

Stress and its Influence on the Well-Being and Quality of Life of Rural Women in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Everyday experience of most rural women in Nigeria is a worrisome burden on their mental health. These women are either directly involved in farming activities or operate a small business they are always faced with frustrating challenges. Most times they experience fatigue, emotional and social isolation, compounded with lack of basic necessities of life. This implies that they virtually have to deal with hardships such as financial strain, social isolation, long working hours and reduced access to health and social services that could improve their quality of life. These experiences enable stress and easily ignite stress with the ever presence of environmental stressor(s) that influence negatively on the psychological well-being of the rural women. This work reviews the consequence of stress, its implication on women and how to manage it to enhance good quality of life. It is believed that an individual's satisfaction or happiness does not depend only on his or her level of living but also on his or her expectation and perception of reality. Therefore an individual is considered to be the best judge of his or her situation and state of well-being and not an external person.

Keywords: *Anxiety, Frustration, Hardship, Rural Women, Stress*

INTRODUCTION

Naturally, women are fragile assets of humanity. They are not supposed to partake on activities that are beyond their level of resilience. Unfortunately, the unpredictable dynamics of society expose them to strenuous life. Most affected are women in the rural settlement who engage in various forms of activities day in day out without sometimes having time to think or care for themselves. Though stress is not peculiar to women but humanity as a whole, yet they (women) are the most affected because of their level of resilience to life issues. However, most people have a reasonably clear idea of what sorts of things would enhance their individual quality of life. Stress has direct bearing with feelings and feelings in turn are tied to mind. And anything that attacks the mind excessively can kill. Hence, stress affects a person's quality of life. Quality of life in the rural setting according to Phillips (2006) is a multifaceted phenomenon determined by the cumulative and interactive impacts of numerous and varied factors like housing conditions; infrastructure; access to various amenities; income; standard of living; satisfaction about the physical and social

environment. Also, the fundamental concepts of quality of life, according to Adejunmobi and Odumosu (1998), are values. They play an important role in the experience of qualitative life because they represent the needs, aspirations and goals which are important to individuals and which help to ease the experience of stress in life.

Though, this appears to be farfetched in the lives of rural dwellers considering the fact that there is absence of potable pipe borne water, electricity, health services and good feeder roads that could make living meaningful and enjoyable to them. Thus, it is observed that the rural people have low purchasing power and standard of living (Olayiwola and Adeleye, 2005). In particular, the rural women, according to Zaid and Popoola (2010), are still not able to cater adequately for the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter and in addition, gainful employment and skills. These challenging experiences serve as sources of worry and stress. However, it is of note that women living in rural Nigeria suffer from general deprivation including access to information resources. They most often fail to access various information resources and services even when such information is available. The reasons may not be unrelated to their socio-economic status or the format in which such information is packaged (Zaid and Popoola, 2010). This leads to a situation that ignites worry, frustration and compounded stress that impact negatively on their psychological well-being and quality of life. This is premised against the backdrop of the fact that most women in the village are caged with (stressors) sources of stress such as the experience of bereavement, family problems, financial difficulties, illness, lack of family and spouse support, divorce, troublesome children, difficult marital relationship, etc. This development makes it very important for rural women to be informed of what stress is all about, its causes, implication on their well-being and how well to prevent and manage stress in life. Hence, this study on stress and its influence on the well-being and quality of life of rural women in Nigeria.

STRESS

Stress is what people feel when they are under too much mental or emotional pressure. Pressure turns into stress when an individual is unable to cope. Thus, stress is what individuals feel when they are worried or uncomfortable about something and cannot cope or manage the situation. The worry in their mind can make them feel bad and experience tension. They may feel angry, frustrated, scared, or afraid, which can result in poor quality of life and well-being. Too much stress can seriously affect one's physical and mental well-being. Recurrent physical and psychological stress can diminish self-esteem, decrease interpersonal relationship with family and members of community, and create a cycle of self-blame and self-doubt. Okoiye, Ikpeazu and Ohizu (2013) posit that the manifestation of stress in people can result to hurt of loved ones and other members of the society.

When people have a lot of responsibilities that are burdensome to them,

their predicament tend to ignite worries, unfounded fear and subsequent emergence of stress. However, the more their body's stress system is activated, the harder it is to shut off. Thus, long-term exposure to stress can lead to serious health problems. However, it is good to get stressed up once in a while because solutions do not come in an atmosphere of no problems. When there are problems, there are stresses, and this leads to a curable solution to the stressing problems. Nevertheless, chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in one's body. Furthermore, Okoiye, Ikpeazu and Ohizu (2013) state that high levels of stress can lead to serious physiological (backaches, ulcers, heart attack) and psychological (anxiety, depression and pain attacks) symptoms. Thus, it can raise blood pressure, suppress the immune system, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, contribute to infertility, and speed up the aging process. Long-term stress can even rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety and depression. Indeed, stress symptoms can affect your body, your thoughts and feelings, and your behaviour. Being able to recognize common stress symptoms can give you a jump on managing them. Stress that is left unchecked can contribute to health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and diabetes. This implies that stress is a pervasive issue that can potentially affect health and productivity.

Also, Patterson, Chung and Swan (2011) state that stress can impair an individual's personal life and relationships as well. However, considering the harsh and frustrating nature of farming activity in Nigerian villages across board, there is every possibility that women in agriculture are particularly more susceptible to the effects of stress. In the opinion of this study, three basic reasons exist why people worry. These are: sense of belonging, appreciation and responsibility. In the aspect of sense of belonging, a person begins to worry over being loved and identified with. That is being seen as a part of the social system and treated as such. In the aspect of appreciation, one will want to be noticed. During this time, a young girl desire to be appreciated by the opposite sex and vice versa such that a simple statement like "you are beautiful" tumbles their heads. At this anything that causes them not to attract the admiration and appreciation of other gives serious concern to them. Responsibility wise, a person begins to feel and worry about what to do in order to keep life going. Thoughts on work, family, self, demands, external influences, uncertainties, politics, economy, education and many others lump up and through someone on stress.

TYPES OF STRESS AND STRESS SIGNALS

Eustress - good (positive) is the kind of stress that energizes an individual. This kind of stress serves as a motivator and stimulate people to improve upon their performance. It enables an individual to overcome challenges or situations which need an extra push and sometimes necessary for survival and prosperity in many parts of life. It occurs for a short period of time.

Distress is the kind of stress without control, it is a bad stress with a distressing nature. It brings out the weakness in a person and makes one vulnerable to illness. **Acute** stress is the most common form of stress. It comes from demands and pressures of the recent past and anticipated demands and pressures of the near future. Acute stress is thrilling and exciting in small doses, but too much is exhausting. Acute stress is the most common form of stress. Usually, it occurs as the immediate and intense reaction of the body and mind to a significant threat, challenge, scare or other stressors. Also acute stress can be in the form of acute eustress mostly in small doses (pleasant, cheerful, thrilling, exciting stress) and acute distress mostly in heavy doses (cause of mental health problems and physical difficulties, tension headaches, stomach upset, tiredness).

Chronic stress involves situations that are not short-lived. It is the perpetual stress that wears on people continuously. It often develops when the individual fails to find a way out of a bad situation. Typically, when the individual has no hope, and stops looking for a solution. Persistence of chronic stress can lead to health problems, as it can be more and more problematic. Examples of chronic stress include relationship problems, workplace pressures and financial or health worries.

Episodic stress is the type of stress that develops when continuous disorganization, chaos and crisis is a way of life for the individual. Episodic stress can also ensue when an individual constantly worries. These individuals tend to be pessimistic, which causes them to be anxious and sometimes depressed. For example, Type 'A' personality generally suffer from episodic stress. These are the type of people who tend to always be in a rush, but always late. They often take on too many demands and they cannot organize the overabundance of tasks they have accumulated.

Stress affects people in different ways, and it is important for them to be aware of their unique stress "signals". Stress signals fall into four categories: thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and physical symptoms.

Feelings: anxiety, irritability, fear, moodiness, embarrassment.

Thoughts: self-criticism, difficulty in concentrating or making decisions, forgetfulness, preoccupation with the future, repetitive thoughts, fear of failure.

Behaviours: crying, increased or decreased appetite, snapping at friends, acting impulsively, alcohol or other drug use (including smoking), nervous laughter, teeth gnashing or jaw clenching, stuttering or other speech difficulties, being more accident-prone.

Physical: insomnia, tight muscles, headaches, fatigue, cold or sweaty hands, back or neck problems, stomach distress, more colds and infections, rapid breathing, increased heart beat, trembling, dryness of lips and mouth, pacing, fidgeting among others.

CAUSES OF STRESS

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as stressors. People usually think of stressors as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a

difficult relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on an individual or forces people to adjust can be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, working in the farm, desiring to buy new cloths for an occasion as it mostly concern women, going to market, or receiving bad news. What causes stress depends, at least in part, on people's perception of it. Something that is stressful to one individual may not be same to another; they may even enjoy it. For example, mothers thinking of going to the farm to clear or plant or going to the market to sell their product may make some of them feel anxious and tense because they may tend to worry about the possible difficulty that they may encounter. Such as, getting a vehicle to convey their products to the market and possible dangers on the way. However, others may see it as an enjoyable opportunity. Therefore, what causes stress is mental, physical or emotional tension. This tension is caused by demands being made on people, and they lack the capacity to cope. These demands can be internal or external and if they are not balanced out by one's ability to cope, then the individual experiences stress. External demands being made on a person may come from people or situations such as friends, family members, neighbours, and life events: such as child birth, wedding ceremonies, bereavements, illness, job and others. While internal demands are what a person expects from him/her self and others such as ones' standards of performance, behaviour, appearance and any other personal values and needs for his/her well-being.

INFLUENCE OF STRESS ON WOMEN

Women are so fragile and quickly respond to the dynamics of society than their men counterpart. They are easily carried away by everything and nothing. A stressed woman lacks physical strength and coordination. Health wise, a stressed woman is imbalanced, losses weight rapidly than a stressed man, lacks resilience and stability of mind. It is neither out of place nor exaggeration mentioning that domestic activities are absolutely strenuous tasks undertaken by women. However, some women combine these activities with other activities on daily basis. Most pathetic is the rural settings who walk round the clock and often times do not have time for a meal. Most often, a day's stress drive them to sleep while cooking. Among other influence of stress on women are weary look, demoralized appearance, forgetfulness, poor coordination, deterioration in health and so on. They are unable to overcome sudden attack on them.

Stress can cause physical and emotional problems for most women. One of the first emotional symptoms of stress in women is lack of energy and drop of enthusiasm. A stressed woman would find it difficult to fulfil her obligations, her attention spans would be very short, and she would always feel worn down. This is a sign that the person cannot endure pressure at work, or new obligations at home. Also, a stressed woman experiences persistent headaches after enduring certain stressful situations for a while. Another symptom of stress in women is insomnia, or

inability to sleep. A person sleeps sporadically, a couple of hours at a time. This can have serious effects on a woman's life. Extreme anxiety and worry over things that are of no significant importance are also symptoms of stress in a woman. Constantly worrying over insignificant things tends to create a vicious circle and the woman's life becomes full of fear, anxiety and worry which has serious effects on her mental state and can lead to serious mental illnesses. Also a stressed woman expresses feeling of guilt and worthlessness. The cause may be in past failures and as she starts to reproach herself too much, she strives toward isolation. It is typical for women under stress to be susceptible to infections due to weakened immune system.

STRESS PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT

Stress in itself is not an illness, but it can cause serious illness if it is not addressed. It is important to recognise the symptoms of stress early. Recognising the signs and symptoms of stress will help figure out ways of managing it. Spotting the early signs of stress will also help prevent it getting worse and potentially causing serious complications, such as high blood pressure. Learning how to relax, taking regular exercise and adopting good time-management techniques are some stress management measures. There are many ways to manage unhealthy stress in life, but this work identifies mind ventilation as a practicable panacea for stress management. Mind ventilation is a situation when a person empties his/her mind by aborting all forms of mind bugling thought and get on with life as though nothing had happened. Engage in some forms of physical activities like strolling, playing games of favorite interest. Talk about it if necessary. Take your favourite meals or drinks. Sit out for fun with intimates. Relax and listen to favourite music. Always try to engage in activities that will cause you to laugh. It helps a great deal just as frowning destroys a lot.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated stress and its influence on the well-being and quality of life of rural women in Nigeria. It has been established that individual's satisfaction or happiness does not depend only on his or her level of living but also on his or her expectation and perception of reality. It is this subjective component which is linked to the function of the degree of congruence between the individual's wishes and need on one hand and environmental demands and opportunities on the other. This work has exposed that stress is constructive in a way as it paves way for solution to problems. However, the destructive side of stress as revealed seems to exert much weight on the individual than the former. Mental and physical imbalance, insomnia, demoralization, loss of appetite, deterioration in health, high blood pressure amidst many others are some of the dangers of stress such as eustress, distress, acute stress and chronic stress. The mild among them is the eustress. Based on the foregoing, the study concludes that stress if not effectively managed, can lead to

loss of life. Hence, as panacea to addressing the aforementioned, it is therefore proposed that individuals should adopt the mind ventilation or emptying method of stress management. Take good time out to relax, care for self, exercise, sleep and socialize. Individuals both at work and at home should make time out to listen to music of their choice as this will drive stress enabling attentions away. Government on their part should provide the enabling milieu for stress management by investing on recreation centres, parks and provision of other social amenities and infrastructure like electricity, good roads, and pipe borne water.

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