

ENGENDERING WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ACCESS TO FAMILY PLANNING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, Nigeria has been known as one of several African nations where patriarchy thrives and women often get the short end of the stick. These days with the proliferation of advocacy on women's rights, several policies and laws have been enacted geared towards promotion and enforcement of women's rights, in line with the current global trends. Discourse surrounding Reproductive rights which hitherto were shrouded in secrecy are now front line discussions. Reproductive rights is no doubt pivotal to women empowerment which in turn engender sustainable development of a nation. Consequently, access to family planning is an essential aspect of reproductive rights of women, as autonomy over her body and the right to make informed reproductive choices are indeed incidental to the empowerment of a woman. This article examines the right of women to family planning and the role of government in enabling this access. It further examines the challenges faced by Nigerian women in accessing family planning as well as suggested recommendations to alleviate these hardships.

Keywords: Family planning, Contraceptives, Women Empowerment, Autonomy

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1.0 Introduction

Reproductive rights as it is known today, is closely linked but not limited to the right to health.¹ Inherent therein is the right to reproductive healthcare which includes the right to access safe, high-quality reproductive healthcare services and the right to reproductive self-determination.² This therefore includes the right to plan one's family, freedom from interference in reproductive decision making and the right to be free from all forms of violence and discrimination which affect the reproductive life of a woman. In addition to health, reproductive rights promote the concept of autonomy, choice and freedom in matters of reproduction.³

Reproductive rights are further defined as the rights of women to legal and safe abortion, right to quality healthcare, right to birth control, freedom from coerced sterilization and contraception, freedom from female genital mutilation, right to receive education about sexually transmitted disease and right to protection from sexual offences. It includes the right to plan one's family, freedom from interference in reproductive decision making and the right to be free from all forms of violence and discrimination which affect the reproductive life of a woman.⁴

It therefore implies the right of couples to decide freely and responsibly on the number, timing and spacing of their children and have the information, education and means to do so; attain the highest standards of reproductive health and make decisions about reproduction free of

¹Mercy Erhun, "A Legal Framework for the Enhancement of Women's Reproductive Health as a Means of Attaining Sustainable Development in Nigeria", *Journal of Law, Policy and Globalisation* vol. 40, 2015, Faculty of Law, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

²*Ibid.*

³Mercy Erhun, "A Legal Framework for the Enhancement of Women's Reproductive Health as a Means of Attaining Sustainable Development in Nigeria", *Journal of Law, Policy and Globalisation* vol. 40, 2015, Faculty of Law, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

⁴Ogugua Ikpeze, "Customary Perspective on Reproductive Health Rights" *Journal of Health Law and Reproductive Rights (JHLRR)*4-5 (2014) p.57.

discrimination, coercion and violence.⁵ This is the crux of this paper, family planning as a derivative of women's rights.

According to the **International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)**, Reproductive health can be explained as;

A state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. The right to reproductive health implies that people have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capacity to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how to reproduce and how often to do so. Implicit in this last condition is the right of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of their choice, as well as other methods for regulation of fertility which are not against the law, and right of access to appropriate health care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chances of having a healthy infant.⁶

The scope of Reproductive Health covers all the diseases, disorders and conditions that affect the functioning of the male and female reproductive system during one's lifetime.⁷ It therefore means that Reproductive health care covers a wide range of services. These services are defined in the ICPD Programme of Action (PoA) as including family planning counseling, information, education, communication and services, education and services for antenatal care, safe delivery and post-natal care, and infant and women's health care; prevention and treatment of infertility; prevention and treatment of infections, sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS; breast cancer and cancers of the reproductive system, and other reproductive health conditions; and active discouragement of harmful traditional

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Par 7.2 of ICPD Programme of Action.

⁷Aigbokhaevbo Violet & Aniekwu Nkolika, "Environmental Abuses in Nigeria; Implications for Reproductive Health" *Golden Gate University Of Law Journal* Vol. XIX 2013p. 234.

practices, such as female genital mutilation.⁸ This paper seeks to highlight family planning inherent in the scope of reproductive health.

The enforcement of Reproductive rights is at the core of gender equality which is pivotal to women empowerment in any nation. Notably, Nigeria has taken strides as she has demonstrated willingness and capacity for the protection and empowerment of women. This is laudable considering that in times past, any talks about women liberation was discouraged and received outright backlash from the public. Today there is the existence of National Laws and many state Laws all actively geared towards protection and enforcement of women's rights in Nigeria. However this has not been without impediments, some of which will be addressed in this paper. This paper will discuss this topic in five parts. Part I is the introduction to the discourse, Part II will examine family planning methods, Part III will discuss the benefits of family planning to women and the society at large, Part IV will identify the impediments to women's access to family planning in Nigeria, Part V will give recommendations for the challenges identified and the conclusion of the paper.

2.0 Family Planning

Access to safe, voluntary family planning is a human right. As a participant country accepting the historic Program of Action emanating from the ICPD, Nigeria committed herself to the promotion of Reproductive Health and the achievement of the ICPD goals in the interest of the health and development of her people.⁹

Thus, reproductive rights refer to the rights of women to legal and safe abortion, right to quality healthcare, right to birth control, freedom from coerced sterilization and contraception, freedom from female genital mutilation, right to receive education about sexually transmitted disease and right to protection from sexual offences. It includes the right to plan one's family, freedom from interference in reproductive

⁸Ikeatu, Egondur Grace, "Violations Of Womens' Reproductive Rights In Nigeria" [Violations of womens' reproductive rights in Nigeria | NnamdiAzikiwe University Journal of International Law and Jurisprudence \(ajol.info\)](#) [Accessed 26 March 2023].

⁹Anyaleye Amuda Oluwakemi, "Women and Reproductive Health Rights in Nigeria" Ontario Development Agency SSN 1923-6654.128 <http://www.ssrn.com/link/OIDA-Intl-Journal-Sustainable-Dev.html> [Accessed 31st March 2024].

decision making and the right to be free from all forms of violence and discrimination which affect the reproductive life of a woman.¹⁰

Reproductive health rights therefore implies the right of couples to decide freely and responsibly on the number, timing and spacing of their children and have the information, education and means to do so; attain the highest standards of reproductive health and make decisions about reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence.¹¹

From the foregoing we can ascertain that the right to family planning and contraceptives is a fundamental aspect of promoting and enforcing reproductive rights today as it is the means by which couples have effective control or determine the number, timing and spacing of their children. Family planning is broadly divided into 2, the natural family planning method and the artificial family planning method;

(A)The Natural family Planning method

It is also called fertility awareness or the Rhythm method. This is a method of birth control that does not use any drug or devices. It relies on abstinence from sexual intercourse during the most fertile phase of a woman's menstrual cycle. It consists of the basal body temperature method, the calendar/rhythm method, standard day's method, and symptom thermal Method, Breastfeeding, lactation Amenorrhea method and the cervical mucus method. The Natural family planning is also approved by many faiths for instance, the Roman Catholics do not believe in artificial family planning methods.¹²

(B)Artificial Family Planning Method

This method involves the use of chemicals or barriers in killing or preventing sperm from entering the uterus, hormones to trick the woman's body into believing fertilization shouldn't take place and surgery to prevent eggs or sperm from being released. Methods of artificial family planning include:¹³

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Ogugua Ikpeze, "Customary Perspective on Reproductive Health Rights" *Journal of Health Law and Reproductive Rights (JHLRR)*4-5 (2014) p.57.

¹²[Types of Family Planning and Their Side Effects - Medical World Update](#) [Accessed 3rd February 2024.]

¹³*Ibid.*

- (i) Barrier Method
- (ii) Hormonal Method
- (iii) Emergency Method
- (iv) Permanent Method

These Methods will be discussed below;

(i) *Barrier Method*

This method prevents spermatozoa from entering the uterus either by chemical such as spermicide or mechanical/physical obstruction for example, condoms, cervical caps and diaphragms.¹⁴

(ii) Hormonal Method

This birth control method works by suppressing ovulation and also causes the cervical mucus to thicken thereby making it difficult for sperm to get through the cervix to the uterus. There are 2 main classes of Hormonal contraceptive

1. Combined contraceptives: Contains both estrogen (ethinylestrondo) and progestin.
2. Progestin only contraceptive: Contains only progesterone (progestin).¹⁵

(iii) Emergency Contraceptive Pills (ECPs)

This is used for women who have had intercourse without any type of birth control or maybe taken as precaution against unplanned pregnancy. It is usually taken before 72hours after unprotected sex. The various forms of emergency contraceptive include;¹⁶

- A. Injection: These are long acting contraceptive containing combined estrogen and progesterone or progestogen only. It is given intramuscular. Provides protection for one to three months Examples are : Depo- provera which effect lasts for three months; Noristerat which effect last for two months and Norigynon which effect lasts for one month. There are also

¹⁴[Types of Family Planning and Their Side Effects - Medical World Update](#) [Accessed 3rd February 2024].

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*

other methods like, Skin patches: This is applied to the skin and worn continuously to prevent unplanned pregnancy.¹⁷

- B. Intra Uterine Contraceptive Device (IUD): This is a small plastic T shaped object with an attached string inserted in the uterine cavity to prevent pregnancy. It releases synthetic progestin hormone that changes cervical mucus, fallopian tubes and the uterine lining, it also stops or slows sperm and egg. It can remain active for as long as three to twelve years.¹⁸

(iv) *Permanent Method*

The various forms of permanent contraception are;

- (i) *Sterilization*
- (ii) *Tubal sterilization for women.*
- (iii) *Vasectomy for men.*

It is worthy of note that vasectomy is a surgical procedure done under anesthesia. A small incision is made on each side of the scrotum and the *vas deference* is then cut and tied or blocked. The *vas deference* is the tube that carries sperm from the testicles to the opening of the penis.¹⁹

Family planning is central to gender equality and women's empowerment, and it is a key factor in reducing poverty. Sadly, in developing regions, an estimated 218 million women who want to avoid pregnancy are unable to access safe and effective family planning methods, for reasons ranging from lack of access to information or services to lack of support from their partners or communities.²⁰

In some civilized climes like the United Kingdom, contraceptives (such as the 'morning after pill' also known as emergency contraceptive is made available at no cost in drug stores and health centers.²¹ These pills are effective to prevent pregnancy if taken by the female within 72hours of having unprotected sexual intercourse.²² This paper submits that the Nigerian government should show commitment to protection

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ [Types of Family Planning and Their Side Effects - Medical World Update](#) [Accessed 3rd February 2024].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ [Family planning | United Nations Population Fund \(unfpa.org\)](#) accessed 3rd February 2024.

²¹ <http://www.nhs.uk> [Accessed 3rd February 2024].

²² There are two types of morning after pills namely- Lenonelle or EllaOne.

of reproductive rights by making contraceptives available at no cost especially to impoverished women in rural areas. The underlying reason for this submission is the fact that many government hospitals in Nigeria make condoms available freely and it is notable that even NGOs routinely avail the public of free condoms during seminars and workshops. Research reveals that condoms are less effective than other known methods of contraception. Many Nigerian men also frown at the need to use condoms Thus the availability of alternative methods of contraception to the women who invariably bear the consequences of unplanned pregnancies, is a vital tool for promotion of reproductive health and rights.

3.0 Benefits of Family Planning

i. Women Empowerment and Autonomy; The ability to space pregnancies and plan the family, enables a woman to take control of other areas of her life such as education, work-life, business and financial freedom. The consequences of unplanned pregnancies can cripple a woman and render her unproductive. These complications have far reaching implications on her, psychologically, emotionally and even physically- as uncontrolled child bearing can negatively impact a woman's body and overall health.

ii. Social Benefits; Family planning is a vital tool for engendering gender equality. When a woman is able to plan her family and take control of her reproductive health, she is more productive and essentially more beneficial to the society. Well planned families are better positioned for enhanced standard of living, which invariably leads to poverty alleviation and the overall well-being of society. The incidences of children uncared for- who invariably grow to become a menace to society are significantly reduced when families are well planned and child bearing is controlled and well-spaced.

iii. Public Health Benefits: The use of contraceptives in family planning is a vital tool for enhanced public health. The ability to prevent unplanned pregnancies and control the spacing and timing of child bearing can have significant positive impact on the woman's health which invariable reduces the incidences of maternal mortality. It further impacts positively on child health as well spaced children are more likely to get proper nutrition, care and education which have far reaching benefits for families and the world at large. Contraceptives also aid in prevention of diseases for instance the use of Condoms can

protect against sexually transmitted diseases which invariably promote overall sexual health.

Ultimately, planned and controlled pregnancies position families better to provide and care for their children, which reduce poverty and improve the general standard of living which is essential for societal stability. In a country like Nigeria where the population is currently bursting at the seams, and consequently placing immense pressure on natural resources, infrastructure, and public services, family planning will undoubtedly aid in addressing these challenges by ensuring that families only have the number of children they can adequately cater for. This will slow population growth, thereby making it more manageable and sustainable.

4.0 Impediments to Accessing Family Planning in Nigeria:

Despite the benefits of family planning as identified, accessing family planning services is no small feat for many women in Nigeria. Some of these challenges are;

i. Cultural and Religious Beliefs: Cultural, religious and societal norms have arguably entrenched a historical imbalance in power relationships between men and women and have tilted the overall perceptions and roles of women in Nigeria. Religious teachings deeply influence personal conduct, especially in the areas of sexuality, marriage, gender, childbearing, and parental-children relationships. Not only does religion shape the values of individuals and the cultures of societies, it has the power to influence government policy.²³ In Nigeria, it could be said that the abuse of the natural rights of a woman begins from the time of her birth and only comes to an end at the time of her death.²⁴ Many customs do not recognize the existence of sexual and reproductive rights of women. This position is perpetrated by patriarchy which is deeply entrenched in typical Patriarchal African

²³Ikeatu, Egondur Grace “Violations Of Womens’ Reproductive Rights In Nigeria”[Violations of womens’ reproductive rights in Nigeria | NnamdiAzikiwe University Journal of International Law and Jurisprudence \(ajol.info\)](#)[Accessed 26 March 2021].

²⁴Odiaka Ngozi Oluchukwu “The Concept Of Gender Justice And Women’s Rights In Nigeria: Addressing The Missing Link” [122608-Article Text-336344-1-10-20150923.pdf](#)[Accessed 18 March 2021].

societies, where men are seen as over –lords.²⁵ These cultural and religious beliefs stigmatise and reject the use of contraceptives which is largely responsible for the spread of mis-information , distrust and resistance to family planning in many parts of Nigeria.

ii.Lack of Access to Quality Health care; There is no doubt that the dearth of well equipped and standard healthcare facilities remains one of the major impediments to the enjoyment of reproductive rights in Nigeria. In Rural areas there is either outright unavailability of equipped health care facilities and qualified personnel or limited access to quality healthcare services. Studies show that lack of or inability to access healthcare is the leading cause of the steady decline of women’s reproductive health status in the country.²⁶ Research in Nigeria indicates that, about one Nigerian woman dies every 10 minutes from pregnancy related conditions, these are avoidable deaths which could be prevented by ensuring women and girls have access to education and reproductive health services, including family planning.²⁷ This position is further exacerbated by inadequate healthcare institutions, trained personnel and infrastructure as well as the limited availability of contraceptive methods and services.

iii. Gender Inequality; The imbalance of power in Nigerian families due to the deep seated patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society, makes it difficult for many women to exercise control over their reproductive health. In many households the men are unconcerned about family planning and the use of contraceptives. This makes child spacing cumbersome and a burden borne only by the women which leaves them psychologically and emotionally drained and exhausted. Furthermore poverty and financial dependence of the woman makes it impossible for the woman to insist on any rights or make serious decisions about the family.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations;

²⁵Ogugua Ikpezie. “Customary Perspective on Reproductive Health Rights” *Journal of Health Law and Reproductive Rights (JHLRR)* Issue 4-5 , 2013- 2014 p 59.

²⁶Nkolika Ijeoma Aniekwu, *Reproductive Health Law; A Jurisprudential Analysis of Gender Specific Human Rights for the African Region* 1st edn(Ambik Press Nigeria, 2011), p. 84.

²⁷CEDAW General Recommendation on Women and Health, para 14.

Family planning is beyond the use of contraceptives for pregnancy prevention and control. It is an essential tool for the empowerment of Nigerian women. The ability to take control over and make informed decisions about her body and her reproductive health is essential to realizing her full potential. Family planning as noted in this paper is pivotal to gender equality. It gives room for work-life balance. Gender equality, public health, economic stability and overall social stability can be achieved through promoting the use of family planning which will significantly improve the quality of life of the nation. It is therefore imperative to address the impediments identified in accessing family planning and this requires a collaborative effort on the part of the citizens and the government to foster nation building through women empowerment. Pursuant to this, this paper makes the following recommendations;

1. Legal reforms should be directed at actively promoting and advancing reproductive rights. Reproductive health policies should be prioritized by the Nigerian Government with concerted efforts at making contraceptives and family planning services affordable and easily accessible.
2. Education and awareness beginning from early years should be promoted. Therefore comprehensive sex education should be inculcated into school curriculum to educate especially the girl child on her rights over her body.
3. There should be active advocacy to promote culture shift and increase acceptance and non-stigmatization attached to family planning and the use of contraceptives.