

RETHINKING HIERARCHICAL GENDER REALITIES IN THE TRANSFER OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: EVIDENCE FROM THE UPPER EAST REGION OF GHANA

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Abstract

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Purpose — This study sought to assess entrenched patriarchal roles in the transfer of indigenous knowledge using evidence from the Upper East Region of Ghana.

Methods — The study utilized the phenomenological research design which places emphasis on lived experiences and qualitative interviews.

Findings — The findings indicate that while women play a key role in the transfer of indigenous knowledge, men feel threatened by their growing involvement in the conservation and transfer of indigenous sociocultural knowledge systems. This has resulted in men believing they will lose their control as heads of socio-culturally entrenched gender roles.

Conclusion & Recommendation — The paper proposes a rethinking and rigorous multi-sectorial and dimensional approach in mainstreaming gender activities, which is geared towards viewing the involvement of women in indigenous knowledge transfer as partners for local and national development rather than a threat to entrenched patriarchal roles.

Keywords — indigenous knowledge, hierarchical, gender, sustainable development, Ghana

Introduction

There is a popular opinion that the cultural practices and beliefs of African societies stifle the participation of African women in the management of national and community resources (Wilson, 2021) which includes indigenous knowledge systems and the rich cultural practices of African communities. This view has stoked research interest from scholars to assess gender mainstreaming activities in a very important facet of African societies such as cultural practice and indigenous knowledge systems (Wilson, 2021). Additionally, researchers on indigenous knowledge systems in Africa have acknowledged the vital role of women in the conservation and transfer of indigenous knowledge in African societies. For instance, women have been noted to use their worldviews and inventiveness to solve social and economic problems which help to develop mechanisms for accelerated and inclusive sustainable development. (Wilson, 2021). The involvement of women in the transfer of indigenous knowledge is crucial for diversity and inclusion in

conservation efforts. It can reduce gender discrimination and harassment, according to Strachan et al. (2011).

On the other hand, it is important to note that perpetuating gender inequality, exclusion, and injustice bring forth negative outcomes such as poor socioeconomic growth and underdevelopment because of the underutilization and exclusivity of critical human skills and capital (Tsikata 2009) which can possibly be brought forth by both men and women.

Addressing issues of Gender inequalities in African communities is one important step towards the achievement of SDG 5, which seeks to promote gender equality and empower all women and girls (Anyetimi et al., 2019; Wilson, 2021). Achieving gender equality in African societies is important for reshaping the existing arguments that there are defined cultural roles for men and women for conserving cultural and indigenous knowledge systems in indigenous African communities (Mukoni, 2015). Previous studies, including those by Wyrod (2008) and Strachan et al. (2011), have recognized the advantageous effects of gender diversity and inclusivity on the acceleration of socio-cultural and economic development and growth. These benefits include enhanced creativity, innovation, and productivity, as well as the ability to make better decisions resulting from a broader range of perspectives, to mention but a few.

In Ghana, the literature on gender mainstreaming and indigenous knowledge transfer has predominantly centered on challenging the myths that portray women as passive recipients rather than active agents in shaping gender roles within African societies (Wilson, 2021). Other studies have examined gender equality and inclusion through the lens of legislation and policies (Ayentimi et al., 2019), gender mainstreaming, and gender in agricultural commercialization (Ankrah et al., 2022). However, literature has paid little attention to rethinking the hierarchical gender roles associated with the conservation and transfer of indigenous knowledge. Studies on rethinking gender roles in the conservation of indigenous socio-cultural roles are important because both men and women have knowledge and abilities which are very important for the promotion of socio-cultural and economic development in every society. In view of the aforementioned, this current study explores the (i) nature of gender roles in the transfer of indigenous knowledge (ii) the importance of involving women in the transfer of indigenous knowledge (iii) the perceived threat of women rising against patriarchal roles. The paper is significant for two reasons, first: it complements previous literature on the important role of women in the conservation and transfer of indigenous knowledge. Second: it presents an opportunity for practitioners and gender advocates to increase awareness of the important role of both men and women in the conservation and transfer of indigenous knowledge. The next section presents a theoretical overview of gender mainstreaming activities in Africa comprising a brief stroll through history, opportunities, challenges, and indigenous knowledge systems. This is followed by the study setting and methodology. Following next are the results and discussion, and lastly the conclusion and recommendations.

Gender mainstreaming: The opportunities and challenges

Globally, gender is the social, cultural, and economic roles and expectations assigned to individuals based on their biological sex (Conway, Bourque, & Scott, 1987). Historically, gender has been used as a tool for oppression and discrimination, particularly against women and girls, who have been denied equal access to education, employment, political participation, and other opportunities (Conway, Bourque, & Scott, 1987). In many parts of the world, gender inequality remains a significant challenge. Women and girls continue to face systemic barriers to their advancement, including limited access to education and healthcare, discriminatory laws and policies, gender-based violence, and unequal representation in decision-making positions (Fatouros, & Capetola, 2021). These barriers not only violate human rights but also hinder economic growth and sustainable development, as they limit the potential of more than half of the world's population. Hence the need for collective rethinking.

In Africa, the issue of gender inequality is particularly acute (Sen, 1995), with women and girls making up the majority of the population and yet are often marginalized and excluded for complex and multifaceted reasons, including cultural and social norms that reinforce gender roles and stereotypes, limited access to education and healthcare, and discriminatory laws and policies, modernization and loss of indigenous inclusion cultures in Africa (Fisher, 2007).

Gender inequality remains a significant challenge in Ghana, despite the country's relatively strong economic growth and political stability. Women and girls in Ghana face a range of challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, and productive activities, gender-based violence, and discrimination in employment

and political participation (Molini & Paci, 2015). While there have been some positive developments in recent years, such as the adoption of laws to promote gender equality and the appointment of women to leadership positions, much work remains to be done to ensure that women and girls in Ghana can realize their full potential. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted and comprehensive approach that includes legal and policy reforms, education and awareness-raising campaigns, and efforts to challenge cultural and social norms that reinforce gender stereotypes and discrimination.

Gender mainstreaming activities have gained momentum among international stakeholders after the proceedings of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (Mannel, 2019). Since then, the programmes of these organisations have seen some successes albeit challenges. This demonstrates that the last almost two decades of gender mainstreaming activities have not been a walk in the field (Moser & Moser, 2005). Before the Beijing conference in 1995, the literature on the history of gender mainstreaming activities points to an active engagement of women in governance and conflict issues in African societies. For example, the history of the Ashanti Kingdom of Ghana reveal that Nana Yaa Asantewaa led an army of 1000s to fight against and defeated the British army who were trying to steal the Golden stool that is a symbol of unity and sovereignty for the Ashanti tribe (Nyamekye, 2022; Brempong, 2000). Further, the Igbo people in Nigeria have a rich tradition of entrepreneurship dominated by women. The Igbo women were known for their highly developed business acumen which they use for economic gains for their society, and this made them the economic powerhouse in Nigeria (Osiri, 2020; Igwe et al., 2018).

Research has revealed that in most African countries and institutions, affirmative actions that will ensure women's representation across all sectors have always brought about tensions and issues related to opportunities and meritocracy, an example is given of the military where the argument is made that, it will be impossible to bring about gender equality, as women are obliged to conform to and assimilate masculine traits, which is what they perceive to be the only traits needed in the military, and where feminine traits are not valued (Heineken, 2017). Hence, the inability of women to bring their knowledge, expertise, and capabilities to bear. On the contrary, historical facts have revealed the important military roles of African women in the past before the colonizers permanently changed the political, social, economic, and cultural landscape of Africa (Mehari, & Ryano, 2016). Apart from the example of Nana Yaa Asantewaa above, the Nanny of Maroon is one of the most famous historical personalities who led many battles against the British and is now a national hero in Jamaica (Simpson, 2017).

Women in Pre-Colonial African Societies: A Historical Discourse

In the past, before colonization, the needs, interest, abilities, and priorities of men and women were equally taken into account in the facet of society. Most, if not all communities in Africa were people-centered and will ensure that women, men, girls, and boys were given equal opportunities (Msuya, 2020). The ways of living at that time were more spiritually centered than physically centered. History through the African continent demonstrates the important role women played in various sectors such as the military, spirituality, and in economics -Entrepreneurship. (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2018)

Ancient African women were often considered the most powerful spiritual figures in most African societies. For instance, in Ghana, there was a very powerful female goddess among the Ashanti's called "Antoa" whom the people seek assistance from in times of need. In Zimbabwe, there is a very powerful female spiritual leader known as Chaway who led the first chamanranga (War of liberation) she was considered to be the female reincarnation of the oracle spirit known to the Zimbabweans as Nihanda. From the period 1800 to 1960, there were significant historical experiences in Africa, especially in West Africa, during which the colonizers permanently changed the political, social, economic, and cultural landscape (Mehari, & Ryano, 2016.)

The experience of the African woman today is not the same as the experience of the African woman before colonization. The strength of the African woman before colonization was overwhelming, women were able to harness their potential with support from the entire community, with a very strong indigenous knowledge transfer system where younger generations learned and practiced.

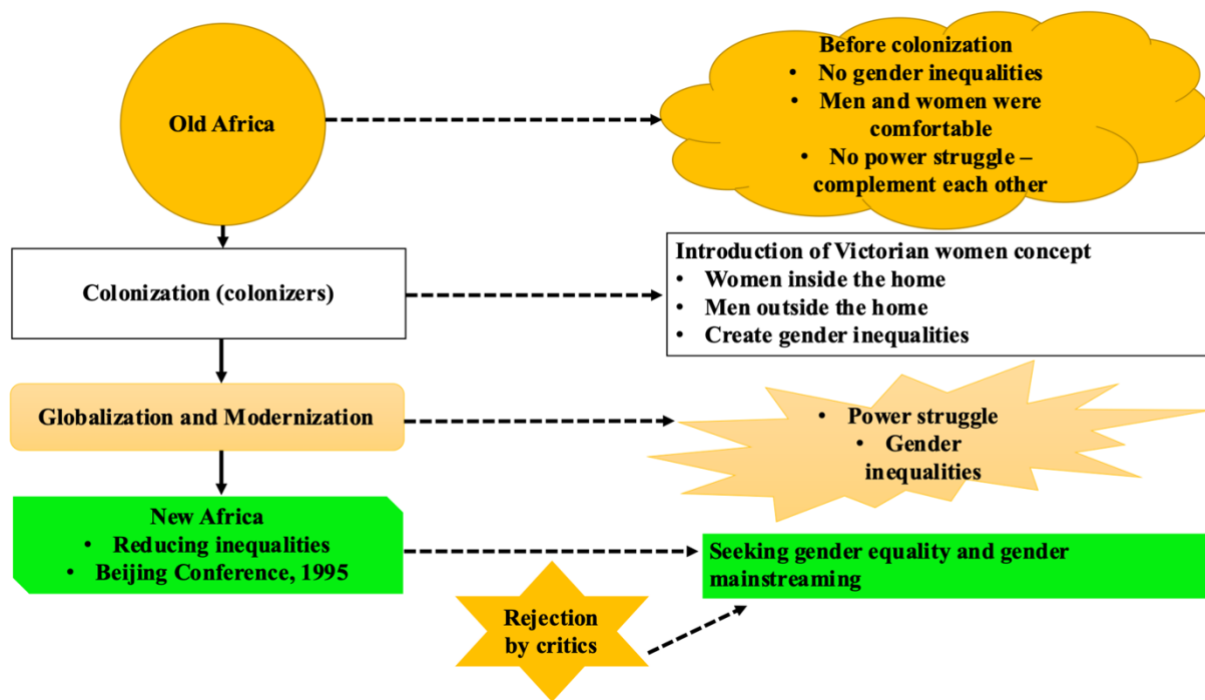


Figure 1: Conceptualizing gender mainstreaming in Africa: before and after colonization (Authors own elaboration)

The Importance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Gender Mainstreaming

Indigenous knowledge (IK) and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) relate to information and organizational structures that are specific to a particular culture (Ellen & Harris, 1996). Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) are local knowledge that has been created by our ancestors over the course of many generations of exploration, it is the knowledge, practices, and beliefs that have been developed by indigenous communities over time. These knowledges are created and altered through a methodological process that involves analyzing local circumstances, trying out potential fixes, and adapting previously discovered fixes to new environmental, socioeconomic, and technical circumstances (Brouwers, 1993).

In our effort to create models for sustainable development, it is very critical to appreciate the relevance of gender mainstreaming activities in indigenous knowledge transfer (Hill, 1993). For instance, leveraging women's traditional knowledge of household management and caregiving, recognizing their roles in resource management, integrating gender roles into governance structures, and utilizing traditional healing practices to promote women's well-being and empowerment. By valuing and promoting these indigenous knowledge systems, gender mainstreaming can be effectively integrated into indigenous communities. These knowledge systems have previously come under criticism for being "backward," "static," and "an impediment to modernization" (Hill, 1993). This thinking has diminished the ability of indigenous knowledge systems to innovate and has devalued the position of grassroots innovators, particularly women, whose contribution to the advancement and growth of their communities has historically been undervalued. Some types of knowledge may be complementary depending on the culture, which means that the knowledge of both males and females may be required to comprehend a specific aspect of society (Senanayake, 2006). While such "shared knowledge" cannot be assumed, other sorts of knowledge may be shared. In some cases, women and men may have different levels of knowledge of the same things, different levels of knowledge of unrelated things, distinct organizational methods for knowledge, and different methods for conserving and transmitting knowledge (Senanayake, 2006). In view of this, there are different perspectives on gender inequalities in knowledge systems and must be taken into consideration. (Norem et al., 1988).

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in the Binaba community in the Bawku West District of the Upper East Region of Ghana. According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, the community had a total population of 2,174 with 980 males and 1194 females. The majority of the community's population belongs to the 0-34 age bracket and hence can be described as a youthful population that depicts a broad base (Ghana Statistical

Service (GSS), 2014). It is widely accepted that education is the backbone of the development of every geographical area and the foundation for lifelong learning. The informal medium of education, even though provide opportunities for the dissemination of critical knowledge such as indigenous knowledge, the attention has often been shifted to formal education for the transfer of information and shaping the world view of individuals and groups (GSS, 2014). The lack of attention to indigenous knowledge systems affects its preservation and derails the community and its inhabitants from learning significant community or ethnic values.

This study adopted the phenomenological research design. This is a research design that focuses on the lived experiences of the individual and do not take into account prior knowledge that the researcher has about the research problem (van Mannen, 2016). Furthermore, the study adopted the qualitative method in the collection, analysis, and presentation of the data. This allowed for an in-depth inquiry into the gendered dimension of indigenous knowledge transfer from the perspectives of the respondents in the study community (Thapa et al., 2017). The main tool used for the data collection was an unstructured interview guide. During the data collection process, ethical considerations were made so that the respondents do not provide the data under duress, hence the aim of the study was explained to them, and they were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. They were also assured that at any point, they could disengage from the interview or decline any of the questions if they are not comfortable.

The unstructured qualitative interviews involved 15 community members i.e. 7 men and 8 women who were purposively selected based on their experience with certain socio-cultural roles in the community. Each of the interviews lasted for close to an hour and the interviews were conducted by the first, second, and third authors who are very familiar with the study area and understand the local language. The interviews were conducted in the local language or English, based on the preference of the respondents. However, most of the respondents preferred the local language. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic content analysis. First, the interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents and were transcribed according to themes. Second, similar and divergent views were noted and grouped accordingly. Finally, the findings were presented using quotations, and these were captured under the various objectives of the study.

Results and Discussion

Nature of gender roles in the transfer of indigenous knowledge

The Upper East Region is home to a number of communities with rich cultural value systems, which have formed the bedrock of their socio-cultural traditions. Yet, participating in these cultural values, and the performance of significant socio-cultural roles tend to favor male-gendered roles over the female counterpart. It is interesting to note that, in the Upper East Region, discussions on issues surrounding gender roles, equality, and equity, are interpreted as an attempt to erode the rich socio-cultural values already embedded in hierarchical gender realities. An attempt to allow women to perform socio-cultural roles designated or ascribed traditionally to be the responsibility of men has been blamed on the influence of modernity and globalization of local socio-cultural practices. They believe such external influences will cause the erosion of socio-cultural indigenous knowledge and a disregard for traditional responsibilities ascribed to men.

According to the elders in the study community, one of the critical traditional practices performed by only men is the spiritual consultation and engagement of the ancestors for answers to strange happenings in a family and within the community. The statement below resonates with what most male respondents said.

“In this community, some male elderly, not female elders, have the ability to find the cause of deaths or any misshaping in our community. These elderly men are spiritually powerful, and they are able to speak to the leaders of the spiritual world, who sees them as their agent in the physical world.

Women can never perform such roles because it is not their work.” (41 years old, Male).

Confirming the gendered nature of roles and responsibilities in the community, an example of what happens during the enskinments of a chief was given. It is an important socio-cultural event in the community, where men and women play different roles. Below is a statement from a male respondent that resonates with other statements made by respondents:

“In this community, during the enskinment of a chief, we do not struggle for power and roles, our ancestors have laid down the roles that each must perform. This we cannot change. The men know what they must do, and females also know what they must do, no one can perform what is not

designated for him or her. This has helped to protect the values of the community and honored our ancestors.” (56 years old, Male)

Despite the above findings, the study revealed that women were custodians of certain key indigenous knowledge and skills that are important for the life cycle of the community and must always be transferred from generation to generation. Below are the statements from respondents that echoes with that:

“When it comes to knowledge of our indigenous foods our women are the custodians, they know how to cook them, and how to preserve them for the lean season. So, we expect them to teach the young girls.” (45 years old, Female)

“Food and water keep the community alive, and the people healthy, and women are the first point of call when it comes to that”. (52 years old, Female).

“In this community, people will prefer to visit the female herbalist over the male herbalist, unless the male herbalist is very good. This is because female herbalists are very knowledgeable when it comes to medicinal plants.” (48 years old, Male).

“Consulting the ancestors and performing certain rituals for family protection or seeking solutions, are reserved for men. We transfer this knowledge to our sons who show interest.” (61 years old, Male).

The nature of indigenous knowledge and skills found also included chieftaincy-related activities. Women were found to be very instrumental in performing these roles, as well as transmitting cultural and societal values such as trust, honesty, and hospitality. These findings confirm the complementary role of men and women in indigenous institutions as well as the roles that they play to preserve and transmitting indigenous knowledge (Senanayake, 2006).

Importance of involving women in the transfer of indigenous knowledge

Despite the challenges, women face in the performance of their gendered roles in our traditional societies. They offer numerous importance for the conservation and the socialization of indigenous knowledge and skills, especially for the younger generation. Not only this, but women also play significant roles in any society or group where they find themselves. In view of this, there is the need to recognize the full potential of women in the transfer of indigenous knowledge in our societies, as this will help to preserve a lot of traditional values from going extinct or being wiped away by external forces such as modernization and globalization. For instance, critical traditional values such as courtesy, hospitality, and kindness towards people that we know and do not know have been taught by women. Further, women have been the guardian of wisdom and values which designate them as natural agents for the dissemination of indigenous knowledge. The empowerment of women and their full participation in society is vital to achieving SDG5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Despite women's obstacles and gender-based roles in traditional societies, they offer invaluable benefits to the conservation and socialization of indigenous knowledge and skills, particularly for the younger generation. Women's significant roles in any society or group they find themselves in must be recognized. Recognizing the full potential of women in transferring indigenous knowledge is crucial in preserving traditional values from going extinct or being eroded by external factors such as globalization and modernization. Women have been the guardians of wisdom and values, making them natural agents for the dissemination of indigenous knowledge. For example, women have been taught critical traditional values such as courtesy, hospitality, and kindness toward people. Thus, promoting gender equality and empowering women is essential for preserving cultural heritage and promoting sustainable development. During the qualitative interview, one of the women mentioned:

“We are very important in the preservation and transfer of indigenous knowledge in this community. Men have what they exclusively do, but there are some important roles that we also perform. Therefore, what I will say is that we are all important in preserving our culture for the future generations”. (50 years old, Female).

Some of the women also mentioned that their role in the preservation and transfer of indigenous knowledge has nothing to do with a power struggle between the men and them. They mentioned that the perceived threat by the men regarding the involvement of women in indigenous knowledge systems is not what pertains in reality, but opinions exclusively entitled to only the men. They mentioned that:

“We have no intention to disrespect our men, in all communities, men are regarded as the head of the family, therefore we don’t intend to assume that headship role. The perception that we intend to take over their roles and disrespect them is not true”. (49 years old, Female).

“It is not possible to detach children from their mothers, so it is important to involve women in the transfer of indigenous knowledge to children”. (45 years old, Female).

“The men, sometimes leave the women and children for a year or two, and just come briefly for a few days or months and go back, leaving the women to take charge. It is the women who will have to teach these children most of the indigenous cultures like farming, cooking, weaving, pottery, indigenous courtesies, and storytelling”. (48 years old, Female).

“We are very important in the preservation and transfer of our indigenous knowledge in this community. Men have what they exclusively do, but there are some important roles that we also perform. Therefore, what I will say is that we are all important in the preservation and transfer of our culture from generation to generation.” (54 years old, Female).

The outcome of this study is quite revealing as the respondents stated that, we are losing our children to social vices and our indigenous knowledge is disappearing at an exponential speed. Hence the need to rethink and involve women in the transfer of the rich indigenous culture for sustainable development. One participant said:

“In the past, single mothers (single parenting) will willingly stay and lovingly take care of the children, it is not the same today, why? Because the women don’t feel appreciated and respected anymore”. (50 years old, Female).

Literature and results from the studies revealed the important role women play in their traditional societies amidst the challenges. Another female respondent said ensuring that men and women have equal opportunities in participating in activities that foster local and national development undoubtedly brings fairness and happiness to every community. This is even more important for women who have been largely maligned in decision-making at the local and national levels. The findings reveal that women played very integral part in the transfer of indigenous knowledge and cultural values. This confirms the important role of women in preserving and transmitting indigenous knowledge as well as acting as important personalities in our societies (Brempong, 2000; Senanayake, 2006).

The perceived threat of women rising against patriarchal roles

Indigenous knowledge constitutes one of the greatest assets of every Ghanaian society. Therefore, preserving indigenous knowledge is one of the surest ways of ensuring that critical dimensions of traditions are safeguarded for transfer to future generations. One of the ways of ensuring this is the equal involvement of both men and women in the transfer of indigenous knowledge. Yet, the study’s findings reveal that structural challenges exist with regard to the performance of these roles. For instance, men perceive the involvement of women in the transfer of indigenous knowledge as a threat to their entrenched gender roles. The resistance by these men to the involvement of women can be described as personal and deeply rooted in religious, colonization, and psychological dimensions. During the qualitative interviews, one of the respondents mentioned:

“We do not allow the women to perform certain functions in this community because we fear we might lose our importance as the head of the family or our traditional roles. It is also because we don’t want to lose respect in front of them.” (51 years old, Male).

The findings of the study also found different reasons for men’s perceived insecurity regarding the involvement of women in the role of the transfer of indigenous knowledge from one generation to the other. For instance, a respondent mentioned that:

“We do not allow women to take part in some traditional roles because we fear they will take over the position as the head of the family. And you know as a man I will not be happy with that. If we allow them, we will be called weak men and not capable of leading our communities.” (58 years old, Male).

“A no-go area for women in this community is the fact that women can’t own or build a house, they can’t have more money than their husbands, and they cannot be more educated than their husbands. If any of these happen the men will lose authority and control of the family.” (40 years old, Male).

The call for women's empowerment across developing countries necessitated women's entrepreneurship programmes toward financial independence which came as a threat to men. As a female respondent stated:

"The men have stopped rendering their responsibilities and are not doing what they are expected to do, the women end up doing petty trading to take care of the family's needs, at this point, the men are no more in control and so they feel they are losing power and so always creating trouble at home." (45 years old, Female).

The perception of men that the involvement of women in indigenous knowledge transfer threatens their entrenched patriarchal roles as heads of the family and masculinity was found to be backward and do engender inclusive and sustainable gender mainstreaming activities in the study area and Ghana at large. This thinking is in contravention to that shared by (Hill, 1993), which projects the provision of equal opportunities for men and women in the transfer of indigenous knowledge as integral for relishing the benefits of ensuring gender equity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study sought to explore the following objectives: (i) nature of gender roles in the transfer of indigenous knowledge; (ii) the importance of involving women in the transfer of indigenous knowledge; and (iii) perceived threat of women's rise against patriarchal roles. The findings show that the nature of indigenous knowledge in the study community takes the form of engaging with the spiritual world with their ancestors to seek explanations for happenings in the physical world. Indigenous knowledge also included activities involving the enskinment of chiefs. Further, it was also revealed that men feel uncomfortable with the involvement of women in the transfer of indigenous knowledge. They mentioned that they fear to lose respect and power, hence see women as threats to their enriched patriarchal roles. Lastly, it was revealed that the women in the community were an integral part of indigenous knowledge transfer, and their involvement rather promote inclusive and sustainable preservation of indigenous knowledge. The study concludes that the prevalent gender discriminatory values, rules, norms, and practices should be looked at and readdressed to achieve gender equality and inclusive sustainable development that was in existence before colonialization. This study therefore, recommends a rethinking of the role of women in indigenous knowledge transfer and recognizes them as integral partners for sustainable local and national development rather than passive members of the society. The study did not consider institutional perspectives on hierarchical gender realities in the transfer of indigenous knowledge. Future studies should therefore consider hierarchical gender realities in the transfer of indigenous realities from multiple actors.

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