

A Participatory Gender-oriented Study of Information and Learning Needs of Youth in a Rural Community in Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract: Understanding youth information and learning needs could provide planners with information required to address the needs of youth in a community. Using data collected from 220 and 250 male and female youth through focus group discussion and a questionnaire survey, this study investigated the information and learning needs of youth in Uzoagba, a rural community in southeastern Nigeria. Two categories of youth could be identified based on their information practices. They are those under 12 where education, health/HIV/AIDS and income dominate. Another is the group of those above 12 where the issues that dominate their needs are income/employment and education. In summary, youth want to remain healthy in order to develop their person efficacy through education and then be usefully integrated into wider social and economic life. Meanwhile, they are concerned about how to participate in generating income to achieve this ultimate aim, and to assist their families and community.

Keywords: Information and learning needs, Youth, participatory gender-oriented study, Southeastern Nigeria, Di Nwanna

1 Introduction and Background

This report documents a participatory gender-sensitive assessment of information and learning needs of youth in Uzoagba, a rural community in old Owerri in Southeastern Nigeria. The report is an excerpt from a larger study which focused on the impact of the practice of *Di Nwanna*¹, a traditional marriage rite observed in the community and its neighbours, on the reproductive health of adolescent girls (Nwagwu 2006). The result of the larger project showed that girls suffered all the disadvantages arising from the traditional practice, a disadvantage that could be corrected through the understanding of the learning needs of the youth in the community.

There exists a vast literature on gender equity in human society and the need to address them (March, Smyth & Mukhopadhyay, 1999; Guijt & Shah, 1999). A wide consensus of opinions suggest that the best way to address unfair gender relations and promotion of equity relevant to the day-to-day lives of people is to create spaces for males and females to engage in meaningful exchange of ideas and knowledge (UNESCO 2002). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has made calls for children and young people to participate in the debates and decisions made concerning their well-being, their education and their communities. These calls are fuelled partly by a growing recognition of children's rights to express themselves, participate and be heard in general. In developing policy to support and facilitate young people's participation, key issues remain unresolved. Should initiatives be directed at children and teenagers, encouraging their civic interests and participatory skills before they are old.

In line with these observations, this paper is intended to develop a clear understanding of information and learning needs and activities of male and female youth in the community, and what they consider needed to improve their individual efficacy. Community in this study is conceptualised as a complex social system rather than a homogenous group of people in order to obtain a detailed understanding of the range of information needs of the subjects (Kertzer and Fricke, 1997).

1 *Di Nwanna* is a form of marriage apprenticeship rite indulged in by cousin-relations who are not expected to marry each other or indulge in sexual intercourse, by traditional laws and customs. It was aimed at equipping young girls to cope with the demands of marriage, which they entered at a very early age – immediately after menarche. The new forms and structure of the practice in the modern times and the consequences for the sexual and reproductive health of the girl child was the focus of the larger project funded by MacArthur Funds for Leadership Development 2005-2006 (04 83064 000 GSS).

Going by what is available in the literature on information practices in Nigeria (Oshiname, 2007), the information needs of youth, and particularly in the rural areas, have scarcely been investigated by researchers. This implies that planning and other activities that affect the welfare of the rural youth have been carried out without adequate understanding of their priorities. Yet the youth are the future of the society. If organizing human society would mean preparing the youth for future roles, then planning authorities should integrate information priorities of youth in their plans and programmes. Otherwise the configuration of the future society will be incongruent with the development stature of the youth who ought to be managers of the new society.

Rather than defining a very specific age range within which one must fall to be considered in this study as youth, focus is on the unmarried males and females between the ages of 7 and 30 years. We defined youth this way because the larger study showed that the tradition of *Di Nwanna* was most indulged in by the unmarried. For a clear understanding of the situation, we divided the whole age groups into three: 7-12 years, 13-19 years, and 20-30 years. Although the 7-12 age group is not usually included in the category of youth, but rather children, it was deemed important to consider the information needs of this age group because this category was significantly and adversely affected in the findings in the larger study. The second age category defines those who are generally known as adolescents while the older group 20-30 consists of persons who are actually adults. The overall wellbeing of the youth is shaped by many factors which range from the social, economic, cultural and political conditions of the wider society, to those that characterize the living situation of an individual adolescent. Based on inferences from the result of the larger project and our interactions with various categories of people in the community, we anticipated that educational opportunities, HIV and diseases, employment and poverty, and, income generation activities would dominate issues in the minds of the youth. But the extent of manifestation, relationship and variation of these variables among the various gender and age groups as well as how the youth meet the information requirements associated with these issues need to be established.

2 Methodology

This study adopts a participatory manner to appraise the information and learning needs of the youth using focus group discussion strategy, a qualitative research technique. In addition to the focus group discussion, a brief questionnaire which included both closed and open-ended questions was designed to collect information for further validation the findings of the focus groups. Finally, throughout the research process the issues raised were informally and formally discussed with the participants, facilitators and experts in order to ensure that they addressed the objectives stated. This triangulation is believed to be particularly very necessary when using predominantly qualitative methods which often allow for subjectivity (Babbie & Mouton, 1998).

2.1 The Focus Group Design

Focus groups discussions (FGD) are a way of engaging people in a discussion, listening to them and then learning from them (Morgan, 1998). They provide a forum where participants can share experiences, ideas, attitudes, and together explore a particular topic that concerns them from several viewpoints. When correctly facilitated, FGD encourages learning as participants come to see the same issue from different perspectives (Babbie & Mouton, 1998).

For the FGD sessions, we formed three groups - one female group, one male group and one mixed group for each of the three age categories, and the detail of the discussion was moderated by the perceived information needs of the community. This approach allowed for testing for different responses from the specific gender groups, as well as gender interactions within the mixed group, following a standard focus group plan. Each group had two trained facilitators, one to facilitate in the group and the other to take detailed notes of the discussions. To qualify as a facilitator, one must be at least 18 years of age, be confident to talk in a group, enjoy working and relate well with people, and must be able to take or translate notes in English.

2.2 The Questionnaire Design

After the synthesis of the FGD, a questionnaire consisting a mix of closed and open questions to address the same issues was also administered to all the respondent groups that cut across, by a little margin, those involved in the FGD. In addition, the questionnaire provided basic demographic information about the respondents: age, education level, and employment status and then covered information needs and current sources of information. The project coordinator administered the questionnaire.

2.3 Sample Selection

In the focus groups, youth were recruited to participate in the study based primarily on their willingness to do so. For the younger age groups, the headmasters and principals of schools in the community were informed about the project, and asked to select participants in the specified age categories to be invited. For the other categories, people who visited our project site, or expressed interest in the project, as well as the subjects from whom data was collected in the larger survey, were invited to participate. On each of the eight days during which the FGD were conducted, additional participants were also invited to join in cases where numbers were still low. It was ensured that 120 participants were invited for each of the age groups as well as for the gender groups, both in the questionnaires and the FGD. Altogether, 120 participants took part in the FGD while 250 participated in the questionnaire survey. The responses of the participants in each group were synthesized and classified accordingly. Results of the study are presented by using frequency distributions both in tabular and graphical formats. The overlap in the responses means that the total percentages for any of the groups need not necessarily add up to 100%.

3 Findings

The findings from focus groups are presented for each of the three age groups. Altogether, the FGD exercise was spread over a period of eight days and a total of three sessions involving one age and gender group at a time were held per day. Thereafter, the data from the questionnaire were collated using basic statistics to clarify, and help maximize the triangulation.

3.1 FGD Findings

The total sample for the FGD was conducted across three age categories and with three groups in each of the age categories. The pattern of distribution of the respondents is shown in Table 1. Altogether 62.17% of the participants were females and 37.83% were males.

Table 1 shows that many of the male participants invited did not attend, indicating that there was less willingness from the males to join in the research. The participation of the 13-19 year age group is also observedly somewhat less than that for the other two groups. This might probably be due to previous frequent invitation of this age group to many different meetings in the course of the project. The age range across all the groups was 10 years to 30 years. The average age for the age group below 12 years was 11.5 years, 14.6 years for the 13-19 year age group, and 21 years for the 20-30 year age group.

Table 1 Aspects of personal demographic information about the respondents

Age category (years)	N	Female (%)	Male (%)
<12	64	68	32
13-19	94	62	38
20-30	62	52	48
Total	220		

3.2 Information Learning Needs 7-12 Years

All the respondents below 12 years old reported that their greatest expressed information need is pregnancy. Altogether, information sources available to them however, included family (43.23%) and friends (21.34%), schools (20.19%), TV (8.9%) and churches (5.26%). A very few mentioned computers (1.10%), none mentioned the Internet and none of them have computer literacy.

There was an interesting difference between the gender groups, with the boys group listing very different kinds of information needs from the girls and the mixed groups. The opinions of the girls' group included issues on HIV/AIDS (32.23%), careers (19.19%), children's rights (18.19%), school information (13.14%), health (12.98%) and education (4.27%). According to some of the girls:

I am afraid of HIV/AIDS because I do not know whether they are telling us the truth. People have died in this village due to HIV/AIDS and I am afraid.

I want to know more about this world, so that I can be knowledgeable. I want to know what is happening in the world in Africa and in Nigeria, to know about other countries and their problems, the problems we are facing in our school.

The younger boys only group (<12) listed school subjects (59.9%), computers (32.19%) and sports (29.1%). The older ones (>19) reported requiring information about higher education (67.23%), how to make money (42.23%), employment after education (39.39%), and the future (39.30%).

Each participant was asked whether he or she had ever used a computer. In the 12 years and under group we found that only 12.5% had used a computer, in the 13-19 years group 23% and in the 20-30 years group 32%. Thus we can say that majority of the respondents have not used computer previously. Regarding the purpose for which computers have been used, responses varied widely, but some common themes emerged. For the under 12 years age group, most participants had used computers for typing and playing games. Similarly, in the 13-19 years group, typing and games were common uses. For the 20-30 age group, typing and games were noted. In each of the age categories, only one or two participants mentioned having used computers for communication purposes.

The 12 years and under groups were asked whether they thought boys and girls used computers differently. Some interesting responses emerged from the discussions with examples of how computers are used the same and differently being given.

Girls use the computers for typing, boys will use it for business matters.

Boys and girls want different careers so they want to use it for different reasons.

Girls will type, boys will use it to play – puzzles and love letters.

This is an interesting dynamic that could be explored further to see if the pattern occurs with different groups of respondents or if it was rather peculiar with this particular group.

3.3 Information and Learning needs of 13-19 Year Age Group

Within all the three groups in this age group there was a consensus that computers are important and that computers can help with learning, even though they neither had access nor are they computer literate. Computers were seen as important for communication, studying, finding information on the Internet, "to know what is happening in the world", and learning basic skills like reading, and for entertainment. The discussion about topics to learn provided a wealth of information and a wide variety of responses. Since this was expected when designing the research, ranking exercises was included in the design of the focus groups so that a prioritised list of information needs could be found. For the boys only group, income, discipline at school were ranked the most important issues they were currently facing. For the girls only group, older males dating younger girls and teenage pregnancy were noted as most important.

For the mixed gender group, education, income, poverty and unemployment, poor health facilities, sexual abuse/teenage pregnancy and HIV/AIDS/STD were priorities. Having identified and ranked current issues, each of the groups was asked whether they have the information they think they need and where they can get it. There was a general consensus in all the groups that quite a lot of information is available from various sources, including the media, promotional materials, parents, teachers, books, clinic and church. Interesting in this report is the discussion around what information is not available that participants feel that they need. Unfortunately both the girls only and boys only groups did not seem to fully understand these questions. However, the girls only group did note a need for medical expertise and information about AIDS and early sexual initiation while the boys want information about how to become economically comfortable. For the mixed gender group, their opinions seem to reflect issues around education and income.

The main issues for the 13-19 years age group seem to be: how to be successful in life, self-esteem and confidence, being financially secure, how to stay healthy, personal safety and security. When asked whether boys and girls would face the same issues, there were some differences across the groups and the need to openly address gender issues came through very strongly. With the girls only group in particular there was a lot of anger expressed, largely in response to the high incidence of sexual assault. Some of the responses were:

Boys like crime, they like material things.

Boys won't like for abuse to be over, because they commit sexual abuse, 90% of them.

Boys like to hit their girlfriends to prove power.

No, boys won't like punishment at school because they like to control the teachers.

In general, the boys only group thought that most of the issues were faced by both genders. This included AIDS, unemployment and pollution. However, specific issues were noted as being especially problematic for women. For example:

Poverty is mainly faced by women because they have to struggle to care for their children.

Homelessness affects both, but women face homelessness especially badly.

The mixed gender group had an interesting discussion about their needs, and the list of needs were almost the same for both genders. However, there was also an opinion that pregnancy affects women and only impacts a little on the man, and that men run away from most of their responsibilities.

3.4 Information and Learning Needs of 20-30 Age Group

This group recognized the importance of computers and their roles in learning. The reasons for considering computers as crucial ranged from employment, and communication to education. Some other interesting responses included that computers would help "open your mind", "make you think and give you ideas" and "give you a better skill". These three examples of responses provide some evidence of the willingness of the respondents to engage with issues relating to the computer. The enthusiasm notwithstanding, only 3.7% of the members of this group have any computer literacy while much less than this, about 2.2%, have ever used the computers on their own. Lesser number of people have Internet literacy (2.1%), although none of them has any regular access. Ironically a relatively higher number of them (4.7%) reported having used information obtained from the Internet or having used the Internet to send messages to their relations who are not at home (4.5%). Those who have used the Internet traveled to Owerri township, about 10 kilometers from the village. According to them, the distance is not even as much a problem as that of getting to Owerri to find out that there is no power supply, or, the Internet café is filled up with people or that there is no connectivity. One of the participants who always passes the night in the city each time he required Internet

access also reported being discouraged in addition by the unwillingness of the café operators to give him the desired assistance, because of his very low computer literacy level.

The discussions around learning needs and problems generated various responses from the various groups. For the women only group, poverty, lack of housing, and education were noted as most important. For the men's group, unemployment, crime, education, poverty, and income generating activities were seen as most important. For the mixed group, issues seen to be of high importance included HIV/AIDS, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, illiteracy, lack of educational facilities and inadequate income generating activities. Ranking these issues more broadly, the main issues for this age group are unemployment (poverty, income, job and career information), education (and illiteracy), and health/HIV/AIDS. When asked whether the same issues are likely to be faced by men and women, it was found that the women only group have the strongest opinion with respect to gender issues. Responses from this group included: "Women are most affected by unemployment", "Men are more relaxed when they are unemployed than women". Both the men only group and the mixed gender group felt that the same issues were faced by men and women.

3.5 Personal Most Important Information Needs

Beyond the group responses, the study also investigated the perception of the individuals regarding their personal information needs. To address this, the participants were given a slip of paper and were asked to anonymously record their most important personal needs. The responses were classified as Figure 1: employment related, rape, abuse, life skills (includes sex related information but not abuse and rape), education, environment, housing, infrastructure and services, computer access and training, lack of unity among the youth, crime, lack of information generally, and teenage pregnancy.

Others include HIV/AIDS, funding for education, community development, and school attendance. However, income and HIV/AIDS are the major issues that border the youth the most, followed by education and crime. Respondents also showed some concern about how to develop their communities as well as employment matters. Issues that appear to be of least importance by general rating include rape and abuse, probably because this would be an issue of concern to females mainly.

For the separate groups, the result shows some gender disparities in the perception of individual information needs. Education, HIV/AIDS, life skills, abuse and teenage pregnancy are the four most crucial information needs of females while issues about community development and unity among the youth border them the least. Other issues that featured very prominently in the information needs of the females include school attendance, marriage and violence.

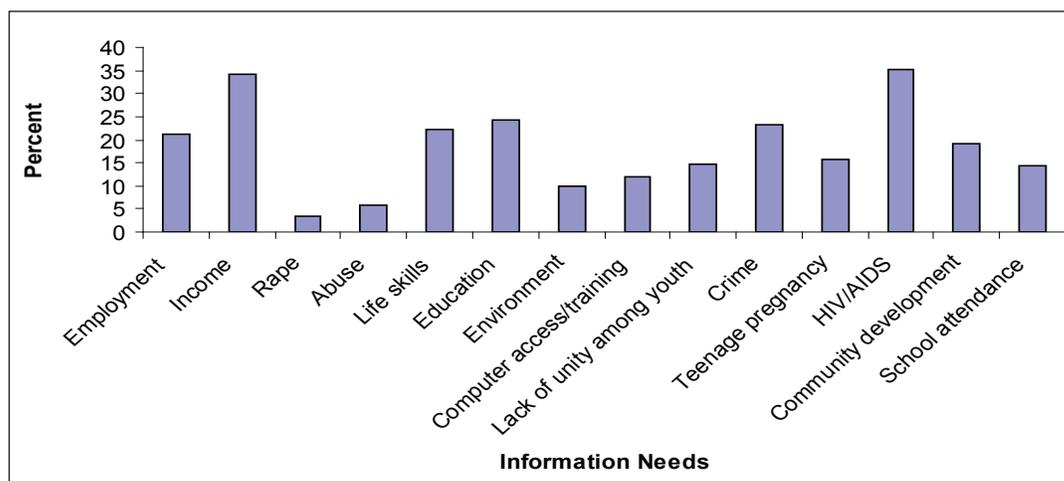


Figure 1 Main information needs of the respondents-all groups

For the males, Figure 2 shows that their information needs differ markedly. How to earn income tops the list of their needs followed by employment, education and life skills. Others are HIV/AIDS, computer access and training, community development and environment. A few issues featured exclusively in the information needs of the girls, such as teenage pregnancy, school attendance, violence and rape. On the other hand, some issues such as community development and unity among the youth featured exclusively in the boys' information needs but not in the girls.

Figure 3 shows the age category distribution of the responses of the youth; there exists evidence of variation in the information needs of the youth probably more than could be visualized in the gender categorisation. Employment is the most crucial information need of those aged above 18 years old age, followed by income and life skill. Issues such as unity among youth and rape as well as abuse and teenage pregnancy are at the bottom of their information needs. For those who are between 13 and 17, HIV/AIDS ranks first in the information needs followed by education and marriage. Rape, environment and unity among youth constitute the least three factors. Finally, for those youth less than twelve years of age, HIV/AIDS and education as well as teenage pregnancy and school attendance rank the first four factors on which youth need information, while environment, crime and community development are the least three factors.

3.6 Questionnaire Result

Altogether, 250 copies of the questionnaire were completed. When the data in the questionnaire were analysed, it was found that 20.4% of the respondents were secondary school students, 55.9% were not in school and 1.2% have tertiary education, 27.5% did not indicate their educational status. Of the whole sample, only 3.8% reported that they have used a computer previously. When these figures were disaggregated, the result remains similar for gender, although men seemed to have a slightly higher percentage in the tertiary education category (66.7%) compared to 60% for women. For the sample as a whole, 43.2% are unemployed, 6.2% have fulltime employment, 14.8% part-time employment, 6.5% are self employed and 19.3% fell into the 'other' category which included volunteer work and students.

3.7 Employment Status of Participants by Gender

Disaggregating employment level by gender shows clear gender differences. The proportion of males (7.6%) and females (4.9%) in full time employment in the community are very low, and males reported

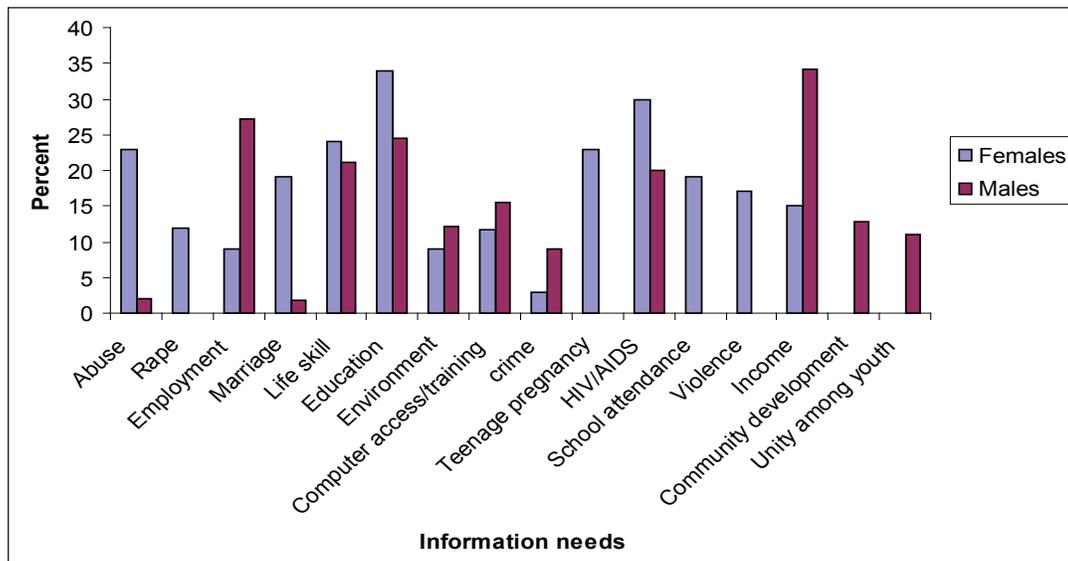


Figure 2 Main information needs for males and females

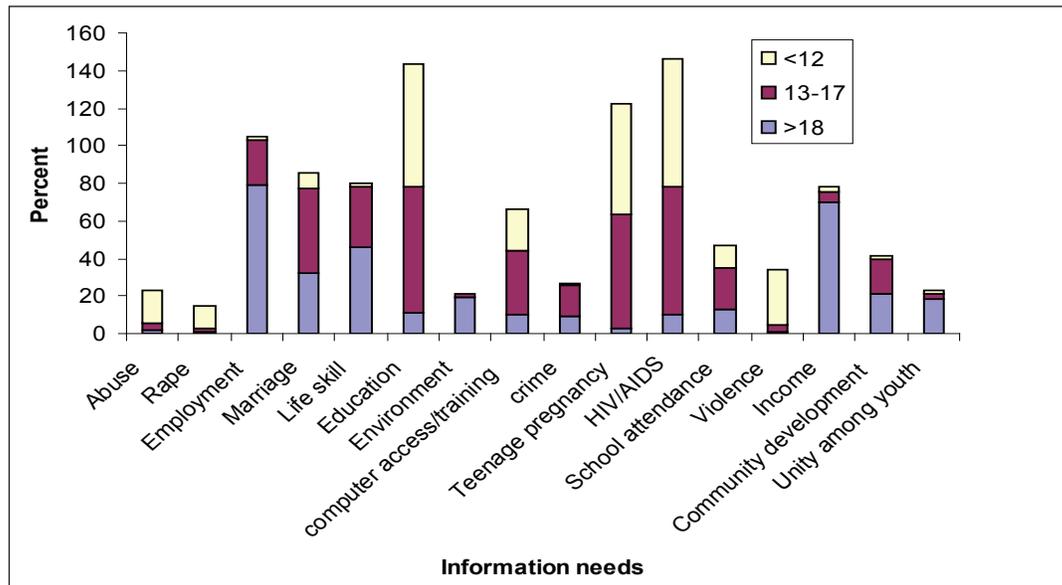


Figure 3 Main information needs by age groups

having more access to part time employment (21.21%) than the females (19.1%). Even in the self employment category, women (29.12%) have less access to jobs than the men (32.0%), and they also reported to be jobless (34.88) more than the men did (14.11%). Respondents were asked in an open-ended question if they thought computers were important and why they thought so. All respondents noted the importance of computers, for various reasons, including job searching, information, education, enhancement of efficiency and communication.

3.8 Most Important Information Needed

The respondents were further asked to rank a list of information we provided according to their importance. Over 7 out of every ten respondents reported that they want information on education as shown in Figure 4. More importance is attached to socio cultural news than local (6.7%) although local news appear more important to them than national news (6.7%) and government news (2.7%). But the youth would prefer to have information about employment (31.5%), health care (19.1) and prices of goods (16.8%). A comparison of men and women shows that more men (75.2%) than women (69.1%) want educational information and national news (24.6%) and (0.9%) respectively. Furthermore, men reported needing information about employment (43.0%) more than the women (19.2%) who however seemed to be more interested in healthcare and prices of goods information (21.2%) and (22.9%) than the men (1.4%) and (2.9%) respectively.

3.9 Most Important Sources of Information

Table 2 shows that television is considered both by the whole sample and the gender groups as the most important source of information, although women appear to consider the source more important than the men. Radio and newspapers are the next important sources of information to all the groups, but they serve men more than the women.

Pamphlets, friends/relatives and community meetings follow but men seem to consider pamphlets as an important source more than the women, while women see their friends and relatives as well as community meetings as more important sources of information. None of the respondents mentioned computers of Internet as a source.

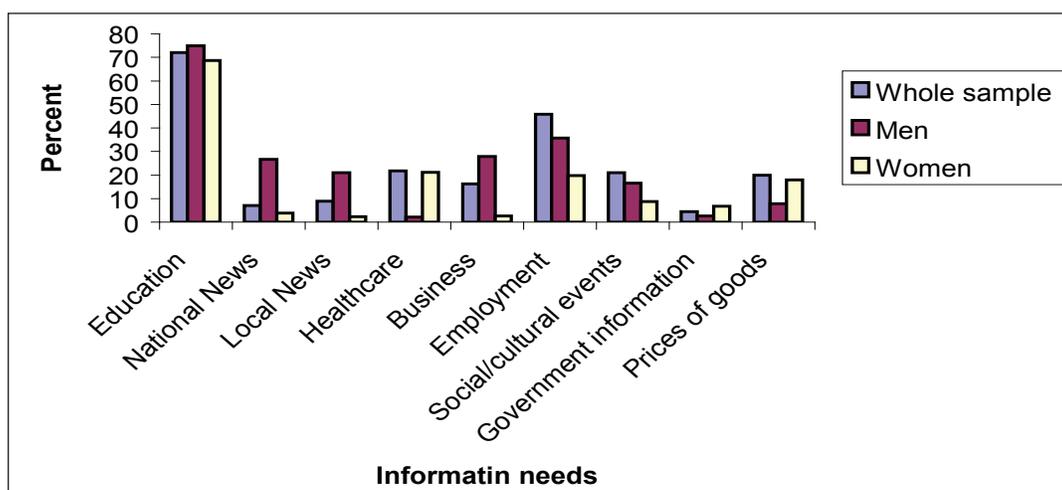


Figure 4 Most important information needs

Table 2 Important information sources

Information source	Whole sample %	Men %	Women %
Radio	32.3	34.5	28.9
Television	43.6	46.5	49.9
Newspaper	22.1	21.1	11.1
Pamphlets/Magazine	18.4	19.1	17.1
Clinical health	5.9	4.9	11.1
Place of worship	5.2	4.6	6.3
School teacher	2.9	3.6	9.7
Community meeting	12.9	17.1	23.2
Friends/relatives	16.2	18.8	32.2
Workplace	0.9	2.1	0.1
Cinema	0.2	0.3	0.2
Exhibition	2.1	1.9	2.4
Adult education	1.9	2.1	1.3
Political leaders	1.2	0.9	0.0

4 Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

The objective of this paper is to assess the information and learning needs of male and female youth in Uzoagba community in order to generate information that could assist in planning. Having examined the different information and learning priorities of youth across age and gender criteria, it is adequate to tease out the information priorities of the categories. The details of the issue indicate that differences were greater across the different age groups than the gender groups, and we summarise this in Table 3. The need for gender related discussions was evident specifically in the 13-19 year age group where the girls expressed strong feelings towards men. Gender differences were also found with respect to employment status, with women showing much higher levels of unemployment than men.

Table 3 shows that education appears in all the age group categories. An overall classification of these needs fits into the following two main categories, namely;

Table 3 Summary of needs and sources by age groups

12 years and below		13-19 years		20-30 years	
FGD	Individual voting	FGD	Individual voting	FGD	Individual voting
1. Education	1. Health, HIV/AIDS	1. Income/ Employment	1. Employment	1. Employment	1. Employment / Income
2. Health, HIV/AIDS	2. Pregnancy	2. Education	2. Life skills	2. Education	2. Community development
3. Rights, abuse	3. Education	3. Life skills	3. Education	3. Health, HIV/AIDS	
			4. Computer Training		

- (i) *Those under 12* – In this group, education, health/HIV/AIDS and rights/abuse dominate the needs.
- (ii) *Those above 12* – The issues that dominate the needs of this group are: income/employment (job searching, career information, and entrepreneurship); health (HIV/AIDS, general well-being); education (school-related information, access to further and higher education, information about educational opportunities, information about funding for educational opportunities, what education will help one become) and life skills (decision making, safe sex, how to keep healthy, how to look after and protect one, how to be successful and how to be financially capable). One theme namely employment/income, appears central.

Some questions need to be addressed in this report. Why does education cut across the information needs across all age and gender groups? Why do education, health/HIV/AIDS and sexual abuse constitute major issue for the under 12 youth? Why does employment and income related matters seem to be more a pronounced need for those youth more than 12 years old? The fact that education is a stronghold of modern development (Ahmed and Nwagwu, 2006), and that it influences earning in the formal sector (Juma, 2003) is a common knowledge among the young and old. Incidentally educational opportunities are not easily accessible to those who need them in many rural communities, while those who have access study under conditions that are below standard. The additional focus of the under 12 on HIV/AIDS and sexual abuse/ pregnancy are indicators of likelihood of insufficiency of HIV/AIDS awareness information activities in the community as well as their expression of concern for the negative impact of the disease on their development.

Like in most rural communities in Nigeria, the youth in this community see themselves as people who ought to participate in the generation of income required to run both their individual lives and the community. Simply, youth, whether schooling or not and whether males or females are concerned with how to participate in income generation. They are concerned with livelihoods - capabilities, assets and activities which people need to be economically successful. Further studies will be required to unearth how this finding relates to other observed areas of needs of the youth. For instance, how does youth participation in income generation in the community relate to the escalation of the problem of HIV/AIDS in the rural communities? Further studies are also required to design adequate models of youth participation in community development adopting culturally sensitive methodologies. It is also important to research into and fine-tune non-income measures of children's well-being within specific cultural contexts on the basis of which their sexual and other behaviours could be more realistically modeled.

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