An Exploration of Socio-cultural Challenges of Left behind Wives in Edo State, Nigeria

Adediran Daniel Ikuomola

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria
diranreal@yahoo.com

Abstract

Research emphasising effects of migration on left behind families often focus on implications of absent fathers, particularly in Africa and areas with historic male migration. Yet, information on the experiences of left behind wives in a patriarchal and familial setting is scanty. This Study explore the socio-cultural challenges facing wives of migrants (Bini women), in Edo State, Nigeria. Specifically it examines the stigmatised experiences and the effect of cultural constrains on women adjustment to life in the absence of their husbands. Drawing on qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews with twenty-one (21) left-behind wives in Benin, Edo State. The study shows how women are confronted with traditions and the need to readjust their lives amidst cultural and familial cooperation and constrains. Narratives buttressed on the excessive surveillance through significant others and the renegotiation of living arrangements based on patriarchal values and expectations. Life adjustment was described as stigmatic, hectic and demanding in maintaining the home front.

Keywords: Left behind wives, tradition, surveillance, life adjustment, stigmatisation

Introduction

In this study we examine the associated socio-cultural challenges of left behind wives in their role as household heads in a patriarchal society, among the Binis[1], in Edo State, Nigeria. Most research that focus on migration among the Binis, are often towards female prostitution, sex and child trafficking, and migration cartel (Okonofua et al. 2004; Omorodion 1999; Onyeonoru, 2004; Skilbrei & Tveit 2007). Media hype catches in on this, and the life of left behinds wives caught in the complex web of migration hardly gets the academic attention it deserves. Much of the available literatures on left behind wives are in Asia and South America particularly on the adverse effect on children's education, economic difficulties, challenges and adjustment in the absence of their husbands (Desai & Banerji 2008; Hoang & Yeoh 2011; Kuhn 2006; Massey et. al. 1994).

Research emphasising the effects of migration on left behind families has primarily focused on the implications of absent fathers on children, particularly in Africa and Asia with historically-entrenched male migration systems (Brown 1983; de Haas 2007; Reed, et. al. 2010). Similarly in Nigerian migration research, little attention has been given to left behind wives, especially in communities that are highly traditional and patriarchal in nature. The Binis in Edo state, Nigeria, have a dated history of male migration prior to colonial times and a social organisation that is highly patriarchal (Bradbury 1957; Eboreime 1989; Omorodion 2011). With the dominance of men in migration statistics, women and by implication wives, are left behind intentionally and circumstantially in many communities (Mascarenhas-keyes 1990; Mondain & Diagne 2013). In some communities in Nigeria, there are evidences showing the economic empowerment of women and wives of migrants. For instance in Benin, Edo State, the impact of migration on women changing status, was evident in the number of female headed households and landladies emerging in the 21st century (Oke 2001; Osezua 2013). The snowballing effect of male migration on women socio-economic empowerment cannot be overemphasised, most especially of left behind wives. Often times the economic gains and empowerment of women through migrant remittances come with some prospects as well as challenges.

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[1] The Binis are a cultural group living in or around the present day Benin City in Edo state, Nigeria, They are also referred to as the 'Edos'. (Omorodion 1999; Onyeonoru 2004).

Hondagneu-Sotelo (1999) and Hugo (2000) documented two types of effects male migration has on left behind wives: the first being on women's autonomy and the second which revolves around financial hardship and increased responsibilities. In a study in India, Desai & Banerji (2008) noted that men's absence from home, irregular and meagre remittances provides conditions for fostering women's autonomy, self-esteem and role expansion. In some difficult instances, women engage in tasks that they would not have otherwise done. Nevertheless economic freedom and participation of women in decision making in traditional societies are gradually changing for the better in communities with long history of male migration (Adepoju 1997; Desai & Banerji 2008; Posel 2001). Among the Binis as with many patriarchal societies, gender relations varies among societies, but the general trend is for women to have less personal autonomy, fewer resources at their disposal and limited influence over the decision making processes that shape their societies and their own lives (Osezua 2013; Reed et. al., 2010; Schafer 2000). Gender, like race or ethnicity, functions as an organising principle for society because of the cultural meanings assigned to being male or female (Tuyizere 2007).

Recognising the stigma and challenges of left behind wives is paramount in understanding the level of constraints they face in the drive towards better life. Connell (1987) argues that gender relations are organised by gender structures such as those of labour and power especially in different spheres such as work, home, and community. Similarly Adams & Coltrane (2005), Taga (2005) echo the unwritten and enduring gender boundary between public and domestic spheres occupied by men and women respectively in many societies. In Africa, the male dominance in migration studies and gendered division of labour that attaches the breadwinner's role to men, and the caregiver's and nurturer's roles to women continues to shape perceptions and gendered spheres in powerful ways (Parrenas 2005; Piper and Roces 2003). Given the diversity of migratory phenomena and the unavoidable limitations of any explanation confined primarily to economic factors this article incorporates both economic and non-economic elements towards the analysis of qualitative data from women with migrant husbands, living in Benin, Edo state. This article emphasises particularly a number of "sociocultural" factors, funnelling women into a fairly narrow range of stigmatised roles and statuses in an urban, but cultural milieu. However, it is important to note that 'sociocultural' factors, as used in this article, are not thus opposed to economic factors, but rather relate to the kinds of attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions associated with culture.

Apart from socio-economic impact on the area of origin, migration has a profound influence on the status of left behind wives in the community. The effect of husbands' emigration makes the life of wives stressful and difficult. Often times many are faced with excessive workload especially with the burden of catering for children and several other things, which culturally are done by men (Gulati 1993; Hadi, 1999; Hugo 1995). In the same vein the relationship of migrants with their community and places of origin take the form of remittance (finance, property, exchange of information and ideas) which often assist in improving family welfare. Most families in developing countries believe that working abroad is a major way out of poverty (Adepoju 1997; Desai & Banerji 2008; Mondain & Diagne 2013; Sadaf et. al. 2010). Thus migrants are in an unwritten contract to support their families that are left behind (Hamann 2007). Keeping in view the impact of migration on the families left behind, this study investigated the experienced stigma and associated social problems faced by married women with emigrant husbands often labelled as 'left behind wives' in Benin.

An Overview of Women in Benin Tradition

Historically, among the Binis, women's access to economic resources such as land and tangible properties were based on status within the family and involved right of use, not ownership. The customary practices exclude women from ownership; property is held in a man's name and passed patrilineally within the group. In the case of death of a husband, a widow's right to remain on the land is not secured. Customary rules have the effect of excluding females from the clan or communal entity; such rules also serve to exclude females from ownership. Attempts by women to control property, especially land, are considered as misbehaviour (Iruonagbe 2010). A woman who buys land is seen as having sinister intentions either to run away from her matrimonial home, or use it as a place to entertain other men. The socio-political structure and processes offer no role for women. Gender inequality pervades all aspects of life (Bradbury 1957; Omorodion 2011). Women generally are excluded from inheritance and therefore cannot share or inherit land from either their patrilineage or matrilineage. In addition, inheritance is strictly by primogeniture, with the most senior son becoming the custodian of their father's property and liability (Bradbury 1957; Eboreime 1980). Marriage is permissible only between persons not related by blood, and is expected to be heterosexual. For many of the people, adultery, homosexuality and incest are classified as abominations that often require cleansing

through rituals to prevent calamities befalling the families of those who offend. The threat of women gaining power through property ownership makes society frown upon women who go ahead to acquire property of their own.

Although women under statutory law have ownership and inheritance rights, under customary law, these rights are not upheld. It is almost universal in Nigerian customary law that widows have no capacity to inheritance (Adepoju 1997; Oke 2011; Osezua 2013). One reason for this is that there is no concept of co-ownership of property by couples in traditional Nigerian culture, the presumption being that all substantial property, including land belongs to the husband (Oke 2001). The long held tradition, expect women to be satisfied with males being the providers in their lives, and to take whatever is given to them with gratitude, and teach their daughters to do the same (Tripp 2004). With modernity, education and migration; more and more women are breaking the barriers of traditions accumulating wealth by buying directly in the open market, often in places not connected to their lineage (Omorodion 2009). Similarly, the historical dominance of migration by men is gradually changing as more and more women left behind are becoming enlightened, empowered, owning and controlling properties in many patriarchal communities (Brink 1991; Desai & Banerji 2008; Lan 2003). However the fact remains that a number cultural practices deeply entrenched discriminatory views, beliefs and stigmatization about the role and position of women directly and/or indirectly; and often affront the dignity of women when measured against modern acceptable standards of behaviour and civility (Tripp 2004; Osezua 2013). The role differentiation and expectations in society relegate women to an inferior position from birth throughout their lives. Similarly harmful traditional and cultural practices maintain the subordination of women in society and legitimize and perpetuate gender based violence.

Methodology

The research consists of an ethnographic study which involves the in-depth research of 21 left behind wives' situated in Edo State. In this study, all respondents' husbands are international migrants working in both the informal and formal sectors in Europe (Germany, Belgium, and Spain) and America and none of their wives have ever been to these countries. This study is thus qualitative in nature. Data were gathered over a three-month period of ethnographic fieldwork among women in Benin, Edo State, Nigeria. Edo State is an inland state in mid-western Nigeria.

Its capital is Benin City. It is bounded in the north and east by Kogi State, in the south by Delta State and in the west by Ondo State. The state is located in the South-South Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria. Naturally the state is endowed with abundant resources like crude oil, natural gas, clay, marble and limestone; similarly with a rich cultural heritage; famous for its unique bronze, brass and ivory works of art. The 2006 Census estimates the population at 3,233,366, with a 2013 estimate of 4,553,667 (National Population Commission 2013). It remains principally inhabited by Edo-speaking people, plus a large population of migrants (NPC 2013; Omorodion 2009). The foundation of the socio-political system amongst the Bini, is built on a firm patriarchal tradition (Bradbury 1957; Eboreime 1980).

Data were collected through comprehensive face-to-face interviews and participant observation from 21 left behind wives. Interviews were conducted in English and Edo languages and lasted approximately one hour. The respondents were contacted at their different homes, offices and places of choice with prior appointments through telephonic and personal contact. Respondents' ages range between 26-51 years at the time of the research. Field-notes were also used as a means of getting data. A snowball approach was adopted to gain access to research participants. The snowball technique was useful in identifying the social networks of participants required for this research in Edo State. That is to say, participants that were interviewed helped in recommending other people that meet the criteria of the study and those recommended were contacted and interviewed. Of the 21 respondents (left behind wives) only 8 of their husbands were employed in the informal sector, while others (13) were self employed businessmen in the informal economy prior to their sojourn abroad. On the other hand, two-third (14) of the left behind wives were self employed as petty traders, as against 7 working in the formal sector. Thus the socioeconomic statuses of respondents varied. Data collected were subjected to content analysis, limited to interviews with left behind wives on discussions within the scope of husbands' migration and life experiences thereafter within and outside the family, with specific emphasis on husbands absence. Major issues surrounding the narratives revealed cultural constraints, familial expectations, household leadership, and reoccurring stigmatisations forming the basis for discussion below.

Empirical Findings and Discussion

There were several issues raised by participants buttressing the ways and manners, familial behaviours and cultural practices stigmatise and undermine women's status as left behind wives within and outside their homes. However, for the sake of brevity, the analyses of the data was discussed under the major subthemes of: familial surveillance and cultural constrains on left behind wives; fears and expectations; disappointments and resilience after husbands' departure; their experiences as household heads and entrepreneurs; and lastly their narratives as a stigmatised group.

Familial Surveillance and Cultural Constrains on Left Behind Wives

The family is said to be a social institution which creates patriarchal practices by socialising the young to accept socially and sexually differentiated roles (Kambarami 2006). In most African culture, from a tender age, the socialisation process differentiates the girl from the boy child. Males are socialised to view themselves as breadwinners and heads of households whilst females are taught to be obedient and submissive to the family and cultural dictates. In the case of a married woman these expectations often become problematic in the absence of the husband (Mondain and Diagne 2013). Respondents noted that extended family intrusion in existing housing arrangement was the first among all other challenges. This was informed by the cultural norms among the Binis that, married women should not stay alone in the absence of their husbands except in circumstances of divorce or death (Bradbury 1973; UNICRI/ UNODC, 2003). Thus respondents were either living with their in-laws in the same apartment or very close to their husbands' relatives, whom often were assigned to protect, monitor and spy on them. For those who never had a personal building of theirs prior to their husband departure, where to stay was a major decision left behind wives had to take, sometimes in conjunction with husbands, other times with relatives but in the overall interest of the in-laws.

Though it was expected that decision-making power of women will increase in the absence of their husbands, this was never the case. And as consistent with literature women empowerment regarding decision-making in the absence of their husbands is limited within the boundaries of the nuclear family (Jejeebhoy & Sathar 2001; Mondain & Diagne 2013). Similarly earlier literature on migration and family dynamics emphasized the commonality of families 'left behind' by male migrants, with married women acting as de facto heads of households in the absence of their husbands. In other cases the wife and children are expected to move into any of

the husbands' siblings household (Archambault 2010; Gordon 1981; Morrison et al. 2007; Posel 200; 1Schafer 2000). According to the Bini tradition, the household head is always the husband or his male relative in his absence. Inherently wives/women are culturally disadvantaged in household decision-making (Bradbury 1957; Eboreime 1980). Only three of the respondents had no close relatives monitoring their daily routine (R3, R8 and R10). This was as a result of their age. Respondent 3 and 10 were in their late 40s while respondent 8 was in her mid-50s. This indicates that age is a very important variable in the relative freedom and power they have over familial decisions and living arrangements. Age was described as very important for three reasons: (1) they have been married for long (2) their children were all grownup and (3) cases of infidelity has never been an issue since they got married (they were also contributors to their husband's journey and success). These were echoed in following narratives:

> […] I am an elder myself, with my age, there are very few members of my in-laws, who would dare me, or accuse me of anything, knowing what I have contributed to the marriage and the life of my husband. (R8/Trader/ Secondary education/55 years).

> […] We have been married for long with grownup kids around. They can stand for me in case there are issues from the extended family. We relate cordially with the extended family, no interference of whatsoever, certainly not now! (R3/Civil Servant/University education/46 years).

> […] Since our marriage took place about twenty years ago, I rarely stay at home. The family knows that I am a business person. So they mind their businesses, while I do mine. So there is more or less no difference in relationship since my husband left (R10/48 years).

However for younger wives, the following narratives revealed that there were series of surveillance on them which often restricted and hampered their freedom.

> […] It was a difficult year, after his emigration, with my first child, just about two years old. My father-in-law made it clear that it would be nice for us not to renew the rent of the two-bedroom apartment we were occupying. He said that customarily it is expected of us to move into the family house, since their son has emigrated. So I had no option, since I was not working and my husband did not object to it (R6/fashion designer/29 years).

> […] The family was very happy when my husband made it known that he has secured a visa to Belgium. The joy was short-lived, with in-laws visiting always. My sister in-laws made my apartment their second home. There was no breathing space for me and my three children. One day I got fed-up and ask them to leave, that I could not cater for the entire family. This generated a lot of issues in the family. My action was misinterpreted and relayed negatively, they informed my husband 'that I sent them parking in order to

be free and have fun with other men around. This allegation almost broke up my marriage. After much persuasion we both agreed that my mother in-law should be the only one to stay with the family (R14/Event Manager/ Secondary education/35 years).

[…] Life has its ups and downs, I felt so bad, when my husband left for hustling abroad, especially when families and friends pork nose and interfere with one's movement. I cannot imagine in-laws descending so low, informing neighbours to keep records of my daily routines! (R1/Nurse/University education/32 years).

The disparity in cultural interference on women is obvious in the way and manner older wives with grownup children are better accommodated on emigration of their husband. Similarly the relationship with in-laws was also more cordial for independent wives, with little or no restrictions on their daily activities. Nonetheless for younger wives, the reverse was noted as in-laws sometimes restrict and interfere with the movement of wives. These restrictions on women, (often based on culture, traditions, familial and behavioural profiles) have been noted in several studies as hindering the aspirations of women as well as their children in the absence of their husbands in many developing countries (Bloom et al. 2001; Brown 1983; Gulati 1993; Okome 2003). Respondent 5 noted that the motive behind restrictions of women is linked to the fear of adultery in the absence of their husbands or a male relative around. Respondent 9, a working class mother, was of the opinion that family interference precede husbands sojourn 'it is also a function of how family members were interfering before the departure of the husband'. Irrespective of the case, restrictions and surveillance have been emphasised as a cultural constrain through socialisation, more often than not on the female child. In India, for example, Bloom et al. (2001), concur that women are expected to get permission from an older family member in the absence of their husbands, or elderly male relative. Similarly respondents highlighted the cultural dictate of the Binis, which stipulates that a male in-law irrespective of his age, should grant such permission in the absence of an elderly person:

[…] I once went out with a friend to a nearby market to purchase some personal items. We later spent some time with other friends and I returned late, my mother in-law was furious, that I should have informed her when I was leaving. I replied that she was not in at the time I left. To my surprise she told me that I should have taken permission from my brother in-law who is very much younger. I felt insulted. But she told me that it is just what the Bini culture stipulates and subsequently I had to obey to avoid problems (R3/Civil Servant/University education/46 years).

Another respondent narrated her situation as 'much better' because she was not living with her in-laws, nevertheless there is an extended family member watching over her and whom she is also expected to report her daily routines:

> […] Since my husband left, my life and that of my children are built around an elderly aunty and her family. I must either go to her place or she comes to my place to see how we are faring before leaving for work in the morning, On weekends, if I am tired, I will ask my children to send my regards to her, if not she will make a phone call or walk down to my house. This does not really bother me because she is not only elderly but also friendly (R13/Civil Servant and Businesswoman/University education/32 years).

Fears and Expectations from Left behind Wives

Narratives echoed the fears and expectations among husbands' relatives regarding the independence wives enjoyed in their husband's absence. Women married into families that are more traditional as explained by respondents, often were caught in this web. As with R6, 'with my in-laws, it is difficult for me to single handedly do things without their knowledge, they live a communal life and will not tolerate any woman's action either in the decision making or execution of household projects'. They believe that all women should be tamed, or else, they will become uncontrollable. The whole idea about monitoring of wives is built in what another respondent (R1) regarded as the fear of women becoming promiscuous or vulnerable to male advances.

> [...] One thing family members especially in-laws fail to understand is that no matter the amount of monitoring, a woman who will cheat will definitely cheat. A promiscuous woman will be promiscuous even if the husband is around. So it is just a fear among the older ones, who see women as cultural items that must be preserved and protected in the absence of their husbands (R1/Nurse/University education/32 years).

Though some interviewees and family members regarded the surveillance on them as an informal social protection measure, it however encompasses a wide range of support, and varied widely in different households. For wives living in the same household with their in-laws, responses reveal that in-laws were very supportive in household chores and most especially during pregnancy, early stage of child birth, during and after their husbands' emigration.

> […] Having my in-laws around as a newly married couple was fantastic; they were caring and helpful with daily responsibilities, assisting me with my four kids. Going to work and shopping was very easy with them around. However with the departure of my husband,

things gradually changed, most of the assistance reduced. Ever since then it has been difficult having them around (R16/Trader/Secondary education/29 years).

Among younger respondents with more than two members of their husbands' relatives living with them, as time runs by, animosity and conflict often characterised their relationship with the extended family. According to R21, it involves first a friendly atmosphere and later a heated relationship:

[…] At the early stage of my husband's departure, my in-laws were very supportive and caring, but with time relationships were strained. Currently it is difficult to ask older in-laws to assist in some of the household chores, except they voluntarily decide to give a helping hand. Telling them what is expected of them is taken as an insult and disrespect. In the long run the cost of having them around is really expensive financially and socially (R21/Trader/Secondary education/32 years).

Younger wives/mothers were major beneficiaries of the cultural practices of wives living with their in-laws in the absence of their husbands. Contrarily, for older respondents, the need to complement the remittances from their husband at the early stage of migration created a lot of tension. Instances were narrated on how family members opposed such ideas:

[…] It got to a time, the financial arrangement made before leaving was not able to support the family, (myself, three kids and a housemaid) and my in-laws were not forthcoming. I was accused of spending too much. Then I had to let go my housemaid, still that was not enough, the kids' school fees were rising, what was left was for me to look for a job, which I did and started working to support the family since my husband was yet to get a better job overseas, and my health was not helping either. Then things changed, I stopped bothering my in-laws. This did not go down well with them, I was told that I was looking for freedom. Some extended family members were of the opinion that I was having affairs with men for financial stability and other derogatory words (R7/Civil Servant/Polytechnic education/29 years).

From the above it could be inferred that economic down turn in the absence of the husband will push a woman and most especially a mother to go the extra the mile in searching for economic opportunities to cater for the children and in maintaining the household, prior to the husband economic recovery. This is because no woman would like the children to go hungry when they are still in their tender ages.

Disappointments and Resilience after Husbands' Departure

The statement above points to the fact that left behind wives, were faced with numerous experiences and difficulties in the absence of their husbands. Although many women had encouraged their husbands to emigrate, they worried nevertheless that their husbands may fail to find jobs in the host country. In such a case, most especially if their husbands were unskilled and

without jobs prior to their departure, women often considered engaging in some kind of cash earning activities, usually petty trading in the local markets and at home, using their verandas. The aspect of women encouraging and supporting their husbands' decision to migrate is often not emphasised unlike the role of the larger kinship network support in migration (Akanle 2012; Desai & Banerji 2008; Onyeonoru 2004). Working class wives noted their involvement financially and in the decision of their husbands to emigrate:

> […] My experience was quite different, because I was and still working before my husband left and the decision was made jointly. My contribution financially to his leaving cannot be quantified, just the way our house was jointly built. It was difficult for him to secure a reasonable job abroad and for two years I was left with four children. This meant I had to cater for the children alone. It got to a stage it became a struggle to provide regular meals for the household. I had to remove my children from a private to a public school to reduce the expenses. The family socio-economic condition dwindled to the extent that colleagues at my workplace often made jest of me whenever I advertise and sell some petty items after working hours. I was often welcomed with songs and slogans such as: 'Akata wife'; Wife for Nigeria, husband for abroad, na food be the ko ko'! (R11/Civil Servant/University education/40years).

The concluding remark of respondent 11, simply means a woman's status as a 'migrant wife' does not portray anything good, if she is not economically empowered. In difficult times women were expected to manage the household on their own, without specific and prior arrangements. In other cases wives' limited access to husbands' remittances especially where the majority of transfer passes through the hands of in-laws, who exercise strict level of control over disbursements and expenditures were among other disappointments experienced. Interviews revealed that on the eve of migration, wives are often overwhelmed and accept any arrangements made by their husbands. Usually money was entrusted with them, often from past savings, loans, and financial assistance from relatives, to manage the household, with the notion that their husbands will get employed as soon as possible in the host country and start sending money immediately and regularly. This was not always the case. Women were forced to complement their husbands' effort with whatever they get. According to a respondent in her mid-thirties, she noted:

> […] I learnt my lesson shortly after he left, he made a standing order that whenever I am in need financially, his elder brother will be of help, I did that for the first six months, then he started complaining that my husband has not sent him anything since he left and that he can no longer assist me. It was then I made up my mind to get a shop, in order to earn some income (R12/Civil Servant and Trader/Secondary education/35 years).

Another corroborated:

> […] My husband does not send much, what I get from him can only pay the children's school fees and nothing more. I have to provide food and other needs for the household. This is the major issue giving me concern. When the complaint was becoming too much for me to bear, I had to take a loan and start a business. The stress of doing business is really affecting the quality time expected of me from my children. Similarly my health and the constant thinking of how to settle the loan is more torturing, than not seeing my husband for over five years (R13/Civil Servant and Businesswoman/University education/32 years).

From the above analysis, migration brought considerable change to household responsibilities hitherto handled by husbands, such as children fees and money management patterns. This overwhelmed wives especially those who were not gainfully employed prior to their husbands' migration. For wives who had always managed the financial affairs of their households, they experienced less stress in their situation, although they lost access to the total income of their husbands, at least temporarily. Prior to migration, 15 of the 21 interviewees had their husband as sole financier of household expenses, while 7 received partial allowance. During their husbands' emigration, however, women became the sole budget managers of the household, an experience which they all welcomed but admitted as overwhelming at first. In the same vein discussion also revealed that women are becoming more empowered in the community. This was attributed to the increasing number of women owned houses, properties and small businesses across the town, as well as the long and recent history of men and women living and working abroad. Empowerment of women in the community nevertheless had its own challenges as explained in the experiences of left behind wives who are now proud owners of houses and businesses in the community.

Left Behind Wives and their Experiences as Household Heads and Entrepreneurs

The saying that 'there are more female landladies than landlords in Benin' as explained by respondents' was often used to tease left behind wives and female returnee migrants (R7; R9; R14) This historically emanated from the fact that culturally land has been recognised as a primary source of wealth, social status, and power, often left in the preserve of the male gender (Omorodion 2011). Similarly it is the basis for shelter, food, and economic activities. The speed at which modernisation and urbanisation is taking place in Edo State has brought a number of women into the mainstream economy as well as owning of landed properties and houses. Though

R2 and R11 noted that they have been empowered by their husbands in building houses and establishment of businesses, but just like other respondents empowerment was described as a major benefit of having a husband abroad. Cases of left behind wives, owning a house, managing a small business venture or being called a landlady, were described as a reality that is still very difficult to accept:

> […] The culture still frowns at the idea of being called a landlady or owning a business venture. Family members and tenants would want you to refer to the house as 'my husband's house'. As a young woman they keep asking me 'where is my husband and the owner of the business? (R20/Businesswoman/Secondary education/39 years).

The above statement simply implies that different favourable preferences exist on who should own a house or control a thriving business enterprise. While is it not derogatory for men irrespective of their age and for elderly women to own a house and be called a landlord and landladies, in the case of younger woman, being called a landlady often comes with different and suspicious interpretations. These situations are put into words by a woman who acts as the landlady in the absence of her husband:

> […] While my mother in-laws can claim to be the owner of the building and properties without much stigma, I cannot because am not in the elderly category. When younger women say they are landladies, the belief is that they must have either lost their husbands or may have killed them in order to inherit their properties. So some women tend not to disclose their identity as owners of their husbands' house (R15/Civil Servants/Secondary education/43 years).

Another reiterated:

> […] Once people know you have built a house and that your husband has not been seen for years, the notion is that one must have used a spell on him, not to return back home (R9/High School Teacher/University education/42 years).

By implication, stigma and gender inequality in land and ownership of houses are related to the cultural privilege and preference for the male child in inheritance, succession rites, and other cultural norms in general (Oke 2001; Taga 2005; Iruonagbe 2010). The fact that land is an important springboard in alleviating poverty in many parts of Africa puts women at a disadvantage economically in household and community relationship. In the pursuit for economic empowerment, many women are faced with various economic difficulties and stress which often constitute major challenges facing left behind wives. The trauma and fear of their

husbands remarrying or dying abroad was also echoed. The sequence of events in the lives of R7 and R11, reveal some of the sufferings and stress migrants' wives faced in their husbands' absence. First is the responsibility of seeing to the affairs of the children, which is completely left on the shoulders of their wives. Secondly, more often than not, the longer it takes for a husband to get a job, the more economic strain on wives and the extended family. This explains the major reason why many left behind wives are forced to engage in more than one economic activity to support the family. The complaint of having to shoulder the day to day expenses and affairs of the children was one too many for those whose husbands do not send money home regularly. Though a number of literature have shown that such complaints can be analysed from the notion that women preferred investing their incomes in items for which they could claim ownership and whose presence was a constant reminder of women's extra-mural contribution to the household (Eelens 1992; Hoodfar 1997; Moot 1992), it nevertheless justifies the long-time absence of husbands and the eminent hardship involved for a woman to single handedly cater for the family (especially for the children). Traditionally and to a large extent, in contemporary times all domestic chores and homemaking responsibilities in Africa remained the wife's responsibility, thus wage-earning wives felt that their hard work and extra effort only serve to enable their husbands to shirk their responsibilities. For wives who were hitherto not working, getting a job becomes unavoidable. Situations such as this often attract remarks that are not palatable. The following quotes illustrate these situations:

> [...] Derogatory jokes and tantrums from friends and colleagues at the workplace such as 'having a good life in Nigeria is much better than having a husband abroad' are traumatising (R12/Civil Servant and Trader/Secondary education/35 years).

> [...] Apart from all sorts of name calling and jest people make about me, whenever I take my goods to people around the neighbourhood and market place to sell, sometimes I am reminded of the possibilities of my husband, not returning back to Nigeria or of even returning home with a European wife and children. I laugh over it and pray it does not come to be (R8/Trader/Secondary education/55 years).

Another respondent sustained the above position:

> […] Having a husband abroad no longer commands respect 'my husband is living abroad but there is nothing to show for it'. This is because returns do not come as often as when due. With extended families interference, the little money sent is shared. Sometimes it becomes difficult to ask for help, as they believe that any woman with a husband abroad should not be in need. People laugh at me saying

'having a husband abroad is not the ultimate' (R1/Nurse/University education/32 years).

She noted other slogans such as 'nothing to show for it', 'conditions remain the same' hustling continues'. These literally mean that wives with migrant husbands often remain in the same position economically, because there are no clear cut evidences to show that they have their spouses overseas. Generally having a husband overseas was expected to uplift woman's status and economic power generally in the community, just as in other countries with long migration history. Findings in Mexico, India and Senegal revealed how women overcome economic difficulties and patriarchal constraints by expanding their ingenuity, responsibilities and acquisition of skills in tasks hitherto not envisaged such as hiring and supervision of agricultural labour. (Hondagneu-Setelo 1999; Mascarenhas-Keyes 1990; Mondain & Diagne 2013). Some of these ingenuities of left behind wives have not only gone unnoticed but also have come with stigma and oppositions as many become economically liberated among the extended families.

Narratives of Derogatory Appellation and Stigmatised Identity

Often culture and power are in the hands of the family heads and in-laws over women, and obviously more on married women whose husbands are far away. Going by the premise that stigma is entirely dependent on social, economic, and political power; and apparently it takes power to stigmatise (Fiske 1998; Link & Phelan 2001). Narratives buttress the powerlessness of women in contending and challenging in-laws. As discussed in earlier quotes, the powerful role of in-laws over left behind wives was obvious. However, the role of the society and significant others in stigma production is frequently overlooked because power differences are so taken for granted as to seem unproblematic and at best cultural, especially in a patriarchal setting, where people think of economic power and freedom as preserve for men, and promiscuity and silence for women. The tendency thus, is to focus on the attributes associated with these conditions rather than on power differences between, men and in-laws who have power and left behind wives who do not. Often they are left at the mercies of family members as shown in their narratives. The social cultural challenges and stigmatisation of women are not limited or produced within the family context only, but also amidst friends and the society at large.

The emanating traumatic experiences were linked not only to husbands' departure and inadequate arrangement but also on family pressure that follows the departure of a spouse, which

seem to be greater for wives living with in-laws, than wives in separate living arrangements. As R10 reiterated, 'sometimes I am treated as if I am a widow, I am deprived of the little freedom I enjoyed while my husband was around'. Her state buttresses the fact that patriarchal societies confer social status on a woman through a man. A decrease in women social status, will not only have implications for their livelihood, and quality of life, but also increases women's vulnerability to discrimination, abuse, harassment, gender-based violence, as well as ability to assert their rights. Though both women and men experience increased social pressure, especially on each other's absence, but in opposite directions. For instance women are pressured to remain 'loyal' and 'faithful' in the absence of their husbands. Expectations, surveillance and doubts about faithfulness on respondents were echoed as some of the psycho-social problems they experienced. R9, noted that her husband left for Sweden over seven years ago, and that in the last three years nobody has heard anything from him: 'I noticed that his family members are also confused, now they are becoming friendly and often console me…..for waiting this long'. The experiences of left behind wives are quite diverse from one household, or family to another, it is however very obvious that there are quite a number of challenges left behind wives contend with culturally and psychologically.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that there is a mixed relationship between husbands' migration and socio-economic protection of women, as well as the cultural discrepancies and discriminatory experiences of wives left behind in specific situations. As observed, migrants' wives often are faced with a lot of socio-cultural challenges imposed on them most especially by their in-laws. Though respondents appreciated the familial and economic supports rendered, but often than not the over protection and excessive surveillance placed on them were issues of major concern which restrict wives agency in many ways, such as household decision making and freedom to engage in productive activities outside the home. Where they do, many are often stigmatised and alleged as martially unfaithful. Further these narratives were strongly influenced by cultural beliefs and norms which particularly see women (in this case left behind wives) as the property of the in-laws. Issues relating to the protection, surveillance and other cultural ethos may not be entirely needless, but must be readdressed within the family forces for the benefit of all irrespective of the living arrangement and the economic sojourn of their husbands abroad.

The mixed feeling experienced at the departure of their husbands, was more visible most especially at the initial stages of emigration and times of economic difficulties, especially when remittances were not regular. This was also found to often strain the relationships between wives and their in-laws. However other sides of the picture were quite bleak. Most of the respondents reported loneliness as a major psychological problem after their husbands' departure. Similarly insecurity and lack of guidance and father's affection were also reported as affecting the children left behind. Lastly the study concludes that left-behind wives experiences are quite enormous amidst the economic benefits or expectations from their husbands. Thus, it is also difficult to synthesise the associated stigmatised experiences into a single study, in spite of the evidences to show that culture and belief systems affect the way and manner wives are treated in the absence of their husbands via emigration. The study has shown some of the significant challenges women encounter in the migratory processes of their husbands alongside the one-dimensional and stigmatised vision of women as 'left behind' in a patriarchal society.

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