



COUNSELLING FOR GENDER SENSITIVITY IN NIGERIA: COUNSELLORS' ROLES

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Abstract

This paper examined the need for Nigerian counsellors to engage in gender sensitive counselling in order to promote national development. Gender-sensitive counselling is an enlightened process that emphasises increased awareness of the social order of gender. Gender-sensitive counselling refers to the counselling process that identifies and acknowledges gendered structures and processes in the society, as well as how they affect men and women's lives. The contributions of women in the development of any nation cannot be over emphasised. There are many gender stereotypes in Nigeria as well as in some other parts of the world that influence individual's daily processing of information. These gender stereotypes affect people's thoughts often without realising this influence. Invariably, such biased thoughts limit individual choices in many daily situations especially for the females. Gender stereotypes has led to discrepancy in the male/female interest and participation in education, science and technology, key economic activities, labour market and other social exclusion problems. School guidance and counselling has the capacity to change these cultural barriers and restrictions; however, current situation revealed the need for Nigerian counsellors to be more gender sensitive in the discharge of their professional responsibilities. This can be achieved through the development of gender sensitive counselling skills and activities. This paper therefore highlights the needed gender sensitive skills for counsellors to contribute their quota to national development by reducing and gradually eradicating sexism in Nigeria.

Keywords: Counselling, counsellors' roles, gender, gender sensitive counselling, gender Stereotypes

Introduction

In nearly all societies, men and women, boys and girls, have a different status and play different roles. Men and women behave differently, dress differently, have different attitudes and interests, and have different leisure activities. Contrary to the traditionally held beliefs that these differences are biologically or genetically determined, studies have revealed that they are to a large extent socially constructed, or based on the concept of gender (Millimo, 2000). Ascribed gender role has led to gender stereotypes in the society. Gender stereotype usually impacts individual's daily processing of information, and this influences his/her perceptions, thoughts and feelings often without being realised, thus limiting their choices in many daily situations (Aapola & Kangas, 1996). Stereotypes has affected the female gender negatively in many ways

and in all aspects of their lives, including education, marriage, occupation, social lives, as well as their physical and mental health.

There is gender disparity in access, participation as well as retention of girls at all level of the educational system in Nigeria. In terms of the indicator of access for the Millennium Development Goals, it was revealed that 3.9 million primary school-age children were out of school, of which 71% are girls (Yahaya, Oniye & Mustapha, 2009). The researchers while highlighting the factors militating against gender parity in female enrolment, retention and achievement listed socio-cultural practices and misinterpretation of religious tenets as key among other factors. These two factors have culminated into gender stereotypes in the Nigerian society.

Ojo (2008) found that counsellors themselves were not excluded from being gender biased. The study revealed that the training programmes experienced by counsellors at the University level had been devoid of gender studies. Although, there is a section that discusses gender stereotypes in vocational guidance, gender issue requires more attention due to its great impact on individuals and the society. This paper therefore examines counsellors' roles and approaches in gender sensitive counselling. It can then serve as material for gender studies in counsellors' training programme. The main aim of this paper is to:

- introduce counsellors in training to material on gender studies
- provide practising counsellors with gender sensitive material that will assist them in their practices and
- help practising counsellors in assisting teachers to be gender sensitive in the teaching/learning process.

For counsellors to be gender sensitive, it is important that they understand some basic concepts. These include Sex, Gender, Sex-role, Gender role, sex stereotypes among others.

Basic Concepts and their Implications on Women

Gender is used to describe those characteristics of men and women, which are socially determined, in contrast to those which are biologically determined. Understanding this distinction has important implications for counsellors to offer gender-sensitive counselling. Essentially, the distinction between gender and sex is made to emphasize that everything men and women do, and is expected of them can change. However, the sexually distinct functions such as impregnation, childbearing and breast-feeding are specific to female gender. These roles do not change, at any time and in different cultural factors. Gender is a dynamic concept. Gender roles for men and women vary greatly from one culture to another and from one social group to another within the same culture. Race, class, economic circumstances, age – all these influence what are considered appropriate for men and women. As culture is dynamic, and socio-economic condition changes over time, so gender patterns change with them. Sometimes, the changes have permanent impact.

Sex according to Juutilainen (2005) refers to the biological classification of human being into male and female based on biological and physical aspects. It should be noted that biological sex has led to the formation of the present day social gender. Gender refers to the roles and behavioural patterns adopted by the individual and the entire society formed by social roles, norms and expectations. Gender role is the sum of the cultural expectations and norms, imposed on an individual's personality and behaviour according to his or her (biological) sex

(Lempiainen, 2003). This concept has systematically led to gender stereotypes in societies across the world.

Gender stereotypes refer to established, permanent and usually simplistic assumptions and expectations on females and males characteristics and the duties of the two genders in the society. Sex-role stereotypes can have both positive and negative effects on females and males in society. If the stereotype describing a sex group is negative, it could have negative effects on some members of that group and vice-versa. Effects of sex-role stereotypes on individuals include conformity. In order to be accepted by the society, women and men may start behaving in the way stereotypes portray their respective sex. Hence, girls may tend to be shy, submissive, quiet, etc. They may conform to very negative stereotypes, e.g. girls are not good at mathematics and science. Studies conducted in the United States showed that some girls deliberately perform poorer than their boyfriends did in the 'hard' or 'masculine' subjects so as not to embarrass them. Boys on the other hand behaved in the opposite way, by trying to be good at mathematics and science, because society expects them to perform better than girls in these areas. They may also try to be aggressive and assertive just to impress others that they are 'real men'. This notion promotes violence and oppression against women. People who conform to stereotypes through Impression Management do not necessarily believe in the stereotype. They merely conform to the stereotypes in order to impress other people (Millimo, 2000).

The effect of sex-role stereotypes is much more deeply rooted when people conform through self-fulfilling prophecy'. In this type of conformity, people tend to believe in the stereotype (i.e., they regard the stereotype as the best way to behave as females or as males). If they are males, they believe that men ought to be aggressive. If they are females, they are perceived as 'not good at mathematics and science', consequently they may set negative goals for themselves not to achieve in these subjects. They may stop working hard in these subjects because they believe that they cannot do it. If males in a particular society are viewed as 'good at mathematics and science', they will set positive goals to fulfil the stereotype and work hard to achieve good results in these subjects. This is done unconsciously and girls and boys do not realize that they are fulfilling a stereotype. As a result of the different mechanisms of conformity, there tend to be a lot of women and men in society who behave in stereotyped ways.

There is the need for Nigerian counsellors to sensitize students to the existence of stereotypes in the Nigerian society, and intimate clients about the dangers that may exist when people conform to negative stereotypes, e.g., females may perform poorly or fail, if they believe that mathematics and science are for boys.

Self-Image: Sex-role stereotypes can also affect a person's self-image. **Self-image** refers to the way in which individuals view themselves. Research findings based on American society revealed that, generally, females tend to have a somewhat more negative self-image than do males. This is because sex-role stereotypes contain many more negative characteristics of females than males. As far as self-image is concerned, sex-role stereotypes tend to have negative effects on females and positive ones on males in a number of aspects.

Stereotypes attributed to women have generally led to prejudice and discrimination against them, particularly in the world of work. Women may be considered less reliable as workers because of their child-rearing functions. Men on the other hand may be regarded as more reliable employees because they are deemed not to be affected by such functions.

Socially, gender stereotype has led to the treatment of the female as the inferior gender (Aapola & Kangas, 1996). Females are described with different psychological concepts like the weak, the emotional, the dependent and the subjective gender, while the men are described as been rational, strong, independent, objective and mathematical (Lahelma, 1992). The gender relation has discouraged some females from pursuing higher education with the belief that their husband who will be financing the family, especially in the northern part of Nigeria. Most females have been made to believe that they do not possess the needed physical and intellectual capacities to engage in certain professions.

In terms of occupation, gender stereotype has saliently affected occupational choices and thus creating division of labour between men and women. Men engaged in productive activities while females engaged in reproductive activities of the society. The housework carried out by women within the family and communities has extended to cover caring professions in the public sphere such as school, health care as well as day-care (Juutilainen, 2005). Females would rather choose occupations that would give them the opportunity to return home on time for their house chores. Similarly, work that are highly paid are occupied by males while work with less pay reflect the women's work such as the teaching profession dominated by women. Chauhan (2007) also noted that few women have changed their status in terms of higher education and are entering various professions formerly reserved for the males. He stressed that the changed status and roles of these women is fraught with several problems such as conflict in home, tension and constant anxiety. The number of divorces, separations and suicide are increasing. He therefore advocates the need for gender sensitive counselling in providing services that will assist women in adjusting themselves properly in their new roles in the society.

Nigerian counsellors need to be gender sensitive in counselling by emphasising a counselling process that increases the awareness of the social order of gender. There is the need for Nigerian counsellors, when offering career counselling to identify and acknowledge gendered structure and processes in society as well as how they affect the life of both men and women.

Rationale for Gender Sensitive Counselling in Nigeria

Gender sensitive counselling has been described as any approach that explores power differentials between women and men and directly addresses client issues related to gender inequality with the goal of empowering women and increasing equality (Feminist Therapy Institute; FTI, 1999). Gender sensitive counselling is imperative in Nigeria based on many factors. These include the need:

- i. to bridge the gap in the accessibility, enrolment and retention of male/female ratio at all levels of the education system,
- ii. to increase the participation of women in key economic development areas in Nigeria
- iii. to promote social inclusion of females in matters that concern them
- iv. to assist client deals with factors that poses threat to physical, economic as well as emotional security of women and the girl-child in Nigeria
- v. to assist client deals with stresses that emanates from value conflicts, family conflict, tension as well as constant anxiety.
- vi. for women empowerment
- vii. to promote national development.

Education is an important tool for both social and economic transformation of an individual as well as that of the nation. Education is the process of refining the raw natural child into a well

developed man or woman who will be useful to him/her self, his family and the society (Yahaya & Durosaro, 2012). According to Amaele, (2005), education helps to produce quality manpower who in turn transforms the entire society. The importance of educating a girl-child or woman cannot be under rated. According to Salman, Olawoye and Yahaya (2011), educating the females leads to improved management of the home environment, effective use of health services, application of improved hygiene and nutrition practices, reduced fertility, lower child mortality, longer life expectancy, better child health care and smaller families.

Realising the importance of girl-child education, many programmes have been developed in Nigeria to improve girl child education. These programmes according to Jekayinoluwa (2003), include: formation of National Association of Women in Science, Technology and Mathematics; creation of special awards for girls; formation of the National Association of Women in Colleges of Education; establishment of thirty-one all-female Federal Government Colleges, as well as open and distance education to widened opportunity for women.

Regrettably, in Nigeria, there has been selection (in favour of males) in the provision of education at the family level due to gender discrimination, stereotypes and traditional values and practices. Some parents in some communities up to this moment have not been showing positive attitude towards their female child education, believing that all the benefits of education that a female accrued will be conveyed to her husband's house, thus it is viewed as a waste of resources (Salman, Olawoye & Yahaya, 2011). There is the need for counsellors to be aware of the various cultural and traditional values and practices that serve as impediments to the education of the females in Nigeria.

Economically, the contribution of women to national development is far greater than many may realise. A high proportion of women are economically active. For example, by 1990 in industrialised countries, women formed 42 percent of the labour force, and in East Asia the proportion reached 43 percent, according to the United Nations Development Programme *Human Development Report* (1993). However, in Africa and Nigeria, the proportion is lower; the contribution of women to the economy remains substantial. In Nigeria, for example, women complete 80 percent of post harvest agricultural work. In addition, the role of women in the informal economy is substantial, and their domestic work is considerable. If housework were assessed as productive output, global output would increase by 20 to 30 percent. Women thus tend to work long hours often for little or no pay. They are keen to take up education and training opportunities for many reasons, but the benefits to be derived from present or future employment are undoubtedly the main motivation. Better education can lead to a better job and better pay. From the employer's perspective, highly skilled workers are of greater value in a modern economy. The driving force for education and training for women is economic (Jenkins, 1995).

Gender sensitive counselling is important in order to allow women to take active part on matters that concern them. Traditionally women are to be seen but not to be heard. Yahaya and Durosaro (2012), while reporting the description of girl-child from traditional point of view, opined that girl-child are called the weaker sex who must remain silent hewers of wood and drawers of water, bearer of children, and toiler of arduous labour from sunrise to sun-down. Women can be seen but not to be heard in both the private and the public spaces of decision-making. The girl-child by the natural status ascribed to her by the male defined norms of societal conduct and behaviour remains a property to be owned and commoditized. As a result, her rights are circumscribed by tradition, custom, and the chauvinism of male patriarchy. Gender sensitive

counselling is important to help client deal with stress related discrimination and oppression especially in the current dispensation of increased political will and support for women.

Gender sensitive counselling is important for women empowerment. Empowerment is needed to help women overcome social risk factors such as poverty, violence, emotional abuse, work inequities, role overload as well as unrealistic media portrayal of physical attributes (American Psychological Association, 2007). These problems are enhanced by stereotypical socialisation of girls in families and institutionalised discrimination in the larger society. Empowerment is equally important to reduce the rate of mental health challenges prevalent among women. The increase in the mental health disparities between males and females have been attributed to the social risk factors highlighted above; these factors have been found to have negative impact on mental health of women more than men (APA, 2007).

Globalisation in the world has led to tremendous changes in societies all over the world. Value conflict may arise as a result of gender roles within oneself, with family, friend and partner. Changes in the society may lead individuals to experience conflict within themselves and with others. Patriarchal values may lead to conflict due to variables such as generational status, education and religious view. Conflict may occur when a person's beliefs or desires differ from the gender role expectations of others in his or her family or community as revealed by studies conducted on immigrants (Nguyen & Williams, 1989; Rosenthal & Grieve, 1990; Rosenthal, Rameri & Klimidis, 1996 and Chung, 2001 among others). Gender sensitive counselling is necessary to assist client deals with stresses that emanates from value conflicts. This is necessary as it can create inner confusion and turmoil, clashes with family, friends, colleagues, or more often than not, two or all of these at the same time. Gender sensitive counselling is important to deal with value conflicts, which in turn will promote individual mental health and healthy functioning of families.

Counsellors' Roles in Gender Sensitive Counselling

For a counsellor to deliver effectively gender positive counselling, he/she must be aware of his/her own biases and areas of inexperience on gender issues and challenge it: as well as professional level biases such as assessment criteria. Counsellors should promote client empowerment, this means being willing to take a risk in supporting women in their desire to create more egalitarian gender roles in their family, social and work relationships. The conclusion of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Fact Sheet (2010) on gender and mental health supports the importance of empowerment in reducing oppression and violence toward women. The report described three protective factors that help women resist oppression, escape from violent relationships, and avoid depression. These protective factors include having enough autonomy to respond to their situation, access to material resources for freedom to make choices, and psychological support from family, friends and healthcare workers. Although mental health professionals cannot directly impact a woman's economic resources, they can certainly help facilitate a client's psychological sense of autonomy and provide psychological support. The WHO report makes a compelling case for promoting the value of autonomy for women as a vital part of this support, regardless of cultural beliefs about this value. Of course, the promotion of this value must be culturally contextual or it may not be relevant to a woman in a particular situation. But this is more of a practical matter, rather than ideological neutrality about the value of autonomy (Tresky, 2010).

When counselling Nigerian women, counsellors must get a thorough description of the client's culture, values and life history, so as to understand the client contextually and avoid making uninformed assumptions. Emphasis should be laid on the importance of a social justice perspective and counselling should not be limited to individual mental health concerns. Counsellors should help clients deal with stress related to discrimination by providing them with information about their rights and the laws that protect them, as well as referring them to organizations that may help them become more empowered in the country. However, if true empowerment is to be achieved, social justice cannot stop at the macro level but should get to the grassroots (Yakushko & Chronister, 2005).

Tresky (2010) highlighted the following roles for gender sensitive counsellors:

- Acknowledging, identifying and discussing apparent and or subtle effects of gender socialisation and internalised societal stereotypes on clients' feelings, thoughts and behaviour.
- Ask clients about their identities regarding gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, social economic status, and others, and discuss how their identities may interact by increasing oppression or creating dichotomies of privilege along with oppression
- Engage in sensitive discussion about gender discrimination and oppression in a client's intimate relationships, family, ethno-cultural community, and religious life.
- Educate clients about external factors that cause or contribute to distress, including discrimination in healthcare, education, the workplace, the legal establishment and within other relevant contexts. Suggest ideas that may help them navigate these systems to solve problems.
- Whenever possible, take a positive view of client's attributes as strengths within the client's cultural context and present this positive perspective to the client.
- Avoid categorising client behaviour based on gender or cultural biases by using assessments and methods that allow for the needs, values and preferences of diverse groups.
- Counsellors should mitigate their own subtle biases and attend to power differentials between themselves and the client by encouraging clients to express their own opinion, even if it differs from the counsellor's own beliefs or values.
- Teach relevant skills to increase empowerment, e.g. assertiveness and self-advocacy for victims of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and use established counselling interventions such as cognitive restructuring to address mental health issues common among women (e.g. self-blame among victims of violence, low self-worth in depression, and internalized negative body image in eating disorders). Help clients develop initiative and gain empowerment by encouraging them to actively participate in therapy as an equal partner.
- Encourage and support clients in expanding their options and choices in ways that resist gender stereotypes
- Reduce potential assessment biases by encouraging client collaboration in the assessment process and incorporating client perspectives into the case conceptualization. Help clients reframe and integrate experience from a strength-based perspective.
- Help clients avoid self-blame for externally caused problems by offering alternative explanations that encourage empowerment. Suggest relevant opportunities and resources in

addition to therapy that are geared for helping women gain relevant skills and solve problems that come up in counselling

- Support client actions that increase equality and empowerment within societal organizations and institutions they are connected to. This may include providing information resources outside of counselling that can help the client facilitate change.
- Counsellor should use the therapy process as a model for egalitarian relationships, work to reduce power differentials and encourage client participation in the counselling process (American Psychological Association, 2007)

Approaches and Skills in Gender Sensitive Counselling

Counsellors in delivering gender sensitive counselling can employ various counselling skills and strategies. These include:

- a. Questioning: relevant in challenging one's own biases and areas of inexperience on gender issue,
- b. Active Listening: This is vital in determining gender issue that is important in each client life as well as in inquiring into the client's identity.
- c. Confrontation: this skill is useful in challenging gender stereotypes such as patriarchal attitude within the family
- d. Peer Mentoring: Same sex groups consisting of members from different families to give support and insight to each other
- e. Modelling: Use of video clips or films as well as other media with characters that demonstrate egalitarian norms
- f. Gender games and activities: use to differentiate sex from gender, sex role from gender roles among others.
- g. Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy and other Cognitively Based Therapy: these theories are useful for cognitive restructuring.
- h. Client-Centred Therapy, Assertiveness Training Skills: these theories are useful for promoting empowerment in counselling process.
- i. Discussing: counsellor discusses with female client who are serving in various capacities; contributing significantly to the development of this nation as live models. Role Models and Mentors are useful support structure for women. Mentorship will help female aspiring to advance in higher education or profession to deal with barriers at workplace and to develop self-esteem (Grove & Montgomery, 2000)
- j. Watching Models that demonstrate egalitarian roles among males and females in families and in workplaces.
- k. Stories of men and women who have contributed to development of the nation in any way to disabuse the mind of males and females on stereotypes about the nature of women erroneously held to be weak, as well as examples of great women in religion.

Conclusion

This paper examines the need for Nigerian counsellors to be gender sensitive in counselling especially in the present dispensation where there is increasing political will for women participation and involvement. It also highlights various counsellor's roles as well as intervention strategies that could be used by Nigerian counsellors to become gender sensitive in the discharge of their professional responsibilities. This is important to fast track the bridging of the discrepancy between males and females in access, participation and retention in education,

employment, economy, social, and political realms in Nigeria. It is also important in promoting the mental health of women who already have conflicts within them, in the family or in workplaces.

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