

ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE PRECARIETY OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN IGBO CULTURE

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Abstract

In Igbo culture, the intricate web of institutions, social relations, beliefs, values, and practices have historically shaped and perpetuated asymmetrical relationships, particularly concerning the precarious position of women. This paper explores the complex dynamics of women and girls in all forms of kinship ties both consanguineal and affinal relationships that leave them dependent, precarious and predisposed to exploitation and enslavement in Igbo society. The analytical framework of Asymmetrical dependency was applied to demonstrate how Igbo culture deeply rooted in patriarchy position women and girls as subordinate to men through domination by their parents, brothers, husbands and in-laws. Intersectionality approach also was used to explain the intersecting realities of systemic inequality that promote female subjugation and enslavement. Ethnography; a qualitative method of social research was employed and data were collected through participant observation, unstructured interview and secondary sources. Institutions play a pivotal role in reinforcing these asymmetrical relationships. Beliefs and values are equally instrumental in upholding and entrenching this gender hierarchy. The institution of marriage, for instance, often places women in positions of economic dependency on their husbands. Moreover, the persistence of harmful cultural norms, such as forced marriages and widowhood rites, perpetuates women's subjugation and vulnerability. Gender-based violence remains prevalent, often normalized within the confines of family privacy. Women are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, both in the household and the wider community, diminishing their agency. To address these issues and promote gender equity in Igbo culture, the study engaged with these complex dynamics at multiple levels. Policy initiatives that challenge deeply ingrained cultural norms are a formidable aspect of the resistance against asymmetrical relationships. The study recommended that collective resistance against entrenched norms holds the future for a more equitable and inclusive space for women and girls within Igbo culture.

Keywords: *Asymmetrical Relationships; Precarity; Women and girls; Igbo Culture, Beliefs and Values.*

Introduction

Igbo culture, rich with traditions and historical significance, provides an outlook through which one can understand the complexities of asymmetrical relationships and their profound impact on the precarity of women and girls due to the myriad of discriminatory practices doled out on women and girls in the family¹ (Ifemeje, 2008). Like many human

¹ Ifemeje, Sylvia. C. "A Critique of gender Discriminatory Practices in Igbo Customary Law Marriages." *Journal of Women and Minority Rights*, no. 1 (2008).

societies, Igbo society is patriarchal and places much value on males than females² (Muchomba, 2019). In the intricate tapestry of Igbo society, gender roles have played a pivotal role, shaping the dynamics within familial, societal, and interpersonal realms leading to unequal relationships. This study examines the nuanced layers of asymmetry, throwing more light on the intricate patterns of power imbalances that have endured over time.

Throughout history, women and girls have found themselves entwined within complex network of kinship ties, both affinal and consanguineal, that dictate their roles, status, and agency within societies. It is imperative to note that men have more agency than women due to the prevalence of social norms that constrain their access to influential positions³ (World Bank, 2012). However, beneath the facade of familial bonds lies a stark reality of precariousness and vulnerability, often leading to exploitation and even enslavement. This study analyzes the multifaceted dimensions of women and girls' position within various forms of kinship ties, highlighting the systemic inequalities and power dynamics that perpetuate their subjugation.

In examining the position of women and girls within affinal kinship ties, it becomes evident that societal expectations and norms often dictate their roles as daughters, wives, widows and mothers. Within patriarchal systems and structures, women are expected to fulfill traditional gender roles, subsuming their identities and aspirations to the needs and desires of their male counterparts⁴ (Walby, 1990). Patriarchy is at the root of the asymmetrical relationships characterized by institutionalized male dominance of women's agency, reproduction, inheritance, production and sexuality in Igbo culture. This subservience within affinal kinship ties renders women vulnerable to exploitation, as their worth becomes contingent upon their ability to conform to societal expectations and cater to the needs of their male relatives. Women and girls are socialized to be dependent on their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons⁵ (Ubelejit-Nte and Erundu, 2022).

Moreover, the commodification of women through outrageous bride price⁶ (Nwanunobi, 1992) within affinal kinship ties exacerbates their vulnerability, as they are often treated as objects to be exchanged in marriage alliances or as means to secure economic and social capital for their families. This transactional nature of affinal kinship ties reinforces the subordinate status of women and girls, relegating them to the margins of decision-making processes and perpetuating cycles of dependency and exploitation.

Similarly, within consanguineal kinship ties, women and girls face a myriad of challenges that leave them susceptible to exploitation and enslavement. The intergenerational transmission of power and privilege often privileges male lineage, relegating women to subordinate positions within family structures. Inheritance laws and cultural practices further marginalize women, depriving them of property rights and economic autonomy within consanguineal kinship ties. The Igbo customary law is patrilineal in nature and the basic principle of inheritance is the exclusive right of the sons⁷ (Ifemeje and Umejiaku, 2014).

² Muchomba, Felix. M. "Sex Composition of Children and Spousal Sexual Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Maternal and Child Health Journal* 23, no. 8 (2019): 1130–39.

³ World Bank, . "Promoting Women's Agency". In *World Development Report 2012*, 150–93. The World Bank, 2011. https://doi.org/10.1596/9780821388105_ch4

⁴ Walby, Sylvia. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990.

⁵ Ubelejit-Nte, Adaku A., and Chinyere I. Erundu. "Gender Stereotypes and the Dynamics of Women Evaluation: A Study of Igbo Anthroponymic Systems". *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(3), 2022. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-1576958/v1>

⁶ Nwanunobi, , C. Onyeka. *African Social Institutions*. Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press. 1992.

⁷ Ifemeje, Sylvia. C., and Umejiaku, Nneka. "Discriminatory Cultural Practices and Women's Rights among

Furthermore, the prevalence of practices such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and female infanticide underscores the systemic inequalities and violence perpetrated against women and girls within consanguineal kinship ties. These practices not only strip women of their agency and autonomy but also perpetuate cycles of abuse and exploitation, reinforcing their precarious position within familial structures.

Additionally, the intersectionality of gender with other sites of oppression, such as religion, class, marital status and caste, further compounds the vulnerabilities faced by women and girls within kinship ties. Marginalized women, such as widows, single mothers or those belonging to lower socioeconomic strata, are disproportionately affected by exploitation and enslavement within familial structures, as they lack the resources and support systems to challenge systemic inequalities.

In the light of these complexities, it is imperative to interrogate the root causes of women's and girls' precarious position within kinship ties and suggest possible measures to dismantle the structural barriers that perpetuate their exploitation and enslavement. Empowering women economically, socially, and politically is essential to challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and fostering gender equality within familial structures. Asymmetrical relationships, characterized by unequal distribution of power and influence, permeate various facets of Igbo culture. These imbalances are deeply embedded in historical contexts, intertwining with cultural norms, traditions, and religious beliefs.

This paper explores the complex dynamics of women and girls in all forms of kinship ties both consanguineal and affinal relationships that leave them dependent, precarious and predisposed to exploitation and enslavement in Igbo society. Moreover, the study investigates the repercussions of these asymmetries on the precarity faced by women and girls. From economic vulnerabilities to limited educational opportunities, the consequences are far-reaching, shaping the narratives of countless individuals within the society. By analyzing real-life examples the study elucidates the multifaceted nature of precarity and underscores its significance in understanding the challenges faced by women and girls in Igbo culture. In traversing the terrain of asymmetrical relationships and the precarity of women and girls in Igbo culture, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricacies at play. By scrutinizing historical legacies, current challenges, and potential avenues for change, the research aims to foster awareness and stimulate dialogue that transcends cultural boundaries.

Theoretical Framework

Beyond mere exposition, this study seeks to provide a theoretical framework for comprehending the asymmetrical dependencies that underpin these relationships. The concept of asymmetrical dependency, offers a lens through which to interrogate the intricate power dynamics at play. At the heart of understanding the asymmetrical relationships pervasive in Igbo culture lies the theoretical lens of Asymmetrical Dependency. This conceptual framework provides a nuanced perspective to explore the intricate power dynamics that characterize relationships between men and women in this cultural milieu. This is a strong form of dependency or relationship⁸ made up of a dyad or more actors⁹

the Igbos of South East Nigeria: A Critique.” *Journal of Law, Policy and Globalization* 25 (2014).

⁸ Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982

⁹ Sandnes, Marie. “The Effect of Asymmetric Interdependence on the Outcomes of Military Cooperation in the Sahel”. *Cooperation and Conflict* 59, no. 3 (September 2024): 405–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367231184717>.

(Patterson, 1982, Sandnes, 2023) in which one actor controls the actions or access to resources of the other¹⁰ (Coleman, 1990), through an institutional mechanism that hinders the dependent actor from changing the narrative either by quitting or engaging in any protest¹¹ (Hirschman, 1970).

Asymmetrical dependency, in the context of Igbo society, refers to the uneven distribution of power, resources, and opportunities between genders. Gender in the Igbo cultural landscape is used synonymously with the term sex to denote the classification of people according to their physical or biological characteristics. In the light of the above, women's subjugation is institutionally approved by a culture that favours patriarchy and female dependence¹² (Wordu, 1998; Wright, 1979; Olukoshi and Olukoshi 1989; Chukwuma, 1984). It recognizes that relationships are not built on equal footing but are rather influenced by societal structures and systems, norms, and historical legacies. This analytical framework draws insight into the dependencies that individuals, particularly women, have on societal structures that perpetuate imbalances. In the specific context of Igbo culture, Asymmetrical dependency manifests in various dimensions. Social, economic, and educational spheres are deeply impacted by the uneven power dynamic between genders. Cultural norms and expectations create dependencies that shape the roles individuals play within the community, reinforcing the asymmetry.

Scholars have extensively explored the concept of Asymmetrical dependency in the context of gender studies¹³ (Scott, 1988; Schmieder, 2013). Some have scrutinized this analytical framework to unpack the complexities of gender disparities¹⁴ (Laske, 2023), offering insights that illuminate the specific manifestations of asymmetrical dependency within Igbo society. The works of feminist theorists such as¹⁵ Collins (2000) and Crenshaw (1999) offer valuable insights into how power imbalances are institutionalized within societies. Drawing from the Intersectionality approach, this research supports¹⁶ De Vito (n.d) to expose the complex

¹⁰ Coleman, James S. *Foundations of Social Theory*. London, England: Belknap Press, 1990.

¹¹ Hirschman, Albert O. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.

¹² Wordu, Steve. A. "Gender Inequality in Traditional Nigerian Societies," in *Women in Development: The Evidence from Nigeria*. Edited by Julie Wika & Martin Ifeancha. Belpot Publishers, 1998.

Wright, Marcia. 'Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change in Signs'. *Journal of Women and Culture* 4, Summer, (1979).

Olukoshi, Hussainatu., and Adebayo Olukoshi. "Gender and Class: Critical Notes on the Woman Question in Nigeria". *African Notes* 1, no. 2 (1989).

Chukwuma, Helen. *Feminism in African Literature: Essays on Criticism*. Enugu: New Generation Venture Ltd, 1984.

¹³ Scott, Joan. *Gender and the Politics of History*. Gender and Culture Series. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018. Accessed 3 October 2024. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41604323>

Schmieder, Ulrike. "Interdependencies of Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Postemancipation Societies of Martinique and Cuba". In *Interdependencies of Social Categorisations* Pp, edited by Daniela Celleri, Tobias Schwarz, and Bea Wittger, 65–89, 2013.

¹⁴ Laske, Caroline. 'Women in the Sachsenspiegel: Gender and Asymmetrical Dependencies'. In *Naming, Defining, Phrasing Strong Asymmetrical Dependencies*, 213–38. *De Gruyter*, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111210544-010>

¹⁵ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. *Perspectives on Gender*. Taylor & Francis Group, 1999.

Crenshaw, Kimberly. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Colour." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

¹⁶ De Vito, Christian. G. "Five hypotheses on dependency" Unpublished manuscript, PDF file (Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies, University of Bonn n.d)

power dynamics and matrices of women domination with intersecting systems of oppression organized along structural, hegemonic, disciplinary and interpersonal lines at various levels of familial structures. More so, to identify the ways in which traditional norms and practices contribute to the dependency of women on established structures. Asymmetrical dependency serves as a critical framework for analyzing and addressing gender disparities. It underscores the interconnectedness of societal structures and individual agency, emphasizing that women's precarity is not solely a result of personal choices but is deeply entwined with systemic imbalances.

To illustrate the practical application of asymmetrical dependency, the paper examines specific examples within Igbo communities. For instance, marriage is sometimes arranged¹⁷ (Sam 2009), forced or imposed on a girl if the potential suitor is rich and powerful and can improve the wellbeing of the girls' family. As a result of the perceived benefits derivable from this marriage, the girl is coerced into marriage. In this type of arrangement, the interest of the bride to-be is not considered in marriage rather, the pecuniary benefits and opportunities accruable to the family. Also, the traditional practice of bride price, while rooted in cultural significance, can be seen as a manifestation of economic dependency, highlighting the financial transactions that underpin marital relationships.

By applying this theoretical lens, the study analyzes the ways in which asymmetry influences decision-making processes, access to resources, and opportunities for women and girls. It provides a comprehensive framework to understand the complex network of dependencies that contribute to the precarity of women in Igbo culture. The analytical framework of asymmetrical dependency unveils the intricate dynamics at play within the Igbo society, highlighting the power differentials that have far-reaching implications for the roles, opportunities, and vulnerabilities faced by women and girls.

Methodology

The methodology for this critical social research derives from the application of a qualitative method of research known as ethnography. Ethnography was used to produce a comprehensive and firsthand account of the historical and cultural contexts of the lives of women and girls within the Igbo culture. The study examined the social relations, beliefs, values, and practices that have historically shaped and perpetuated asymmetrical relationships, and the complex dynamics of women and girls in all forms of kinship ties that leave them dependent, precarious and predisposed to exploitation and enslavement in Igbo society. Data for this article were collected through participant observation, unstructured interviews, field notes and archival sources. This research applied in-depth and semi-structured interviews to explore the thoughts and lived experiences of women and girls in their own words. This qualitative research sample comprised 30 women and girls purposively drawn from three age groups (18-32, 33-50, 51-65 + years) selected from three out of the five Igbo states in Nigeria namely: Abia, Anambra and Ebonyi. Most interviews were in English but some were in Igbo and translated into English for data analysis.

The Cultural Landscape/Historical Contexts

The roots of asymmetrical relationships within Igbo culture are deeply embedded in the annals of its history. P19 reiterated that examining the evolution of gender roles provides a crucial backdrop to understanding the dynamics that persist today (Ngozi; 27 year old mother). Historically, Igbo society has been marked by a complex interplay of communal

¹⁷ Sam, Monibo A. Arranged marriage: Change or persistence? Illustrative cases of Nigerians in the USA. *Journal Comparative Family Studies*, 40(5), 2009, 739-757.

values, spiritual beliefs, and economic structures, all of which have contributed to shaping the roles of men and women.

Responding to the question about the historical contexts of asymmetrical dependency, P-2 expressed the view that publicly held notions suggest that in the pre-colonial era, Igbo communities exhibited a certain degree of flexibility in gender roles. While there were distinctions in responsibilities, women often held positions of influence within their communities (Ugboaku; a 70 year old great grandmother). The Igbos recognize only two gender namely female and male and their worldview, guided by principles of equity and community cooperation, allowed for a more balanced distribution of power marked by a dual sex political system in which functions were assigned to men and women respectively¹⁸ (Uchendu, 1993), a similar view on the balanced distribution of power was shared by P-7; an octogenarian great grandmother (Nnediya). However, with the advent of colonialism, a seismic shift occurred¹⁹ (Anikpo, 1998; Anikwenze, 2021). The rise of urban centres, urban work patterns and gendered division of labour within the colonial era²⁰ (Anikpo, 1998) gave rise to patriarchal structures that disrupted the traditional equilibrium. P-7 further explained that the imposition of Western ideals and the marginalization of indigenous governance systems ushered in a new era where male-centric authority gained prominence. The resulting power imbalance laid the groundwork for the asymmetrical relationships that continue to shape Igbo society (Nnediya).

Moreover, the fusion of traditional Igbo beliefs with Christianity during colonial rule further contributed to the redefinition of gender roles. Christian doctrines, often interpreted through patriarchal lenses, reinforced existing power dynamics. As a result, women found themselves increasingly relegated to subordinate positions, both within the family unit and the broader community²¹ (Ndu, 1998).

Post-colonial Igbo society witnessed various attempts to retain traditional values and adapt to a rapidly changing world. While some communities clung to aspects of their pre-colonial heritage, others embraced modernization, often at the expense of gender equity. The push and pull between tradition and modernity underscored the evolving nature of gender dynamics within Igbo culture. During the interview, P-1 related that “traditional ceremonies and rites, once imbued with a sense of communal celebration”, began to take on more rigid, gendered structures. “Initiations” that were once inclusive became exclusive, reinforcing gender hierarchies. Economic shifts also played a role, as the emergence of a market economy altered the dynamics of labour, affecting the roles of men and women in profound ways (Ikodiya, 58 year old woman).

The historical trajectory reveals a nuanced narrative where gender roles in Igbo culture underwent transformation, influenced by external forces and internal adaptations. The ensuing asymmetrical relationships, a departure from historical egalitarianism, have left an

¹⁸ Uchendu, Patrick Kenekwuwu. *Role of Nigerian Women in Politics*. Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1994.

¹⁹ Anikpo, Mark. “Women in Development, the Dialectics of Gender Equity in Nigeria,” in *Women in Development: The Evidence from Nigeria*. Edited by Julie Wika & Martin Ifeanchu . Belpot Publishers, 1998.

Anikwenze, Chinenye. “The Long Walk to Equality: Historical Influences on Women in Igbo Society”. *The Republic* 5 (2021).

²⁰ Anikpo, 1998

²¹ Ndu, Eme. C. “Colonialism and gender Inequality in Nigeria,” in *Women in Development: The Evidence from Nigeria*. Edited by Julie Wika & Martin Ifeanchu. Belpot Publishers, 1998.

indelible mark on the fabric of Igbo society. The echoes of colonial legacies, in conjunction with the interaction of tradition and modernity, form the backdrop against which the asymmetrical relationships affecting women and girls in Igbo culture unfold²² (Ndu,1998).

Asymmetrical Relationships in Igbo Culture

Asymmetrical relationships are deeply ingrained in societal structures, influencing differentials between men and women. Power differentials manifest in various forms, from familial settings to communal engagements. Traditional gender roles assign distinct responsibilities, creating a hierarchical framework that shapes interactions and decision-making processes. P-28 argued that central to the perpetuation of asymmetry are cultural norms and traditions that prescribe specific roles for men and women. These norms often dictate expectations around marriage, family dynamics, and community participation. For instance, the concept of “head of the household” traditionally aligns with male authority, reinforcing a patriarchal structure that permeates daily life (Isioma, 41). The Igbo political organization though not centralized is based on the agnate group *umunna* composed of the eldest sons of the family²³ (Ekwunife, 1990; Nwoye, 2011). P-15 observed that unlike the *umuada* made up of married daughters of the family the “umunna are the highest decision making body in the family (Okwuoma, 38).

Religious beliefs, a cornerstone of Igbo culture, further contribute to the asymmetry within relationships. Interpretations of religious doctrines often amplify traditional gender roles, positioning men as spiritual leaders and women as supporters. The mutual role of cultural and religious expectations solidifies the unequal distribution of influence within familial and community spheres. P-4 added that the act of breaking of kolanut *oji* symbolically depicts the sanctity of male authority as women do not break the kola nut (Ugegbe, 65). “Oji” is a symbol of male authority that is at the heart of social, cultural, religious and ritual observances in Igbo culture²⁴ (Otagburuagu, 2010). The family symbol of the spirit of the ancestors *ofo*, the *obi* (seat of power) and *ogu* symbolizing prayer and invocation for good and evil are all cultural and spiritual symbols of authority passed down to the eldest male in the family²⁵ (Anyanwu, 1989). This view was supported by most of the participants.

Economic structures within Igbo culture also play a major role in shaping asymmetrical relationships. The division of labour often assigns specific economic roles to men and women, with economic power serving as a significant determinant of influence. The Igbo society is an agrarian society with land as the most important resource. Most of the participants affirmed that proprietary rights such as the right to inheritance are traditionally given to males only. Also, the practice of outrageous bride price, while carrying cultural significance, can be seen as an economic transaction that reinforces dependency and power imbalances against daughters.

Marriage, a cornerstone of Igbo society, reflects and perpetuates asymmetrical relationships.

²² Ndu,1998.

²³ Ekwunife, Anthony. Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion. Nsukka: Jet Publishers, 1990.

Nwoye, Chinwe. Miriam. A. “Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview: An Insider’s Perspective”. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 3, no. 9 (2011): 317–21.

²⁴ Otagburuagu, Emeka. J. “Kolanut in Igbo Culture: The Ngwa Example”. In *Readings in African Studies*. Enugu: Benak Ventures, edited by Emeka. J. Otagburuagu, J. T. Omenma, and Adiele. E. Afigbo, 93–107, 2010.

²⁵ Anyanwu, Chukwuma. Nnorom. “Ofo and Ogu in the Culture of the Igbo”. *Journal of Igbo Life Culture* 2, no. 11 (1989).

Traditional marriage ceremonies, while celebratory, often underscore gendered expectations and responsibilities. The dynamics within the family unit, influenced by cultural norms, can lead to unequal distribution of decision-making power and resources, impacting the agency of women. P-30 explicitly described social expectations as further contributing to the perpetuation of asymmetry, with stigma attached to individuals who deviate from prescribed gender roles (Nma, 22). Similar feelings are voiced by P-23 as she asserted that this societal pressure can limit the choices available to women, influencing their educational and career paths (Ifenkili, 30). The fear of judgment can curtail the agency of women and girls, reinforcing the status quo.

Asymmetrical relationships are not confined to broad societal structures; they manifest in interpersonal relationships as well. P-29 emphasized that power dynamics within marriages, extended families, and communities shape the experiences of women and girls. Unequal access to education, healthcare, and decision-making processes can impact the well-being and autonomy of individuals (Nneka, 55). Despite the pervasive nature of asymmetry, there are instances of resistance and challenges to traditional norms. P-6 succinctly added that women and girls within Igbo culture have actively engaged in efforts to challenge gender expectations, advocating for education, economic empowerment, and broader societal change. These acts of resistance, though often met with resistance themselves, represent a crucial aspect of the ongoing dialogue surrounding asymmetrical relationships (Abubugo, 44). From cultural norms to economic structures, the influences shape the lived experiences of women and girls, illuminating the complex landscape of gender dynamics within Igbo society.

Precarity of Women and Girls

Precarity of women and girls represents a collective form of asymmetrical dependency built from socialization. The different voices that emerged in the interviews emphasized the dominant discourse about precarity of women and girls in Igbo tradition. They noted a defining aspect of the precarity experienced by women and girls in Igbo culture as the economic disparities they face. Unequal access to economic opportunities and denial of inheritance, coupled with traditional practices like bride price, reinforces financial dependencies. Limited economic agency restricts women's ability to make autonomous decisions, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability. Data on education, a human development index and a basis for individual empowerment, indicated that the South-East region (the home of the Igbo nation in Nigeria had the highest percentage (95.4) of women and girls aged 15 – 24 who are literate within the period 2016-2017²⁶ (NBS, 2021). Societal expectations, economic constraints, and gender biases converge to limit educational access. This educational gap, rooted in asymmetrical relationships, further entrenches the precarity of women by restricting their ability to participate fully in social, economic, and political spheres. Healthcare disparities compound the precarity faced by women and girls. Limited access to reproductive healthcare and family planning services affects their well-being. Cultural norms and economic factors contribute to delayed or inadequate healthcare for women, exacerbating health challenges and perpetuating vulnerability.

Women participants identified norms surrounding marriage and family dynamics as imposing social and cultural constraints on women and girls. “This influence of cultural expectations on early marriages limits educational and career opportunities of women and

²⁶ National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). Statistical report on women and men in Nigeria. Home'. Accessed 3 October 2024. <https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng>. 2021

girls.” The pressure to conform to societal norms restricts individual agency, contributing to the precarity experienced in various aspects of life.

A distressing manifestation of precarity noted by the participants is the prevalence of gender-based violence reinforced by cultural inhibitions and norms of marriage. Societal norms that normalize or justify such violence exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls, creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear and insecurity. As P-11 and P-17 pointed out, power imbalances within relationships can escalate to physical, emotional, or economic abuse. Political participation remains a challenging terrain for women in Igbo culture (Ada, 36; Njide, 57). Asymmetrical relationships translate into limited representation in political spheres. The absence of women's voices in decision-making processes reinforces systemic inequities, hindering progress toward gender-inclusive policies and societal transformation.

The precarity experienced by women and girls is often exacerbated by intersectionality, where multiple marginalized identities intersect. Factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and rural-urban divides contribute to layered vulnerabilities, intensifying challenges and limiting opportunities for those at the intersection of various marginalized identities.

Amidst these challenges, stories of resilience and resistance emerge. Women and girls within Igbo culture actively engage in efforts to challenge societal norms, advocating for their rights and seeking avenues for empowerment. Grassroots movements, educational initiatives, and community-driven projects highlight the potential for positive change and offer glimpses of a future where the precarity of women and girls is mitigated. In examining the precarity of women and girls in Igbo culture, P-13 and P-22 demonstrated that addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. By dismantling systemic barriers, challenging cultural norms, and fostering educational and economic empowerment, there exists the potential for transformative change that can enhance the well-being and agency of women and girls within Igbo society (Ijeoma, 49 and Urenna, 66).

Discussion

Addressing the asymmetrical relationships and precarity faced by women and girls in Igbo culture involves confronting deep-rooted structural challenges. Patriarchal norms, economic disparities, and entrenched cultural expectations form formidable obstacles. These challenges permeate various aspects of life, influencing educational opportunities, economic empowerment, and societal expectations. One of the primary challenges lies in overcoming educational barriers. Gender biases within educational systems, coupled with societal expectations, limit the educational pursuits of women and girls. Resistance to these barriers involves challenging stereotypes, advocating for inclusive educational policies, and fostering a supportive environment that encourages female education.

Economic disparities contribute significantly to the precarity of women and girls. Overcoming these challenges requires initiatives that promote economic empowerment. This involves dismantling traditional economic structures that perpetuate dependency and creating opportunities for women to participate actively in economic activities. Microfinance initiatives, vocational training, and entrepreneurship programs can play a crucial role in fostering economic independence.

Challenging deeply ingrained cultural norms is a formidable aspect of the resistance against asymmetrical relationships. Initiatives that promote cultural sensitivity while advocating for gender equality are essential. Engaging with community leaders, fostering open dialogues, and promoting cultural exchange can contribute to reshaping norms and fostering a more inclusive cultural landscape.

Legislative changes are pivotal in challenging and transforming gender disparities. Advocacy for legal reforms that address issues such as gender-based violence, discriminatory practices, and unequal economic opportunities is integral. The 1999 Nigerian Constitution provides a national legal guideline on women's rights as stipulated in sections 34, 35 and 42 alongside regional and international frameworks on the rights of women and girls. Disinheritance of girls in Igbo culture negates the provisions of Section 42 (1) (a) and (2) of the constitution²⁷. Collaborative efforts involving activists, legal experts, and policymakers can pave the way for the implementation of laws that safeguard the rights and dignity of women and girls. Building awareness within communities is a powerful tool for resistance. Educational campaigns, community forums, and media engagement can disseminate information about the impact of asymmetrical relationships on women and girls. By fostering a collective understanding, communities can actively participate in challenging detrimental norms and promoting gender equality.

Resistance often emerges from grassroots movements that empower women and girls at the local level. Initiatives that provide a platform for voices to be heard, such as women's cooperatives, support networks, and community-led projects, contribute to building resilience and challenging systemic inequities. Educational programmes that specifically target gender equality can play a transformative role. Integrating gender-sensitive curricula, promoting awareness in schools, and creating safe spaces for dialogue empower the younger generation to challenge existing norms. Education becomes a catalyst for change, shaping attitudes and fostering a more equitable society. The media serves as a powerful tool for shaping societal perceptions. Resistance involves advocating for positive and empowering portrayals of women and girls in media. Highlighting diverse narratives, showcasing achievements, and challenging stereotypes contribute to altering public perceptions and fostering a more inclusive cultural narrative.

In navigating the challenges and resistance, it is crucial to recognize that transformative change is a collaborative effort. By combining legal reforms, grassroots initiatives, educational endeavours, and community engagement, a multifaceted approach can address the structural challenges that underpin asymmetrical relationships. The collective resistance against entrenched norms lays the foundation for a more equitable and inclusive future for women and girls within Igbo culture.

Conclusion

In examining the complex landscape of asymmetrical relationships and the precarity faced by women and girls in Igbo culture, it becomes evident that the path forward requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach. The historical legacies, cultural norms, economic structures, and systemic challenges that contribute to these dynamics are deeply entrenched, necessitating sustained efforts for transformative change. The historical trajectory, marked by colonial influences and evolving cultural paradigms, forms the backdrop against which asymmetrical relationships have persisted. Recognizing the impact of these historical legacies is fundamental to understanding the intricacies of gender dynamics within Igbo culture.

The theoretical framework of asymmetrical dependency has provided a valuable lens through which to analyze power imbalances. Understanding the ways in which dependencies are institutionalized and perpetuated is a critical step toward unraveling the

²⁷ The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. 1999

complexities of asymmetrical relationships within Igbo society. The precarity experienced by women and girls is multi-dimensional, encompassing economic vulnerabilities, limited educational opportunities, healthcare disparities, and social constraints. These challenges intersect with cultural expectations, exacerbating vulnerabilities and shaping the lived experiences of individuals within the community.

Confronting the structural challenges inherent in asymmetrical relationships requires targeted efforts. Educational barriers, economic disparities, and cultural norms present formidable obstacles that demand a multifaceted resistance. From grassroots movements to legal reforms, the collective endeavor to challenge these norms reflects a resilient spirit that defies systemic inequities. Education emerges as a potent catalyst for change. By fostering awareness, challenging stereotypes, and promoting inclusive curricula, educational institutions become key players in reshaping societal attitudes. Empowering the younger generation with the tools to challenge gender norms sets the stage for a more equitable future.

Transformative change necessitates collaborative efforts that extend beyond individual initiatives. Community engagement, awareness-building, and open dialogues create spaces for collective understanding. By fostering collaboration between community leaders, activists, policymakers, and the broader population, a more inclusive cultural narrative can emerge. Reflecting on the challenges and resistance within Igbo culture, it is essential to look ahead with optimism. The stories of resilience, the efforts to challenge norms, and the transformative potential of education and awareness signify a burgeoning momentum toward change. While acknowledging the complexity of the task at hand, the seeds of progress have been sown.

In conclusion, addressing asymmetrical relationships and the precarity of women and girls in Igbo culture requires a sustained commitment to dismantling systemic barriers. It involves not only challenging ingrained norms but also fostering a societal shift that embraces gender equality. By building on the resistance efforts, fostering education, and promoting inclusive policies, a future emerges where women and girls can navigate a more equitable landscape, free from the constraints of historical legacies and systemic inequities.

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INDEX

Igbo culture

Institutions

Practices

Precarity

Girls

Asymmetrical relationships

complex dynamics

Gender

kinship ties

Beliefs

social relations

intricate web

Female

pivotal role

harmful cultural norms

subjugation

everyday practices

societies

Igbo

asymmetry

complexities

History

human societies

Ifemeje

Myriad
profound impact
outlook
traditions
Agency
familial bonds
Dynamics
societal expectations
institutionalized male dominance
patriarchal systems
Widows
Wives
Daughters
Norms
male relatives
Conform
Dependent
affinal kinship ties
outrageous bride price
Commodification
Erondu
Ubelejit-Nte
Privilege
consanguineal kinship ties
intergenerational transmission
Enslavement
Exploitation
female genital mutilation
Prevalence
Umejiaku
Sons
Inheritance
support systems
Compounds
Caste
Religion
Oppression
Intersectionality
structural barriers
Measure
precarious position
Root
Interrogate
Igbo culture
religious beliefs
cultural norms
Intertwining

affinal relationships
Asymmetries
Understanding
Narratives
Dependency
multifaceted nature
Elucidate
real-life
Society
countless individuals
limited educational opportunities
economic vulnerabilities
Repercussions
Theoretical Framework
intricate power dynamics
Hirschman
Genders
Igbo cultural landscape
Sex
Resources
societal structures
Framework
Culture
analytical framework
Olukoshi
Institute
Asymmetrical Dependency
historical legacies

Chukwuma
Wright
female dependence
Patriarchy
power dynamics
Imbalances
Marriage
Methodology
Bride
critical social research

cultural significance
cultural context
First-hand account
Ethnography
Communities

gender roles
Interplay
Igbo society
Cultural Landscape
Historical Contexts
economic structures
spiritual beliefs
complex interplay
crucial backdrop
Evolution
Annals
Colonialism
Christianity
traditional Igbo beliefs
Tradition
Modernity
Traditional ceremonies
evolving nature
Pull
Push
gender equity
Expense
pre-colonial heritage
rapidly changing
Post-colonial Igbo society
male authority
Spirit
Oji
traditional gender roles
amplify traditional gender
religious doctrines
Interpretations
Play
Education
Expectations
Resistance
economic disparities
economic empowerment
Healthcare
Vulnerability
Initiatives
decision-making processes
Education
Community
transformative change
Collaborative efforts
Empower

Awareness
systemic inequities
grassroots movements

community engagement
Media
powerful tool
legal reforms
Dependency
systemic barriers
resilience
Nigeria
Anikwenze
Belpot Publishers
Ikot ekpene
evidence
Igbo Life Culture
African Literature
Feminism
identity politics
margins
Mapping
Crenshaw
Bonn
Knowledge consciousness
Collins
Slavery Studies
Harvard University
Cambridge
Minority Rights
Igbo customary law
Sociology
religious worldview
Nwoye
Nigeria Press
Nsukka
Otagburuagu
African Notes
Critical notes
Interdependencies
University Press
Ethnicity
Schmieder
Harvard University Press
Sandnes
Comparative Family Studies

Nigerians
Arranged marriage
women evaluation
Uchendu
Social Sciences
Humanities
traditional Nigerian societies
Development Report
Gender inequality
Wordu
Agency
economic change
Africa