

To investigate the above points, the study posed the following research question:

In what ways do widows negotiate empowerment within their sociocultural environment?

Negotiation in this case means the various sources the widows used to enhance their wellbeing. Sociocultural environment in this context means the widows' local community. The next section presents how we investigated this research question.

Methodological Approach

The process studied in this paper is how widows negotiate and experience empowerment in their communities. To capture the complexity of this process, we viewed widows' empowerment through a social constructionist perspective (Lindgren and Packendorff 2009) and with a qualitative ethnographic approach (Morgan and Smircich 1980). The environment created in a qualitative and ethnographic study makes it possible for us, as researchers, to act reflexively and continuously compare and evaluate the findings (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). As empowerment is something that can be experienced, observed and verbally described (Alvesson 2003; Draper, 2015; Johnstone 2007; Martin 2003), a mix of techniques was used including interviews, participation in formal and informal meetings and observations. Since social institutions (ISGs) are likely to be transparent and easier to observe in a rural community, due to the well-defined rural context, the ethnographic approach explains what the widows say they do and what they actually do (Angrosino 2005). The qualitative approach provides an appropriate means for gaining an in-depth insight into a hitherto under-researched phenomenon (Creswell 2007) and leads to the discovery of "richly detailed narratives of the lived experiences of individuals" (Fassinger 2005, 279). The interview method gives voice to women's experiences and is useful in understanding their meanings and interpretations (Creswell 2007). Because the research questions are exploratory in nature, the qualitative research methods have been shown to offer the most effective means of answering such questions (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). The methodological approach adopted was particularly

beneficial to this research because it allowed us to study the widows in their natural settings, at the grassroots.

The study, which lasted for seven months (January to July 2016), was conducted in Abia State, which is located in the south-eastern part of Nigeria. Abia State was selected because it is the only Ibo-majority state in Nigeria yet to promulgate effective laws to protect the rights of widows (Louder Please 2013; Owete and Odili 2015). This makes it one of the states in Nigeria where dehumanising widowhood traditions are still widely practised. A total of 48 widows were selected for this research. The widows were similar in the fact that they (1) defined themselves as poor widows who needed support, (2) sought support from ISGs, and (3) have a sort of connection to each other because of their widowhood condition. For reasons of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used. Thirty participants were selected from the list of four aid organisations in Abia State and the remaining 18 widows from informal networks through a snowballing process. This involved asking participants who agreed to participate to recommend other persons within their community who fitted the criteria. The snowballing approach has been found particularly useful for accessing hard-to-reach populations and for exploratory studies (Cornelius and Skinner 2008). Given the possibility of sampling bias due to the use of a non-purposive sampling method, we made efforts to minimise the possibility of this occurrence by seeking participants from a variety of "snowballing chains" (different networking sources) (Liamputtong 2007).

A total of 48 interviews were conducted with the widows, each lasting approximately 40–60 minutes. All the interviews were conducted privately with the participants. At the beginning of each interview participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of the confidentiality of the research process and permission was requested to record the interviews. They were also informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. The semi-structured interviews were used to gain an "authentic" understanding of the participants' perception and experiences of support from the aid organisations and/or ISGs. The participants were asked for personal biographical details (e.g., age, educational background, and years of widowhood). Consistent with the interpretive approach adopted in this study, the participants were asked a number of open-ended questions to understand their experiences and to probe deeper into some interesting emergent themes.

The data were analysed with the aim of identifying themes, issues and relationships that emerged from the data, in order to answer the research questions posed. Data analysis was iterative and was structured by recurrent patterns and organised into analytical themes. In line with the grounded theory approach to analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990), we started analysing the transcripts by developing codes (labelling verbatim statements of the participants), thereafter generated themes (based on common characteristics between codes) and then developed core categories (refining and amalgamating relevant themes). We coded each interview independently and when we disagreed upon certain themes, we asked the third researcher to do her own analysis of

the interview and compare her interpretation of the statement with our independent analysis. The few differences were reconciled through personal discussions. Data were analysed gradually after each interview. The interview and data analysis was stopped when theoretical saturation occurred (that is, the point at which it was perceived that themes were recurring and additional data collection was unlikely to reveal new insights). From the analysis, the experiences, perceptions and the challenges faced by the widows were uncovered. Parsimony was applied in presenting quotations. The findings section presents only illustrative quotations designed to demonstrate the consistency of views.

Findings

The analysis revealed that the widows negotiated empowerment within their sociocultural environment in three ways. Although the widows used the aid organisations' services which were provided to them, they went further to use alternative sources in their communities such as the support group called Esusu group that they formed on their own, using the support of widow groups and their religious networks. These alternative sources are categorised as indigenous support groups (ISGs). The study equally revealed distinct characteristics in the empowerment services of these indigenous groups. We concentrated on an analysis of the supports from the indigenous groups as this is the major focus of this paper.

The Esusu Group

The analysis revealed that about 30 widows confirmed that they formed a collective group called Esusu group to further support themselves. Only indigent widows of the community were allowed to be part of this group. This suggested collective agency widows may generate from eliciting the cooperation of others within their immediate environment. Two widows (Stella, FBO beneficiary and Anne, SBO beneficiary, respectively), reflecting upon the benefits of their collective group, said the following:

> The Esusu group helped us to start trusting each other and contributing money among ourselves to continue the project.

> We want only widows because we understand ourselves and it makes us do things well … We also have been able to share the work, everybody knows what their job is … unlike in the cooperative group we have made much progress and increased our gain.

Furthermore, there were other interesting issues that influenced the rationale for forming the Esusu group. The widows felt marginalised by the non-widows in their original cooperative groups set by aid organisations and decided to form a separate group. From the observations of the women in the cooperative and Esusu group meetings, the evidence suggested that the relationships within these two groups differed. The relationships among members in cooperative groups were mostly characterised by suspicion, envy, strife and discord. In the Esusu group, the widows freely expressed their solidarity, common interest, trust, and understanding. This trust and understanding

are expressed in various ways, such as the way they shared information on how to expand their livelihoods and seek external supports or pooled resources to engage in common goals. This is illustrated in the response of two participants (Rita, FBO beneficiary and Anne, SBO beneficiary, respectively) as follow:

> In the cooperative group, we were always quarrelling, our meetings will always end with a fight and we achieve nothing at the end of the day except fighting ourselves. We decided and formed the [Esusu] group … This [Esusu] is an opportunity to be strong and come together to deal with what concerns us.

> When we were in the cooperative we were achieving nothing … We knew we were more likely to get the money from the bank because we registered our [Esusu] group, that was what our priest advised us to do—to register as a widow group so that we can get the loan from ADB quickly and it worked.

Moreover, the Esusu groups provided a way of exercising control over decision-making for the widows. This was something that was impossible in the much larger cooperative groups. The Esusu group proved an important strategy for reaching other resources which could not be achieved at the individual level. This view is evidenced in the following quotations from participants (Christy, SBO beneficiary and Mary, FBO beneficiary, respectively):

> We got loans from the bank when we formed the Esusu group … Banks find it difficult to give you loan as a person …

> What can I say together we stand … We could access bank loans easily when we formed the Esusu group, and we also got support from government.

These widows' comments suggest that by forming the Esusu groups they could further pursue their goals outside the scope of the aid organisations' services. The widows' views showed how widows can operate autonomously to alleviate their vulnerabilities. This depicted the value of widows' collective agency in advancing their wellbeing. By forming and using the Esusu groups the widows became drivers of the empowerment process, which gave them capabilities in dealing with common challenges.

From the observation of the women's interactions in the Esusu groups, it was clear that there were distinct characteristics such as solidarity, mutual responsibility and commitment that allowed for the more positive outcomes compared to the cooperative groups. These are all attributes of social capital which are inherent in the repertoires of social relationships within the community. This view is captured in some of the widows' responses (Mary, FBO beneficiary, Theresa, SBO beneficiary, and Janet, FBO beneficiary, respectively) as follows:

> In our Esusu nobody claims they are better than the other, we trust each other and share things in common … We understand ourselves because we have the same problems and can tackle the problem together.

> There was no trust in the cooperative group it is always quarrels; in Esusu group we do things together because we want to achieve things together … We have to help each other.

> Together like a broom, that is the motto of the Esusu group.

The widows explain that they started the Esusu group to ensure unity and trust amongst the members, which was important for achieving their goals. Forming the Esusu group was a necessary action to ensure solidarity and common interest, which they lacked in the cooperative groups. The collective initiative was possible because of shared collective imaginaries and social capital (such as trust, solidarity, mutual responsibility and ties).

The Religious and Widow Groups—Social Networks

The majority of the widows (40 out of 48) confirmed that they receive support from the religious and widow groups in their community. The women had been using supports from the churches and widow networks long before the inception of aid organisations in their communities. Pentecostal and Orthodox churches were particularly prominent in supporting the widows in the communities. The entrance of the aid organisations in the late 1990s however decreased reliance on these local support groups. Eventually, the widows resorted back to using the churches and widow groups which were readily available. Specifically, the findings showed that widows used their membership and close ties in the community to elicit support from the widow groups[1] and churches. This view was shared by some participants (Theresa, SBO beneficiary and Mary, FBO beneficiary, respectively), as the following quotations illustrate:

> We could get this support because we are members of the widow group …

> These women support us because they understand what we are passing through and the community will come to our help.

> There [is] some help you cannot get elsewhere but from those who understand you and how you feel … because no one can understand more than those people who are passing the same problem like you.

The above quotations from the widows point to the sense of mutual responsibility, understanding and instilled values which are immanent in the widow groups. Moreover, the widows relied on these community support groups because they have more understanding of their needs than the aid organisations. The quotations from the

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[1] It is necessary to point out that the widow group is different from the Esusu group. The widow group is formed by proactive widows in various communities to support less privileged members. Moreover, the Christian women groups are different from the faith-based organisations, in the sense that the former are merely women groups established in local churches that support the development of the spiritual, physical and material wellbeing of their members. The FBOs are more organised development institutions that have structured programmes for supporting their beneficiaries.

following participants (Tina, SBO beneficiary and Beatrice, SBO beneficiary, respectively) demonstrate this:

> When we have problems, we go to our parish priest, and he immediately settles any conflict in meetings, this was no different with the aid organisations who always disappointed us.

> We trust the widow groups because they have an understanding of our needs … during the *mkpe* [widow mourning rituals], nobody can visit you in the house to give you words of consolation in your time of worries but the widows and church they will visit you and help you … this is something you cannot get from the aid organisations.

The researcher observed that some of the needs of the beneficiaries were beyond the provision of material support or financial capital. There were certain types of support the aid organisations could not provide. Domestic, emotional, cultural and familial supports were virtually missing in their services. For instance, during mourning, widows in the studied communities are banned from normal social activities and association with other community members. Only fellow widows are allowed to mingle with them. The widow groups provided support to widows in mourning, such as carrying out domestic chores for members, for example, fetching water and firewood or taking care of the children. In other cases, the church members provided food for widowed members and their families. The church groups also supported members during burials or memorial services of their deceased husbands or family members. The widow groups have also provided support to elderly widows without children who have been abandoned by family members, who are sometimes ostracised and branded as *mgbashi* (witches).

Discussion

In this study we focused on examining the various ways rural widows negotiate their empowerment within the context of their sociocultural environment. We argued that since most of the vulnerabilities of rural widows are framed within their cultural settings, it is important to assess their empowerment from the context of how they can use support from their cultural institutions to enhance their wellbeing. We have seen that in Nigerian rural areas, most widows are faced with cultural and economic restrictions that hinder their agency and general wellbeing. In addressing the limitations widows face, the study examined the way they negotiate their empowerment by using indigenous sources.

The cultural-institutional theory holds that people can deal with their challenges by eliciting the co-operation of others (Hall and Taylor 2009, 85). By employing this theory, the study was able to reveal how the widows used their collective and individual agency to address their challenges. From the analysis the widows demonstrated both collective and individual agency by using alternative sources in their environment. Sen (1985, 203) defined agency as "what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of

whatever goals or values he or she regards as important." Collective action is a key factor in women's empowerment because of its implications for poor women's life transformations at the grassroots (Evans and Nambiar 2013). This is the power to work with others to achieve a common goal. Due to the patriarchal nature of traditional societies, women are often denied access to needed assets. However, organised in collective groups, women are able to control resources and assets that were hitherto out of their reach (Riza 2013 as quoted in Evans and Nambiar 2013). Collective action creates more autonomy for poor widows to pursue goals which could have been difficult in an individual capacity (Kabeer 1999). Studies such as those by Evans and Nambiar (2013), Riza (2013 as quoted in Evans and Nambiar 2013), Kabeer (2003; 1999), and Nussbaum (2000) have shown how poor women are able to develop connections to rural resources through collective efforts. With the big institutional voids created by the government in the provision of needed financial assistance and basic amenities to support poor rural women (especially widows who are a more vulnerable group), an assessment of how these women can support themselves using immediate supports from their communities is essential and valuable (Swidler 2013).

Assessing widows' empowerment from the cultural-institutional perspective also uncovered social capital characteristics in the Esusu, widow and religious groups which enhanced the widows' empowerment. Social capital elements such as bonds, solidarity, trust and norms of reciprocity enabled the widows to share their problem together and address their problem from a collective dimension. It enabled the widows to pool resources together effectively to achieve their goals. Through their membership of religious and widow groups, the widows were able to receive emotional and domestic supports which were impossible to get elsewhere. Social capital can play a significant role in women's empowerment and development. It is based on the proposition that a network of social relations is a resource that may enable and/or constrain social and economic activities and outcomes (Adler and Kwon 2002).

As mentioned earlier, the communal nature of most developing societies can enable social relations and networks that are beneficial and important to the wellbeing of people, which include kinship groups and axial religious groups (Swidler 2013). The immanent presence of these social groups in their localities enables opportunities for receiving timely support for the poor widows (Evans 2009). In addition, people's culture can inculcate in them civic values such as communal living, compassion, justice and fairness which enable them to cooperate and help each other (Swidler 2009). Along similar lines, Hall and Taylor (2009) argue that people can use social resources much like economic resources in order to cope with life challenges. Social capital can lead to the achievement of economic outcomes, faster information flows and the efficiency of a society by aiding co-ordinated actions (Gilchrist 2004; Kilpatrick, Field, and Falk 2003; Woolcock 2001). Being part of a social network (characterised by shared norms, shared identity, trust and reciprocity) can give access to resources that were formerly inaccessible, thereby helping widows to escape the poverty trap (Ansari, Munir, and Gregg 2012).

Traditional societies have robust cultural systems that enhance norms of reciprocity and moral values that foster trust and solidarity for civic engagement (Swidler 2013). Indigenous groups can enhance social capital (trust and social ties) by tapping into cultural systems that work to buffer these characteristics in society (Inglehart 1999; Norris and Inglehart 2011). The study also revealed the implication of widows' social networks in assessing supports from community groups. The widows' local networks enabled them to have links to resourceful women (activists) who could link them to support they could not have reached in an individual capacity. This reflects how social networks (social capital) feed into the analysis of widows' empowerment at the grassroots. Thus, widows' networks (religious and widow groups) underpin the analogous representation of their capability and agency, in the sense that they help them to tap needed resources in the society.

Conclusion

Using the cultural-institutional perspective, this study provided a conceptualisation of widows' empowerment from the neglected context of the relevant roles of indigenous support groups (ISGs). The paper argued that since the challenges that widows face in developing societies are framed by their cultural milieu, their empowerment should be assessed from the perspective of how they can elicit supports from their cultural institutions. This study is particularly important given that few studies have been conducted to find out the role of indigenous support groups in the empowerment of widows at the grassroots. Yet in developing societies, kinship ties, axial religious groups and indigenous networks have been utilised by poor women in the past and present. However, due to the Western-centric focus of gender literature, traditional sources of information have often been deficient in women's development literature. This study went ahead to bridge this gap and lacuna in existing knowledge.

We saw from the study that the religious and widows' groups made a significant impact on the widows' empowerment in the rural communities. The formation of the Esusu groups pointed to the importance of widows' collective agency in the assessment of their empowerment. The collective group was possible because of the trust, solidarity and bond the widows shared. The trust, bond and solidarity, which are social capital characteristics, facilitated the desire to pool resources and function as a group in order to reach hitherto inaccessible resources. The Esusu groups enhanced the widows' autonomy and access to other resources they could not receive in an individual capacity. This finding is particularly significant since the issue of social capital is gaining importance in women's development literature.

The study highlighted the significance of indigenous groups in filling up institutional voids in local communities. The inception of aid organisations in the local communities was due to the government's unresponsiveness to the people's needs; however, the indigenous support groups (ISGs) to some extents provided succour to the widows because they were readily available to them. Widows at the grassroots level would consider relying on the local support groups more than the aid organisations' supports

because they are more available and accessible in dealing with their immediate problems. They are important in initiating better strategies for dealing with background vulnerabilities facing widows in communities because they are familiarised with the cultural framework that affects widows in traditional societies. The domestic and emotional supports the widows received from widow and church groups confirm this assertion.

Furthermore, considering the necessity for a policy shift and advancement of the roles of indigenous groups in the empowerment of widows in rural Nigeria, this paper offers the following recommendations:

1) There is a need for the development initiatives to assess the overall context of the widows' situations. Such an approach will prioritise the capacity of the widows to develop agency in dealing with their problems at individual and collective levels.

2) It is important for the government to identify and build partnerships with relevant actors involved in the widows' empowerment at the grassroots. This includes religious support groups, widow groups and their collective groups. Together they can bridge necessary gaps. This will enable the development initiatives to identify their strengths and potential for enhancing the push for policy change that will impact upon the lives of the widows. Government and other development actors can utilise the widows' social networks to collect basic information about the local widows, and how to deal with their challenges.

3) Other valuable roles the widows' social networks can play to strengthen the empowerment of widows at the grassroots level involve the following functions: (1) to articulate and relate the widows' needs to the government; (2) to provide information about the programme or scheme to communities of service users (widows); (3) to organise the communities to take advantage of the scheme in supporting widows' autonomy and wellbeing; and (4) to deliver services to a less accessible population of widows or serve as intermediaries to the government in reaching remote areas (Salmen and Eaves 1989). On the other hand, the government and other development actors should foster a more enabling environment for these social networks to be more effective in this role. In addition, to increase the capacity of social networks, they should be integrated into the design and implementation of the projects. This will enlighten them on the procedures and strategies that need to be adopted to benefit the widows.

4) A particularly cost-effective way of delivering results-orientated services recognises the importance of collaborating with people at the grassroots given their legitimate and informative strength (Clark 1995). As most of these indigenous groups are locally based and are not yet exposed to extensive funding, they can be reliable sources for channelling aid to poor widows without incurring too much expenditure.

This paper acknowledges some limitations in the context of other parts of Nigeria, as the study focused on a small sample of widows and just one state out of 36 states in Nigeria. Therefore, more research is required to examine the practical application of the established ideas through the evaluation of widows in other states of the country in order to understand their own experiences. Such an approach could consider a comparative study of widows' experiences of the support offered by ISGs in other states in Nigeria. This would lead to better understanding and outcomes in the overall study of the role of indigenous support groups (ISGs) in widows' empowerment in rural Nigeria.

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