

Only menopausal women whisper to gods: why it matters for SDG5

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Realizing SDG 5 requires an understanding of cultural norms

Empowering women is now firmly established as the fifth Sustainable Development Goal: [“Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”](#). Realizing this goal through outside interventions is however not straightforward. For instance, [the positive impact of a business training for women in India did not extend to Muslim women](#), because their restricted mobility prevented them from putting their knowledge to use. This example illustrates what motivates our research. Designing effective female empowerment policies requires a thorough understanding of cultural norms, and how they apply differently to different women within society.

Age enhances women’s autonomy, but we don’t know why

Take for instance the fact that [women gain autonomy in decision-making as they get older](#), a finding emerging from several studies, and pointing to the potential role of elderly women as agents of change. Scholars have however struggled to pin down explanations for this age dividend. A [review of the literature](#) concludes that “older women are argued to have more independence and empowerment than younger women because they have more experience with life, a better understanding of how to get what they want or need, a closer relationship with the husband, or because they have fulfilled certain social obligations to the husband and his family (for example, bearing children or sons) and thus are more trusted than are young wives, over whom tighter controls are maintained” (Mason and Smith, 2003, p.15). These reasons remain speculative.

Only menopausal women can whisper to the gods...

In a [recent study](#), we look at women’s autonomy across age in Nigeria, Togo, Ghana and Benin. These four West-African countries are home to ethnic groups that practice(d) [‘voodoo’, a religion that spread with the expansion of the Dahomey kingdom](#) in the 17th century. Voodoo adherents

worship collective deities (related to the sea, the earth, or thunder) and family deities (ancestors that turn into spirits after death). The interactions with the family deities are led by a menopausal woman, referred to as the 'Tassinon'. [Only she can transmit the prayers and requests of the family members](#) to the ancestors and consult the oracle to see if the spirits have accepted the offering and sacrifices.

...and this translates in more autonomy and a higher BMI

In a sample of 21,000 women, we find that autonomy in household decision-making increases with age, and especially so for women belonging to the four 'voodoo-ethnicities'. Moreover, we find a menopause-dividend in women's autonomy, that exists – on top of the age-dividend – only among women of voodoo-ethnicities. This additional menopause-dividend, which we coin the 'Tassinon effect', is sizeable. It is equivalent to the effect of an additional 6 to 8 years of education. It also translates into a tangible welfare effect, in terms of a higher Body Mass Index among menopausal women of voodoo-related ethnic groups.

Why does this matter ?

Our research provides support for the argument put forward in the African feminist literature, that [seniority trumps gender in an African context](#). It also adds to the evidence that voodoo continues to play a role in West-Africa (for [common pool resource management](#), and [preventive health care](#)), and – more generally - that magicoreligious beliefs continue to play a role in many African societies. While it is well documented that [elderly women are often the victim](#) of such magicoreligious beliefs (in the form of witchcraft accusation), we show that there is also a positive side of the medal. These insights are important in terms of policy. To be effective, policies should identify potent agents of change, and – despite their apparent agency - elderly women in West-Africa have been overlooked so far.

Reference

Alidou, S., Verpoorten, M. (2019). [Only women can whisper to gods: Voodoo, menopause and women's autonomy](#), *World Development*, [Volume 119](#), July 2019, Pages 40-54