

Potentials of Providing Sexual and Reproductive Health Information to Rural Women in Nigeria: A Challenge of Library Services

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Abstract:

While motherhood is a thing of joy, it is a source of sadness to many households as many women lose their life-giving birth in Nigeria. Every single day, Nigeria loses hundreds or thousands of lives, particularly local women of childbearing and sexually related issues. Discussions on reproductive and sexual health rights which had hitherto been a 'taboo' in traditional African societies are on the increase amongst African scholars. The need for women to have access to quality reproductive health services such as medical care, planned family, safe pregnancy, delivery care and treatment and prevention of sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV/AIDS is increasingly gaining recognition in Africa at large and Nigeria in particular. Sex and reproductive information are important for women everywhere, majority of women live in rural areas, they are the least knowledgeable and informed about reproductive health issues due to educational, economic and cultural factors that pose as barriers to reproductive health information seeking. The sharing or provision of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information to local women holds significant potential for improving health outcomes and empowering communities. This study buttresses the importance of sexual and reproductive health information dissemination on women's health knowledge, attitudes, and practices in a local context. By leveraging community-based programs, health education programmes and campaigns, information packaging and repackaging, outreach services, awareness and sensitization, advocating for rural women' health information services, and other effective strategies for enhancing SRH education and access to information which can leads to better reproductive health outcomes and improved overall well-being. Information needed to actualize this paper was gathered from secondary sources of data which were obtained from text books, journal articles, conference papers and online sources etc. this involves reading meaning into materials consulted for purpose of achieving a reliable conclusion.

Keywords: Information, Library, Sex and Reproductive Information, Rural Women, Nigeria.

Introduction:

Information remains the basic asset to individual, communities, organizations and nation at large, this is because no society can develop without adequate, timely and up to date information at their disposal, and preferably free of charge. Information has been identified as catalyst for empowering women to play proper societal roles and ensure their advancement. In particular, sexual and reproductive information have been identified as crucial for healthy human reproductively, if effectively shared and used by rural women. This will significantly help in mitigating the rate of mortality and morbidity among rural women. Sexual and reproductive health information among rural women has become an issue of concern due to high mortality rates recorded in recent times (Promise, 2021). Thousands of rural women are dying in silent and some are suffering from different health complications, as they have no information with which to decide on the proper line of action. They are marginalized in the provision of basic amenities such as healthcare services, education, etc. Women have right to access all the reproductive health services without any discrimination in the society.

Literature have shown that, sexual and reproductive process has been one of the leading causes of mortality among women in addition to high incidence of divorces that have to do with sexual issues. This contributed to lack of awareness and sensitization especially among rural women. Some local women may not seek Sex information because of confidentiality, lack of trust in healthcare providers, embarrassment, lack of awareness and knowledge of services and lack of knowing how to access information. Morris and Rushwam (2018) observed that rural women worldwide face challenges ranging from unwanted pregnancy to high rates of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, etc. Despite the need for reproductive health information for women of all categories without discrimination, those that live in the rural areas are excluded from various health programmes designed for the benefit of all. It is well-known fact that majority of mortality rate is highly occurred among rural women compare women living in city.

Despite the avalanche of information and services now available in the field of health, women who reside in rural areas lack the awareness and skills required to access them. As a result, they are vulnerable to different reproductive health challenges that would have been effectively dealt with if armed with adequate information. Ezema (2018) opined that there was a need for women in rural areas to have information to advance their reproductive health. The concept of health entails a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not just being free from a particular disease or ailment (Rushwam, 2018). Reproductive health, therefore, implies that individuals should have a responsible, satisfying, and safe sexual life. They also have the freedom, not only to reproduce but also to decide if, when and how to have children. Women need information in areas such as teenage pregnancy, family planning, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Harmful Practices and Reproductive Health

There are various harmful practices against women which contributed to reproductive ill health in Nigeria and constitute a violation of reproductive health rights. These include female genital mutilation (FGM), forced early marriage, traumatic puberty initiation rites, hard labor and delivery practices, wife inheritance and sexual hospitality practices. Some of these practices such as wife inheritance and group circumcision could facilitate the spread of HIV. Female genital mutilation/cutting is practices in many states in Nigeria in various forms from infancy to adulthood. The reason often cited for the practice of FGM is to reduce promiscuity among women. These practices cut across religious and cultural boundaries and the victims are unaware of the associated potential dangers such as haemorrhage, shock, and infections including Hepatitis B and

HIV/AIDS. The long-term complications of these harmful practices include psychological consequences, recurrent urinary tract infections, sexual dysfunction, chronic pelvic infection, infertility, prolonged obstructed labour, vesico-vaginal and recto-vaginal fistulae (VVF and RVF). Though there are several legislations against FGM in Nigeria, it is still prevalent because it is culturally rooted in the beliefs of the people.

Sexual and Reproductive health information needs of rural women

Rural women are entitled to reproductive health information, like their counterparts in urban areas. Reproductive health information is essential for women, whether they live in rural or urban settings. Therefore, the health information needs of women varies depending the condition or situation woman found herself. Ezema (2028) discovered that fertility, abortion-related information, management of untimely pregnancies, information on sexually transmitted diseases, rape and female genital mutilations are among the reproductive health information needed by rural women in the area. Similarly Sale (2020) reported that Rural women in Borno State, Nigeria, require reproductive health information on safe delivery, prevention, and management of vascular vaginal fistula (VVF), prenatal and postnatal care, and immunizations against childhood killer diseases.

In the study carried out by Ngwenya (2020) on the health information needs and health seeking behavior of rural women in Zimbabwe, the respondents indicated their health information needs relate to epidemics such as tuberculosis, prostate cancer, and cervical cancer, HIV/AIDS and Diarrhea. Also, Coraggio (2010) wrote on women's needs in developing countries, and discovered that the primary information needs of Ugandan women were reproductive health and birth control. These needs were not met due to a lack of access to information and the local clinics' inability to meet their demands.

Challenges Associate with Rural Women for Accessing Health Information:

There are several factors hinder the ability of rural women to access sexual and reproductive health information in Nigeria. These include their low level of education, limited availability of quality health facilities and services in the rural areas, shortage of health workers, and poor infrastructure³⁸. There is a considerably high percentage of illiterates among rural women and this poses a significant challenge to the process of accessing reproductive health information. Harande¹⁸, in his study on information service for rural communities in Nigeria, revealed a high rate of illiteracy among rural women.

Reproductive health information is sometimes packaged in formats not familiar to this group of users (Rural Women). Most of the information on available services are packaged in print and electronic formats. Rural women rarely access this information because of their enlightenment problems and lack of exposure. This, may limit their chance to access and utilize the available information. A reasonable percentage of rural women do not even see the importance of information about their reproductive health. They have little or no knowledge about dangerous diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. As a result, they do not see the need for information on preventing or managing such diseases. Lack of libraries and information centres is a contributing factor to poor access to health information. Library and Information professionals are responsible for packaging and repackaging information to the target audience (Rural Women).

Poverty level of the Rural Women

Majority of rural women live in poverty. These people are not financially stable and can hardly afford some essential medium of technology that could aid access to information on their health-related issues. Some of these gadgets include mobile phones, tablets, iPad, television, computer systems, radio set, and others. These media enhance the process of information access by rural dwellers, but unfortunately, most cannot afford to purchase them.

Language barrier

Given the fact that the majority of these females are illiterates, they can neither read nor write. Even when information is transmitted orally, they are still faced with the barrier of the second language. Invariably, this hinders their information access because they do not understand the language of the source.

Roles of library and information centers in provision of health information to rural women:

Libraries are custodians of knowledge and information, and it is one of the organization or institution that have suffered and undergo several changes and transformation to fit with the technological advancement just to remain relevance to its users. These services of library and information centers can be extended to rural women to help them access various services and information in health-related issues. The involvement of libraries in the provision of health information is not new, that in developed countries libraries provide health information materials to their users. Also, libraries in Africa and Nigeria in particular can do the same to save the life of thousands rural women.

Health Education Programmes and Campaigns

Libraries, information centers, information professionals in collaboration with health workers, can organize education programmes and campaigns geared towards addressing specific reproductive health challenges and equipping rural women with accurate and comprehensive information. Libraries can help significantly mitigating the rate of information illiteracy among rural women, and this will in the long run, enhance the process of access to sexual and reproductive health information. Libraries should have a positive impact to the community through the promotion of information literacy via the organization of educational activities like, adult literacy programmes, and mobile library services. Libraries in developed countries routinely advance these types of programmes.

Libraries should be strategic conducting these programmes by considering location, date, and time for the programmes have to be agreed upon by all stakeholders, especially the target audience. Most of the rural women are farmers and petty traders. They spend most of the time on their farms and markets. Relevant stakeholders must consider these before fixing the date and time. Traditionally and historically, for most rural areas, important events occur in what is regarded as 'village square'. The village square is a central location within a rural area where important ceremonies take place.

Information packaging and repackaging

Another aspect through which libraries can enhance access to sexual and reproductive health information for rural women is through the process of information repackaging. Information repackaging simply entails changing the physical format of the information resource to suit the status of the information users, (rural women). Most of the rural women are illiterates or semi-

literate and cannot read or write; it is therefore pertinent that information on reproductive health is repackaged in other media like audio, visuals, and audio-visuals to promote access.

Mobile library / Outreach services

It is high time for libraries to extend their services to persons in places where there are no libraries. This service involves the use of vans to convey information resources and library personnel to rural areas at periodic intervals. All the programmes mentioned above targeted at reproductive health information literacy can be implemented through mobile library services.

Awareness creation and sensitization

Libraries can create awareness and sensitizing rural women on trending sexual and reproductive health related issues through various media. The media include illustrated posters, leaflets, billboards and others. Ntlotlang and Grandi reported that public libraries in Botswana have successfully used brochures/leaflets, outreaches, and exhibitions to promote health information among library users. To facilitate better access to information among rural women, public libraries' role as community information gatekeepers cannot overemphasized.

Advocacy and sensitization of relevant agencies

libraries can sensitize governmental and non-governmental agencies to see the need to embark on the provision of necessary infrastructure useful for information dissemination and accessibility. These should include providing electricity, and information and communication technology (ICT) facilities through which access to health information can be achieved in rural areas.

Community engagement

For public libraries to effectively and efficiently render the services mentioned above, they must engage members of the community. They must adopt a workable community engagement model.

Advocacy for rural women' health information services

In recognition of the various reproductive health services and information needed by rural women, various countries have put programmes in place to help provide necessary services for women. Aside from the critical roles being played by government agencies in the provision of timely reproductive health information to rural women, non-governmental organizations provide complementary services. For example, in the United States of America, the Women's Health and Family Planning Association of Texas (WHFPT), which was founded in 1977, is dedicated to the idea that Texans, regardless of financial or insurance status, should have equal access to affordable reproductive health services and high-quality family planning services.

In the Netherlands, Women Global Network for Reproductive Right (WGNRR) was founded in 1984 to build and strengthen the movements for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and social justice for all people especially the marginalized groups. WGNRR's objectives are to campaign and fight for and to promote social justice and dignity around the world. They support any call for reproductive justice initiated by activists and social advocates.

In the United Kingdom, the provision of reproductive health information and services is treated with utmost concern. Interestingly, the UK government is not concerned about her citizens only but is also interested in rural women's condition in developing countries. The United Kingdom Department for International Development (DID) funded two international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to implement a programme to reduce maternal mortality from unwanted

pregnancy in Africa and Asia. Alongside providing various family planning and safe abortion services, the DID in 2011 established a non-governmental organization in South Sudan to expand its operations in Malawi. Both countries were classified as having extensive reproductive health care needs. It has been discovered that unsafe abortions are a significant cause of maternal mortality in South Sudan and Malawi.

ASTRA Network is non-governmental women organization that fights for the sexual and reproductive rights of women in Central and Eastern Europe (ASTRA is a greek word meaning from the stars). It aims to promote sexual and reproductive health and women and girls' rights in accessing reproductive health services. It works with many NGOs in Croatia, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Macedonia.

Conclusion

The state of access to reproductive health services in Nigeria is still below internationally acceptable standards and government efforts aimed at improving same is non committed. Access to reproductive health rights is a major component of reducing maternal mortality and morbidity in Nigeria. When women have access to good information and health care, they are in a position to make sensible choices about marriage and the size of their family. When young people are able to obtain reproductive health information and services, they increase their chances to make a successful transition to adulthood. Saving women's lives requires a functioning health system to deliver the package of sexual and reproductive health services. Health system investments in women's sexual and reproductive health services provide a strong foundation for health services for all. With accessibility to comprehensive reproductive health services, women are less likely to die in pregnancy, more likely to have healthier children and better able to balance their family and work life.

Way forward

- ❖ Improve communication opportunities and social networks of women and girls through a holistic approach that includes; interventions focusing on reducing dependencies of women on their family members, facilitating access to education and income generating opportunities for their well-being and advancement.
- ❖ The government should develop strategies that focus on addressing restrictive social norms and harmful health practices among women.
- ❖ Encourage open forums for the discussion and dissemination of good practices amongst health care workers, where women and girls can participate and contribute.
- ❖ Design inclusive outreach strategies and referral mechanisms that take into full consideration the barriers women and girls experience in accessing services.
- ❖ Ensure the participation of women and girls with their family members in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of health programmes targeting male family members (i.e. fathers, brothers, and husbands), and female caregivers of all ages.

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