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ISSN (Online): 2455-7838

SJIF Impact Factor (2016): 4.144

UGC Approved Journal No: 48844

EPRA International Journal of

Research & Development (IJRD)

Monthly Peer Reviewed & Indexed
International Online Journal

Volume:2, Issue:6, June 2017



Published By :
EPRA Journals

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SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS AND WOMEN MENIAL LABOUR IN ABAKALIKI EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA

Eze Ifeoma Louisa¹

¹Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences University of Port Harcourt, Rivers state. Nigeria

Owapiriba, P. Abu²

²Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences University of Port Harcourt, Rivers state. Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The study examined women's participation in menial labour in Abakaliki. It argued that large family size, as well as the preference for the male child contributory factors to women's engagement in menial labour in Abakaliki. Relevant literatures were reviewed to give a better understanding of the nature of women's work load. As an empirical study, the cross sectional survey design was adopted and a total of 354 questionnaires were administered and completely retrieved from our respondents showing a 100% rate of respondents. A four Point Likert-scale method was also employed in structuring the questionnaire. The simple percentage was used to analyse the discrete data which also covered the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while, Chi-square (χ^2) statistical tool was used to analyse the research hypotheses. The study revealed that, women's involvement in menial labour in Abakaliki is significantly associated with the family size as well as the tradition which favours male child preference. This led us to conclude that large family size (either in a polygynous or monogamous marriage system) and the denial of the girl-child access to basic education as a result of male child preference contribute to women's involvement in menial labour in Abakaliki.

KEYWORDS: Family size, socio-cultural factors, menial labour, male child preference

INTRODUCTION

Women's labour is a world wide phenomenon. Their contribution to the socio-economic development cannot be over emphasized, as much as it is, without recourse to the various roles they play in the society. These roles cut across societies and cultures, and have also been viewed as being multidimensional. Admittedly, Verick (2014) confirmed that participation of women in the labour market especially in the informal sector varies across countries, reflecting differences in economic development, cultural practices, educational levels and social norms.

There has been a concern about the rapid increment of female menial workers in Abakaliki, Ebonyi state. The predominance of this situation in

Abakaliki became obvious in 1996 after the creation of Ebonyi state, which was accompanied by an unprecedented growth of urban centers, construction of infrastructural facilities such as roads, bridges etc. The above scenario negated the existing traditional labour practice instituted culturally in the area in terms of sex and age. Then, adult males engaged in outdoor productive activities requiring exertion of raw physical power such as soil tilling, stone crushing, blacksmithing, hunting etc, while, the women took care of the kids, joined their husbands relatively in both the subsistence agricultural farming system and in commercial agricultural productivity. This implies that they also planted in the tilled soil, partook in the harvesting of farm products, and selling of them

in the market. Most importantly, they had the primary role of preparing the family meals and other house chores. Children, on the other hand, are socialized into these sex roles.

However, with the administrative status of the state, Abakaliki became a hub for governmental activities and labour spinning center. This attracted and led to the migration of a number of illiterates, if not indigent women from rural areas to urban centers in search of menial jobs. The situation inadvertently made a large number of women to be seen carrying head pans, shovels, plastic buckets and seating at different points or sites within Abakaliki waiting for prospective customers to hire them for menial jobs. They sometimes sat there till dusk, went home penniless because no one came to hire them for the day's job. Moreover, at the work sites, women engage in menial jobs like fetching of water, mixing and carrying of concrete, supplying of materials to the male bricklayers, and after a long working hours, go home with a pittance. There are also cases of sexual harassment from the male labourers or from male hirers. This very problem has led to the distabilisation of some many marriages today in our study area. Similarly, those engaged in quarry jobs are exposed to dust. They crush, sort and carry pans of crushed and uncrushed stones either to the machine or to the heap of already crushed stones set out for sale. Women in the mining sites are also not left out; they are seen carrying large lumps of stones from the deep valley where extraction takes place to the up land, from where they are transported to the crush stone industries.

Several studies around the globe have shown that women constitute a great number of informal workforces that contribute to the total enhancement of the economic growth of countries. In Bangladesh for instance, since the establishment of the First Ready Made Garment (RMG) industry in 1976, agricultural production has declined in its relevance among women, who constitute more than 85 percent of garment production workers in the country (Sikdar, Sarkar & Sadeka, 2014). This implies that women drive the economic sector that accounts for the nation's 77 percent yearly foreign exchange earnings. In a similar vein, Uthman and Uthman (2012) noted that at present, Malaysian women play a leading role in all sectors of the Islamic Malaysian society. Likewise in Africa, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) (2003) women in Africa are responsible for 70 percent of crop production, 50 percent of animal husbandry and 60 percent of marketing (cited in Kent, 2010). They equally undertake virtually 100 percent of food processing activities in addition to child up bringing

as well as household responsibilities. Little wonder Kalu (1998) observed that most women are known to be engaged in the informal sector such as petty trading, manual labour and agriculture, in addition to their traditional roles as mothers and housewives. .

In another study, Nwibo, Ugwuja, Nwambeke, Emelumadu and Ogbonnaya (2012) revealed that chronic exposure to dust due to stone quarrying was found to increase the risk of respiratory problems and impaired lung function among quarry workers in Umuogbara, Ebonyi state. There exist an obvious gap following the outcome of the above studies, given their geographical and context delimitations as well as the paucity in research with regards to the cultural underpinnings in terms of large family size, that actually act as a factor for women's involvement in menial labour in Abakaliki. This study therefore examines all the women menial labourers in the whole of Abakaliki, Ebonyi state. The study intends to empirically examine, from the socio-cultural point of view, the level and reasons for women's increasing engagement in menial jobs. This study uses Abakaliki women as a focus study

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main aim of the study is to examine the socio-cultural factors and women menial labour in Abakaliki, Ebonyi state.

Implicitly, this study has the following as its objectives:

- i. Examine whether large family size influences women's choice and participation in menial labour in Abakaliki.
- ii. Ascertain whether the preference of male children acts as a pre-disposing factor to women's involvement in menial labour in Abakaliki.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions will be answered in this study;

- i. How does large family size influence women's choice and participation in menial labour in Abakaliki?
- ii. To what extent does the traditional preference of male children create conditions that pre-dispose women to engage in menial labour?

HYPOTHESES

H₁: The larger the family size the likely women are to engage in menial labour in Abakaliki.

H₂: The higher the preference for male children the higher the negligence of the girl-child in Abakaliki

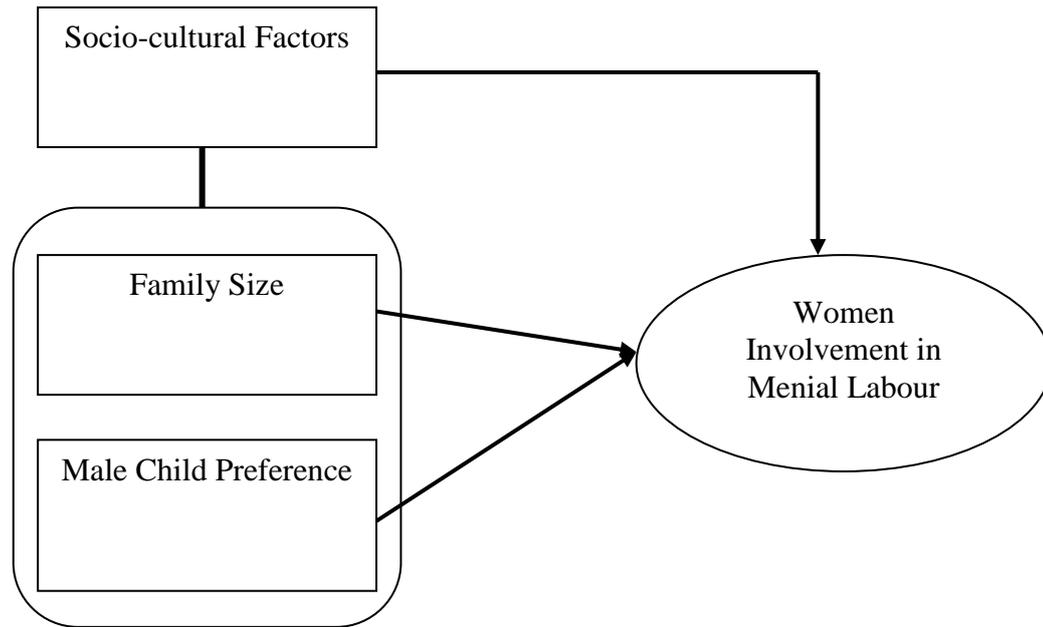


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the research

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Menial Labour

The word 'menial' lacks a universal scholarly acceptable definition. According to Schwarz (1994) menial labour is any unskilled work performed by domestic servant or a subservient person. But, Hornby (2005) defined it as "works that are generally boring, low-status, ignoble, obsequious, servile, degrading, demeaning, ignominious, lowly, subservient and vile". The above definitions apparently entail that menial as a term, distinctively used to represent a whole gamut of works that are not only precarious and sub-standard but are denigrating and deplorable in nature, markedly undertaken by the downtrodden in the society. This explains why Soguno (2016) described menial workers as "the visible machinery of our corporate political structure". They are colloquial 'masses' and the teeming population of uneducated poor and often illiterate Nigerians. Of course going by the recent poverty rating, their numbers is accumulating to 70 percent of the population that is about 110million to 119million humans. However, Vrabie (2014) captured more of this, when he aligned menial works to being more quantitative than qualitative. This simply means that they can be as done/not done rather than done-well/not-done well. This however, accounts for its unskillfulness and casualness. The above terms have been used interchangeably and independently in one way or the other to describe categorically jobs that are menial. Oluwadare (2014) for instance, has noted that there is no standard definition of casual work but one common definition puts it as jobs that:

- i. Are short-term or temporary
- ii. Involve irregular hours

iii. Are not guaranteed to be on going Women Education and Menial work in Nigeria

Education has been conceptualized in various ways. Over the years, the little amount of women involved in the educational system in Nigeria and Abakaliki in particular, which has led to an unprecedented increase of Abakaliki women's involvement in building construction works and other menial works has perpetuated a long-course of intergenerational transfer of poverty among the womenfolk. Odey (2014) likened education to the laying on of foundation of a building on the type of solid rock which Jesus of Nazareth talked about in the bible. Education is the foundation on which we can lay over future. In other words, whatever a young boy or a young girl is going to be in the future will mainly be determined by the type of educational foundation he or she embarks on. The implication of the above definition on individual is far from mere intellectual development. According to Nduka-Ozo (2013) it entails that there must be a positive development of ones behavioural pattern and values in relation to the individual's environment, and education helps the developmental processes which is a life-long process that must be started early enough.

However, in writing on women and education in Nigeria with reference and insight centered on the unprecedented increase of Abakaliki women involvement in building construction, quarry mining and crush stone work which is indirectly, perpetuating a long-course of intergenerational transfer of poverty among the women folks. William (1988) supported this claim when he opined that inheritance right given to men

by culture has given men more opportunities and privileges than women to acquire education. It is culturally believed that women are other people's property and should not be trained since they will later be married to outsiders. Based on history insight, Uchendu (1993) contended that "women education faced considerable handicaps right from the inception of modern formal education". This according to him was as a result of the then British Colonial government concept of women, which was a great departure from the normal people's perception of women in Nigeria. He conspicuously noted that this was a Colonial indigenous practice, which forbade British women from participating in certain fields of study and which minimized their involvement in public matters or public affairs.

Following Uchendu (1993) argument, Ezeani (1998) posited that "the basic premise of the Colonial gender ideology was the domestication of women. They were not to function in the public domain like the men (pg.)". Having being marginalized in terms of educational attainment, the main purpose for the education of men at the time, was simply to enable them acquire skill that will equip them and make them effective to serve in public offices.

Extending further on above fact Onwuka (2008) argued that the introduction of the western-styled education in Nigeria was solely to prepare boys to be able to qualify for employment as clerks, interpreters, teachers, catechists, stewards, cooks etc., for government offices, commercial houses and missionaries, while, girls who were not considered fit for such employment opportunities were left to cater for the children and attend to other house chores. The idea of this marginalisation of women was an adaptation made from Medieval Europe, inherited by the British educational set up, which ensured that established schools for girls were just to prepare them to be good mothers and wives.

Consequently, this act became an integral part of the colonies educational policy which incidentally, ensue a sharp dichotomization or contradiction in the women's role. The effect of this as Nduka-Ozo (2013) observed, meant an upliftment of men in the social ladder and a concomitant relegation of the womenfolk.

Son Preference as Socio-Cultural Outcome

Son preference is one of the harmful socio-cultural and traditional practices that constitute a great problem to the women particularly in developing countries, most importantly, in Nigeria for which they need to be protected (Oluduro, 2013). The practice has been viewed by various scholars as one of the fundamental forms of discrimination and the type which has far reaching implications for women. Of which, Millazzo (2012) gave some of the implications as include: the denial of the girl-child

access to basic education, good health, economic opportunity and the right to choose life partner. Hence, the General Assembly Resolution (1979) observed that these whole ranges of values and attitudes which are manifested in many different practices are often concomitant with daughter's neglect. Negligence of daughter according to Ugwu (2001) include all acts of omission and denial of women their basic rights and needs, which also impair their wellbeing and genuine efforts to create conditions that will enable the women to develop adequately so as to face future challenges. The system, according to UN General Assembly Resolution (1979) occasions a disadvantaged position for the female children right from birth. It becomes the determinant of quantity and quality parental care and the level of investment in her development, especially in a setting where the resources are scarce. On this prevalence situation, that is, male preference, as enshrined by culture and custom, El-Gilany and Shady (2007) observed that, it is a widely known phenomenon in several developing countries where the status of women is low, relegated and subordinate to their male counterparts.

In Nigeria, just like it is prevalent in several other countries of Africa and Asia such as India, China, North Korea, Pakistan etc, many a family is particularly involved in condoning this obnoxious practice such that the birth of a male-child is usually heralded with greater joy than the female ones. Of course, preference for male children, according to Purewall (2012) transcends many societies and cultures, therefore making it a local, national and global issue. Thus, suffice it to observe that preference for sons has a global dimension. It is not peculiar to developed or developing societies, rather it is a trans-cultural phenomenon that is embedded in the culture and value systems of societies even though its prevalence varies from one society to the other. However, one basic factor is that this practice is rooted in culture and economics but most importantly, it is stronger in countries where patriarchy is firmly rooted (Ine, 2013).

The preference for sons among diverse cultures in Nigeria dates back to pre-historic times which are tied to inheritance. Unfortunately however, it has not succumbed to societal changes, but has remained sacrosanct because of the desire for a son to carry on the family name and sustenance of the family lineage. On marriage for instance, because of the desire for a son, in Igbo communities, it usually comes with an immense pressure on the wives to give birth to or in their parlance produce sons. The status quo sometimes places women in a situation where, they inadvertently encourage or support preference for male children. The far reaching implication is that it affects them in taking decision with regard to

their reproductive life, which largely affects their psyche.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a cross sectional survey design, which is a research strategy that uses question-based or statistical tools to collect information about how people think and act. The reason for survey design is because it permits the application of natural setting and random sampling (Sekaran, 2003).

Population of the Study

The population of the study was drawn from the total number of women that make up the selected sites or locations (ie places the women first meet before taking off for the day's job). This was derived through the head count of all the women found at a time in all the recognised sites within Abakaliki from where selection was made. A total number of One thousand, one hundred and seventy six persons (1176) were obtained.

Sample Size/Sampling Techniques

The study comprises nineteen (19) sites selected based on the site/location that has a population of forty (40) women and above. The sample size for the study was therefore obtained by thirty (30%) percentage of the total population. A total of three hundred and fifty four women (354) was finally realised as the sample size for the study. From each of the sites/clusters the Simple Random Sampling Technique was employed for the purposes of questionnaire administration to the respondents.

Questionnaires

Copies of questionnaire were distributed by hand on a face-to-face pattern to the

respondents. The researcher trained four research assistants who are indigenes of Abakaliki that understands the indigenous language, since majority of the respondents are illiterates. Their duty was purely to guide the women on appropriate way of filling the questionnaires. Responses will be designed after the modified 4-point Likert-Scale (Agree-A; Strongly Agree-SA; Disagree-D; Strongly Disagree-SD) model, open and closed-ended questionnaire structure to facilitate coding and analysis of data.

Reliability

Basically, reliability suggests consistency and dependability of data. Hence, testing for reliability further ensures that an instrument adopted would prove a similitude of results if repeated, hence, the consistency in the scores of a single measure rather than identical scores on two alternative measures. Therefore, it is better to test reliability through repeated applications of the same measuring instrument (Test retest). As a result, repeated measurements were very necessary for the instrument to be used in this study. In the light this, the test-retest method of determining reliability was used in this study.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Descriptive statistics involving frequencies and their percentages were used to analyze data on demographic profiles of the respondents. The results of the analysis were presented in the following sections

Table 1: Demographic distribution of the respondent

Demographic Characteristics	No of Respondents	Percentage
Age (yrs)		
15 - 25yrs	22	6.2%
26 - 30yrs	60	16.9%
31 - 40yrs	79	22.3%
41 - 50yrs	129	36.4%
Above 50yrs	64	18.1%
Marital Status		
Married	238	67.2%
Widowed	99	28.0%
Single	17	4.8%
Educational Qualification		
No formal education	184	52.0%
Primary education	134	38.0%
Secondary education	36	10.2%
Income Level (per week)		
₦500 - ₦2000	191	54.0%
₦2100 - ₦3500	62	17.5%
₦3600 - ₦4500	58	16.4%
₦4600 - ₦6500	33	9.3%
₦6600 and above	10	2.8%
Religion		
Christianity	354	100%

Source: Fieldwork, 2016

The age group of the women: The mean age of the women used in this study is 40.5±7.3years. Women in 15-25 age group were 22 (6.2%), while 64 (18.1%) were aged above 50years. However, most of these women 129 (36.4%) were in age 41-50years

The marital status of the women: Most of these women 238 (67.2%) were married. However, 99 (28.0%) of them were widowed, while 17 (4.8%) of them were still single.

Educational qualifications of the women: More than half 184 (52.0%) of the women had no formal education, while 134 (38.0%) of them had

primary education and only 36 (10.2%) of them had secondary education.

Income level (per week) of the women: More than half 191 (54.0%) of the women had income level of ₦500 – ₦2,000 per week, and the number of women decreases as the income level (per week) increases to only 10 (2.8%) of the women had income level of ₦6,600 & above per week

Religion of the women: All the women 354 (100%) were Christianity in religion

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: The larger the family size the likely women are to engage in menial labour in Abakaliki

Table 2: Computation of Chi-square observed/expected values for larger family size

Response	O	E	O - E	(O - E) ²	$\frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$
Agree	31	88.5	-57.5	3306.25	37.36
Strongly agree	310	88.5	221.5	49062.3	554.38
Disagree	13	88.5	-75.5	5700.25	64.41
Strongly disagree	0	88.5	-88.5	7832.25	88.2
					$\chi^2 = 744.64$

Source: Author's computation from fieldwork, 2016.

Calculated $\chi^2 = 744.64$; Level of Significance = 0.05; Degree of freedom (df) = k - 1 = 4 - 1 = 3.

DECISION RULE

The general accepted decision rule for the application of chi-square (χ^2) test states that; you accept the null hypothesis if the calculated value is less than the table value and reject alternate hypothesis, if the calculated χ^2 value is greater than the table value. In computation of hypothesis one (1), the calculated value for $\chi^2 = 744.64$ is greater than the Tab $\chi^2 = 7.815$. In effect, the difference between the observed and expected frequencies is

statistically significant. Hence, we accept the alternate hypothesis (H_1), which states that the larger the family size the likely women are to engage in menial labour in Abakaliki. This shows that there is a relationship between women's involvement in menial labour and large family size in the study area.

Hypothesis 2: The higher the preference for male children the higher the negligence of the girl-child in Abakaliki

Table 3: Computation of Chi-square observed/expected values for male child preference

Response	O	E	O - E	(O - E) ²	$\frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$
Agree	147	88.5	58.5	3422.5	38.672
Strongly agree	104	88.5	15.5	240.25	2.715
Disagree	75	88.5	-13.5	182.25	2.059
Strongly disagree	28	88.5	-60.5	3660.25	41.358
					$\chi^2 = 84.804$

Source: Author's computation from fieldwork, 2016.

Calculated $\chi^2 = 84.804$; Level of Significance = 0.05; Degree of freedom (df) = k - 1 = 4 - 1 = 3

DECISION RULE

The accepted decision rule for the application of chi-square (χ^2) test states that; you accept the null hypothesis if the calculated χ^2 value is less than the table value and reject null hypothesis if the calculated value is greater than the table value. In hypothesis two (2), the calculated $\chi^2 = 84.804$, is greater than the Table $\chi^2 = 7.815$. Hence, we accept the alternate hypothesis (H_2) which says the higher the preference for male children the higher the negligence of the girl-child in Abakaliki.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study set out to examine the issue surrounding the socio-cultural factors and women

menial labour in Abakaliki, Ebonyi state, of which, the aim is to investigate how several socio-cultural factors in Abakaliki influence or contribute to women's increasing involvement in menial labour. The study was implicitly designed to achieve the following objectives; examine whether large family size influences women's choice and participation in menial labour, and also ascertain whether the preference of male children acts as a pre-disposing factor to women's involvement in menial labour. The evidence of the analysis support substantial levels of association between the variables.

It was observed that women who are involved in menial labour in Abakaliki either had

the same experience at their childhood age or they are presently undergoing a common experience in their husbands' houses. In the course of carrying out this investigation, a lot was observed, heard, learnt and discovered. The study found that engagement of Abakaliki women in menial labour is unethical and unacceptable considering what women stand for as mothers and as care givers in the homes (Onwuka, 2008; Verick, 2014). At the same time, in as much as women continue to give birth to so many children be it in a single (monogamous) or in a double (polygynous) marriage system, they would continue to be subjected perpetually to undue sufferings in order to feed their families. Besides, the practice of having multiple children denies these children the opportunity of being educated (ILO, 2008). However, the increasing numbers of women who undertake menial jobs for a living prove that education still lacks its fervour, continuity and consistency among the youths in Abakaliki. Of course, the greater the numbers of educated youths in the study area especially, the girl-child the lesser their mothers are to engage in these strenuous jobs that are quiet harmful to their health.

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