

WOMEN, FAMILY HEALTH AND WELL-BEING: NEED FOR STM EDUCATION TO MEET ROLE EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discussed the position of women in the Nigerian Society. It high lighted the deprived underprivileged, marginalized and disadvantaged position of the Nigerian women. It also examine the role of women in family health and well being considering their important role in the provision of good quality, adequate and safe food that meets the nutritional needs of each member of the family in order to avoid malnutrition which retards the growth of children physically, socially and mentally. It also looked at the role of Science Technology and Mathematics (STM) education in providing women with necessary knowledge, skills and attitude essential for safe motherhood and positive contribution to family health and well being. It recommended that women should be given the best possible education to be able to perform their roles in the society as wives and mothers effectively.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout life, living organisms are in a continuous state of interaction with one another and with their physical and social environment for the mutual benefit of all. As a result of this interaction an individual influences and is being influenced by other persons and their patterns of behaviour. According to Verma (1969) an individual's ways and standard of life, likes and dislikes, interest and attitudes are all the products of the constant interaction between the individual and the surrounding physical and social forces.

The human family is an example of such social environment through which social values standards of behaviour and skills are introduced to individual members. According to Ebigbo (2009) "Every child has one place and there exists one place where the child can heartily entrust its dreams and fears, desires and embarrassment, this place is the family". It is the first social group with which a child is identified and it is the primary transmitter of culture to the child.

According to Salawu (1997), it is characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. According to Kolo (2006) family members generally have intimate and enduring relationship with one another and that adult members of the family provide basic training to children through the process of interaction. As a member of a family therefore, an individual has to be part of its routines, rules and customs and needs to learn how to fit in it.

The environment or institution called family usually comprises of the biological parents, children, siblings and others incorporated through fostering adaptation and provision of such other arrangements (Ebigbo, 2009) members have to support, protect and comfort one another.

Every member of a family has some roles and responsibilities to perform which are the defining features of his position and which reflects the social realities of the society.

The man (father) is the head of the family in-charge of the general administration and protection of the family. He is the bread winner. He provides food, clothes and shelter and is expected to lead in the training of the children. He is a disciplinarian and has the overall authority. He dictates the rules and he has to be respected and obeyed by his wife and children.

The woman (mother) takes charge of domestic domain. She performs the roles of the house wife and mother. She bears and rears children. She is the care taker, charged with the responsibility of caring for all members of the family. This includes, feeding, weaning, toilet training health care, discipline, personal and environmental hygiene.

The children contribute whatever function their parents assigns to them. They are expected to obey and respect their parents.

This paper looks at the position of women in the Nigerian society, it examines the role of women in family health and well being and the role of STM education in providing women with relevant knowledge, social and intellectual skills, correct attitudes and values for positive contribution to the progress and advancement of family health and well being.

WOMEN IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Every society around the world assigns gender roles which direct activities and govern behaviour for males and females. According to a world Health Organization report (2000) the role and position of women, the world over is

socially constructed and culturally determined. This is because an individual is a product of his culture. According to Verma (1969) an individual is born into a cultural world created by his predecessors which has a continuity of existence and that the individual becomes identified with this vast body of culture, find his roles in it and seeks to modify it.

Nigeria is characterized by patriarchal structures in which gender shapes the lives of all members of the society. It determines the position, roles and expectations appropriate to each sex. Men are expected to behave different from women and adults to behave different from children.

Men in the Nigeria society enjoy superior position and they dominate all spheres of life. According to George (2006) men are more in number in the government of the country, they are captains of industry, commerce and banking. They are generals in the army, engineers, pilots, brain surgeons business entrepreneurs etc.

Nigerian women on the other hand are expected to totally submit to male authority and control. Their position is complimentary to that of the men. They are deprived, under privileged, marginalized and disadvantaged (Otu, 2009) According to Ebigbo (2009).

“Power by culture is very much in the hands of the man as a woman must marry to be recognized. She must have children, males and females alike. She can suffer a lot of trials and tribulations if she cannot get a child and especially male children. Because of the power in balance on the side of the man, a woman cannot risk being sent away by the husband as her children run the risk of being rejected by the man” (pg 11).

In the indigenous Nigeria society, the state and its bureaucracy dictates the life styles of the women endorsing the domesticity of women and unwaged services they provides for the family (Roja's 1990). They are responsible for the entire house chores and they are expected to take care of all household members.

Nigerian women sometimes encounter gender related obstacles and some harmful traditional practices. For example in some parts of the country female genital mutilation is being practiced, women are not allowed to own property in some parts while widows suffer from serious maltreatments. According to Oliagbo (2006) the death of a husband is not only a time of emotional grief but also a time of severe torture and humiliation from in laws as women are often being accused of being responsible for the death of their husbands as such they are subjected to

serious interrogation and brutalities. These brutalities and humiliations are not inflicted on men whose wives die.

Nigerian women face gender inequalities in the area of education. There is a wide gap between the educational opportunities for males and females. While the males are encouraged to receive education to be able to gain waged employment in order to support their parents and keep the family going, little value is placed on the education of the females as it is believed that the education of women will disturb the established order in the society. According to Danyaya (2008) 53% of Nigerian female have no access to formal education while 38% of Nigerian males have no access to basic education. This low level of education for women is a limiting factor in everything women do in Nigeria (Danyaya, 2008). This is because education provides knowledge of all aspects of life and through education an individual learns the art of living and surviving in his changing environment. Women should therefore be exposed to the type of education that would prepare them for useful living within the society. They should be provided with knowledge, skills, information and self confidence essentially for being better mothers.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN FAMILY HEALTH AND WELL BEING

Women have a special role to play in family health and well being. This is because women are saddled with the responsibility of caring for all members of the family which includes the total welfare of the family as a whole and the quality of life of its' individual members.

Mothers competence in matters of food and nutrition to a large extent determines the health and well being of the family, it is her responsibility to ensure that each member of the family eat an adequate amount of good quality and safe food that meets the nutritional needs of body maintenance, work and recreation and for growth and development in children. Thus the mother affects the physical, social, moral and mental health of the family.

Development of a child starts from conception and continues through a number of stages. These include:

- i) *Prenatal* – is the period between conception and birth of the child. This usually lasts for nine months. It is during this period that the structure of the child is formed, his intelligence, appearance and sex are determined.
- ii) *Infancy* which covers the period between 0 – 2 years. It is during this period that the child grows and develops more rapidly. The child develops from mere lying down to sitting, crawling, standing and walking.

- iii) *Childhood* – This covers the period between 2–11 years. It is usually divided into early childhood which is between 2–6 years and late childhood which is between 6–11 years.

At every stage of the child's development there is need for the right kind of environment and care to help the child develop properly. It has been asserted (Voumard, 2001) that "every child has the right to a good start in life", and a good start in life encompasses adequate nutrition, health care, a hygienic home and community, loving care, play and stimulation.

Good nutrition is the key to good health and the opposite malnutrition causes ill-health malnutrition refers to bad nutrition it results when there is impairment of health, growth and physiological functions as a result of failure in obtaining all essential nutrients in proper quantity. Malnutrition retards the growth of children physically, mentally and socially. Malnourished children cannot produce the antibodies which fight against diseases. Thus, malnutrition not only kills directly by starvation but indirectly by lowering the resistance of the body to diseases. It is therefore how well our children eat good and sufficient food that tells how healthy they are and how much resistance they have to the attack of any disease. According to Adedeji and Olarewaju (2008) good, balanced and sufficient food is one of the essentials of life and good healthy living.

The influence of the mother on the health and well being of children starts from conception. Mother's age, drugs environmental hazards, maternal diseases, nutrition, emotional state and stress are some of the maternal conditions that can harm the unborn fetus. With implementation, the maternal and embryonic cells interacts to form the placenta which serves to nourish the embryo by conveying oxygen, water and nutrients to the developing fetus. Therefore, the fetus completely depends on its mother for nutrition which comes from the mother's blood. Thus, the nutritional status of the fetus is determined by the total caloric intake and also by appropriate levels of protein, vitamins and minerals of the mother. It follows therefore that if the mother is malnourished, it is possible to have premature, still births or malformed babies. According to Dobbin (1976) incidents of rickets, anemia and tuberculosis are high with malnourished expectant mothers.

The effect of prenatal conditions depends on what happen and at what time it happens. This is because a baby's development is such that certain organs develop at certain times and each organ has developmentally critical stage when extra-uterine influence many impair subsequent growth. However, the effects of malnutrition on physical development such as skeletal growth and body shape has long been established (Dobbin, 1976 and Albert1977). According to Dobbin

(1976) rickets are found to be more frequent in newborn babies when malnutrition occurs in the last months of pregnancy during which period the process of mineralization of the skeleton of the baby is most active.

Malnutrition also restricts an infants cognitive development as it is said to have a retarding effect on the structural development of the brain. According to Dobbin and Smart (1974) there can be no doubt that nutritional insult at the time of the brain growth spurts causes lasting deficits and distortion of brain growth.

The place of delivery and the type of assistance available to pregnant woman at the point of delivery are of paramount importance to the health of both the mother and the child. This plays an important role in the levels of maternal and neo-natal mortality. This is because many mothers and infants die during this period as a result of tetanus and other infections.

In the first months of his life a child depends on his mother completely for his welfare and survival. The mother will have to feed, bath, dress, change his diapers and carry him around.

Breast is one of the greatest attributes of the woman and the milk it produces is considered as a natural gift for the new born infants. Breast feeding is seen as the most effective way of feeding babies as it is nutritive and healthy. It contains colostrums which has antibodies and many white cells which are rich in vitamin A that keeps away allergy and infection.

The mother invests a lot of human and material resources to ensure that the child is protected from infections, pains and disease. As custodian of healthy living she ensures that strict standards of personal hygiene and proper measures of sanitation are maintained in the family.

Proper sanitation ensures a safe environment which is free from dirt and germs. Poor sanitary condition provides breeding grounds for mosquitoes, houseflies, rodents etc. many of these organisms are carriers or vectors of disease. For example malaria parasite is transmitted by the bite of female anopheles mosquito. Contamination of food, water supply and other edible materials results to outbreak of diseases such as typhoid caused by salmonella typhi and cholera caused by vibriod-cholerae. According to Vourmard (2001) nearly two million children almost all under the age of five die annually from diarrhea and other water borne diseases. And in Nigeria water-related diseases accounts for 20% of child deaths.

To minimize the spread of diseases and ill-health in the family, the mother must serve as an important model of health and well-being to the children. She

communicates effective strategies for health and well-being and monitors how effectively these strategies are being followed. For example she has to ensure that rooms are cleaned regularly, bathrooms and toilets are cleaned and sanitized daily. She has to consider early dental care by inspecting their teeth, nails, hair and general personal cleanliness of the children must be ensured.

A mother must be sensitive to early signs of ill-health in children. This means she has to recognize when a child is sick and to act accordingly. She must learn basic first aid procedures and when she needs to find assistance. To prevent future illness she has to immunize her children against childhood diseases such as measles, polio, whooping cough, diphtheria and tetanus.

Children have strong curiosity to explore their environment. Some children grab any object that they come across and put it in the mouth, nose, ear etc. The objects may be sharp and dangerous to the health of the child. A mother must be sensitive to these and other domestic accidents and try as much as possible to prevent their occurrence.

NEED FOR STM EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

Women are the producers and nurses of children. They are the nearest and most important health workers for the family. They are responsible for the entire upbringing, education and training of the children. How well they are able to perform these functions depend on the knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies they acquire through the educative process.

Science, Technology and Mathematics (STM) education provides scientific and technological knowledge through which desirable and enduring skills essentials for understanding and interpreting the natural world in every aspect of human life are acquired. Women therefore need to acquire good and relevant STM education that provides knowledge, skills and competencies essential for safe motherhood.

Safe motherhood begins with the right choice of partners in marriage. The scientific understanding of genes and inheritance leads to an understanding of the implication of marriage between two sickle cell carriers. Sickle cell anaemia is a hereditary disease and the gene causing it is recessive. It is characterized by the presence of abnormal haemoglobin. Sufferers have two copies of the gene, one inherited from the father and the other from the mother. A carrier is a person who has only one copy of the faulty gene, in other words he is heterozygous. It takes two carriers to produce a sufferer. Affected individuals show poor growth and development and are more prone to infections. This knowledge prevent marriage between two carriers thus minimizing the incidence of sickle cell anaemia.

Healthy eating is essential to good health and is the key element in healthy human development. STM education provides women with the knowledge of the science and technology of food, nutrition, hygiene and home management. According to Alamina (2001) "good health for the family is a result of proper understanding of the need for balanced diet for the family". Through STM education, women acquire the knowledge of food substances, the digestive tract, digestive enzymes and the absorption process. They understand the need for a balanced diet which contains the correct proportions and quantities of the various nutrients, water and dietary fibres required to maintain good health. They know that carbohydrates and fats are needed for energy, protein for growth and repair process and vitamins and minerals for protection of good health and prevention of diseases. They understand the nutritional needs of each member of the family. That is, the different dietary needs of infants, toddlers, adolescents, active adults, aged and invalid members of the family.

STM education increase women's efficiency in household hygiene. The ability to maintain high standard of personal and environmental hygiene enables women to raise healthy children. Bathing ensures cleanliness of the body of their children it also enables the mother to observe the body of her children for signs of skin diseases such as rashes and decide on what to do next. She decides which clothes to wear at different seasons and different times of the day so as to keep healthy.

Through STM education women become aware of the need to bring up their children with love, care and concern. This is essential as children need to experience a strong emotional bond with the mother to promote good mental health. Without that bond a baby may grow up to be disruptive, slow to learn and difficult or even at risk of teenage delinquency.

STM education provides women with increasing intellectual capacity for dealing with all problems of life. Problem of protein deficiency for instance can be solved through acquiring the knowledge of aquaculture. This is the growing of fish in fresh water or ponds around the home. The pond can be fertilized with crops and animal waste which results to rich growth of algae and water plants. These are fed upon directly by herbivorous and detritus eating fish. Fish can also use spoiled grains, cottonseeds and other organic resources which are not directly useful to man. Poultry and other livestock can also be raised around the home. A woman can also prepare a garden around the home to grow and harvest carrots, lettuce, spinach, pumpkins, pears, green beans etc. The advantage of all these is to provide edible protein and other essential foods for the family.

Through STM education women are aware of the need to create a safe environment for children to play as this is essential for physical growth and the

development of motor skills. They know that children need to play indoor and outdoors and the need to closely monitor them while playing to avoid domestic accidents such as burns, poisoning, fall etc. they also know that they need to keep constant vigil and ensure that broken pieces of glasses, pins, etc are removed from play and walk-ways.

CONCLUSION

The paper looked at the position of women in the Nigerian society. It noted that women are being deprived, under privileged and disadvantaged in the Nigerian society. It examined the role of women in family health and well-being which includes the total welfare of the entire family members. The role of STM education in providing women with relevant knowledge, social and intellectual skills essential for positive contribution to family health and well-being was also highlighted.

RECOMMENDATION

The paper recommends that women should be given the best education possible to be able to perform their roles in the society as wives and mothers effectively. STM education is particularly recommended as it is capable of providing the women with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes essential for successful living within the society. With this they can produce a generation of Nigerians that are healthy and capable of contributing to the well-being of the nation.

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