

Effectiveness of Gender-Awareness Therapy in Addressing Issues Stemming from Gender Inequality and Promoting Individual Freedom of Choice in Rivers State

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Abstract

This study examined Effectiveness of gender-awareness therapy in addressing issues stemming from gender inequality and promoting individual freedom of choice in Rivers State. Descriptive research design was used for the study. The researcher formulated two objectives of the study two research questions and two hypotheses that guided the study. The population for this study consisted of all members of Rivers State Counselling Association of Nigeria with the population of 373 members. The researcher made use of quota sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique that ensures that a representative proportion of individuals, objects, or traits are selected as sample. Only the 93 members from the 3 selected Universities in Rivers State who are members of the counselling association were used for the study. The instrument used for data collection was self-structured questionnaire. The research instrument was subjected to face validation by the researcher's supervisor and two other experts in Measurement and Evaluation, all from the Faculty of Education, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt. To ascertain the reliability of the study, the researcher adopted the test-retest method. The instrument was administered and collated with the help of two trained research assistants and analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions while the hypotheses were tested using t-test statistical tool at 0.05 level of significance. Based on the analysis, the findings of the study revealed that gender-awareness therapy helped individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes, challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that, government, through the Rivers State Counselling Association of Nigeria should organize workshop for parents on gender-awareness therapy, government and non-governmental organization should organize seminar for the citizens on the importance of gender-awareness therapy.

Key Words: Effectiveness, Gender-awareness therapy, Gender Inequality, Individual Freedom

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INTRODUCTION

Gender-awareness therapy effectively addresses issues from gender inequality and promotes individual freedom by helping people recognize how societal norms influence their lives, challenge harmful beliefs, and develop strategies for greater self-determination and equality in personal and public domains. It is a systemic approach that looks at power dynamics, resource access, and social roles, ultimately empowering individuals to make choices aligned with their own well-being and rights within a context of fairness and equal opportunity (Holter, 2014).

Many studies have found that there are significant differences in gender equality awareness and mental health among different genders. Men usually have lower gender equality awareness, whereas women usually have lower mental health. Lower gender equality perceptions and lower mental health not only create psychological problems, such as anxiety and depression but also can endanger one's physical health and increase the risk of death. Studies have found that a high sense of gender equality can promote both men's and women's physical, mental, and sexual health (Syed, 2017) the higher the national gender equality index and personal mental health level, the longer the life expectancy of men and women. Common measures of individual mental health include self-esteem and subjective well-being. As an important part of a healthy personality, self-esteem can affect both positive and negative psychological states of an individual. Moreover, it is regarded as an important measure of mental health. Subjective well-being is a comprehensive evaluation of personal life according to subjective standards, which combine emotional experiences with life satisfaction (Wang, 2021), and is significantly correlated with 24 positive personality traits such as love and gratitude. This is the most common positive psychological experience related to mental health. High self-esteem and subjective well-being are associated with higher mental health. An egalitarian perception of gender awareness leads to a higher sense of self-esteem and subjective well-being for both men and women. Men generally have higher self-esteem and subjective well-being than women, especially in areas with high gender equality.

Most adult gender equality awareness and psychological problems stem from childhood, especially at school age. School age refers to the period of development from primary school to adolescence, usually between 6 and 12 years of age. At this stage, children are in a critical development period of individual gender equality awareness, self-esteem, and subjective well-being. Cui (2023) found gender stereotypes in children aged 4–9 years old and significant differences in different gender groups and that individual gender stereotypes appeared at the age of five, reached a peak of rigidity at 7 or 8 years of age, and then gradually gained flexibility as children's gender cognition and understanding deepened. Zhang's (2014) research on children aged 3–9 years old found that 4–5 years old and 7–8 years old were two key transitional periods for children's self-esteem development. Beck (2022) analysis of children aged 7–14 in 15 countries found that in most countries, 10 years old was the transitional period for children's subjective well-being. Moreover, significant differences in self-esteem and subjective well-being among school-age children of different genders have been found. Studies point out that higher gender equality, self-esteem, and subjective well-being can improve the mental health and life satisfaction of school-age children. Overall, school age is a critical development period for gender equality awareness, self-esteem, and the subjective well-being among children. Positive gender equality awareness, self-esteem, and subjective well-being can have a positive impact on school-age children, and there are significant differences in gender equality awareness, self-esteem, and subjective well-being among children of different genders.

In general, biological and sociological theories are used to explain the psychological and behavioral differences among children of different genders. According to biological theories, gender differences in psychology and behavior are caused by congenital factors, such as sex hormones, chromosomes, genes, and heredity. According to sociological theories, children's gender equality awareness and role development are formed through social learning and cognition (Chen, 2016). Children of different genders will have different gender role responses in different or similar groups. Gender roles refer to the gender characteristics that a society assigns to men and women. For example, men tend to be seen as independent, aggressive, and ambitious, whereas women are seen as affectionate, gentle, and compassionate. "Masculinity" refers to individuals who have highly masculine characteristics and "femininity" refers to individuals who have highly feminine characteristics; individuals with both highly masculine and highly feminine traits are considered "androgynous." Those who have both low masculine and low feminine characteristics are considered "undifferentiated". Studies have shown that androgynous profiles predict positive outcomes, such as greater self-esteem and mental health.

However, with further investigation in many studies, more and more scholars have found that gender differences in individual psychological and behavioral responses are influenced by a wide variety of factors. Consequently, Wood and Eagly (2022) proposed a new concept called the biosocial model. This model posits that the differences in gender equality awareness and psychological behavior responses between men and women are caused by social, cultural, and environmental interventions along with biological factors such as genes and hormones, mainly influenced by congenital factors, critical development periods, and parenting (Chen, 2016). Therefore, under the premise that biological factors cannot be changed, understanding the key development periods for children's gender equality awareness and psychology, targeted, reasonable education, and guidance for children of different genders have become a research focus. According to several scholars, the transitional periods of children's gender equality awareness, self-esteem, and subjective well-being appear at school age (Zhang, 2014). Moreover, some have found that school and teacher support are more conducive than family and other social support in enhancing children's gender equality, self-esteem, and subjective well-being. Hence, a positive educational environment can also effectively promote children's physical and mental health, along with their academic development. Therefore, during primary education, schools and teachers should help children establish gender equality awareness, self-esteem, subjective well-being, and other positive psychological states through education and interventions, which will be critical for their future physical and mental health and also their academic success.

Compared with the United States, Sweden, Taiwan, and other regions, gender equality and mental health education on the Chinese mainland started late and is still in an exploratory stage. Relevant courses and activities have been conducted only in some regions and schools, with short follow-up. Moreover, there are few studies on gender equality awareness, self-esteem, and subjective well-being among Chinese school-age boys and girls. This study aims to fill this gap by providing theoretical and educational guidance for education and intervention in schools through the investigation and analysis of gender differences in school-age children's gender equality awareness, self-esteem, and subjective well-being in China. Our objective is to help teachers and other practitioners to improve gender equality awareness, self-esteem, and subjective well-being among school-age children.

Gender-awareness therapy is effective in addressing gender inequality's mental health impacts by promoting equitable self-perception, challenging harmful stereotypes, and providing trauma-informed care for survivors of gender-based violence. By integrating gender perspectives into mental health care, this approach helps individuals build self-esteem and

well-being while also advocating for broader systemic changes (Bem, 2021). Bem has stated the following as how gender-awareness therapy helps

1. **Challenges Harmful Stereotypes:** It helps individuals, especially children, to recognize and question rigid, gender-based stereotypes that can negatively influence their self-perception and interactions.
2. **Promotes Self-Esteem and Well-being:** An egalitarian understanding of gender fosters higher self-esteem and subjective well-being for both men and women, leading to more positive mental health outcomes.
3. **Offers Trauma-Informed Care:** For survivors of gender-based violence, a gender-aware approach provides specialized, sensitive care that acknowledges the specific impact of gender inequality on trauma.
4. **Increases Access to Services:** By integrating mental health care into primary healthcare and reducing stigma, it improves access to services, particularly for marginalized groups like low-income women (Bem, 2021).
5. **Fosters Systemic Change:** By integrating a gender perspective into mental health research, data collection, and policy-making, it supports efforts to address the socioeconomic determinants of mental health.

Applications and Broader Impacts on Gender-Awareness Therapy citing Beck 2022: Mental Health System: Gender-aware approaches can ensure equitable access to mental health care by considering the unique experiences of different gender groups; Education: It can help to challenge the development of gender stereotypes from a young age by promoting an egalitarian perception of gender (Beck, 2022). Also in Policy-Making, by prioritizing gender sensitivity in mental health initiatives, this approach can lead to policies that address the root causes of gender disparity and improve public health (Chen, 2016).

Promoting gender equality expands individual freedom of choice for all, not just women, by dismantling restrictive social norms and power imbalances that limit options based on sex (Cui, 2023). Gender equality ensures individuals of all genders have equal access to education, economic resources, and political power, allowing them to make autonomous decisions about their lives, careers, families, and health without being constrained by their sex. This, in turn, leads to improved societal outcomes, including greater economic prosperity, better health for families, and more inclusive communities. Chen, (2016) reviewed the following as how gender equality fosters freedom of choice:

1. **Expanded Opportunities:** By eliminating gender-based barriers, both men and women gain broader choices in education, employment, and leadership roles, allowing them to pursue their interests and potential more fully.
2. **Increased Autonomy in Family Life:** Gender equality allows individuals to make independent decisions about their family size and structure, empowering women to have careers while still raising children, and enabling men to be more involved in childcare.
3. **Improved Economic Stability:** With equal pay and economic opportunities, individuals are more secure and have more options. This creates a safety net for families, allowing individuals to have greater freedom to choose their career paths without facing financial hardship (Cui, 2023).
4. **Empowerment in Reproductive Health:** Gender equality is crucial for reproductive freedom. When women are empowered to make their own decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, they are better able to care for themselves and their children.
5. **Greater Political and Social Participation:** Equal representation and participation in public life ensure that diverse perspectives are heard and that policies benefit everyone, fostering an environment where individuals of all genders have a voice and can shape their societies.

According to Cui 2023, Gender Equality can be Promoted by: Implementation of Pro-Gender Equality Policies: Governments and organizations can enact policies that promote equal pay, access to education, and fair treatment in the workplace.

Empower Women and Girls: Focus on empowering women and girls to challenge power imbalances and give them greater control over their lives (Cui, 2023).

Promote Gender-Inclusive Media: Use media to challenge gender stereotypes and promote a broader understanding of gender roles and capabilities.

Secure Legal Protections: Enact and enforce laws that protect against gender-based discrimination and violence, ensuring safety and equality under the law (Lewis, 2023).

Citing Lewis 2023, Gender-Awareness Therapy Focus on Societal Norms: The therapy helps individuals understand how gender roles, norms, and beliefs shape their experiences and opportunities, creating a foundation for self-awareness and critical thinking. Examines Power Dynamics: It analyzes how power is distributed within society and personal relationships, revealing inequalities and their impact on individuals' lives and access to resources (Cui (2023)). Challenges Harmful Beliefs: By fostering critical evaluation of cultural norms, the therapy encourages individuals to question and reject discriminatory ideas about gender, leading to more empowered perspectives and Promotes Bodily Autonomy: It emphasizes the fundamental right of individuals to make decisions about their own bodies and health, which is crucial in addressing gender-based disparities in sexual and reproductive health.

Benefits for Individual Freedom and Equality as reviewed by Lewis 2023, are: Increased Self-Awareness: Individuals gain a deeper understanding of how gender issues affect them, enabling them to make more informed choices about their personal and professional lives; it brings about Empowerment and Self-Determination: By challenging restrictive norms, individuals are empowered to assert their rights and make decisions that align with their goals and well-being, leading to greater freedom (Lewis, 2023). Creates Broader Societal Impact: When implemented on a larger scale through counseling, education, and supportive policies, gender-awareness therapy can contribute to systemic change, leading to more equitable access to resources and opportunities for everyone. Also brings about Reduced Gender-Based Violence: By addressing harmful masculinities and promoting equality, the therapy can help reduce the high rates of gender-based violence that stem from inequality.

Statement of the Problem

Gender inequality remains a persistent social challenge in Nigeria, including Rivers State, where cultural norms, stereotypes, and patriarchal practices often restrict opportunities and limit individual's freedom of choice. These inequalities manifest in various forms such as educational disadvantages, limited career opportunities, restricted decision-making power, gender-based violence, and unequal social expectations. Such disparities not only affect the well-being of individuals but also hinder the broader goals of social justice and sustainable development. Gender-awareness therapy, as a counselling intervention, has emerged as a promising approach to address issues stemming from gender inequality. By helping individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes, challenge harmful beliefs, and build self-confidence, this therapy promotes personal empowerment, equality in relationships, and freedom of choice. However, despite its potential, there is limited awareness and application of gender-awareness therapy in counseling practices across Rivers State.

Many counselling programmes still operate with traditional approaches that may not fully address the deep-rooted psychological and social consequences of gender inequality. Furthermore, there is inadequate empirical evidence on the effectiveness of gender-awareness

therapy in changing attitudes, reducing gender-based barriers, and enhancing individual autonomy among diverse populations in Rivers State. Without such evidence, the integration of this therapeutic approach into counselling practice remains slow and underutilized. Therefore, the problem this study seeks to address is the effectiveness of gender-awareness therapy in addressing issues caused by gender inequality and in promoting individual freedom of choice in Rivers State. By evaluating its impact, the study aims to determine whether gender-awareness therapy can serve as a sustainable counseling strategy for fostering equality and empowerment in the region.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined the effectiveness of gender-awareness therapy in addressing issues stemming from gender inequality and promoting individual freedom of choice in Rivers State. Specifically, the objectives of the study seek to:

1. Examine the extent to which gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State
2. Determine the extent to which gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State

Research Questions

The researcher developed the following research questions that guided the study

- 1 To what extent does gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State?
- 2 To what extent does gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State?

Hypothesis

The researcher developed the following research questions that guided the study

- 1 There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State?
- 2 There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State

METHODOLOGY

This study made use of descriptive research design. According to Ezinwa and Okonye (2025), descriptive survey design is a research method which focuses on a representative sample derived from the entire population. This design was adopted because of its ability to ensure a representative outlook and provided a sample approach to the study of opinion attitudes and values of individuals.

The study was carried out in Rivers State; According to Wikipedia Rivers State is a state in the Niger Delta Region of southern Nigeria. Formed on 27 May 1967. Rivers State borders Imo and Anambra states to the north, Abia and Akwa-Ibom states to the east, and Bayelsa and Delta to the west. The State capital, Port Harcourt, is a metropolis that is considered to be the commercial center of the Nigerian oil industry. With an estimated population of 9,898,470 in 2024, Rivers State is the 4th most populous state in Nigeria. Rivers State is a diverse state that is home to many ethnic groups including: Ikwerre, Degema, Ijaw, Ogoni, Ogba, Ekpeye, and Kalabari. The state is particularly noted for its linguistic diversity, with 30 Indigenous languages and dialects being said to be spoken in Rivers State. Rivers State is the 25th largest state by area, and its

geography is dominated by the numerous rivers that flow through it, including the Bonny River. The economy of Rivers State is dominated by the state's booming petroleum industry. Rivers State is considered one of the fastest-growing states in terms of modern infrastructure and urbanization in the country.

The population for this study consisted of all members of Rivers State Counselling Association of Nigeria (Rivcasson) with the population of 373 members. The researcher made use of quota sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique that ensures that a representative proportion of individuals, objects, or traits are selected as sample. First the population is segmented into mutually exclusive sub-groups with identified characteristics or traits, next samples are selected proportionally from the population based on the population of each subgroup, i.e. Imagine that a sample of 93 is to be selected from a population of 373 comprising of 88 RSU Casson member, 130 Uniport Casson members and 155 Ignatius Ajuru University Casson. The quotas for the various universities are obtained thus:

$88 \div 373 \times 93 = 21.94$; $130 \div 373 \times 93 = 32.41$; $155 \div 373 \times 93 = 38.64$, with a total of $21.94 + 32.41 + 38.64 \approx 93$. Only the 93 members from the 3 selected Universities in Rivers State who are committed members of the counselling association were used for the study. The instrument used for data collection was self-structured questionnaire. The research instrument was subjected to face validation by the researcher's supervisor and two other experts in Measurement and Evaluation, all from the Faculty of Education, Rivers State University Port Harcourt. The instrument has 10 items and it was rated using 4-points rating scale of Very High Extent, High Extent, Low Extent and Very Low Extent. The instrument was distributed directly to the respondents by the researcher. To ascertain the reliability of the study, the researcher adopted the test-retest method. The instrument was administered and collated with the help of two trained research assistants and analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions while the hypotheses were tested using t-test statistical tool at 0.05 level of significance. Based on the analysis, the findings of the study revealed that gender-awareness therapy helped individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes, challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that, government, through the Rivers State Counselling Association of Nigeria should organize workshop for parents on gender-awareness therapy, government and non-governmental organization should organize seminar for the citizens on the importance of gender-awareness therapy.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: To what extent does gender-awareness therapy help individuals internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation analysis on the extent gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State

S/ No	Questionnaire Items	Male Counsellors = 31			Female Counsellors = 62		
		Mean $\bar{x}$	SD	Remarks	Mean $\bar{x}$	SD	Remarks
1.	Gender-awareness therapy is effective in addressing inequality's mental health.	2.83	0.84	High Extent	2.91	0.85	High Extent
2.	Individuals internalized gender	2.72	0.82	High	2.86	0.84	High

Wokoma, E. (2025)							
	stereotypes help by providing a framework for fitting in and gaining approval from family and peers.			Extent			Extent
3.	Individuals internalized gender stereotypes can align individuals with their social group, leading to acceptance.	2.75	0.83	High Extent	2.93	0.85	High Extent
4.	Stereotypes provide a simple blueprint for behavior, reducing the complexity and ambiguity of forming an identity, which can feel comforting.	2.69	0.82	High Extent	2.95	0.86	High Extent
5.	Adhering to norms can lead to positive reinforcement from family, peers, and society, boosting self-worth.	2.67	0.82	High Extent	2.87	0.85	High Extent
Grand Total		2.73			2.90		

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 presents that items 1 to 5 have means of 2.83, 2.73, 2.75, 2.69, 2.67 for male counsellors with standard deviations ranging from 0.84 to 0.82 and means of 2.91, 2.86, 2.93, 2.95, 2.87 for female counsellors with standard deviations ranging from 0.85 to 0.85 which indicate “High Extent” on the extent gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State. Also, the grand means for male and female counsellors are 2.73 and 2.90 respectively, further confirming a “High Extent” on the extent gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State. However, it was found that gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State to a High Extent.

Research Question 2: To what extent does gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation analysis on the extent gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State

S/ No	Questionnaire Items	Male Counsellors = 31			Female Counsellors = 62		
		Mean $\bar{x}$	SD	Remarks	Mean $\bar{x}$	SD	Remarks
6.	Therapists help clients analyze how rigid and often prejudiced societal expectations about gender.	2.89	0.85	High Extent	2.95	0.86	High Extent
7	therapy helps individuals challenge internalized shame or guilt.	2.86	0.83	High Extent	2.86	0.84	High Extent
8	The therapeutic process actively	2.78	0.83	High	2.91	0.85	High

Wokoma, E. (2025)								
	works to dismantle harmful stereotypes, such as women being "too emotional" for leadership or men being "weak" for expressing vulnerability.			Extent				Extent
9	Therapy sessions foster dialogue and self-reflection, making clients more aware of how inequality operates in their daily lives and empowering them to question the status quo.	2.83	0.84	High Extent	2.82	0.84		High Extent
10	Gender equality is crucial for reproductive freedom	2.86	0.84	High Extent	2.86	0.84		High Extent
Grand Total		2.84			2.88			

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 presents that items 6 to 10 have means of 2.89, 2.86, 2.78, 2.83, 2.86 for male counsellors with standard deviations ranging from 0.85 to 0.84 and means of 2.95, 2.86, 2.91, 2.82, 2.86 for female counsellors with standard deviations ranging from 0.86 to 0.84 which indicate “High Extent” on the extent d gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State. Also, the grand means for male and female counsellors are 2.84 and 2.88 respectively, further confirming a “High Extent” on the extent gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State. So, it is found that gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State.

Table 3: t-test analysis of the significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State

	F	Sig.	T	Df	p-value	α -value	Decision
Equal variances assumed	1.085	.298	4.251	91	.107	.050	H_0 Not Rejected
Equal variances not assumed			4.251	796.709	.107	.050	

The information in table 3 shows that equal variances assumed has $t = 4.251$, $df = 93$, and 2-tailed $p = 0.107$. Thus, the null hypothesis 1 that “there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State ” is not rejected as $t(93) = 4.251$, 2-tailed $p = 0.107 > \alpha = 0.05$. This implies that respondents are in agreement that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State

Table 4: t-test analysis of the significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State

	F	Sig.	T	Df	p-value	α -value	Decision
Equal variances assumed	15.599	.123	11.985	91	.097	.050	H_0 Not Rejected
Equal variances not assumed			11.985	781.568	.097	.050	

Table 4 presents that equal variances assumed has $t = 11.985$, $df = 91$, and 2-tailed $p = 0.097$. Therefore the null hypothesis 2 that “there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State” is not rejected as $t(93) = 11.985$, 2-tailed $p = 0.097 > \alpha = 0.05$. Thus, the respondents agreed that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

The finding of the study in research question one: revealed that gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State. The corresponding hypotheses 1 was accepted and concluded that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes in Rivers State. This finding is consistent with that of Bem (2021) who admitted that Gender-awareness therapy can paradoxfully *help* some by offering a clear, socially accepted "script" for behavior, boosting self-esteem if they align with group norms, and fostering a sense of belonging and reduced ambiguity in rigid social contexts, though this often comes at the cost of potential and well-being. They help by providing a framework for fitting in and gaining approval from family and peers, but actively harm by narrowing potential and increasing mental health issues like anxiety and depression, especially for those who don't fit the mold. The study notes that stereotypes can align individuals with their social group, leading to acceptance and a feeling of fitting in and that stereotype provide a simple blueprint for behavior, reducing the complexity and ambiguity of forming an identity, which can feel comforting. It also adhering to norms can lead to positive reinforcement from family, peers, and society, boosting self-worth and life satisfaction, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In essence, while stereotypes offer a seemingly "helpful" shortcut to social acceptance, they build a cage around individual potential, making them ultimately detrimental to overall well-being and societal progress

The study in Research Questions two: indicated that gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State. The corresponding hypotheses 2 was accepted and concluded that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the extent gender-awareness therapy challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State. This study is in the same view with Lewis (2023), who asserts that gender-awareness therapy, also known as gender-sensitive or feminist therapy, challenges harmful beliefs and builds self-confidence by providing a supportive, nonjudgmental space to explore the impact of societal gender norms and power dynamics on an individual's mental health. Therapists help clients analyze how rigid and often prejudiced

societal expectations about gender (e.g., men must be strong, women must be nurturing) have shaped their beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. By reframing issues as resulting from societal pressure and systemic bias rather than personal failure, therapy helps individuals challenge internalized shame or guilt. The study also observed that the therapeutic process actively works to dismantle harmful stereotypes, such as women being "too emotional" for leadership or men being "weak" for expressing vulnerability. This involves replacing these limiting beliefs with healthier, more empowering ways of thinking. Therapy sessions foster dialogue and self-reflection, making clients more aware of how inequality operates in their daily lives and empowering them to question the status quo.

Conclusion

Effectiveness of gender-awareness therapy in addressing issues stemming from gender inequality and promoting individual freedom of choice in Rivers State cannot be over emphasized. Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concludes that gender-awareness therapy help individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes, challenge harmful beliefs and build self-confidence in Rivers State. The study also deduced that most adult gender equality awareness and psychological problems stem from childhood, especially at school age. School age refers to the period of development from primary school to adolescence, usually between 6 and 12 years of age. At this stage, children are in a critical development period of individual gender equality awareness, self-esteem, and subjective well-being.

Recommendations

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

1. Government, through the Rivers State Counselling Association of Nigeria should organize workshop programme for people on gender-awareness therapy hence it helped individuals recognize internalized gender stereotypes.
2. Government and non-governmental organization should organize seminar programmes for the citizens on the importance of gender-awareness therapy because, s harmful beliefs and build self-confidence.

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