

## **Coping strategies Adopted by Women with High Fertility among the Tiv in Benue State**

Nguavese Adoo Agundo

### **Abstract**

*High fertility places undue pressure on households' socio-economic status. This study examines the coping strategies of women with many children among the Tiv in Benue State, conducted in the Gboko and Buruku Local Government Areas. It employs qualitative methods, including 10 in-depth interviews (IDI) and 4 focus group discussions (FGD), as well as quantitative methods through the administration of 355 questionnaires. The data analysis is guided by the Resilience Adaptation Theory. The findings reveal that women in high-fertility households face significant challenges that negatively impact their socio-economic conditions. These challenges result in inadequate nutrition, limited access to quality education for their children, and an inability to afford quality healthcare, potable water, and suitable housing. Additionally, the study identifies various coping strategies employed by these women to address these challenges, such as sending children to live with relatives, reducing parents' food portions to provide more for the children, farming, and rearing animals for sale. Furthermore, it is noted that many of these households, as a resilient mechanism, are influenced by the belief that children are gifts from God and should be born regardless of the circumstances. Therefore, it is recommended that the National Orientation Agency and other stakeholders intensify efforts to educate couples about the negative impacts of high fertility on family well-being.*

**Keywords:** *Coping strategy; high fertility; early marriage; socio- economic*

### **Introduction**

Multiple factors contribute to women having many children, including early marriage (marriage before obtaining an education), low or nonexistent literacy rates at the time of marriage, a preference for sons

to ensure lineage continuity and decision-making, and the belief that having many children will lead to wealth. However, the economic value placed on children is uncertain, and many women in these communities bear the sole burden of raising and caring for their children (Agundo, 2018). The challenges of raising multiple children cannot be overstated, even in communities that practice communal living. With the rising prices of commodities, particularly fuel and foodstuffs, coping has become increasingly difficult for the average Nigerian. Previous studies have focused on the socio-economic conditions of high-fertility families, but none have examined how these families cope when their socio-economic conditions are poor, particularly among Tiv women in Benue State, Nigeria. Therefore, this study investigates the coping strategies employed by women with high fertility to mitigate the difficulties associated with harsh economic conditions. Tiv women often face unique challenges shaped by their communal and agricultural lifestyles, gender roles, and social expectations, which contribute to their resilience in overcoming various obstacles.

### **Literature review**

#### **An Overview of High fertility**

The fertility rate in sub-Saharan Africa is higher than in many parts of the world, primarily due to strong kinship networks and the high economic and social value attached to children. The family is a universal institution with functions that cannot be overemphasized; one of these functions is procreation, which is a fundamental aspect of marriage in Nigeria. Women with high fertility, meaning many children, are commonplace, contributing to Nigeria being the most populous country in Africa. In 2020, Nigeria's population reached two hundred and six million (206 million), with a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 5.3 (PRB, 2024). In this context, children are viewed as wealth or assets. Additionally, high fertility is often seen as a measure of a man's prowess, particularly if he can father male children. Nigeria is one of

the sub-Saharan African countries that has experienced a high and persistent fertility rate for an extended period. Although there has been a slight decreasing trend from year to year, the rate remains high compared to developed nations. Uncontrolled fertility can have adverse effects on the socio-economic, demographic, and environmental development of the country (Jara et al., 2013).

In a study by Anderson et al. (2022), it was shown that mothers with limited economic resources employ various positive and often creative coping strategies to meet their families' needs. They frequently prioritize their children's needs above their own. Additionally, the resilience often exhibited by these women, who experience high fertility, sometimes masks the tears shed in private moments of anguish. High fertility refers to individuals with more than four children, based on the 1988 National Population Policy, specific objective three. The National Policy on Population serves as the standard for measuring individuals with more than four children, and this research focuses on this demographic (National Population Commission, 2009).

Fertility desires are reported to be higher in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) than in other major regions, indicating that much of this childbearing is desired. The mean desired family size in SSA is 5.0, compared to 2.9 in other low- and middle-income countries (Church et al., 2023). The higher average fertility rates in SSA result from relatively high desired fertility. Although high fertility is not being adequately addressed by the Nigerian government due to religious, cultural, or political reasons, households—especially women—are beginning to feel the pressure. This has led to the adoption of coping mechanisms.

### **Coping Strategies of Women with High Fertility**

Coping strategy is an action, a series of actions, or a thought process used in meeting a stressful or unpleasant situation or in modifying one's reaction to such a situation, typically involving deliberate

prospectives to issues (Anderson et al., 2022). Coping strategies are meant to ameliorate the discomfort experienced by women with many children.

Coping could also be defined as the thoughts and behaviours mobilized to manage internal and external stressful situations. It is a term used distinctively for conscious and voluntary mobilization of acts, different from defence mechanisms that are subconscious or unconscious adaptive responses, both of which aim to reduce or tolerate stress (Algorani & Gupta, 2023). This is in consonance with works by Carr (2007), where coping strategies are behavioural and cognitive tactics used to manage crisis, conditions, and demands that are appraised as distressing. Such strategies may have short-term or long-term impacts. Normally, households first implement coping mechanisms with short-term effect such as expending savings, asking for assistance or selling assets, and when those mechanisms fall short, households may resort to other strategies with more long term effects such as withdrawing children from schools.

When individuals are subjected to a stressor, the varying ways of dealing with it are termed coping styles, which are a set of relatively stable traits that determine the individual's behaviour in response to stress, which are consistent over time and across situations. Coping strategies adopted by women with infertility were religion, social support, child adoption, and distraction activities (Naab et al., 2021). This aligns with the coping strategies employed by the Tiv women in this study. When mothers find themselves in a situation they encounter difficulty improving, they look for a way to manage the situation. Their ability to cope with many children is in their reliance in God as the giver of children, and cultural norms that is communal in nature, with expected roles assigned to the mother as a care giver and often, provider.

There are however, reports of high anxiety and fatigue among mothers due to too much workload such as taking care of children, working, cooking, cleaning the house, sending children to school, managing the household and so on (Durak et al., 2023). In addition, women who work as full-time housewives experience higher distress than women who work outside the home (Amir and Mahmud, 2014). This maternal fatigue tries to explain where a mother experiences chronic stress and it can interfere with daily activities including emotional disturbances. In addition, it can be defined as extreme fatigue in performing the role of a mother so that she feels less happy when she sees her children and doubts her ability to be a good mother ( Mokhtar and Ku Johari, 2024). This stance differs from this study because the Tiv women in this study are socialised to have many children and function normally while taking care of the children, cleaning, cooking, sending children to school and general management of the household. They are not expected to complain about 'normal duties', as any complain made in respect to this is considered as laziness and ungratefulness to God. Instead, the social support from communal living tends to provide temporal ease when mothers need to go out for errands, also prayers are a coping strategy. The most important aspect of having many children is for them to be beneficial to the parents in future.

This is similar to a study on some Korean mothers who reached a point of burnout as a result of contributing factors such as parenting stress, depression, and lack of spousal support , adopted coping strategies such as; to be alone, eat, socialize, and make sober reflections, such as praying. These coping styles was for the wellbeing of both mother and her children in order to avoid poor child outcomes in future (Seo and Kim, 2022).

Changes in family dynamics where time of marriage is delayed, women are increasingly gaining employment, also the number of single parents have increased is gradually shifting coping strategies. For instance, coping with the circumstances of family disruption in most

African countries has entailed single-parent families among lower-income groups taking their children to live with relatives, in particular, the children's grandparents (Bogle et al., 2022; Moller and Devey, 1995). Hence, in a bid to provide for households, families are being separated. A discussion of coping on its own may cause society to question the family's ability to shield their children from vices. These have the tendency to set parents on edge, because they worry that it speaks to their individual failure as parents (Chilton et al, 2013). Circumstances such as having many children cannot be undone, it then becomes necessary to seek a means of coping.

Families with high fertility tend to lean towards child labour, as married women with high fertility are under the authority of their husbands. Child labour may be desirable because it contributes to the family income, and it may be desirable to the child because it increases his or her weight in the family decision function (Beegle et al., 2002). Gathering from discussions among the Tiv women with high fertility, it suggest some of their coping strategies to include; sending their children to live with relatives, cutting the amount of food the parents eat for the children to have more, believing children are a gift from God; selling off farm produce/ farm animals, begging, living with the belief of being "better than one's parents" as children are a blessing, men transferring the bulk of child provision and training to the mothers, amongst others. Another important aspect to emphasize is the influence of culture on the family's coping regarding the different stressful events, because coping in each cultural system is based on the social system, religion and the way that people receive support from their personal relationships (Childress et al., 2023). This correlates with how the Tiv women adopt ways to cope which is determined by their culture norms and values, social system and religion.

### **Theoretical framework**

The Resilience Adaptation Theory by Norman Garmezy is employed as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory is considered

suitable because it provides the veritable tools to account for the strategies households with high fertility adopt to cope with attendant challenges. It takes cognisance of the fact that coping strategies are drawn from cultural, economic, social, and psychological perspectives.

The assumption of this theory is that resilience helps people to overcome hardships, by aiding their ability to flourish and overcome obstacles (Zimmerman, 2013). This theory is considered applicable to this study because Tiv women with many children choose adaptive strategies rooted in resilience, cultural values, and communal support systems.

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted in Gboko and Buruku Local Government Areas (L.G.A) of Benue state. The predominant language spoken in these areas is Tiv. Gboko has a projected population of 505,788 (world pop. Review, 2024), with 18 wards. Buruku L.G.A has a projected population of 297,700 (NPC, 2006), with thirteen (13) council wards. The selection of this location is mainly because Gboko is the most populous L.G.A and the traditional and administrative seat of the Tiv people, while Buruku contains households that are more rural dwellers. Respondents selected for data gathering were women between the ages of 15 and 49 years, since the study is concerned with women of reproductive age. A total of three hundred and fifty-five (355) questionnaires were administered.

A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select eligible respondents in the area of study, which is Benue state. The first stage involved the purposive selection of two Local Government Areas (L.G.As) namely Gboko and Buruku. The second involved the simple random selection of wards by assigning a number to each ward selected. Five (5) wards each were selected from Gboko and Buruku L.G.A. The third stage involved the selection of one (1) village from each ward and in each village; one of the major roads was selected.

Finally, houses were conveniently chosen. For every house that was selected, where the household female of reproductive age with a total number of children exceeding four, they were interviewed. . To supplement the quantitative data, 10 In -depth Interviews and 4 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted in both L.G.A's.

The Socio demographic characteristics revealed that the prominent age (35.2%) of the respondents was 20-29 years. This exposes the reason for high fertility as usually being associated with younger married females. The respondents were female (100%). Most of the respondents are of the Christian religion (95.8%) and the number of currently married respondents (76.6%) was significantly higher than all other categories, other categories make up for 22.5 percent comprising of the single parents, separated, divorced and widowed. The level of literacy among the respondents is also high with a 99.2 percent majority of respondents having attended school with qualifications ranging from primary (9.6%), SSCE (26.5%), NCE/ND (30%), HND/ Degree (28.7%), M.Sc (0.8%), Ph.D (0.8%) and Nursing qualification (3.6%).

### **Data Analysis**

The survey was able to elicit data on how women with many children meet their clothing, feeding, educational, health and financial needs. It also explored other strategies deployed by persons with many children in coping with many attendant challenges.

**Table 1: Strategies to address clothing and feeding needs**

How clothing needs are met.	Respondents	Percent
Buy new clothes	279	78.6
Second hand clothes	41	11.5
Handouts from friends/ relatives	27	7.6
Borrow clothes	8	2.3
Total	355	100.0

**How feeding needs are met.**

<b>Reduce number of daily meals</b>	Yes	152	42.8
	No	203	57.2
	Total	355	100.0
<b>Buy food on credit</b>	Yes	211	59.4
	No	144	40.6
	Total	355	100.0
<b>Reduce the quantity of food</b>	Yes	156	43.9
	No	199	56.1
	Total	355	100.0
<b>Child labour for money</b>	Yes	44	12.4
	No	311	87.6
	Total	355	100.0
<b>Limit food consumption by adults</b>	Yes	172	44.5
	No	183	51.5
	Total	355	100.0
<b>Beg</b>	Yes	110	30.9
	No	245	69.1
	Total	355	100.0
<b>Increase farm input</b>	Yes	18	5.1
	No	333	93.8
	Total	355	100.0

**Strategies to Address Culture-related challenges.**

Data on Table 1 shows that majority of respondents meet their clothing needs by buying new clothes (78.6%); 11.5% buy second hand clothes, 7.6% said friends and relatives give them clothes and 2.3% borrow clothes. This implies that most respondents are able to meet their

clothing needs since it is not a common occurrence and clothes are bought during festive periods, also relatives send clothes.

On coping with feeding, 42.8% of the respondents reduce the number of meals per day, 43.9% reduce the quantity of food portions, 59.4% buy food on credit, 12.4% send children to work for money, 44.5% reduce adult food portions, 5.1% Farm more and 30.9% beg for assistance to feed. The reduction in number of meals per day is not considered prevalent because of the communal and hospitable nature of the Tiv, which bridged the gap of not being able to feed properly at home, but were offered meals from relatives within the community.

The role of Traditional Values in the Resilience theory comes to play where culture emphasizes the importance of family, communal living, and motherhood. Tiv women derive strength and purpose from their role as caregivers and contributors to the continuity of society.

The coping strategies discussed by participants highlighted food insecurity and fears of starvation. They were concerned with their inability to meet up with basic feeding needs and quality of food. A participant from Boagundu, Buruku and a participant from Igyorov, Gboko shared the following thoughts:

*Tiv are very hospitable people and food is not a problem because we are hardworking farmers, but times have changed and we have to reduce the quantity of food eaten to ensure it takes us till the next farming season (IDI 2, Boagundu community leader's wife).*

*We don't consume the quantity and quality of food we use to eat in the past; most times we eat without meat (IDI 2, female Women leader, Igyorov).*

**Table 2: Responses on how persons with high fertility meet their financial needs.**

Child labour	Respondents	Percent
Yes	96	27.0

No	259	73.0
Total	355	100.0
<b>Parents accepting menial jobs</b>		
Yes	156	43.9
No	199	56.1
Total	355	100.0
<b>Children hawking after school</b>		
Yes	96	27.0
No	259	73.0
Total	355	100.0
<b>Children working for relatives/strangers</b>		
Yes	133	37.7
No	221	62.3
Total	355	100.0
<b>Ways the above reduce the stress of raising many children.</b>		
It doesn't	297	83.7
It contributes to income	58	16.3
Total	355	100.0
<b>Child labour as a means for coping</b>		
It is not	158	44.5
It means more proceeds from the farm	32	9.0
Increase in income	165	46.5
Total	355	100.0

#### **Strategies to Cope with Economic Demands**

Table 2 reveals that 27% of respondents meet their financial needs through child labour, 43.9% mentioned parents accepting menial jobs, 27% said children hawking after school and 37.7% children working for relatives.

When asked on how the aforementioned helps reduce stress, 297 (83.7%) responded that it doesn't reduce stress since it doesn't really impact on economic well being. However, 58 (16.3%) believe child labour contributes to household income.

When inquired on how child labour is a coping strategy, 158 (44.5%) respondents believe child labour is not a coping strategy, while 32 (9.0%) believe it translates to more proceeds from the farm through farm work and 165 (46.5%) said it increases household income.

The theory explains the non prevalence of these strategies, where the economic adaptation strategies of Tiv women is focused on subsistence farming, trading, and small-scale businesses to supplement household income, while leveraging on traditional farming techniques and kinship networks for food security. There is also the delegation of responsibilities to older children and relying on extended family members for childcare

**Table 3: Meeting Educational and Health needs**

<b>Educational needs</b>	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Attend public school	246	69.3
Few household members attend school at a time	64	18.0
Only the males attend school	12	3.4
Increase farm input	18	5.1
Educational needs are met with salary earned	15	4.2
Total	355	100.0
<b>Strategies for healthcare</b>		
Herbs	109	30.7
Self medication	168	47.3
Divine healing	43	12.1
Exercise	43	12.1
Medical centre	20	5.6

Chemist	4	1.1
Total	355	100.0

#### **Strategies for Social challenges**

Table 3 shows how respondents achieve the educational needs of their household as thus; 69.3% attend public schools, 18% said they allow few members of their household to go school at a time, 3.4% said only the male members go to school, 5.1% stated that they farm more to raise more income from proceeds and 4.2% said they meet their educational needs with the salary they receive. The interest in education highlights its importance making women accept their challenges positively by focusing on the joy and future contributions of their children.

On strategies for meeting healthcare needs, 30.7% of the respondents said they achieve health needs through the use of herbs, 47.3% said they adopt self-medication, 3.1% said they rely on divine healing, 12.1% exercise as a strategy, 5.6% make use of the medical centre and 1.1% rely on the chemist. The reliance on herbs and self medication is a more affordable and convenient way of meeting health needs considering their socio economic status and traditional way of life.

**Table 4: Responses on whether alcohol is a coping strategy.**

Responses	Respondents	Percent
Yes	90	25.4
No	265	74.6
Total	355	100.0
<b>Explanation of responses</b>		
It doesn't ease stress of having many children	262	73.8
It helps one forget their sorrows	93	26.2
Total	355	100.0

As shown in Table 4, majority of respondents (74.6%) said alcohol does not ease the stress of coping with many children while 25.4% believe alcohol relieves the stress of coping with many children. This coping strategy is possible only because it makes one temporarily forget one's sorrows. Almost all the participants agreed that drinking alcohol is not a coping strategy as it does not solve the problem. These participants attest to this fact:

*Alcohol does not ease the stress of having many children because the problem still remains (IDI 3, Mbaagishi, Buruku).*

*Alcohol just relaxes you for the moment; you will still face your problems (IDI 3, female leader, Gboko).*

### **Findings and Discussion**

The economic advantages Tiv people with many children enjoyed was large scale farming, a trend that is gradually eroding as a result of fewer farmlands to cultivate, changing social trends, more ferocious attacks by herdsmen on farm lands and inter tribal crisis.

Female youth with less than a secondary education were twice as likely to have more children compared to those with higher education (Otu et al., 2024) which has implications on the household. The socio- economic conditions of households with many children signifies the privileges that a person or his family enjoys in the society. It is an important social determinant with significant bearing on the health, nutritional status and morbidity and mortality patterns of people (Dudeja et al, 2015).

When living conditions are low, there is always a need to adjust to the current economic realities. Coupled with the fact that most residents are civil servants, subsistence farmers and do menial jobs; also previous governments owed public servants so many months of salary, farmers have suffered great losses due to herdsmen attacks and have had cause to relocate because their houses/ properties have been destroyed. There is a challenge of populations of Tiv people being stuck in Internally

Displaced Persons ((IDP) camps. This has greatly inhibited their purchasing power and ability to cater for basic living standards especially feeding, as a Tiv adage believes once you can feed well, you are a wealthy person. This inability to properly feed is seen as a major challenge. In similitude with a study by Okogu (2011), in his findings, large family size comes with its implications of poor health, inability to provide adequately for the education of the siblings, low standard of learning and the inability to fulfil one's dreams in life. The three basic necessities of life, food, clothing and housing were essentially issues underscored in his study. This justifies the need for women to adopt coping strategies for survival. The household coping strategies adopted by families with many children among the Tiv in Buruku and Gboko vary from children hawking fruits after school; to parents accepting menial jobs at the cement factory and warehouses, to children living and working for relatives/ strangers to be trained and sent to school. The assumption of the Resilience Adaptation theory is that Tiv women's coping strategies are primarily shaped by their interaction with traditional values, community-based support systems, and economic ingenuity. The resilience displayed is a result of their ability to harmonize cultural expectations with practical adaptations to daily challenges. It is the resilience that helps women overcome hardships.

Women with high fertility tend to lean towards child labour which was evident in this study and corroborated by Beegle et al., (2002) stating that child labour may be desirable because it contributes to the family income. These coping strategies are not truly effective in meeting the financial needs of high fertility families as for mothers that do menial jobs and the children that hawk fruits only bring a small fraction of income to the home. These strategies make it impossible to realistically meet up emergencies and absorb economic shocks, not to talk of living comfortably. Even though some children are sent to live with relatives to train them, a large number of these children still live with their parents.

Findings indicate that meeting educational needs require attending public schools; allowing just few members of the household to attend school per time; by allowing only male household members to school; others farm more to get more produce to sell and others meet their educational needs with the salary they earn. Even though many women attempt to meet their children's educational needs, the quality of this education is a challenge. Women living in food insecure households with children engage in a variety of strategies to shield their children from the physical and emotional effects of hunger, including eating less, compromising the quality of their own diets, and skipping meals, among other strategies (Fram et al., 2011). This is evident in this study as the most frequently used coping strategies for feeding are related to reduction in food consumption, buying food on credit, begging, putting more effort in farming, child labour and limiting food portions by adults. This corresponds with studies by Amendah et al., (2014) where more households report eating fewer number of meals in a day. The second most commonly used strategy is accessing credit: more than half the households report purchasing household goods or food on credit. Results on coping strategies for healthcare include taking herbal drinks and mixtures, engaging in self-medication, participating in exercise and divine healing and attending clinics. Findings on whether alcohol eases the stress of having many children; majority disagreed to alcohol being a coping strategy as it does not solve the problem, however some believe it temporarily makes one forget one's problems. The extended family system, on the other hand, provides a support system where members can encourage and morally support one another when in distress or bereaved.

Majority of women with high fertility live among relatives or with their husbands in personal and inherited properties, this is expected considering the location of study being rural and urban. A significant number live in rented mud apartments under dismal conditions by reasons of affordability. Their source of cooking is predominantly

firewood being the most affordable cooking source that can accommodate their large number. This study disclosed that households meet their educational needs by attending public schools because school fees are cheaper and most children are catered for by their mothers.

### **Conclusion**

Coping with many children can be challenging when the coping strategies are not yielding expected outcomes, especially in an economy that is inflationary in nature, and a society that is uncertain with insecurity and food shortages. These women will continue to strive to overcome the obstacles and managing their responsibilities, as they find solace within the conduits of culture and religion, accepting their circumstance as the will of God. There is the need to change unfavourable cultural norms that threaten, more than sustain quality of life.

### **Recommendations**

Improved Interventions like access to healthcare, education, and financial support for rural women can strengthen these coping strategies and alleviate challenges. Controlling high fertility among female youth requires addressing education, employment, early marriage, poverty, and culture.

Introduction and maintenance Community-Based Programs that will encourage women's cooperatives, and support groups can amplify communal support systems.

Sensitization on family planning methods suitable for women would assist in child spacing and discontinue myths that could stall healthy living practices that family planning has to offer.

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