HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES AGAINST WOMEN IN NIGERIA: A CALL TO “SET THE RIGHT AGENDA” USING COMMUNITY RADIO

NWAMMUO, ANGELA NKIRU (Ph.D)
Department of Mass Communication
Anambra State University - Igbariam Campus
Email: angelanwammuo@yahoo.com.

ABSTRACT
Cultural practices prevalent among some ethnic groups in Nigerian do not promote development and empowerment of women; instead they further contribute to women’s oppression and subjugation. If cultural practices are to be eliminated, then radio as an accessible, available and preferred medium for rural communities should be used in setting the right agenda that will elicit the desired thought patterns in the minds of Nigerians. This is the crux of this study. It brings the harmful cultural practices against women in Nigerian under examination. It calls for the adoption of the agenda setting theory of the media by journalists while reporting these unhealthy practices. It is the view of the paper that elimination of these harmful customs and traditions will not only empower Nigerian women but will lead to their development both economically, politically, socially and otherwise. Finally, the paper draws the attention of Nigerians to the need for the establishment of functional community radio stations in all the 36 states of Nigerian while calling on Nigerian law makers to legislate against harmful cultural practices that subjugate women.

Key words: Radio, Cultural practice, Agenda setting, Empowerment of women, Subjugation of women.

Background of the Study
Women in Nigeria represent the majority of the rural poor up to 70 percent; and they play a major role in the survival strategies of rural households, (UNDP, 2007). But surprisingly these women are not even consulted and considered in making decisions that affect them. They are only informed about decisions taken. Over the past few years, women groups and women activists have protested against this dangerous trend. For example, Women’s Right Watch, Gender in Africa Information Network (GAIN), Association for progressive Communication (APC) for African women, are just few of such organizations that are started campaigning against this ugly trend (Asabagna, 2011). Most of these decisions are often taken in good faith especially in the areas of women empowerment. But while seeking for policies and programmes that will empower Nigerian women, government and other agents of change forget that there are cultural practices that still subjugate women. The cultural practices seem to make it impossible for empowerment and development to take place.

Cultural practices and traditional beliefs of some ethnic/groups in Nigeria do not promote the empowerment of women but rather tend to oppress them. The belief in male dominance and female subordination, female genital mutilation (FGM), Harmful widowhood rites, early marriage of the girl-child, superstitious beliefs against equality, etc are just few of them. Most rural I. women still believe that it is useless educating a young girl because she will eventually marry and end up in home management activities. The high illiteracy rate among rural dwellers tend to have made it difficult to change the mindset of rural women about their unequal relationship with men. If this trend continues, how could an average rural woman be empowered? (Amos-Abanyie, 2011). This is where radio comes in. Radio is potentially a powerful tool in enabling women's participation in decision-making on matters that impact on their communities, on matters that impact on their families and on them personally, (Cabrera-Balleza, 2007). This means that radio can potentially lead to the empowerment of the rural women.

To drive home this point, AMARC (The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters) with members in five continents conducted a survey in 2006 which involved 23 community radio station and production groups in Asia-Pacific to examine women's programming and women's participation in community radio. The study found out that all the 21 radio stations studied have one to five hours of weekly programmes by and for women. These programmes cover issues such as women's rights,
healthcare, violence against women, literacy and success stories of women in society (Miglioreto 2006 in Hadi and Brotten, 2007). Similar studies, like that of Hadi and Brotten (2007) has shown that community radio has the potential of discouraging harmful cultural practices that prevent rapid empowerment of women. Some of these customs as emphasized by Omonubi-McDonnel (2003) include:

- Customs that permit early marriages;
- Customs that permit older men in their 50s and 70s to marry 14year-old, and those that allow girls to be kept out of school and be used as domestic and cultivation assistants;
- Customs that condone child abuse and child molestation;
- Customs that control women’s bodies and their products;
- Customs that encourage female genital mutilation
- Customs that reduce the worth of educated wives,
- Overburden and relegate women to the background
- Customs that encourage harmful widowhood rites etc.

Until these harmful cultural practices are eliminated, there may be no empowerment and development of women in Nigeria and Africa in general. Women may remain voiceless because customs and traditions are highly revered and are seen as “sacred” among some ethnic groups in Nigeria. But setting the right agenda using radio will definitely bring the desired change. Radio seems to be the only medium of communication which will perform this magic due its basic characteristics of defeating many barriers that prevent rural audiences from exposure to media contents. These barriers range from poverty, illiteracy, poor road networks, lack of regular supply of electricity and other social amenities.

Radio As A Medium For Rural Communities

AMARC (1998), identifies a geographically based group of persons or a social group or sector of the public who have common or specific interests as a community. The notion of a radio for a community started in the 1970s and 1980s with people's disenchantment with the authoritarian centralized state-owned and controlled media in Africa. This trend encouraged experiments with new forms of media that would address the needs and interests, particularly of rural communities. This was also motivated by a strong desire to use mass media in promoting the socio-economic development of the rural population in the face of intensifying poverty. Many projects for rural-based mass media were experimented with. The state owned broadcasting systems ventured into setting up radio transmission services for particular geographical localities, (Karikari, 2000). Radio from then till now has been identified as a medium of mass communication that can best be used to reach the rural audience. This is why some Non-governmental agencies and governmental bodies advocate for the establishment of community radio stations in rural communities.

A community radio is a radio station established by the rural community, run by the villagers themselves and carried news stories, commentaries, commercials, music etc for rural people. It is for this reason that there is the tendency to associate community radio with the poor, the politically and socially marginalized or powerless in the society, the so-called “voiceless”, those who traditionally have little access to the media in terms of ownership, use and expression. In view of this, AMARC describes it as a radio in isolated rural villages and in the heart of the largest cities in the world that is all the same, the voice of the poor, and voiceless, landless peasants, urban shack dwellers, impoverished indigenous nations, trade unions etc and also a tool of development”.

Whether it is called a radio-club, rural radio, community radio, or a private local radio, it has one major objective, i.e to favour the communication of proximity, taking into account the needs, socio-cultural, linguistic and economic realities of rural communities. Through its programmes, it provides the information and technical knowledge which the population needs in the multiple domains of national development like agriculture, health, education economy, environment and population (Ahade, 2000).

Radio is the foremost and widespread technology when it comes to the use of media to empower rural dwellers. It is the preferred instrument of providing information and education in rural communities by reason of its technical qualities. It reaches a wide public, literate as well as illiterate. It is easy to run, is not confined in space, readily accessible, permits collective listening and is very well adapted to African oral culture, (Opabor, 2000).

A lot of countries in Africa used radio stations to empower and develop rural dwellers. English Speaking West African countries like Gambia, Liberia, Ghana, and Sierra-Leone have used community radio stations to maintain indigenous cultural heritages, (Karikari, 2000). In French-speaking West Africa countries, Ahade (2000), observes that community radios are increasingly reaching out to the various provinces (2 to 19% of the territory). Out of a population of about 80 million inhabitants,
specialists consider that community radios reach about 1.6 million people a day, that is to say, about one fifth of the total population. Successful experiments in the use of community radio stations have been undertaken in Senegal, Guinea Conakry, Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Cote d‘Ivoire and Cameroon.

Community radio outlets reflect their communities and can become integral to the communities which they service. It is for this reason that United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization, (UNESCO), the World Bank and the European Commission recognize community radio as a crucial element in a vibrant and democratic media system. Radio has a long history in allowing communities to rally around various issues and provide a democratic and participatory platform of information. It is the most widespread electronic communications device in the world and is a practical and cost-effective means of reaching and connecting the world’s poorest communities. The freeing of the airwaves makes access to radio a strong reality. Community radio has enormous advantage for community. The technology offers ride choice to suit different spatial requirements for transmission. The technology is conductive to participatory programme production and presentation. It affords easy collection, recording and playback of events and issues. It has the capacity of covering several villages or scattered communities at no extra cost. The low literacy rates also make it still the most efficient and accessible medium of communication (Karikari, 2000).

**Agenda-Setting: A Theoretical Perspective**

Agenda setting theory is one of the many theories of mass communication. It was propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Sharo in 1972. The theory came as a result of researchers’ dissatisfaction with the limited effects model of communication in the 50’s and 60’s, (Severin in and Tankard, 1979). Specifically, the theory resulted from a study conducted by Shaw and McCombs pertaining to the 1964 presidential elections in the United States of America (Akakwandu, 2012). An agenda, is an issue or subject of discussion in the media which elicits either a positive comment from media audience.

The crux of agenda setting theory is that the “media do not tell us what to think but what to think about and the media are responsible for most of the pictures we hold in our heads” (Griffin, 2000). This means that by emphasizing an issue, by frequently reporting an issue or by giving an issue, prominence, the media discreetly force their audiences to adopt the issue as an agenda for discussion. Agenda setting theory therefore refers to media audiences’ acceptance, as important those issues, events and people because the media have made them so for the people to think and talk about (Ngoa, 2012). This is where the mass media are credited with the power to set agenda of the topics for discussion (Eleanyanwn 2015; Ozuru and Ekeanyanwu, 2013). The media therefore project to the public as important; those issues they want them to think about, discuss and treat as important.

In setting Agenda, the media succeed in according importance and relevance to issues in the following ways:
- by generating an appreciable degree of conflict in the report;
- by giving the issue prominence through banner headlines, photographs, graphics, cartoons etc,
- by increasing the frequency or quantity of such reports;
- by accumulating specific media effects over time.

Agenda setting theory is considered apt for this study because the case of fighting against harmful cultural practices against women in Nigerian depends on how to effectively use radio to set the right agenda.

The roles which the media, especially radio, perform in the society are but not limited to information, education, entertainment, socialization and surveillance. Community radio can be used to set the right agenda that can bring drastic change in various communities.

In the case of fighting for the elimination of the cited harmful cultural practices against women, the radio can be used to air a series of sequentially planned, executed and coordinated campaigns spread over a definite time span with the aim of achieving well-defined goals. The amount of air time devoted to such campaigns will stunningly make audience members to see such campaigns as important. This is the major tenet of agenda setting theory which guided this discourse. The theory presupposes that the public agenda or what kinds of things people discuss, think and worry about (and sometimes ultimately press legislation about) are powerful shaped and directed by what the news media choose to publicize (Wimmer and Dominick, 1984). So in this case, if journalists in Nigeria use various radio stations in discussing about harmful cultural practices against women, the audience members will, with time, start discussing such issues and how those practices subjugate women and hamper their development. And since the governed, according to Sambe (2005 p.179), have the “right and responsibility to influence policies by which they are governed”, the right legislation against these harmful cultural practices can be made by
either government or traditional leaders in the communities concerned. Following the agenda-setting process in this regard, journalists need do the following:

- Create awareness of the harmful cultural practices, their effects on women and the role of government and traditional leaders in the fight against such practices.
- Establish priorities/prominence concerning harmful cultural practices in mentioned communities. This should be done by devoting enough time for such discussions and airing such discussions during prime time belts.
- Creating an interactive forum in form of phone-in programmes which will allow both men and women in affected communities to air their views when such discussions are on-going.
- Inviting traditional leaders and spokespersons in the ministry of women affairs and religious leaders and airing their views on how such practices could be eliminated.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has brought to the fore the fact that there are still harmful cultural practices which subjugate women and make it impossible for empowerment and developmental programmes to take root and yield the desired impact on Nigerian women and African women in general. Most ethnic groups in Nigeria still adopt the widowhood rites of shaving of the widow’s hairs, forcing her to stay indoors for months, not sleeping in afternoons of the mourning periods, depriving barren widows of any inheritance, depriving widows with only female children of landed properties, abuse and molestation of the girl child by men in their 70s and 50s and other customs and traditions too numerous to mention here.

The question of what can be done and how it is to be done have been answered by this study. Radio as a preferred, available and accessible medium for the rural communities can be used in setting the right agenda that will help both Government, No-governmental bodies and other change agents in eliminating these harmful practices. Radio creates opportunity for the marginalized to have freedom and have a voice. Radio also ensures cultural, socio-economic and other aspects of development. It can be used in creating an interactive forum which will allow discussions on the subject and draw the attention of the relevant authorities that will help in fighting these cultural practices that subjugate women. This study therefore recommends in line with its position that:

- Functional community radio stations be established in all the 36 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to give a voice to women and other disadvantaged group of persons;
- Radio stations be used in “setting the right agenda” that will elicit the desired thought patterns among Nigerians;
- That prominence be given to discussions on the prevalent harmful customs that affect women’s development and employment;
- That Nigerian lawmakers should legislate against all harmful customs that either degrade or subjugate women.

References


