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## Theoretical Perspectives of Empowering Vulnerable Widows in Rural Nigeria

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper presents theoretical frameworks for assessing the empowerment of widows from their vulnerabilities and the processes involved in changing their conditions in the rural areas in Nigeria. To address this issue, three prominent human development theories, namely - Relational Autonomy (micro), Capability (meso) and Cultural and Institutional approaches are adopted (macro). Thus, the paper reflects on the pertinent issues to be addressed in assessing the widows' empowerment from the three theoretical perspectives. To achieve this aim, this paper has been divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the conceptualization of widows' vulnerability in rural communities and how they can operate to transform negative attributes in their lives. The second section focuses on the conceptualization of their empowerment. Here, the role the aid organisations will play in enhancing the agency of the widows in terms of providing capabilities in the form of services to enable them to make more relevant choices in addressing challenges in their lives. Also, this section scrutinizes the capacity of the widows to address their life challenges by using cultural groups and elements of their social relationships which are available to them in the community. In this way, we can understand other ways that widows in traditional societies can exercise their agency in dealing with their life challenges outside the scope of supports of the aid organizations. The rationale for adopting the cultural and institutional approach is to advocate the benefits in addressing other sources that could be beneficial to the rural widows in pursuing their goals outside the scope of the aid organizations, thereby showing how they can operate as agents in transforming their lives in the grassroots.*

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**KEY WORDS:** *Widowhood, Vulnerability, Empowerment, Relational Autonomy Theory, Capability Theory, Cultural Institutional Theory, Agency, Aid organizations.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the years, the concerns of widows have been overlooked in women's empowerment thesis (Beijing Platform For Action, 2010; Owen, 1996; Women 2000 and Beyond, 2001; Young, 2006). The Beijing Platform for Action (2010) particularly noted that the omission of widows in research underscores the obvious discrimination of widows across the globe. The Women 2000 and Beyond (2001:2) report also observes that there is no other group that has been omitted in development studies more than widows; yet they experience the worst fate and marginalization in most parts of the developing world. The recent publication of the book entitled - *Invisible, Forgotten Sufferers: The Plight of Widows around the World* in 2008, raised awareness of the vulnerable conditions of widows throughout the world, and pointed to the rationale for engaging in more research that would go some ways to assess how these challenges can be addressed in order to enable widows to attain better lives. A starting point for addressing the issues of widows' wellbeing within their community is the topic of their vulnerability, and how it can be responded to theoretically. Widows' vulnerability in developing societies is said to be multidimensional (Sossou, 2002). Given that the various vectors of vulnerability that widows endure in most rural areas affect their self-esteem,

dignity and self-sufficiency (which are all autonomy competences) (Ezeakor, 2011; Ezeilo, 2006; Nwankwor, 2004), it is relevant to address the autonomy concerns in their vulnerability. The focus will be to draw theoretical perspectives for elucidating how vectors of their vulnerability impede widows' autonomy and how they could respond to them as autonomous agents<sup>1</sup>.

### **THE PLIGHT OF WIDOWS IN NIGERIA**

Widowhood is often described as a tragic moment in a woman's life, when her identity is stripped away with the death of her husband (Akimbi, 2015; Young, 2006). Once a woman is pronounced a widow, in some parts of Africa, she is expected to mourn her husband for a specific period of time (Ezeakor, 2011; Ezeilo, 2001; Jackson, 2003; Korieh, 1996). According to UN Women (2000) and beyond (2001) widows across the globe share three common experiences; the loss of self-dignity and social recognition, social exclusion and deprivations that ultimately lead to poverty. Jackson (2007), Akimbi (2015), and Sousou (2002) observe that in studying widow's condition in developing societies one should understand, and address, the complexities of their circumstances insomuch that their challenges cut across various dimensions (Akimbi, 2015; Jackson, 2007; Smith, 2000). Scholars looking at widows' vulnerability in developing countries point to the impact of dehumanizing widow practices and the widows' social exclusion as a result of loss of dignity, emotional trauma and poverty that they suffer due to their changed marital status (Abolarin, 1991; Adams, 1991; Ezeilo, 2001; Ezeakor, 2011; Folbre, 1988; Huisman, 2005; Kesby, 1999; Jackson, 2007; Potash, 1986).

In Nigeria, widowhood practices vary amongst the ethnic groups, but some common practices exist such as mourning for a given period of time, and seclusion from others during this period (Ezeakor, 2011; Durojaye, 2014). Amongst various tribes in Nigeria, widowhood practices are structures that pertain to traditional laws and customs that determine women's rites of passage to widowhood in patrilineal societies (Korieh, 1996). The underlying assumption of mourning rites is that a woman becomes contaminated by the death of her husband (Ezeakor, 2011); thus, she must be cleansed of the contaminating curse in order to move forward. This belief stems from the cultural association of their condition with death, possible murder and the dead spirits of their husbands (Ezeakor, 2011). In most part of south-eastern Nigeria, during the mourning period she ceases to have normal contact with other members of the society, except her fellow widows, who are also considered defiled (Korieh, 1996).

In some parts of Nigeria, the mourning rites/traditions include wailing profusely immediately after the death of her husband or sleeping with the corpse of her husband before waking the household with her wailing, the adequacy of which is measured by her co-wives (Korieh, 1996). In other parts, women are not permitted to cook for another man or even to buy or sell in the marketplace until the mourning period is completed (Genyi, 2013). Ezeakor (2011) observes that the practices of widowhood are structured in such a way to seclude the widow and symbolise the reversal of her status from married to single. Thus, being a widow incurs a lower status and position for women in this society and such practices are used as an opportunity to oppress, exclude and humiliate them (Adams, 1991; Ezeakor, 2011; Tasie, 2013). Adams (1991) suggests that the stigmatization of the widows transcends the cleansing ritual to reinforce her lower status. The extent of humiliation varies among women in rural and urban areas, as rural widows are found to experience more challenges of the culture than their counterpart in the urban areas (Akimbi, 2015; Oke, 2001). The main factor exacerbating this trend is illiteracy (Durojaye, 2014). Because of the extent of illiteracy and lack of

<sup>1</sup> by autonomous agents I mean as individuals who have rational abilities and possess survival competences

awareness of human rights among rural women, it is possible to compel them to undergo the widow rites. Superstitious beliefs are more accepted by less educated women who have not been exposed to any other way of life. For instance, Oke (2001) suggests that it is almost outrageous to compel a well-positioned woman in the society to undergo some of the humiliating practices, thus, widowhood practices may not be so much of tradition but of social standing and privilege within society. This is why Chuku (2005:5) suggested that the dynamics of the urban-rural dichotomies is important in understanding how the place of residence of women feed into their critical condition in Nigeria.

Most authors point to the contribution of patriarchal tradition in instigating this problem (Ezeakor, 2011; Ezeilo, 2001; Korieh, 1996). The term patriarchy is typically used in reference to male power, dominance and control over women in society (Moore, 1995). Rothman (2005) asserts that the consequence of patriarchy is the maintained hegemonic hold on cultures that stress male domination over women. Widowhood practices are said to be gendered in most parts of Nigeria, in that the men do not pass through the same dehumanizing culture as the women (Ezeakor, 2011; Korieh, 1996; Tasie 2013). Korieh (1996) views this uneven treatment following a spouse's death as an extension of the unequal relationship during marriage. In some parts of Nigeria, traditional laws transfer most of the property of the woman's deceased husband to his kinsmen, leaving her with little or nothing (Korieh, 1996). These preferential customs (i.e. the levirate marriage) are established to reinforce existing structures of social relations and continue to subjugate women's rights (ibid). The hegemonic stand of the tradition further compels widows to accept their fate and live with the constraints. For instance, in some parts of Igbo land, a woman retains access to needed assets as long as she is still married to a man. Hence, marriage and living in her husband's homestead is recognised as granting the woman dignity in customary laws (Adams, 1991). In the incidence of the death of her husband a woman's life changes and she becomes victim to gendered culture (Korieh, 1996).

### **CONCEPTUALIZING VULNERABILITY OF WIDOWS – THE RELATIONAL AUTONOMY APPROACH**

In discussing empowerment it is clear that the notion is inescapably bound with the condition of disempowerment (vulnerability), as it is said that disempowered people require empowerment to achieve better outcomes in life (Anderson, 2013; Alkire 2002; Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1981; Mackenzie et al., 2013; Nussbaum, 2000). The ethic of empowerment of the widows begins by asking the questions what is vulnerability, and whose responsibility is it to respond to vulnerable widows? (Mackenzie, 2013:40; Mackenzie et al., 2013:3). These questions suggest a process whereby the widows transcend from vulnerability to empowerment, and emphasise the agents involved in the process. Vulnerability and empowerment are viewed as two sides of a coin and have come to be pertinent concerns for the international community and literature discussing women's development in the poor south (Robyne, 2003). An essential message in these discourses insists on the value of enhancing the capacity of disempowered women to function as self-agents in transforming negative aspects constraining their wellbeing (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007; Malhotra and Schuler, 2005). These initiatives focus on the fact that these women have aspirations, as well as more of an understanding of how to respond to their challenges (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1981).

Vulnerability as a topic has been defined in many ways. One of the most common definitions derives from Kelly and Adger (2000:328), who defined it as "*the inability of individuals or social groupings to respond to, in the sense of cope with, recover from or adapt to, any external stress placed on their livelihood or wellbeing.*" This definition subscribes to the perspective that vulnerability is socially constructed due to a combination of

various factors, such as institutional development, social relations and power distributions. The definition of vulnerability in this way suggests that the disempowered individual is incapable of moving from her condition of vulnerability, which is conspicuously debatable. Most literature that subscribes to the social dimension of analysing vulnerability often focuses on topics such as, dependency, risk, disability, victimhood, or pathology (Butler, 2004; Fineman, 2008, 2010; Kittay, 1999, 2011; Shiloh, 2011; Turner, 2006; Wilkinson, 2005). For instance, groups of people (widows included) living below the poverty line, or other stressor margins in developing countries, are often attributed prototypical and sympathetic labels in analysing their conditions and the development strategies for reducing their suffering, thereby excluding other important factors (Mackenzie, 2013). Other conceptions of vulnerability centre on discussions of the philosophical enquiries to the interpersonal and socio-cultural relevance in understanding the standings of vulnerable people in society (Anderson, 2013; Dodd et al., 2013; Mackenzie, 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2013). These different emphases have created ongoing debates regarding how theory, analysis and policy could be applied to reduce vulnerability that affects women in various stressor margins.

One major debate centres on the universality of human vulnerability and stresses embodied frailty, dependency and constant proneness to risk, harm and danger (Butler, 2004, 2009; Fineman, 2008; Goodin, 1985; Mitszal, 2011; Turner 2006; Wilkinson 2005). According to these theorists, our shared vulnerability (which carries with it the ever-present possibility of risk and misfortune) is an apparent reality of mutual dependence or interdependence and the rationale for developing institutions of support in society (Fineman, 2010: 269; Kittay, 1999; Turner, 2006). The concern of some of these theorists is to promote a different notion that disassociates the vulnerable subjects from being solely responsible for transforming their lives, as posited by traditional liberalists' views, but stresses the responsibility of institutions to protect and support vulnerable subjects. The assumption by these theorists is that the concentration of autonomy (the self-competence of the individual) in assessing people's vulnerability tends to foster the shifts of responsibility of care and support to the vulnerable subjects (Fineman, 2008). For instance, Fineman (2010:225) uses her *vulnerable subject thesis* to argue against the over emphasis of the implication of the individual's autonomy in achieving desired wellbeing, which continues to obscure the responsibility of state and its institutions for protecting the welfare needs of poor people in society. Fineman's (2008:9) view of this protection is that vulnerability is a static position, and justifies the reason for state or development institutions' responsibility in protecting the rights and welfare of the vulnerable subject. For instance, Fineman (2008:9) purportedly said "*whereas both (vulnerability and dependency) are universal, only vulnerability is constant.*" Fineman's proposition has been criticised for making the so-called 'vulnerable subject' a helpless and constantly dependent one without any form of idea or strategy for moving out of their circumstances (Mackenzie, 2013:38). An important issue here is that focusing on this definition of support for disempowered women often encourages development policies and initiatives to forget the important value of addressing empowerment from the perceptions of the beneficiaries' aspirations, choices and goals they may value in life (Sen 1985). It often gives development institutions the wrong option for imposing their own empowerment strategies of empowerment on the beneficiaries, which often conflict with the individuals' own aspirations or choice of empowerment (Ellerman 2006; Mackenzie, 2013; Sen, 1999).

On this note, a second school of thought within the relational autonomy theory championed by Mackenzie (2013), Mackenzie et al. (2013), and Anderson (2013)<sup>2</sup> critiqued

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<sup>2</sup> see also – Anderson (1994), Anderson and Honneth (2004), Christman (2009), Dodd (2013), Roger and Lange, (2013)



this notion that the digression from the thesis of human autonomy in vulnerability analysis is a recipe for disaster, since the concept provides a platform for guiding decisions and duties involved in addressing specific vulnerabilities facing people in societies. This is especially so as dependency theory has been used to advocate for the protection of certain groups of vulnerable people (disabled, and mentally challenged), who may not be capable of making rational decisions concerning their lives (Shiloh, 2011). However, this concept cannot be applied to all conditions of vulnerability, since some people are more capable than others in rationalising how to achieve personal wellbeing. The argument in using this approach is that the notion of ‘dependency’ only projects the individual as incapable of making personal decisions (or using her initiative) which could bring positive transformations to her life (Mackenzie, 2013:35-38). Hence, vulnerability within this study is defined as deprivation of wellbeing, and is concerned with how the realities of these deprivations motivate change for a better life.

Moreover, because individuals experience vulnerability in different ways and have different coping strategies, focusing on the concept of vulnerability as a universally shared phenomenon will elude our understanding of the various ways the vulnerable individual can operate to overcome her challenges (Mackenzie, 2013). Therefore, as much as the vulnerable individual suffers because of her innate human nature, which is susceptible to pain and harm, she can equally make efforts to transit from vulnerability to a desired state of wellbeing. Therefore, the relational autonomy approach provides a framework for addressing widows vulnerability in rural communities in Nigeria by rationalising how negative interpersonal and social factors (misrecognition and social deprivations) impede their wellbeing (or autonomy) in society (Mackenzie et al., 2013:14). Furthermore, it is arguable that despite life challenges, the vulnerable individual still has the capacity to transform her life, especially as it is in her best interest to do so (Anderson, 2013; Mackenzie, 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2013; Sen, 1981, 1999). This suggests that the analysis of widows’ vulnerability should extend beyond the dimensions of their vulnerability (i.e. misrecognition and deprivations) to focus on the ways that widows attach meanings to their experiences of vulnerability and how this motivates actions for dealing with them. This dimension is important because it provides a guideline for elucidating the important factors (the widows’ aspirations and empowerment needs) that development organizations will be focusing on while structuring and assessing the needs of their beneficiaries.

### ***The Autonomy Capacity of the Vulnerable Subject***

The strength of the relational autonomy approach lies in its recognition of the potential of the vulnerable individual to utilise her agency (initiatives or self-competences) to transform her life. This is considered the micro level of analysis, because it underscores the inherent qualities and decisions which the vulnerable individual can make to address her life challenges (Anderson, 2013; Hall and Taylor, 2009). However, although Mackenzie (2013) observed the capacity of the vulnerable subject to transform her life, she did not demonstrate just how this could be achieved. Mackenzie (2013) concentrated on finding the relational issues (interpersonal and social) that impede human agency, and how to address the institutional concerns in the response to the vectors of vulnerability. Therefore, to show this transition, the subjective dimension projected in the works of Anderson (2013), Hall and Lamont (2009), Hall and Taylor (2009) and Keating (2009) is employed. As aforementioned, Fineman (2008) presented vulnerability as a constant feature of human nature which conditions people to be prone to risk, harm and weakness that is beyond our control. However, concentrating only on the shared human nature of risk and harm will eventually

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obscure other important structures, like the rational capacity of the individual, and the desire for wellbeing, which are both the driving force for change in the individual (Anderson, 2013; Hall and Taylor, 2009; Keating, 2009). Since vulnerability inhibits people's autonomy to lead a good life, it is important to elucidate how the individual can deal with it and progress in life.

One of the premises for elucidating the transition from vulnerability is the rationale that the vulnerable individual (widows) as a rational agent exercises a degree of self-determination in leading a flourishing life, which can instigate the desire for change (Anderson, 2013; Sen, 1999). Since attaining wellbeing is a special goal in an individual's life, the analysis of her vulnerability will assess her capacity to transcend this (Anderson, 2013). Moreover, because human beings have different ways of responding to vulnerable conditions, especially as they have different experiences and values (Mackenzie et al., 2013), it is rational that the analysis of vulnerability should focus on their own perceptions of it. Thus, an effective synthesis of the widows' vulnerability would focus on how their perceptions of vulnerability could encourage initiatives for bettering their lives. Keating (2009:58) termed these initiatives "the response systems in the biological animal" which has its foundation in human evolutionary history. The idea being that the threats to biological needs motivate the individual to take action to respond to their own needs. This response system is shaped in early development, and plays a significant role on how the individual addresses life problems (Hall and Taylor, 2009; Keating 2009: 58). Hence, the meaning that the individual affords their condition is a juxtaposed effect of the struggle to lead a desired life, which is an essence of human nature. Thus, ignoring a widow's capacity will elude her own contribution and efforts to bring much needed change to her life.

In assessing the widows' vulnerability the concern is on how the meaning they attach to vectors of their vulnerability highlight the pathway of actions to transform their life. Focusing on the subjective analysis of vulnerability is particularly important because it will enable an evaluation of various imageries the widows use to interpret their experiences of vulnerabilities in their communities and actions they take to address them (Halls and Taylor, 2009). Moreover, it is argued that personal experiences provide the context for understanding how the meaning people give to their life challenges lead to desire for change – transition from vulnerability (Taylor and Van-Every, 1999). Sense-making (meaning) is the cognitive strength in the individual which allows her to make decisions for change, and act upon it (Keating, 2009). The transient nature of sense-making is construed from the central role it plays in the determination of human behaviour, and in enabling people to make the decisions to actively change things in their lives (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2005). Thus, to understand how people initiate change, it is necessary to assess the meanings they attach to their experiences of vulnerability, rather than generalising their condition. Sense-making becomes even more of a driving force for change when the current state of life is perceived as different from the expected one, or where there is no way to engage properly in a better life (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2005). This is because when faced with an unsatisfied lifestyle, the individual seeks to develop initiatives that can allow her to achieve her expectations (Helms-Mills, 2003). In this way, we can understand how the widows' meanings translate to the choices they make for dealing with their challenges and attempting to change their lifestyles.

Taking into account the multidimensionality of vulnerability (dependency, misrecognition and deprivation) it is clear that the way of supporting disempowered women also requires a multilevel analysis of their empowerment (Mackenzie et al., 2013:16-17; Nussbaum, 2000). One of the initiatives for empowering women focuses on how the autonomy of disempowered women should be advanced to gain control over needed productive resources in societies through the support of development organisations (Ellerman, 2006; Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007; Kabeer, 1999; Narayan, 2002, 2000; Nussbaum,

2000; Sen, 1999). Another initiative would focus on how the social relations they engage in can constitute social resources that disempowered women can use to transform their lives at grassroots level, thereby demonstrating their agency (Evans, 2009; Hall and Lamont, 2009; Hall and Taylor 2009). These initiatives are the focus of the following sections. The rationale for raising these initiatives is because literature has shown that due to the failure of state apparatus in providing needed services for poor people to maintain a good life, this responsibility eventually fell to the aid organisations and other support institutions (Burnell, 2008; James, 2009; Kaldor et al., 2001). Thus, the next section examines how these institutions contribute to the empowerment of disempowered women.

## **CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT THE CAPABILITY APPROACH**

The concept of empowerment has become widely used in development literature, especially with regard to reducing vulnerability, disempowerment and the poverty affecting half of the world's population today, of which rural women constitute one of the greatest proportions (IFAD, 2010; Women 2000 and Beyond, 2008). Consequent to its value laden problem, the concept has no certain definition (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). The recent concentration on widows' empowerment and their obvious vulnerabilities have often been ignored in more general discussions on women's empowerment (UN Women 2000 and Beyond, 2001). The essence in supporting widows owe to the fact that they are more vulnerable than any other class of women, especially as they endure hardship as the sole providers of their households, and often face social deprivations sustained by unjust traditions (Chant, 2003). Most studies on women's empowerment rationalize the importance of providing enabling environments for beneficiaries to make their choices and operate as agents in transforming their lives. For instance, Narayan (2005:4) defines empowerment as "*increasing poor women's freedom (autonomy) of choice and action (agency) to shape their own lives*" and Alsop et al. (2006:10) define it as "*the process of enhancing individual's or groups' capacity to make effective choices and then transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes.*" The definition by Narayan (2005) captures the very nature of the individual as 'one in control of her empowerment' and whose capacity should be enhanced to make effective decisions for her wellbeing. Alsop et al. (2006) view empowerment as a process of change – whereby women are provided opportunities which they can use to transform their lives. Nonetheless, both definitions highlight empowerment as a process of providing support to vulnerable women to enable them to become active agents in the process.

In his capability theory, Sen, like the relational autonomy theorists believes that experiences of vulnerability varies in individuals, and argues that it is unrealistic to have a distinct set of guidelines, since wellbeing is a personal property and varies across individuals. Thus, using a pluralistic dimension of his capability theory, Sen (1981, 1999) emphasises that his theory would then focus on what he called the *value judgement*, which suggests that choice follows from diversity and from commitment to value pluralism (Mackenzie, 2013:50). The rationality in concentrating on the value judgement is "because different people will value different capabilities, depending on their internal capabilities and their conceptions of the good, a just society ought to guarantee equality of access to a wider range of opportunities but leave it to individual to choose which particular capabilities." (Mackenzie, 2013:50). The value judgement emphasised by Sen indicates the relevance of allowing the beneficiaries of support services to make their choice of capabilities that is valuable to them, and the importance of development actors to focus on these choices when structuring empowerment initiatives. From this perspective, Sen made the concept *agency* viable in discussing individuals' contributions in assessing empowerment processes

The agency dimension focuses on the capacity of beneficiaries as autonomous agents to pursue their goals despite foreseen disadvantages and challenges in their society. Sen (1985:203) defines agency as “*what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important.*” Sen (1999) understands the intrinsic role that agency plays in the development of people and argues that people who actually enjoy a high level of agency are people who have been able to engage in actions that expands their values; for unharnessed agency is a result of alienation and oppression and devalues human dignity. In this perspective, beneficiaries are viewed to have the capacity to achieve empowerment by making rational choices beneficial for their wellbeing. The argument set here is that the hardship and suffering of the widows in their rural communities can facilitate the application of various competences or strategies (which is developed in childhood) in dealing with life challenges, especially as it is in their best interest to achieve desired wellbeing (Anderson, 2013:135; Hall and Lamont, 2009:7). Therefore, it could be said that the agency dimension cannot be discussed without its implication on the beneficiaries’ goals in terms of their pursuit of goals which are valuable to them (Alkire 2008:4). This is because pursuing this goal is the freedom space, which is a prerequisite or de-facto requirement for exercising their agency (ibid). Hence, assessment of this level of empowerment (agency) must consider how the beneficiaries are able to enjoy this space within the prevailing socio-cultural contexts (Alkire, 2008: 5).

Sen further argues that the major drive for the empowerment should focus on the provision of capabilities (opportunity structures) that will enable beneficiaries to further pursue their goal of transforming their lives (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007; Sen, 1999). To address this issue, other empowerment theorists such as Narayan (2002; 2005), Ellerman (2006), Alsop et al. (2006), Ibrahim and Alkire (2007), Kabeer (1999), Hennink et al. (2012), and Hudock (2005) provide a platform for measuring the capacity of aid organisations to achieve the much needed task of facilitating autonomy of beneficiaries to handle the role of improving their lives. This perspective is conceived in most capability literature as “the opportunity structure” and addresses the effectiveness of development agencies to respond to the autonomy needs of their beneficiaries through their pro-poor development services (Alsop et al., 2006; Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007; Jejeeboy, 2000; Malhotra and Schuler, 2005; Narayan, 2005, 2002; Samman and Santos, 2009).

In the capability theory, the opportunity structure aspect is concerned with the improvements of human lives as an unequivocal objective of development agencies in society, and highlights the essence of including the autonomy of disempowered women in pro-poor or poverty reduction strategies (Alsop et al., 2006). It is viewed as the meso-analytic level of empowerment because it investigates the intervention roles development or aid organizations play in providing supportive initiatives such as poverty reduction, gender inequalities and effective governance in advancing lives of marginalized women especially in developing world. The provision of empowerment support is expected to increase poor women’s resilience, because providing them with capabilities (or social services) increases their opportunities to live up to their expectations. This reflects the issues of ensuring their inclusion and participation from the starting point to the completion of the empowerment process. Kabeer (1999) emphasised that access and control of resources is dependent on women’s capacity to be included in decision making throughout the whole empowerment process. This suggests that participation is crucial for women’s empowerment. For effective empowerment of women to be achieved, development agencies must address their relationship with their beneficiaries and increase beneficiaries’ informative power, which will allow them to engage effectively in local deliberations and decision making that affects their lives (Slater et al., 1995). This includes a bottom-top approach in disseminating information



that would be beneficial for women to participate in decision making in their empowerment (Watkin, 1995). The idea of participation scrutinizes the capacity of the development agency to provide opportunities for the beneficiaries to own and control decisions over empowerment and mobilization of resources (Cavestro, 2003; Chambers, 1997; Ellerman, 2006; Moser, 1991). Thus, this structure addresses the capacity of aid organisations to be sensitive to the choices their beneficiaries make about bettering their lives, and how they ensure that there is autonomy for achieving this. By following this approach, it is expected it will lead to better outcomes of services, which should be evaluated based on the impact on the beneficiaries' lives (Ellerman, 2006).

Opportunity structure also entails assessing the extent to which staff are trained to ensure that services are impacting on the lives of the beneficiaries, thereby providing aspired or needed services instead of what Sen termed 'counterfactual services' (Moser, 1991; Sen, 1999). Sen's (1999) main argument in his agency postulation is that in assessing poverty and other capability deprivation issues, development initiatives should consider people's agency and freedom (autonomy competences) more than counterfactual choices (that is what one could choose because of its provision). This is because development agencies tend to use these counterfactual choices to cover actual freedom choices (agency) which reflects the beneficiaries' aspirations in using their services (pp: 66). Sen observes that wellbeing is a paramount issue of development and when delivering services, development actors should recognise the existence of the beneficiary's goals and aspirations, which they value and pursue in achieving wellbeing. Hence, it could be argued that providing a choice of services is actual empowerment, and emphasises the autonomy the beneficiary enjoys when receiving supports from the aid organizations.

However, the effectiveness of local based development organisations to embrace grassroots participatory methods, especially with respect to challenges or tensions between agency (ability to control empowerment) and empowerment structures has been questioned (Fisher 1998; Howel and Pearce, 2001; Hudock, 2005; Hulmes and Edwards, 1997; Moser, 1993). This contingency explains why empowerment strategies of some development agencies have not successfully achieved their objectives of alleviating the suffering or poverty of women in developing countries like Nigeria to date (Hennink, 2011; Kabeer, 1999; Moser, 1991). This perspective also exposes the many ways international donors insist on interfering with the strategies of local development organisations which in turn debunk the essence of autonomy in the empowerment process (Moser, 1993:87-89). For instance, Hudock (2005) critically questions the possibility of the local NGOs in Africa to achieve the much needed development results at grass-root levels, and observed that the key reason for this was lack of autonomy to manage funding from the international organisations, whose insistence on a specified programme scheme tend to limit opportunities of applying local based approaches. Due to these limitations in the capability approach framework (i.e. the incapacity of development agencies), there is need to assess other ways of responding to the vulnerability facing disempowered women (Evans, 2009).

### **THE CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH**

As I mentioned earlier, some studies have observed the incapacity of development agencies to work effectively in empowering their beneficiaries, especially in reaching their aspirations (Fisher, 1998; Howell and Hudock, 2005; Hulmes and Edwards, 1997; Moser, 1993). These observations raise a pragmatic concern in focusing on only the opportunity structure component in the capability approach as the only panacea for assessing the empowerment of disempowered women in developing societies. This dimension will enable an assessment of the way the widows can demonstrate their agency in traditional settings, especially as this

study focus on widows in rural areas. This initiative further allows us to understand how the widows can become more involved in the empowerment process by taking up the initiative of improving their lives by using social resources available to them in their communities. Although Sen (1999) did not specify how disempowered people could enhance their capabilities in terms of their social relations and cultural values, his idea that choice follows from diversity and commitment to the achievement of value pluralism of empowerment, provides the justification for exploring other ways the capability of disempowered women could be enhanced in this stead. Addressing this question requires an assessment of how cultural institutions offer alternative sources that the widows can use in order to address their life challenges, especially when services of the development or aid organizations do not meet their specific needs. What this will do is demonstrate the practicality of their agency.

Hall and Lamont (2009), Hall and Taylor (2009) and Evans (2009) argue that the capability approach proposed by Sen failed to acknowledge the various ways poor people may enhance their capability. Hence, to address this gap these authors made an attempt to develop contexts within which the theory of empowerment could be understood from the socio-cultural dimension (macro). Within their “Cultural and Institutional Framework” is the understanding that people can deal with life challenges (i.e. demonstrate their agency) in two ways. One is through personal abilities such as emotional resilience, and personality skills which have been inculcated from childhood to adulthood to deal with their problems in life (i.e. the individual’s agency). The second, which they paid more attention to, is the ability of the individual to elicit the cooperation of others in dealing with life challenges (Hall and Taylor, 2009: 85). This second initiative constitutes the macro level analysis of empowerment and explains how social relations and structures consist of resources that disempowered women can use to deal with life challenges (Hall and Lamont, 2009).

The communal nature of most developing societies can enable social relations and networks that are beneficially important to the wellbeing of people, which include kinship groups and axial religious groups (especially Pentecostal groups) (Swidler, 2013). The ever presence of these social groups in their localities necessitate opportunities for receiving timely support for the poor (Evans, 2009). In addition, the close ties, mutual responsibilities and trust shared in communalistic societies or groups can offer opportunities for eliciting cooperation from others and engaging in social support (Swidler, 2013). It is for this reason that Hall and Taylor (2009:85) argue that people can equally use social resources much like economic resources in order to cope with life challenges. The argument here is that there are many dimensions of social relations which constitute social resources (which is much like the economic resources) that disempowered women can harness to cope, especially in traditional societies where culture is the bedrock of most social relationships (Hall and Taylor, 2009:87); which include the capacity to secure cooperation and support from others, or to mobilize collective efforts, which are defined by the prevailing social imaginary (Hall and Taylor, 2009:88). Thus, while assessing the empowerment of disempowered women, it is important to address how they can access alternative resources.

In addition to the focus on the individual’s endowments (cognitive capacities) or the provision of material resources and services (opportunity structure), attention should also be given to how people’s social relations can allow them to gain access to available resources required for responding to their needs (Hall and Taylor, 2009: 88-90). This social relationship is construed in the process of interacting with others, and in other cases structured by prevailing institutional and cultural practices which support people at grassroots level (Hall and Taylor, 2009). Hall and Taylor (2009:84) suggest further factors of social relations that can help people to deal with life challenges: the impact of collective action and the use of grassroots institutions as a way of further addressing their needs. In addressing the differing ways that the widows can further empower themselves beyond the scope of the service

delivery of the aid organisations, the contending issue will be to explore the elements of their social relations that can enable them to elicit the cooperation of others in addressing their life challenges. Thus, the following subsections will focus on assessing how collective actions and social networks constitute social repertoires, which disempowered women could use to cope with life challenges at local level.

### ***The Impact of Collective Actions***

Collective action is a key factor in women's empowerment because of its implication in poor women's life transformations at the grassroots (Evans and Nimbiar, 2013; Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007; Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer (2004) calls it the power to work with others that explores practical demonstrations of the women's agency (that is their own capacities). Where women are deprived of access to productive resources, collective agency is a key element in supporting them to realise the power they possess as a group in addressing their common goals (Bartlett, 2004; Bennett, 2002). The initiative of collective action assumes that women who are organized into collective groups are able to overcome inequalities and discrimination, and come to control resources and assets that were hitherto out of their reach (Evans and Nimbiar, 2013; Kabeer, 1999).

Most importantly, group action reflects collective initiatives that derive from the interpretation of their social position in society; as people devise actions from the interpretation of the recognition they are given in society (Hall and Lamont, 2009). Hall and Taylor (2009:90-91) point to how the context of meaning people attach to their life challenges influences the development of collective initiatives in dealing with them. The issue of collective action feeds into the framework for assessing people's empowerment in two ways. Firstly, the meanings (imaginaries) people give to their life challenges could encourage the desire to elicit the cooperation of others in dealing with common life challenges (Hall and Taylor, 2009: 91). Secondly, these imaginaries enable the moral obligation and justifications (solidarity) for responding to the needs of others. This highlights the moral and collective value in social responsibility for people in need. People engage in group actions not only for the immediate benefits, but for moral judgement in 'doing good' to others in similar situations (Naverson, 2002; Smiley, 2008).

More importantly are the elements that enable collective action. Kabeer (1994) observes that people generate ideas of collective action to access resources that they may be denied and to address this important need they harness various values of which trust, solidarity, commitment and determination are particularly visible. The issue of trust, solidarity and commitment to shared goals have been projected as moral values that motivate group actions (Evans and Nimbiar, 2013; List and Petit, 2011; Smiley, 2008). These moral values manifest in collective formations and the judgements people make in working with others to address common problems. Collective actions are beneficial for empowerment because it allows people to justify the importance of pooling their resources together in order to bring about much needed wellbeing (Hall and Taylor, 2009; Kabeer, 1999). Individuals can make choices to combine their own individual assets (in terms of material, psychological and human assets) with collective assets (voice, organisation and representations) to increase their capacity for dealing with their challenges (Kabeer, 1999).

Moreover, apart from its collective gain, individuals form a group because their joint intentions are centred on shared goals (List and Pettit, 2011). Therefore, this invariably means that collective agency is an aggregate of the individualistic intentions of the members. This enables us to understand why people would form action groups to pursue their interests in traditional societies (Swidler, 1986). Group agents are vibrant, with stimulating mind-sets which they build around their set goals. This type of mind-set justifies their reasons or rationales for joining the group (List and Petit, 2011); including how individuals make sense

of the gain in vesting their interests to a collective good, and why they may choose to collaborate with one group and not the other (List and Pettit, 2011).

### ***The Impact of Social Networks***

Unlike the opportunity structure framework that focuses on the development strategies and work of the NGOs in providing social services to the poor, this dimension (capabilities of cultural institutions) observes the importance of development services to work in line with the cultural contexts of the challenges facing disempowered people in their societies. The argument posed in focusing on this dimension is that because the sufferings or challenges facing people in traditional societies is often embedded in their cultural frames, it is logical to address (in policy and development initiatives) the different ways they could deal with life challenges from the context of their socio-cultural settings (Hall and Lamont, 2009). This perspective recognizes the relevance of local and grassroots support groups in the empowerment framework, – such as the community associations, solidarity or peer groups, religious associations and other local networks, especially as they are available for poor people to use in societies (Swidler, 2013). Moreover, it will be used to assess the possibility of development organisations to mobilize and sustain collaborations with social networks and groups already established at grassroots level in empowering the widows (Hall and Taylor, 2009; Swidler, 2013). The idea here is that because they are foreign to the people and their culture, development organisations may need the support of grassroots support groups to sustain the legitimacy and capacity to work with poor women at local levels. This is because most of the beneficiaries needs are structured within their socio-cultural environment and in most cases, development initiatives and policies are structured without the consideration of the cultural framework that impinge on their beneficiaries' needs, and by doing so undermine the success of most empowerment projects in the poor south (Hall and Taylor, 2009).

Some studies have shown that social networks provide immediate or grassroots supports that can improve people's resilience in difficult situations in developing societies (Evans, 2009; Hall and Taylor, 2009; Skovdal et al., 2014; Swidler 2013; 2009). This issue underpins how disempowered people use their membership in social networks to deal with their life problems, especially in traditional societies where there is more opportunity for communal relations (Hall and Taylor, 2009; Norris and Inglehart, 2011). People's social networks are often deposits of cultural repertoires (i.e. they can act as logistical and emotional buffers in times of suffering). The contention here is that beneficial interaction or social relationship is dependent on norms of reciprocity that are developed from rationalistic exchanges and mutual trust (Putnam, 1999). Social networks enhance the trust, norms and values that make for easy cooperation with others in the society in coping with life challenges (Hall and Taylor, 2009). Where there is an established bond and consensus of ideas (elements of social capital), this consequently enables collective responses to life challenges. Thus, to understand the benefits of social networks to widows' empowerment in developing societies, it entails exploring how trust, membership and other elements of social relations enable them to solicit the support of other individuals in dealing with their life challenges (Putnam, 2000). This is relevant, especially as membership within associations underpins the analogous representation of people's capability in the sense that it can allow them to tap various resources within their reach (Hall and Lamont, 2009).

### **CONCLUSION**

In sum, the paper has shown that the strategies for empowering women can take place on different levels or various analytic frameworks, which highlights the role of the individual, development organisations and cultural institutions. The analysis of vulnerability in



mainstream literature suggests that vulnerability is a constant human condition, which, in effect, projects the individuals as incapable of transforming their own lives (Butler, 2004; Fineman, 2008, 2010; Godin, 1985; Turner, 2006; Wilkinson, 2001). In this perspective, development initiatives are often designed to assume the direction their empowerment will take, making them passive contributors in their empowerment. Hence, the analysis of empowerment in this study underscored various ways widows' wellbeing can be enhanced without limiting knowledge to only the provision of support services by mainstream development organisations. It did so by drawing on the perspectives of three theories, namely, relational autonomy, capability, and cultural and institutional frameworks. Specifically, the various levels of analysis of the widows' empowerment (i.e. the relational autonomy, capability and cultural and institutional approaches) have shown the importance of focusing on the perspectives of widows as beneficiaries rather than organizational objectives. This approach enabled a more nuanced analysis of the widows' transition from vulnerability to empowerment, which reflected their voice, aspirations and input in the empowerment process. This is relevant to the study of widows wellbeing, especially as the various frameworks have identified different levels that women could operate at to empower themselves in the grassroots.

By adopting the various theories the study's main strength is making a transition from the 'victim' (passive) dimension to the 'agency' (active) dimension in analysing the widows' vulnerabilities and empowerment. The focus on the agency or autonomy capacity of the widows to transform their lives, does not necessarily suggest that the responsibility of care and support would fall onto their shoulders as assumed by some dependency theorists, rather, this analysis provides a better scope for understanding how the choices that they make in changing their lives reflect their aspirations and empowerment needs. Therefore, the analysis that assesses the rational choices that widows make in changing their lives, can unlock a knowledge base approach for examining their needs and aspirations, and how to create an enabling environment to supporting them to make more transformative than counterfactual decisions. This approach proved to be useful in that it identified the widows' aspirations or goals, the direction of their empowerment, and who they would turn to for advancing their wellbeing.

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