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Communication Strategies for Ending Harmful Cultural Practices Against Women in Selected Communities of Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract. This study investigates communication strategies for eliminating harmful cultural practices against women in selected communities of Delta State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study examines the forms of harmful practices prevalent in the study area, identifies communication approaches adopted by relevant stakeholders, assesses the effectiveness of these strategies in promoting social change, and explores the constraints limiting their effectiveness. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining a questionnaire with key informant interviews involving community residents, traditional leaders, women's rights advocates, media practitioners, and relevant institutional stakeholders across the three senatorial districts of Delta State. A total of 400 copies of the questionnaire were administered, of which 386 were validly completed and returned (96.5% response rate), and 16 key informants were purposively interviewed. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. Findings indicate that practices such as discriminatory widowhood rites, denial of inheritance rights, and restrictions on women's participation in community decision-making continue to exist in some communities. The study further reveals that community dialogue, indigenous communication systems, radio advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and interpersonal communication are among the most effective strategies for challenging harmful norms. Exposure to communication strategies was significantly and positively related to awareness of harmful cultural practices and communication strategies significantly predicted attitudes toward ending such practices. However, persistent patriarchal beliefs, cultural resistance, inadequate funding, and weak implementation of protective policies constrain communication interventions.

Keywords: Communication Strategies; Harmful Cultural Practices; Women's Rights; Delta State; Social Change.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Culture provides societies with systems of identity, values, and behavioural expectations through which individuals understand their social world. Cultural practices often contribute positively to social cohesion by preserving collective identity and transmitting knowledge from generation to generation. However, some cultural practices become harmful when they restrict human dignity, reinforce discrimination, and violate human rights, particularly the rights of women and girls.

Globally, harmful cultural practices remain significant concerns within gender equality and human rights discourse. The Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5 on gender equality, recognize the elimination of discriminatory practices against women as essential to achieving inclusive and sustainable development (United Nations, 2023). Despite international commitments, millions of women and girls continue to experience practices that limit their autonomy, bodily integrity, economic opportunities, and participation in decision-making processes (UNFPA, 2020).

In many African societies, harmful cultural practices are sustained through complex relationships between tradition, social expectations, gender norms, and community institutions. Such practices are not maintained only through individual choices but through collective beliefs communicated within families, religious institutions, traditional structures, and everyday social interactions. Therefore, addressing harmful practices requires more than legal prohibition or public awareness campaigns; it requires communication processes that encourage communities to critically examine existing norms and participate in constructing alternative social realities.

Communication plays a central role in social transformation because it shapes how individuals and communities interpret issues, negotiate meanings, and organize collective action. Contemporary Communication for Development scholarship argues that communication should not be understood merely as the transmission of information but as a participatory process through which communities engage in dialogue, share knowledge, and develop solutions to social problems (Servaes, 2020; Servaes & Malikhao, 2021). This perspective is particularly relevant to gender-related cultural practices because such practices are deeply connected to identity, social values, and power relations.

In Nigeria, harmful cultural practices affecting women continue to attract scholarly, governmental, and civil society attention. Practices such as widowhood restrictions, inheritance discrimination, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and exclusion of women from traditional leadership structures have been identified as barriers to women's empowerment and participation in development processes (Nwammuo et al., 2026; UNFPA, 2023). Although legal frameworks and advocacy programmes have contributed to increased awareness, the persistence of these practices indicates that behavioural and social transformation requires sustained engagement with communities.

Delta State provides an important context for examining communication strategies for cultural transformation. The state is characterized by cultural diversity, including Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ijaw, Isoko, and Anioma communities, where traditional institutions and indigenous communication systems continue to influence social behaviour. While modernization and increased media access have created new opportunities for gender advocacy, traditional beliefs and social expectations continue to shape perceptions of women's roles within families and communities.

Previous studies on gender inequality in Nigeria have largely focused on documenting the prevalence and consequences of harmful practices, women's experiences, and legal challenges. However, limited attention has been given to examining the specific communication strategies through which communities negotiate cultural change. This gap is significant because harmful cultural practices are communicated, reinforced, and challenged

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through social interaction. Understanding these communication processes is therefore essential for designing interventions that are culturally appropriate and sustainable.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating communication strategies for ending harmful cultural practices against women in selected communities of Delta State. Drawing from Participatory Development Theory and Communication for Development Theory, the study argues that sustainable transformation requires communication approaches that empower communities, encourage dialogue, and promote collective responsibility for gender equality.

Despite decades of advocacy for gender equality, legislative reforms, and interventions by government institutions, civil society organizations, and international development agencies, harmful cultural practices affecting women remain a persistent social challenge in many Nigerian communities. These practices continue to influence women's social status, economic opportunities, participation in community affairs, and access to basic rights. Although culture plays an important role in preserving collective identity and social values, certain practices embedded within cultural systems have contributed to the marginalization and unequal treatment of women.

In Delta State, Nigeria, efforts have been made by government agencies, women's rights organizations, traditional institutions, and development partners to promote awareness of women's rights and discourage discriminatory practices. However, reports and observations suggest that some harmful practices continue to exist, particularly within certain rural and traditional communities. Practices such as discriminatory widowhood rites, denial of inheritance rights, exclusion of women from decision-making processes, early marriage, and other forms of gender-based restrictions continue to affect women's wellbeing and social participation.

Although existing studies have examined harmful cultural practices from legal, sociological, health, and gender perspectives, limited attention has been given to the role of communication in challenging and transforming these practices, particularly within the context of Delta State. Available literature has not sufficiently explored which communication strategies are most effective, how communities respond to such strategies, the role of traditional and community actors in facilitating change, and the barriers that limit communication interventions.

The problem addressed by this study, therefore, is the continued existence of harmful cultural practices against women in some communities of Delta State despite ongoing advocacy and intervention efforts. The study seeks to address the limited understanding of how communication strategies can be effectively designed and implemented to challenge harmful cultural norms, promote women's rights, and encourage sustainable behavioural and social change.

By examining communication strategies, their effectiveness, and the challenges affecting their implementation, this study provides insights that can assist policymakers, communication practitioners, gender advocates, and community leaders in developing more participatory and culturally responsive approaches for eliminating practices that undermine women's dignity and equality.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine communication strategies for ending harmful cultural practices against women in selected communities of Delta State, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1.Identify the prevalent harmful cultural practices against women in selected communities of Delta State, Nigeria.

2. Examine the communication strategies employed in addressing harmful cultural practices against women in Delta State, Nigeria.

3. Assess the effectiveness of these communication strategies in promoting social change toward the elimination of harmful cultural practices against women in Delta State.

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4. Identify the challenges limiting the success of communication strategies in combating harmful cultural practices against women in Delta State.
5. Propose an integrated, culturally sensitive, and participatory communication framework for eliminating harmful cultural practices against women in Delta State.

Based on these objectives, corresponding research questions guided the study.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication Strategies: Meaning and Relevance to Social Change

Communication is central to human interaction and social organization because it provides the means through which individuals and groups exchange information, construct meanings, negotiate relationships, and influence behaviour (Nwammuo, Nwanolue & Obi, 2019). In development contexts, communication goes beyond the simple transmission of messages from a sender to a receiver; it functions as a process through which individuals and communities discuss challenges, share experiences, and participate in collective problem-solving.

Communication strategies refer to deliberate and coordinated approaches designed to achieve specific communication objectives among identified audiences. They involve decisions about the messages to be communicated, the channels through which messages are delivered, the actors involved in the communication process, and the methods used to encourage understanding and action. In the context of social change, communication strategies are designed not only to increase awareness but also to influence attitudes, challenge existing beliefs, encourage participation, and promote behavioural transformation.

The relevance of communication strategies in addressing harmful cultural practices lies in the fact that such practices are maintained through shared meanings and social acceptance. Cultural beliefs about gender roles are often communicated through families, traditional institutions, religious organizations, community interactions, and media representations (Nwammuo & Amarube, 2022). Therefore, efforts to transform harmful practices require communication approaches that can engage with these existing belief systems and introduce alternative perspectives on gender relations.

Contemporary development communication scholarship emphasizes that effective communication strategies must be audience-centred, culturally sensitive, and participatory (Nwammuo, 2022). Rather than assuming that communities lack knowledge, such approaches recognize that people interpret messages based on their experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social realities. Communication interventions are therefore more likely to produce sustainable outcomes when communities participate in defining problems and developing solutions.

In addressing harmful cultural practices against women, communication strategies may include interpersonal communication, community dialogue, mass media campaigns, advocacy communication, indigenous communication systems, and digital communication platforms. Each strategy serves different purposes. While mass media can provide broad awareness, interpersonal and community-based approaches create opportunities for dialogue and social change.

Harmful Cultural Practices Against Women

Culture deals with the totality of life of a given people. It provides societies with systems of meaning, identity, values, and behavioural expectations. Cultural practices are therefore not inherently negative; many traditions promote social cohesion, solidarity, and collective responsibility. However, some practices become harmful when they violate human dignity, restrict individual rights, or reinforce inequality between social groups.

Harmful cultural practices against women refer to socially accepted behaviours or traditions that negatively affect women's overall wellbeing. These practices often originate

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from patriarchal interpretations of culture, especially where authority, inheritance, and other social privileges are not equally or equitably assigned to men and women.

Globally, harmful practices affecting women and girls remain major concerns within gender equality and human rights discourse. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2020) identifies practices such as female genital mutilation, child and forced marriage, and other forms of gender discrimination as violations of fundamental human rights. However, harmful practices extend beyond these internationally recognized examples to include locally specific traditions that limit women's autonomy and participation.

Within Nigerian communities, harmful cultural practices vary according to ethnic group, geographical location, and social context. Some practices commonly identified include discriminatory widowhood rites, exclusion of women from inheritance, preference for male children, restrictions on women's participation in traditional leadership structures, and forced or early marriages. Although the intensity of these practices differs across communities, they are often sustained by beliefs about morality, tradition, family honour, and social order.

One significant challenge in addressing harmful cultural practices is that they are often defended as expressions of cultural identity. Consequently, communication interventions must carefully distinguish between preserving positive cultural values and challenging practices that undermine equality and human dignity.

Women's Rights and Gender Equality in the Context of Cultural Practices

Women's rights constitute an essential component of human rights and development discourse. They involve the recognition of women's entitlement to equal opportunities, protection from discrimination, participation in decision-making, access to resources, and freedom from harmful practices. Gender equality does not imply the elimination of cultural identity but requires that cultural practices respect the dignity and rights of all members of society.

In many African societies, women have historically contributed significantly to economic activities, family survival, community development, and cultural preservation. However, patriarchal social structures have often limited women's authority in areas such as inheritance, leadership, political participation, and decision-making. These inequalities are frequently reinforced through social communication processes that normalize male dominance and female dependence.

The promotion of women's rights therefore requires communication approaches that challenge discriminatory narratives and promote alternative understandings of gender relationships. Media platforms, community discussions, educational programmes, and advocacy campaigns can create spaces where women's experiences are recognized and where communities can reconsider assumptions about gender roles (Nwammuo et al., 2026).

Communication is particularly important because gender inequality is not sustained only through institutions but also through everyday conversations, symbols, stories, and cultural expressions. Transforming gender relations therefore requires communication processes that encourage critical awareness and empower individuals to question norms that perpetuate discrimination.

Communication for Behavioural and Social Change

Behavioural and social change communication represents a shift from viewing communication primarily as information delivery toward understanding communication as a process that influences knowledge, attitudes, practices, and social environments. It recognizes that behaviour is shaped by multiple factors, including personal beliefs, social expectations, economic realities, institutional structures, and community influences.

In relation to harmful cultural practices, behavioural change requires more than informing individuals that certain practices are harmful. Communities may continue supporting harmful traditions even when they understand their negative consequences because of social pressure, fear of isolation, or attachment to cultural identity (Nwammuo et

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al., 2026). Communication strategies must therefore address the social conditions that sustain these behaviours.

Social change communication seeks to create environments where individuals and groups can reflect on existing practices, discuss alternatives, and collectively support new behaviours. This process involves dialogue, participation, trust-building, and sustained engagement with different stakeholders.

For communities in Delta State, behavioural change communication must consider local languages, cultural values, traditional authority structures, and existing communication networks. Messages that are culturally relevant and delivered through trusted sources are more likely to influence attitudes and encourage acceptance of gender-equitable practices.

Community-Based Communication Approaches

Community-based communication approaches emphasize the active involvement of local populations in addressing issues affecting their wellbeing. Unlike top-down approaches where external actors determine solutions, community-based communication recognizes communities as partners with valuable knowledge and experiences (Ikegbusi et al., 2023).

Such approaches are particularly relevant to addressing harmful cultural practices because these practices are deeply embedded within community structures. Sustainable change requires engagement with those who influence social norms, including traditional leaders, religious authorities, women's organizations, youth groups, and families.

Community meetings, town hall discussions, storytelling, traditional performances, local language programmes, and interpersonal dialogue are examples of communication approaches that can facilitate community participation. These methods provide opportunities for communities to discuss sensitive issues, express concerns, and negotiate acceptable pathways for change (Ikegbusi et al., 2023).

The strength of community-based communication lies in its ability to promote ownership. When people participate in developing solutions, they are more likely to support and sustain those solutions. This principle aligns with participatory development perspectives, which view empowerment and collective action as essential elements of social transformation (Ikegbusi & Iheanacho, 2016).

Indigenous Communication Systems and Cultural Transformation

Indigenous communication systems refer to locally developed methods through which communities exchange information, preserve knowledge, and organize social activities (Nwammuo & Salawu, 2018). In African societies, these systems include market squares, village meetings, visits, elders' councils, storytelling, proverbs, folk media, ceremonies, and symbolic communication.

Although modern media platforms have expanded communication possibilities, indigenous communication remains important because it operates within familiar cultural frameworks. Messages communicated through indigenous channels often possess greater credibility because they are connected to community identity and shared experiences (Ikegbusi et al., 2025).

In addressing harmful cultural practices, indigenous communication systems provide opportunities to engage communities using familiar cultural expressions. However, these systems must be approached critically because some traditional communication practices may also reinforce discriminatory beliefs. The objective should therefore be to use indigenous communication resources to promote positive cultural values while challenging harmful interpretations of tradition.

Communication Strategies for Ending Harmful Cultural Practices: An Integrated Perspective

The complexity of harmful cultural practices requires an integrated communication approach. No single communication channel or strategy can independently transform deeply rooted social norms and behaviours. Effective interventions require collaboration among all stakeholders, such as media organizations, government institutions, non-governmental

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organizations, civil society groups, traditional authorities, and community members (Nwammuo et al., 2026).

An integrated communication approach combines approaches such as:

- Mass media advocacy to increase public awareness;
- Community dialogue to encourage reflection and participation;
- Interpersonal communication to address individual concerns;
- Indigenous communication systems to ensure cultural relevance;
- Digital communication platforms to engage younger populations;
- Advocacy communication to influence policies and institutional practices.

This type of integration reflects the understanding that social change occurs through continuous interaction between individuals, communities, and institutions. Communication becomes not merely a tool for persuading people to abandon harmful practices but a process through which communities collectively construct new social realities.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks provide the conceptual foundation through which research problems are examined, interpreted, and explained. This study is anchored on Communication for Development Theory.

The choice of the theory is based on the understanding that harmful cultural practices are socially constructed and maintained through collective beliefs, cultural interactions, and communication processes. Addressing such practices therefore requires approaches that promote dialogue, community involvement, empowerment, and social transformation rather than relying solely on information dissemination or external interventions.

Communication for Development Theory

This study draws specifically on the participatory strand of Communication for Development (C4D) theory, hereafter referred to as Participatory C4D, which foregrounds dialogue, empowerment, and community ownership over transmission-based models of communication. Participatory C4D refers to the strategic use of communication processes to support social change, development initiatives, and community empowerment. Unlike traditional communication models that emphasize the transmission of information from a sender to a receiver, Participatory C4D views communication as a dynamic process involving dialogue, participation, knowledge sharing, and collective action.

The theory developed from critiques of earlier development communication approaches that relied heavily on persuasion and mass media campaigns. Scholars argued that development challenges are often rooted in social, cultural, and structural conditions; therefore, communication must address these deeper issues rather than simply provide information.

Contemporary Participatory C4D approaches recognize that communication contributes to development by enabling communities to discuss problems, negotiate solutions, influence policies, and participate in decision-making processes. Communication becomes both a means and an outcome of empowerment.

Assumptions of Participatory C4D Theory

Communication is a process of social transformation. The theory assumes that communication does not merely transfer information but also shapes attitudes, values, relationships, and social realities. In the context of harmful cultural practices, communication influences how communities understand gender roles, cultural traditions, and women's rights, and can therefore either reinforce harmful norms or contribute to their transformation.

Effective communication must be culturally relevant. The theory emphasizes that communication interventions must consider local languages, cultural meanings, and social contexts. For communities in Delta State, communication strategies must consider indigenous languages, traditional institutions, local beliefs, and existing communication networks.

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Dialogue is more effective than one-way messaging. The theory argues that sustainable change emerges through interaction rather than simple message delivery, which explains why community meetings, stakeholder consultations, and interpersonal communication are important strategies for addressing harmful practices.

Social change requires multiple communication channels. Different audiences require different channels, including interpersonal communication, traditional media, mass media, and digital platforms. For gender advocacy, radio campaigns may increase awareness, but community discussions and engagement with traditional leaders may be necessary to achieve behavioural change.

Applying Participatory C4D Theory to the Study

Participatory C4D theory provides a useful framework for understanding how communication strategies can contribute to ending harmful cultural practices against women in Delta State. The theory helps explain the relationship between communication exposure, awareness creation, attitude formation, and behavioural change. It guides this study in examining the communication channels used by stakeholders, how these strategies influence community attitudes, the role of dialogue and participation in changing social norms, and the challenges limiting communication interventions. The theory also highlights the importance of moving beyond awareness campaigns toward communication processes that encourage critical reflection and collective action.

C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design involving both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The choice of this design was informed by the nature of the research problem, which requires an understanding of both the measurable patterns of public perceptions and the deeper social meanings attached to harmful cultural practices against women.

The quantitative component employed a survey method to obtain data from residents of selected communities in Delta State regarding their awareness of harmful cultural practices, exposure to communication interventions, perceptions of communication effectiveness, and attitudes toward eliminating discriminatory practices. The qualitative component involved key informant interviews with individuals who possess relevant knowledge and experience, including traditional leaders, women's rights advocates, media practitioners, and government officials.

The combination of survey and interview methods enabled methodological triangulation by providing statistical evidence from community members while also capturing the experiences, interpretations, and institutional perspectives of stakeholders involved in addressing harmful cultural practices.

The study was conducted in Delta State, Nigeria. Delta State is located in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria and has Asaba as its capital. The state is made up of 25 Local Government Areas and is organized into three senatorial districts: Delta North, Delta Central, and Delta South. The major ethnic groups include Anioma (Igbo-speaking communities), Urhobo, Isoko, Itsekiri, and Ijaw groups.

The state provides an important context for this study because of its cultural diversity, mixture of rural and urban communities, and the continued influence of traditional institutions in shaping social practices. The coexistence of indigenous traditions, modernization, media expansion and advocacy interventions makes Delta State a suitable environment for examining how communication strategies influence cultural transformation.

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For effective representation, communities were selected from the three senatorial districts:

- Delta North Senatorial District: Asaba, Ogwashi-Uku;
- Delta Central Senatorial District: Ughelli, Sapele;
- Delta South Senatorial District: Warri, Oleh.

The selection of communities reflected variations in cultural backgrounds, urbanization levels, and communication exposure.

The population of the study consisted of adult residents of Delta State aged 18 years and above. According to the Delta State Government Medium-Term Development Plan (2024–2027), the projected population of Delta State in 2024 was 6,615,899 residents.

Sample Size Determination

The sample size for the quantitative component was determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula:

$$n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$$

Where n is the required sample size, N is the population size, and e is the level of precision (0.05).

Given N = 6,615,899 and e = 0.05:

n = 6,615,899 / [1 + 6,615,899(0.05)²] n = 6,615,899 / (1 + 16,539.75) n = 6,615,899 / 16,540.75 n = 399.98 ≈ 400 respondents

Thus, 400 copies of the questionnaire were distributed among residents of selected communities across the three senatorial districts of Delta State. Given the impracticality of establishing a precise sampling frame for the seven selected communities alone, the state-wide adult population was used as a conservative basis for sample size determination, yielding a sample considered adequate for the multi-stage, purposive selection strategy adopted in this study.

Tabel 1 Key informants

Category	Number
Traditional/community leaders	4
Women's rights advocates	4
Media practitioners	4
Government/social development officials	4
Total	16

Sampling Technique

A multistage sampling procedure was adopted.

Stage One: Stratification. The state was divided into the three senatorial districts namely, Delta North, Delta Central, and Delta South. This amounts to ensuring geographical representation.

Stage Two: Selection of Communities. Purposive sampling was used to select communities based on the presence of traditional institutions, cultural diversity, rural-urban characteristics, accessibility, and relevance to the research objectives.

Stage Three: Selection of Respondents. A combination of purposive and systematic sampling techniques was used to select respondents within the communities. Participants were required to be residents of the selected communities, be at least 18 years old, and have lived in the community long enough to understand local cultural practices.

Instrument for Data Collection

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Two instruments were used for data collection. The questionnaire was developed based on the research objectives and consisted of five sections: Section A (demographic information), Section B (awareness and prevalence of harmful cultural practices), Section C (communication strategies used in addressing harmful practices), Section D (perceived effectiveness of communication interventions), and Section E (challenges affecting communication strategies). Most items were measured using a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 5 to Strongly Disagree = 1).

The key informant interview guide contained open-ended questions focusing on experiences with harmful cultural practices, communication interventions implemented, the role of traditional and community leaders, the effectiveness of advocacy approaches, barriers to behavioural change, and recommendations for improving communication interventions.

Method of Data Collection

The researchers coordinated the administration of questionnaire with the assistance of trained research assistants familiar with the selected communities. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and participation was voluntary. Completed questionnaire were retrieved immediately where possible to minimize loss. Key informant interviews were conducted through face-to-face interactions and, where necessary, telephone interviews. With participants' consent, responses were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected through questionnaires were coded and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics included frequency distributions, percentages, and mean scores. Inferential statistics included Pearson Product Moment Correlation and simple linear regression analysis, used to examine relationships between communication exposure, awareness, and attitudes toward ending harmful cultural practices. Qualitative data from interviews were analysed through thematic analysis, involving familiarization with interview transcripts, identification of recurring ideas, coding of responses, development of themes, and interpretation of findings.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate and Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 400 copies of the questionnaire were administered to respondents across selected communities in the three senatorial districts of Delta State. Out of this number, 386 copies were properly completed and returned, representing a response rate of 96.5%. The high response rate was considered adequate for the analysis.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Demographic Characteristics (n = 386)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	181	46.9
Female	205	53.1
Total (Gender)	386	100
18–30 years	112	29.0
31–40 years	124	32.1
41–50 years	88	22.8
51 years and above	62	16.1

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Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Total (Age)	386	100
Primary education	38	9.8
Secondary education	121	31.3
Tertiary education	202	52.3
No formal education	25	6.6
Total (Education)	386	100
Delta North	129	33.4
Delta Central	132	34.2
Delta South	125	32.4
Total (District)	386	100

Interpretation: The demographic distribution shows that female respondents constituted a slightly higher proportion (53.1%) than males (46.9%). This distribution was considered useful because the study focused on cultural practices that directly affect women while also recognizing the importance of male perspectives in understanding community norms. The age distribution indicates that respondents were drawn from different generational groups, with those between 31 and 40 years constituting the largest category (32.1%), suggesting that the study captured perspectives from adults actively involved in family, community, and cultural decision-making processes.

Research Question One: What harmful cultural practices affecting women exist in selected communities of Delta State?

Table 3: Perceived Prevalence of Harmful Cultural Practices Against Women

Harmful Practice	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Discriminatory widowhood rites	298	77.2
Denial of inheritance/property rights	281	72.8
Exclusion of women from community decision-making	267	69.2
Early/forced marriage	214	55.4
Female genital mutilation	156	40.4
Other forms of gender discrimination	244	63.2

The findings indicate that discriminatory widowhood practices were perceived as the most common harmful cultural practice identified by respondents (77.2%), followed by denial of inheritance and property rights (72.8%) and exclusion of women from community decision-making processes (69.2%). Although female genital mutilation recorded the lowest percentage among the listed practices (40.4%), the finding suggests that the practice remains present in some communities despite increased awareness campaigns and legal interventions. The results suggest that harmful cultural practices in Delta State extend beyond physical practices to include social and institutional forms of discrimination that limit women's participation and autonomy.

Research Question Two: What communication strategies are used to address harmful cultural practices against women in Delta State?

Table 4: Communication Strategies Used in Addressing Harmful Cultural Practices

Communication Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Community dialogue meetings	331	85.8
Radio programmes	304	78.8

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Communication Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Engagement with traditional leaders	297	76.9
Women advocacy campaigns	286	74.1
Television programmes	241	62.4
Religious sensitization programmes	233	60.4
Social media campaigns	219	56.7
Community theatre/storytelling	198	51.3

The findings reveal that community dialogue meetings emerged as the most widely recognized communication strategy (85.8%), suggesting that interpersonal and participatory communication approaches remain highly relevant in addressing culturally embedded issues. Radio programmes (78.8%) and engagement with traditional leaders (76.9%) were also considered important strategies, indicating that both mass media and culturally trusted community actors play significant roles in influencing attitudes toward harmful practices. The relatively lower rating of social media campaigns (56.7%) may reflect differences in digital access between urban and rural communities.

Research Question Three: Are communication strategies effective in promoting social change against harmful cultural practices?

Table 5: Perceived Effectiveness of Communication Strategies

Statement	Mean	Decision
Communication campaigns have increased awareness of women's rights	4.21	Accepted
Community discussions encourage people to question harmful traditions	4.05	Accepted
Radio programmes influence community attitudes toward gender issues	3.98	Accepted
Traditional leaders' involvement improves acceptance of change	4.18	Accepted
Communication interventions have completely eliminated harmful practices	2.76	Rejected
Communication alone is sufficient to end harmful practices	2.64	Rejected

Criterion mean = 3.00. The findings show that respondents generally agreed that communication interventions have improved awareness and encouraged discussions about harmful cultural practices. The highest-rated item was that communication campaigns have increased awareness of women's rights (mean = 4.21). However, respondents disagreed that communication alone had completely eliminated harmful practices (mean = 2.76). This suggests that communication contributes significantly to social change but must operate alongside legal enforcement, economic empowerment, education, and institutional support.

Research Question Four: What factors limit the effectiveness of communication strategies?

Table 6: Challenges Affecting Communication Interventions

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strong attachment to cultural traditions	324	83.9
Patriarchal beliefs	317	82.1
Resistance from community members	291	75.4
Inadequate funding for advocacy programmes	278	72.0
Limited involvement of men	263	68.1
Poor access to communication channels in rural	229	59.3

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Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
areas		
Weak implementation of gender laws	305	79.0

The major challenges identified were strong attachment to cultural traditions (83.9%) and patriarchal beliefs (82.1%). This indicates that the major obstacles to eliminating harmful practices are not merely communication-related but are connected to deeper social structures and belief systems. The findings further suggest that communication interventions require broader institutional support, including effective policy implementation and increased involvement of men as partners in gender transformation.

Results from Key Informant Interviews

The qualitative data generated from interviews with traditional leaders, women's rights advocates, media practitioners, and government officials produced five major themes.

Theme One: Harmful Practices Are Sustained Through Social Norms. Participants explained that many harmful practices continue because they are regarded as acceptable traditions rather than discriminatory behaviours. One participant noted that people continue such practices partly out of fear of losing cultural identity, and that the communication challenge is helping people see that culture can change once a practice is understood to cause harm.

Theme Two: Community Dialogue Produces Greater Acceptance of Change. Most participants emphasized that community engagement was more effective than external campaigns because it allowed people to express concerns and participate in discussions. A women's leader observed that people become more willing to reconsider long-accepted practices when invited to discuss issues openly. This finding supports participatory communication approaches that emphasize dialogue and collective decision-making.

Theme Three: Traditional Leaders Are Important Change Agents. Interview participants identified traditional leaders as influential actors in transforming community attitudes. One community leader noted that people listen when respected custodians of culture, such as traditional rulers, support women's rights. This indicates that communication interventions should involve cultural gatekeepers rather than bypassing them.

Theme Four: Media Awareness Alone Does Not Guarantee Behavioural Change. Media practitioners acknowledged that radio and television campaigns have increased awareness but noted that changing cultural behaviour requires continuous engagement, since informing people is not the same as changing a practice that has existed for generations.

Theme Five: Need for Integrated Communication Approaches. Participants recommended combining traditional communication methods with modern media platforms, emphasizing local language communication, community meetings, women's empowerment programmes, youth engagement, and collaboration with traditional institutions.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

H01: There is no significant relationship between exposure to communication strategies and awareness of harmful cultural practices among residents of Delta State.

Table 7: Pearson Correlation Analysis

Variables	r-value	p-value	Decision
Communication exposure and awareness	0.684	0.000	Reject H01

Interpretation: The result indicates a significant positive relationship between exposure to communication strategies and awareness of harmful cultural practices ($r = .684$, $p < .05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that increased exposure to

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communication interventions is associated with higher awareness of harmful cultural practices and women's rights.

Hypothesis Two

H02: Communication strategies do not significantly influence attitudes toward ending harmful cultural practices against women.

Table 8: Regression Analysis

Variable	Beta	t-value	p-value
Communication strategies	.571	8.214	.000

The regression result indicates that communication strategies significantly predict attitudes toward ending harmful cultural practices ($\beta = .571$, $p < .05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that effective communication strategies contribute significantly to positive attitudes toward eliminating harmful cultural practices.

Summary of Findings

• Harmful cultural practices affecting women continue to exist in some communities of Delta State, particularly discriminatory widowhood practices, inheritance restrictions, and exclusion from decision-making.

• Community dialogue, radio programmes, engagement with traditional leaders, and advocacy campaigns are the most commonly used communication strategies.

• Communication interventions have improved awareness and influenced attitudes but have not completely eliminated harmful practices.

• Cultural attachment, patriarchal beliefs, inadequate funding, and weak policy enforcement remain major barriers.

• Exposure to communication strategies significantly influences awareness of, and attitudes toward ending, harmful practices.

• Sustainable change requires participatory and culturally sensitive communication approaches involving community members and traditional institutions.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined communication strategies for ending harmful cultural practices against women in selected communities of Delta State, Nigeria. The discussion is organized around the major findings of the study and relates them to the assumptions of Participatory C4D theory, as well as previous empirical studies.

Persistence of Harmful Cultural Practices Against Women in Delta State

The study revealed that harmful cultural practices continue to exist in some communities of Delta State, with discriminatory widowhood rites, denial of inheritance rights, and exclusion of women from community decision-making identified as some of the most common practices. This finding demonstrates that although Nigerian society has witnessed increased advocacy for gender equality and women's rights, certain cultural norms continue to reproduce unequal relationships between men and women.

The persistence of these practices can be understood within the broader context of social norms and cultural transmission. Cultural practices are not sustained only because individuals consciously support them; rather, they often continue because they are embedded within community expectations, family structures, and traditional institutions. Practices associated with widowhood, inheritance, and leadership participation frequently reflect historical patterns of male authority and social control.

This finding supports the argument of Odozi and Okafor (2022), who found that discriminatory cultural practices in Nigerian communities often persist because they are interpreted as expressions of tradition and social order.

The implication of this finding is that interventions aimed at ending harmful practices must recognize their cultural and social foundations. Approaches that simply condemn these

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practices without engaging the beliefs and institutions that sustain them may produce resistance rather than transformation. Communication strategies must therefore create opportunities for communities to critically reflect on traditions and distinguish between cultural values that promote social wellbeing and practices that violate women's rights.

Effectiveness of Community Dialogue as a Communication Strategy

One of the major findings of the study was that community dialogue emerged as the most effective communication strategy for addressing harmful cultural practices. Respondents and key informants indicated that dialogue-based approaches create opportunities for community members to discuss sensitive issues, express concerns, and collectively consider alternatives.

This finding strongly aligns with the assumptions of Participatory C4D theory, which emphasizes that meaningful social change occurs when people participate actively in defining problems and developing solutions. The theory challenges externally imposed interventions and argues that communities are more likely to embrace change when they are involved in the process.

The effectiveness of community dialogue can also be explained through the theory's emphasis that communication is a process of interaction and social negotiation rather than merely the transfer of information. Through dialogue, individuals are able to question existing assumptions, exchange experiences, and develop shared understanding.

The finding supports Manyozo's (2021) argument that development communication becomes effective when communities are treated as active participants rather than passive audiences. It also agrees with Servaes (2020), who emphasized that participatory communication approaches are essential for addressing complex social problems because they promote ownership and sustainability.

In the context of Delta State, community dialogue is particularly important because harmful cultural practices are often connected to traditional authority systems and collective beliefs. Creating spaces for discussion among elders, women, men, and young people allows communities to negotiate change without necessarily viewing such change as an attack on their cultural identity.

Mass Media and Awareness Creation

The study found that radio and television programmes remain important communication channels for increasing awareness about women's rights and harmful cultural practices. Radio, in particular, was identified as a significant medium because of its accessibility and ability to communicate in local languages.

This finding confirms Nwammuo and Salawu's (2018) observation that indigenous-language radio programming remains influential in reaching rural Nigerian audiences, including those with limited literacy, because it operates within familiar cultural and linguistic frameworks.

However, the study also revealed that media exposure alone does not guarantee complete behavioural transformation. Respondents agreed that communication campaigns improved awareness but disagreed that communication by itself could eliminate harmful cultural practices. This finding highlights the distinction between awareness creation and social transformation.

From a Participatory C4D perspective, this suggests that media campaigns should be integrated with interpersonal communication, community mobilization, and stakeholder engagement. Media can introduce new ideas and challenge stereotypes, but lasting change requires interaction and collective action. Therefore, the role of media should not be viewed simply as information dissemination but as a platform for public conversation, advocacy, and social negotiation.

Importance of Traditional Leaders and Community Gatekeepers

The study found that engagement with traditional leaders significantly contributes to the effectiveness of communication interventions. Key informants emphasized that traditional

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rulers and community elders remain influential because they are regarded as custodians of culture and social values.

This finding is significant because harmful cultural practices are often located within traditional structures. Attempts to change such practices without involving cultural authorities may be interpreted as disrespect for community identity. However, when traditional leaders become advocates for change, they can redefine cultural expectations and encourage acceptance of gender-equitable practices.

This finding supports the principles of Participatory C4D theory, which recognizes local leadership structures as important partners in development processes, and reinforces the theory's assumption that trusted communication sources increase message acceptance.

The implication is that government agencies and civil society organizations should move beyond treating traditional institutions as barriers to change. Instead, they should engage them as partners who can facilitate cultural transformation from within.

Communication Strategies and Behavioural Change

The study found a significant relationship between exposure to communication strategies and awareness of harmful cultural practices. It also established that communication strategies significantly influenced attitudes toward ending harmful practices.

This finding demonstrates the transformative potential of communication. However, the results also indicate that communication operates within a broader social environment. While communication can influence knowledge and attitudes, behavioural change may require additional interventions addressing economic dependency, legal enforcement, education, and social support systems.

The finding is consistent with Social and Behaviour Change Communication perspectives, which argue that behaviour is shaped by multiple interacting factors, including individual beliefs, interpersonal relationships, social norms, and institutional structures. UNICEF (2021) similarly noted that successful social change interventions require integrated communication approaches combining awareness creation, community engagement, and supportive social environments.

Therefore, communication should be understood as a necessary but not isolated condition for eliminating harmful cultural practices.

Challenges Limiting Communication Interventions

The study identified strong attachment to cultural traditions, patriarchal beliefs, resistance from community members, inadequate funding, and weak implementation of gender laws as major challenges affecting communication interventions.

The influence of patriarchal beliefs is particularly important because many harmful practices are sustained through ideas about gender roles and authority. Communication interventions may therefore encounter resistance when they challenge deeply held beliefs about masculinity, femininity, family structure, and social hierarchy.

This finding agrees with UNFPA (2023), which observed that harmful practices persist because they are reinforced by social expectations and community acceptance, and that sustainable change requires long-term engagement with communities rather than short-term awareness campaigns.

The findings also highlight the importance of institutional support. Communication initiatives may have limited impact when they are not supported by effective policies, legal protection, and community development programmes.

Implications of Findings for Participatory C4D Theory

The findings validate Participatory C4D theory by demonstrating that communication functions as a mechanism for social change. The study shows that communication strategies influence awareness, attitudes, and community discussions about harmful cultural practices.

However, the findings extend existing understanding by showing that communication effectiveness depends on cultural relevance, participation, and stakeholder involvement.

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Communication strategies are most successful when they combine media advocacy with community dialogue and indigenous communication systems.

The study therefore supports a shift from a transmission-oriented communication model toward a participatory and transformative communication model.

Contribution of Findings to Existing Knowledge

The study contributes to existing scholarship in three major ways. First, it provides empirical evidence from Delta State on how communication strategies operate within communities where harmful cultural practices remain socially embedded. Second, it demonstrates that communication should not be viewed only as an awareness tool but as a process of cultural negotiation and social transformation. Third, it highlights the importance of integrating modern communication platforms with indigenous communication systems and community participation mechanisms.

The study therefore advances the argument that eliminating harmful cultural practices requires communication approaches that are culturally sensitive, participatory, and socially embedded.

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E. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study examined communication strategies for ending harmful cultural practices against women in selected communities of Delta State, Nigeria. The study was based on the understanding that harmful cultural practices are not simply individual behaviours but socially constructed practices sustained through collective beliefs, traditional institutions, interpersonal interactions, and community communication processes. Consequently, addressing these practices requires communication approaches that move beyond awareness creation to embrace dialogue, participation, empowerment, and social transformation.

The findings established that harmful cultural practices affecting women continue to exist in some communities of Delta State despite increasing awareness of women's rights, government interventions, legal frameworks, and advocacy efforts by civil society organizations. Practices such as discriminatory widowhood rites, denial of inheritance and property rights, exclusion of women from community decision-making, early marriage, and other gender-based restrictions remain concerns because they limit women's autonomy, dignity, and participation in social development.

The study revealed that communication strategies currently employed to address these practices include community dialogue, radio and television programmes, advocacy campaigns, engagement with traditional and religious leaders, indigenous communication methods, and social media platforms. Among these approaches, participatory communication strategies, particularly community dialogue and engagement with influential community actors, were perceived as more effective because they provide opportunities for discussion, negotiation, and collective ownership of the change process.

The findings further demonstrated that communication interventions contribute significantly to increasing awareness and influencing attitudes toward harmful cultural practices. However, the study also established that communication alone cannot completely eliminate deeply rooted cultural behaviours. The persistence of patriarchal beliefs, social expectations, attachment to tradition, inadequate funding, and weak implementation of gender-related policies continue to limit the impact of communication interventions.

The study therefore concludes that sustainable elimination of harmful cultural practices requires a comprehensive communication approach that integrates mass media advocacy, interpersonal communication, community dialogue, indigenous communication systems, digital engagement, and stakeholder collaboration. Communication must be understood not only as a means of transmitting information but as a process through which

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communities examine social realities, challenge harmful norms, and construct alternative practices that promote equality and human dignity.

The findings also validate the relevance of Participatory C4D theory. The study demonstrates that communities are more likely to embrace social transformation when they are actively involved in identifying problems, discussing solutions, and implementing change. Communication strategies that recognize communities as partners rather than passive audiences are therefore more likely to produce sustainable outcomes.

The study contributes to communication scholarship by providing empirical evidence on the role of communication in transforming culturally embedded practices affecting women in Delta State. It extends existing discussions on gender and development communication by emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive, participatory, and community-driven communication approaches.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

Traditional institutions remain influential in many Delta State communities; traditional leaders should be actively involved in campaigns promoting women's rights and gender equality, supported by capacity-building programmes on gender equality principles, women's human rights, the effects of harmful cultural practices, and conflict-sensitive approaches to cultural change.

Media organizations should develop continuous programmes addressing harmful cultural practices rather than relying on occasional awareness campaigns. Radio should receive particular attention because of its accessibility, affordability, and ability to communicate in indigenous languages, through community discussions, call-in programmes, survivor testimonies, expert interviews, and legal and social guidance.

Since many harmful cultural practices are reinforced by patriarchal beliefs, communication interventions should not focus exclusively on women and girls. Men and boys should be engaged as partners in gender transformation through community education, school-based initiatives, men's advocacy networks, and religious and traditional platforms.

Women should be supported to become active participants in advocacy and community decision-making, with platforms to share experiences, advocate for their rights, access information, and influence community decisions; women's organizations should receive greater support to strengthen their communication and advocacy capacities.

Relevant government institutions should strengthen enforcement of existing legal protections and improve public awareness of women's legal rights, available support services, and reporting mechanisms, combining legal communication with dialogue to avoid creating perceptions of cultural confrontation.

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