

Do male and female heads of households have different beliefs about gender equity on the rights and privileges of young people in Nigeria?

Abstract

Gender-transformative approaches (GTAs) have been successfully carried out to address harmful gender norms and power imbalances to promote more gender-equitability. However, to improve the health and wellbeing of young people, it is necessary to involve household heads by positively transforming their beliefs on gender equity and norms. This paper provides new knowledge on the gender norm attitude of male and female heads of households on rights, privileges and equity promotion of young boys and young girls, as well as its associated factors.

This study was a cross-sectional quantitative research undertaken in six local government areas in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The study population consisted of household heads in households with young people aged 15-24 years. Data were collected for fifteen days using paper and electronic copies of the questionnaire. Descriptive, bivariate and logistic regression analyses were performed using Stata.

The results showed that 46.32% of male and 62.8% female heads of households disagreed with the statement “a good woman never questions her husband’s opinions, even if she is not sure she agrees with them”. Female heads of households of age 50years and below were 0.5 times less likely to have positive attitude on rights and privileges of young girls (OR=0.47; p-value=0.02). While male heads of households of age 50years and below were 1.1 times more likely to have positive attitude on rights and privileges of young girls (OR=1.05; p-value=0.84).

The study findings revealed that there is need for strategic GTA intervention to address attitudes of household head on rights.

Keywords: Female heads of household, male heads of household, equity promotion, rights, privileges and young people.

Introduction

Gender norms are rules that govern beliefs on how individuals at homes, communities, or institutions should behave (WHO, 2018; Pearse and Connell, 2015; Heise et al., 2019). They shape the life prospects of an individual and have significant implications on both girls and boys. These norms begin in the family by parents, and reinforced by teachers, faith leaders, peers, and exposure to media (Patel et al., 2021).

Gender norms have a great effect on the health of young people, as they face diverse expectations in homes and society, depending on their gender (Basu et al., 2017; Buller et al., 2016). These expectations start early and powerfully shape their attitudes, opportunities, experiences, and behaviours with significant health consequences (Closson et al., 2023). Such as child marriage, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection, domestic violence exposure, intimate partner violence, and depression (Blum et al., 2017).

Gender-transformative approaches (GTA), which seek to transform harmful gender norms and power imbalances to promote more gender equitability (WHO, 2011), have been successfully carried out (Stewart et al., 2021), in order to address harmful gender norms and practices (Levy et al., 2020). The benefits of successful GTA programs (Levy et al., 2020), include reductions in gender-based violence (Gupta and Santhya, 2020), and improvement in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes such as family planning use and contraceptive use (Dagadu et al., 2022).

In Nigeria, evidence shows that gender inequality and social norms that favor the male over females remains a major concern. In 2018, 13.2% of women aged 15-49 years reported that they had been subject to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or formal sexual partner (Nigeria Demographic Health Survey Report, 2018). Moreover, women of reproductive age (15-49 years) often face barriers with respect to their sexual and reproductive health and rights: despite progress, in 2018, 35.6% of women had their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods (UN Women, 2021).

To address these gender norm issues, and to improve the health and wellbeing of young people, it is necessary to understand the different beliefs of household heads about gender equity on the rights and privileges of young people. The household is key in society and a head is usually

responsible for the household but, this is not necessarily the oldest member of the household and maybe a male or a female (Statistical Center of Iran, 2016).

In developing countries such as Nigeria, it is believed that the gender of the household head influences the choice of things and behaviour of individuals who live in the household (Morakinyo et al., 2015). Such choice of son preferred over daughter, (Sandström and Vikström, 2015) and other decision-making in the household (Morakinyo et al., 2015) are mostly influenced by the household head. This could be influenced greatly by the gender norm attitude of the household head. Hence, the need to actively engage the household heads in interventions that will positively transform negative beliefs on gender equity to improve overall SRH outcomes of adults and young people.

Gender norms are strongly internalized by young people as they grow up within their households and society at large to become men and women (Blum et al., 2017) and this represents a gap of opportunity to promote gender-equitable attitudes before such attitudes solidify, in turn contributing to adverse gender inequality in the society. Most studies on household heads focus mainly on female-headed households, household heads' choice of social amenities, and social and economic challenges of household heads (Nwaka et al., 2020; Nwaka et al., 2016; Aryal et al., 2019). However, there is a paucity of knowledge of the attitude of household heads toward young boys and young girls on issue of gender norms since the household heads ultimately are responsible for the upbringing of young boys and girls.

Hence, this paper provides new knowledge on the gender norm attitude of male and female heads of households on rights, privileges, and equity promotion of young boys and young girls, as well as its associated factors. This is because being either male or female heads of households have a bearing on attitudes to gender norms as it concerns young people within the households.

Method

Study design and study area

This study was a cross-sectional quantitative research undertaken in six local government areas (LGAs) of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. With an annual growth rate of 2.8%, Ebonyi State has an estimated total population of 4,339,136 and over 355,000 are young people aged 15-24 years

(Ebonyi State Government; Ebonyi-National Youth Baseline Survey, 2014). The six LGAs with the poorest sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes among young people were purposively selected from the 3 senatorial zones. These LGAs have a total of 84 primary health care (PHC) that provide youth-friendly SRH services and have been prioritized by the state government and partners for scaling up SRH interventions. A community was selected from each LGA based on the stakeholders' recommendation.

Study population

The study population consisted of household heads in households with young people aged 15-24 years. The household heads were selected from 6 communities using a modified cluster sampling procedure. Our definition of a cluster was a community governed by a traditional ruler.

Sample size calculation and sampling techniques

A sample size of 606 households was computed using the guidelines outlined in the demographic and health survey (DHS) listing manual 2012 (ICF International, 2012).

To arrive at the 606 households, 101 households were systematically drawn on a cluster basis from each of the six purposively selected LGAs with PHCs that provide youth-friendly sexual reproductive services serving as clusters. The participants were recruited until the desired sample size was reached.

Data collection

The data collection instrument was adapted from an annual publication on gender (Nanda, 2011). It was pre-tested in a contiguous state. Research assistants were recruited and trained for four days to assist with the data collection. Data were collected for fifteen days using paper and electronic copies of the questionnaire. Individual matching of information in the paper and electronic copies of each questionnaire was carried out before the data were uploaded to the server.

Data analysis

In order to examine gender norms attitudes on rights and privileges of men, women and promoting girl equity across male and female heads of household, we employed descriptive, bivariate and logistic regression analyses.

The regression model allowed us to further the analysis by isolating determinants of gender norms attitudes on rights and privileges of young men, women and promoting girl equity across male and female heads of household. Considering variations in individual demographic factors under a

regression framework. However, the multivariate regression model can be specified parsimoniously as:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_i + \mu_i \quad (1)$$

To generate an attitude score for maintaining rights and privileges of men, women and promoting girl equity across male and female heads of households, responses were given weighted scores; “1” for a correct response and “0” for incorrect responses.

Thus, we assigned the value of ‘1’ if an individual answered, ‘do not agree’ to a negative statement or ‘agree’ to a positive statement. Also, the value of ‘0’ if an individual answered, ‘agree’ to a negative statement or ‘disagree’ to a positive statement. Those who agree to a positive statement (or do not agree with the negative statements) on rights and privileges of men, women and promoting girl equity across male and female heads of households were judged to have positive attitudes while respondents who agreed to a negative statement (or do not agree to a positive statement) were judged to have negative attitudes. The total score was converted to a percentage score and used to categorize attitude; scores $\geq 50\%$ as a positive attitude and scores below 50% as a negative attitude.

Based on the percentage scores, the outcome variable for individual Y_i , is a dummy variable that takes the value of “1” if an individual score is $\geq 50\%$ and a value of “0” if an individual score is below 50%. The attitude towards rights and privileges of men were assessed using 6 variables. A total of 2 variables were used to assess attitude towards rights and privileges of women and 4 variables were used to assess attitude towards promoting girl equity across male and female heads of household.

The X_i is a vector of control variables for individual i , which includes (i) age-category (ii) level of education (iii) marital status (iv) religious affiliation (v) source of income (vi) number of young people living in the household (vii) housing arrangement (viii) household main source of drinking water (ix) household cooking fuel. The logistic regression equation was equated to “1” if gender is female or “0” if gender male. The error term, μ_i , is taken to be normally distributed. The level of statistical significance was determined by a p -value of <0.05 .

The household wealth index was calculated using per capita household characteristics, and assets ownership. The per capita household characteristics, and assets ownership was used to classify

households into socio-economic quintiles, Q1 to Q4, where Q1 refers to poorest households and Q4 richest households.

Ethical approval

The protocol for the project leading to the result presented in this study was submitted to the Research and Ethics Committee of Ebonyi State Ministry of Health, with reference number: EBSHREC/07/03/2022-06/02/2026 and, the Health Research Ethics Committee of University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital Enugu, with reference number: NHREC/05/01/2008B-FWA00002458-IRB00002323. Ethical approval was secured from both committees before community entry and mobilization. Written informed consent was obtained from respondents. Participation was voluntary and confidentiality was assured.

Results

Table 1: shows descriptive analysis of Socio-demographic characteristics of heads of households. The findings showed that the respondents were 52.9% females and 47.1% males.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of heads of households

Variable (N=605)	Frequency(f)	Percent(%)
Gender		
Male	285	47.11
Female	320	52.89
Age-Group		
Group 1(50years and below)	431	71.24
Group 5(51years and above)	174	28.76
• Mean(Standard deviation)0.71(0.45)		
Highest Level of Education		
Completed secondary	262	43.31
Completed primary	199	32.89
Completed tertiary	79	13.06
No formal education	65	10.74
Religious Affiliation		
Christian–Roman Catholic	284	47.10
Christian–Protestant	282	46.77
Others ¹	37	6.14
Wealth index		
Q1(poorest)	32	5.29
Q2	81	13.39
Q3	274	45.29

Q4(richest)	218	36.03
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*(Other¹- African tradition, Muslim)

Table 2 shows descriptive analysis of the outcome variables of gender norm attitude on rights and privileges of young boys among male and female heads of households. About 83.51% of male heads of households significantly (p-value=0.05) disagreed with the statement “the most important reason that sons should be more educated than daughters, is so that they can better look after their parents when they are older”.

Table 2: Gender norm attitude on rights and privileges of young boys among male and female heads of households

Variables	Male		Female		p-value
	Agree F(%)	Disagree F(%)	Agree F(%)	Disagree F(%)	
Rights and privileges of young boys					
It is important that sons have more education than daughters.	53(18.60)	232(81.40)	62(19.38)	258(80.63)	0.81
	47(16.49)	238(83.51)	35(10.94)	285(89.06)	0.05*

The most important reason that sons should be more educated than daughters is so that they can better look after their parents when they are older.					
If there is a limited amount of money to pay for tuition, it should be spent on the sons first	69(24.21)	216(75.79)	64(20.00)	256(80.00)	0.21
The only thing a woman can really rely on in her old age is her sons.	40(14.04)	245(85.96)	33(10.31)	287(89.69)	0.16
When it is a question of children's health, it is best to do whatever the father wants.	95(33.33)	190(66.67)	93(29.06)	227(70.94)	0.26

** Statistical significance: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05*

Table 3 shows descriptive analysis of the gender norm attitude on rights and privileges of young girls and promotion of equity for girls. About 62.81% female heads of household significantly (p-value=0.02) disagreed with the statement “A good woman never questions her husband’s opinions, even if she is not sure she agrees with them”.

Table 3: Gender norm attitude on rights and privileges of young girls and promotion of equity for girls among male and female heads of households.

Variables	Male		Female		p-value
	Agree F(%)	Disagree F(%)	Agree F(%)	Disagree F(%)	
Rights and privileges of young women					
Daughters should be sent to school only if they are not needed to help at home.	22(7.72)	263(92.28)	25(7.81)	295(92.19)	0.97
A good woman never questions her husband's	132(46.32)	132(46.32)	119(37.19)	201(62.81)	0.02*

opinions, even if she is not sure she agrees with them						
Promoting equity for girls and women						
Daughters should be able to work outside the home after they have children if they want to.	249(87.37)	36(12.63)	276(86.25)	44(13.75)	0.68	
Daughters should have just the same chance to work outside the homes as sons.	240(84.21)	45(15.79)	270(84.38)	50(15.63)	0.96	
Daughters should be told that an important reason not to have too many children is so they can work outside the home and earn money.	183(64.21)	102(35.79)	226(70.63)	94(26.38)	0.09	
I would like my daughter to be able to work outside the home so she can support herself if necessary.	248(87.02)	37(12.98)	288(90.00)	32(10.00)	1.33(0.25)	

* **Statistical significance:** ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 4 shows the multiple logistic regression analysis of attitudes of female heads of household on rights and privileges of young boys and young girls and promoting girl equity. The findings showed that female heads of households of age 50 years and below were 0.5 times likely to have negative attitude on rights and privileges of young girls (OR=0.47; p-value=0.02).

Table 4: Logistic regression of attitudes of female heads of household on rights and privileges of young people and promoting girl equity

Variables	Promoting girl equity			Rights and privileges of young girls			Rights and privileges for young men		
	OR	p-value	95% CI	OR	p-value	95% CI	OR	p-value	95% CI
Age category (50years and below)	1.06	0.87	0.54-2.08	0.47	0.02*	0.24-0.90	0.66	0.21	0.35-1.26
Level of education complete(primary)									
1. Completed Secondary	0.41	0.01*	0.22-0.77	0.92	0.76	0.53-1.59	1.11	0.70	0.64-1.93
2. Completed Tertiary	0.55	0.17	0.23-1.30	0.87	0.73	0.40-1.91	1.90	0.15	0.80-4.43
3. No formal education	0.31	0.01*	0.13-0.73	0.44	0.04*	0.20-1.00	0.88	0.75	0.39-1.96
Religious affiliation									
1. Christian protestant	0.58	0.42	0.15-2.20	0.27	0.05	0.07-1.00	0.24	0.03*	0.06-0.88
2. Christian roman catholic	0.41	0.19	0.11-1.57	0.41	0.18	0.11-1.50	0.53	0.34	0.14-1.98
Wealth index (poorest)									
1. Q2	0.27	0.03*	0.08-0.87	1.22	0.69	0.44-3.34	1.51	0.42	0.56-4.12
2. Q3	0.96	0.94	0.33-2.80	1.02	0.96	0.42-2.48	1.22	0.66	0.51-2.94

3. Q4 (richest) 0.60 0.37 0.20-1.83 1.09 0.85 0.43-2.76 1.85 0.19 0.73-4.70

Statistical significance: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; OR=odds ratio; CL=confidence interval; Note: Variables in the bracket are the groups of interest

Table 5: Logistic regression of attitudes of male heads of household on rights and privileges of young people and promoting girl equity

Table 5 shows predictors of attitudes of male heads of household on the rights and privileges of young boys and young girls and promoting girl equity. It shows that male heads of households who are Christian roman catholic were 0.2 times less likely to have a positive attitude towards promoting girl equity (OR=0.2; p-value=0.04).

Table 5: Logistic regression of attitudes of male heads of household on rights and privileges of young people and promoting girl equity

Variables	Promoting girl equity			Rights and privileges of young girls			Rights and privileges for young boys		
	OR	p-value	95% CI	OR	p-value	95% CI	OR	p-value	95% CI
Age category (50 years and below)	1.94	0.02*	1.14-3.32	1.05	0.84	0.63-1.76	0.87	0.59	0.52-1.45
Level of education complete(primary)									
4. Completed Secondary	0.71	0.26	0.38-1.30	0.77	0.38	0.43-1.38	0.95	0.86	0.53-1.68
5. Completed Tertiary	0.51	0.12	0.22-1.22	0.82	0.65	0.36-1.89	1.19	0.68	0.52-2.77
6. No formal education	1.54	0.48	0.47-5.05	1.54	0.42	0.54-4.39	1.02	0.97	0.37-2.85
Religious affiliation									

3. Christian protestant	0.16	0.02*	0.04-0.65	0.71	0.50	0.26-1.92	0.86	0.77	0.32-2.34
4. Christian roman catholic	0.20	0.04*	0.05-0.86	0.72	0.52	0.27-1.94	0.62	0.35	0.23-1.67
Wealth index (poorest)									
4. Q2	2.88	0.30	0.39-21.30	2.51	0.44	0.24-26.10	4.60	0.20	0.45-47.45
5. Q3	3.45	0.19	0.53-22.30	3.85	0.24	0.41-36.27	4.25	0.21	0.45-40.08
6. Q4 (richest)	2.72	0.30	0.41-18.09	10.46	0.04*	1.08-101.64	8.64	0.06	0.89-83.69

*Statistical significance: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05; OR=odds ratio; CL=confidence interval; Note: Variables in the bracket are the groups of interest*

Discussion

This study utilized a quantitative research method to assess gender differences in attitudes of heads of households on the rights and privileges of young people and promoting girl equity as well. Issues on promoting girl equity, age, and religious affiliation were factors associated with attitudes of male heads of household, while education and wealth index were factors associated with attitudes of female heads of household. Our findings showed that a high proportion of male household heads believe that a good woman never questions her husband's opinions, even if she is not sure she agrees with them. Many household heads (female and male) disagreed that the most important reason that sons should be more educated than daughters is so that they can better look after their parents when they are older. Gender norm attitudes that force a woman never to question her husband's opinions, even if she is not sure she should agree with him, can adversely affect health behaviors and SRH outcomes of young people.

Our study showed that a good number of male heads of households believe that a good woman never questions her husband's opinions, even if she is not sure she agrees with him. However, this belief was contrary to female household heads' beliefs. The gender-equitable attitudes seen among female household heads towards this gender norm could be influenced by their level of education and career aspiration, as a study carried out on adolescent girls (AGs), revealed that AGs who disagreed with their family member's belief "that a wife should always obey her husband" were those who had positive education and career aspirations (Closson et al., 2023). In addition, a previous study found protective effects on young people's health outcomes when a woman is able to make decisions alone or jointly with her partner (Singh et al., 2015). Reason is that mothers, especially those who give close attention to their children, are typically the first to identify their health outcomes/challenges, (Ellis et al., 2013; Dougherty et al., 2020).

Many household heads (female and male) in our study disagreed that the most important reason that sons should be more educated than daughters is so that they can better look after their parents when they are older. However, further analysis (regression) showed that gender inequity persists among female and male household heads. Heads of households (female and male) who had formal education and those who had no formal education, were more likely to have negative attitudes on promoting girl equity.

In the context of traditional patriarchal and patriarchal systems, sons are considered to have unique value, as they inherit the family name and property and represent an economic value premium to the family and parents (Sandström and Vikström, 2015; Tilt et al., 2019). This gender norm influences the negative attitude of both educated and uneducated parents towards promoting girl equity. Studies show that parental behaviour changes towards a baby as soon as their sex is known or assigned (Mesman and Groeneveld, 2018). Also, boys are consistently encouraged to be strong and independent, whereas girls are seen as vulnerable, ones that should be subordinate, in need of protection, and not be exposed to society (Mesman and Groeneveld, 2018). These gender norms are internalized by parents and they act on it.

Female heads of households, between the age of 50 years and below had a negative attitude on the rights and privileges of young girls, as when compared to male household heads. Similarly, a previous study, revealed that younger female household heads complained of being faced with the challenge of playing multiple roles (head of household and mother role), these put enormous pressure on them, which threatened their physical and mental health, causing them to face physical and mental depreciation (YoosefiLebni et al., 2015). This physical and mental depreciation could cause one to be aggressive and display harmful gender norms towards young people. Across the world, women juggle work with family and household care responsibilities, and this impact greatly in the attitude of the female head of household toward young people.

Also, the male heads of households, with the highest wealth index (richest) were 10 times more likely to have a positive attitude towards the rights and privileges of young girls, when compared to female household heads. In developing countries, it is believed that female-headed households are poorer with lower socioeconomic status and are more vulnerable to income shortages than male-headed households (World Bank, 2018; Nwaka et al., 2020). Reasons for this are drawn from women's disadvantaged positions in terms of limited economic opportunities to asset ownership, the family burden associated with unpaid household work, and gender discrimination in the labour market (World Bank, 2018; Nwaka et al., 2020,2016; Aryal et al., 2019). This in turn contributes greatly to the gender norm attitude of heads of households, in that the one with the greatest economic benefits, is also expected to have greater opportunity/exposure to positive education which in turn reports in the attitude of the individual. The common issue with gender norms is that the ideologies/attitudes are passed down from parents to children, and young people growing up

in these environments internalize and act on these norms (Patel et al., 2021; Kagesten et al., 2016; Dhar et al., 2020), which then adversely affect their health behaviors and SRH outcomes.

This study is not without some limitations as there could be information bias, attributable to the sensitive nature of the study. However, research assistants were trained to ensure that a conducive environment and neutral attitude with respondents were maintained. Respondents were assured of the confidentiality of the information they provided. The collection of data from a large population would enable the generalizability of the findings. Researchers could utilize a qualitative research method for an in-depth understanding of these gender norms and attitudes seen among male and female household heads.

Conclusion

Individual and household level characteristics were adversely associated with heads of household attitudes on rights, privileges, and equity promotion for young boys and young girls. Majority of male and female household heads disagreed with the statement “sons need to have a better education than daughters yet female heads of households who have completed tertiary education were likely to have a negative attitude toward promoting girl equity.

There is a need for strategic gender-equitable intervention to address the attitudes of household heads on rights, privileges, and equity promotion for young people across different intersections. To determine similarities and peculiarities, researchers could undertake similar studies in other settings.

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Availability of data and materials

The analyzed data presented in this study is a subset of datasets generated from a large project and the datasets are not publicly available due to our organizational policies/guidelines on

funded implementation research projects. However, the project datasets will be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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