





Chapter 2

Gender Norms and Socio-Cultural Practices in Nigeria

Barakat Adebisi Raji 

*Department of Jurisprudence and International Law,
Faculty of Law, University of Ilorin, Nigeria* 
babraj2007@gmail.com

Israel Adekunle Adeniyi 

*Department of Jurisprudence and International Law,
Faculty of Law, University of Ilorin, Nigeria* 
israeladeniyi178@gmail.com

Abstract

Gender inequality and the persistence of socio-cultural practices that promote it continue to be major challenges in many parts of the world, especially in Africa. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with over 200 million people, and is located in West Africa. Nigeria has a diverse ethnic and linguistic population, with over 250 ethnic groups, each with their unique cultural practices and norms. Despite numerous efforts to promote gender equality, gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria remain deeply ingrained in society. Gender norms are the expectations and standards that society holds for individuals, based on their gender, while socio-cultural practices are the actions, behaviours, and customs that reflect and reinforce these norms. These norms and practices can be both formal and informal and can shape a wide range of social interactions, from interpersonal relationships to economic opportunities and political participation. Understanding gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria is crucial for achieving gender equality and promoting social, economic, and political development. Gender inequality in Nigeria has significant consequences, including limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, as well as increased vulnerability to violence and poverty. This chapter offers a comprehensive examination of gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria, exploring their impact on gender



equality and development. The chapter identifies challenges in eradicating these norms and practices within the complex socio-cultural context and proposes solutions and recommendations, emphasising the need for policy and programme development to promote gender equality in Nigeria.

Keywords: Challenges, Gender Inequality, Gender Norms, Nigeria, Socio-Cultural Practices

Introduction

In order to understand the socio-cultural and gender-normative landscape of Nigeria, there is a need to examine its geographical, demographic and historical dimensions. Nigeria has a rich historical background, dating back to ancient civilisations and empires (Bondarenko & Roese, 1999). Nigeria is a country located in West Africa and is the most populous in Africa, with over 200 million people (Reed & Mberu, 2014). It covers an area of about 923,768 square kilometres and shares borders with several countries, including Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (Nosiri & Ohazurike, 2016). Nigeria is a culturally diverse nation with over 250 ethnic groups, each with its own set of unique cultural practices and norms. Nigeria is geographically diverse, with a landscape that includes coastal plains, savannahs, plateaus, and mountains (Adedini et al., 2015). Nigeria's historical background is deeply interwoven with its present socio-cultural landscape. Historical events, civilisations, and interactions with other cultures have significantly shaped the norms and practices seen today. For example, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Nigeria was colonised by the British Government. The imposition of British rule brought about a radical transformation in societal norms, governance structures, and cultural practices (Cormier, 2017). In terms of demographics, Nigeria has a young population, with a median age of around 18 years (Okoli et al., 2022).¹ The foregoing dimensions are essential to comprehend variations in gender norms and cultural practices across different segments of Nigerian society. They provide a holistic picture of the interplay of historical, geographical, and demographic factors that shape gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria.²

Building upon the foregoing, gender norms are the social expectations and standards that society holds for individuals based on their gender

1 The population is distributed across urban and rural areas, with major cities like Lagos, Abuja, and Kano experiencing rapid urbanisation.

2 The country has witnessed the rise and fall of various kingdoms and city-states, such as the Nok culture, the Benin Empire, and the Sokoto Caliphate. The arrival of European colonial powers in the 19th century led to the establishment of the British protectorate of Nigeria. Nigeria eventually gained independence in 1960.

(Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). These norms dictate the roles, behaviours, and responsibilities that are considered appropriate for men and women. They are deeply ingrained in social, cultural, and religious beliefs and influence various aspects of life, including family dynamics, education, employment, and political participation (Blackstone, 2003). Socio-cultural practices, on the other hand, are the actions, behaviours, and customs that reflect and reinforce gender norms (Mochache et al., 2020). These practices encompass a wide range of activities and rituals that are prevalent in Nigerian society, shaping the daily lives and interactions of individuals.

Gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria play a significant role in shaping the lives of individuals and communities. These norms and practices are deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and traditional beliefs and are often influenced by patriarchal structures. They define the roles, responsibilities, and expectations assigned to individuals based on their gender (Ugwu & de Kok, 2015). Gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria manifest in various ways, impacting different aspects of life, including education, family dynamics, marriage, employment, politics, and access to resources (Makama, 2013). Understanding these norms and practices is essential for addressing gender inequality, promoting women's rights, and achieving social, economic, and political development in Nigeria.

This chapter seeks to offer an in-depth examination of gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria, encompassing various theoretical perspectives. It aims to shed light on the prevalent forms of these practices and their implications for gender equality and development. The study explores the diversity of gender norms and socio-cultural practices across different regions and ethnic groups in Nigeria, providing insights into the variations and commonalities. Furthermore, it will delve into the challenges faced in eliminating these norms and practices, considering the complex socio-cultural context. Finally, the chapter will propose potential solutions and recommendations to address these challenges, emphasising the importance of policy and programme development for fostering gender equality in Nigeria.

Statement of problem

Gender inequality in Nigeria represents a deep-rooted and alarming societal malaise, which is perpetuated by deeply ingrained gender norms and socio-cultural practices (Olonade et al., 2021). Benebo et al. (2018) posit that the reality is stark, as Nigerian women and girls face widespread discrimination, limited access to education, constrained economic opportunities, and significantly reduced participation in decision-making processes. The

traditional expectations of distinct roles and responsibilities based on gender further entrench these disparities, relegating women to subservient positions within the family, community, and the nation (Akinola, 2018). The extent of this problem is deplorable, with practices such as female genital mutilation, early forced marriages, nutritional disparities, and mortuary indignities systematically robbing women of their agency, dignity, and fundamental human rights (Ajayi et al., 2022). Gender-based violence, both within households and in public spaces, further entrenches this cycle of discrimination and oppression (Osezua & Agholor, 2019). The overarching issue is clear: the prevailing gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria systematically marginalise women, hindering social, economic, and political progress, and demand urgent, comprehensive examination and intervention. This study delves into the depths of this pervasive problem, unravelling its intricacies, and proposing concrete solutions to dismantle the discriminatory structures that continue to plague the nation.

Objectives of the study

The study aims to investigate the gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria. This involves identifying the expectations, roles, responsibilities, and behaviour ascribed to individuals based on their gender, and comprehending the cultural customs and rituals that uphold these norms. The study also examines the implications of gender norms and socio-cultural practices on gender equality and overall development in Nigeria, especially regarding access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political participation for different genders. Additionally, it aims to analyse how these norms perpetuate gender-based violence and discrimination, hindering societal progress. The study aims to identify the barriers that impede the transformation of these gender norms and socio-cultural practices.

Ultimately, the research aims to propose tangible solutions and policy recommendations based on the research findings.

Methodology

This study employed a doctrinal research methodology, particularly centred on the analysis of social norms in Nigeria concerning gender practices. The focus was on understanding the complex interplay of gender norms and socio-cultural practices across diverse regions and ethnic groups in Nigeria. The analysis was underpinned by theoretical frameworks such as feminist theories, Social Constructionist Theory, and intersectionality, allowing for a deeper understanding of how social constructs shape and reinforce gender

norms in the Nigerian context. The research design involved a systematic review and synthesis of existing literature to elucidate the prevailing gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria. The synthesis encompassed a qualitative analysis of research findings, policy documents, and scholarly literature, which allow for a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural factors influencing gender dynamics.

Theoretical perspectives on gender norms and socio-cultural practices

Gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria can be analysed and understood through various theoretical perspectives. This section explores three key theoretical frameworks: feminist theories, social constructionist theories, and intersectionality.

Feminist theories

Offiong et al. (2021) posit that feminist theories provide valuable insights into understanding gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria, shedding light on the power dynamics, gender inequality, and the ways in which patriarchal systems perpetuate discrimination and oppression against women. One prominent strand of Feminist Theory is Liberal feminism. The main proponents of this theory include Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Betty Friedan and Rebecca Walker. This theory seeks to achieve gender equality through legal and political reforms. According to Enyew and Mihrete (2018), Liberal feminism argues for equal rights and opportunities for women, advocating for changes in laws and policies that restrict women's access to education, employment, and political participation. In the context of Nigeria, Liberal feminism has been instrumental in pushing for legal reforms and policies that promote women's rights and gender equality. For instance, the passage of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act in 2015 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015) aimed to address gender-based violence and protect the rights of women. This legislation was enacted with the intention of providing comprehensive legal protection for women against various forms of violence, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and harmful traditional practices (Arowolo, 2020). By criminalising these acts and establishing legal mechanisms for reporting, prosecuting, and punishing offenders, the Act aims to create a safer environment for women and hold perpetrators accountable for their actions (Onyemelukwe, 2016). Furthermore, the Act recognises the importance of providing support services and rehabilitation for survivors of gender-based violence, emphasising the need for holistic approaches to addressing this pervasive issue (Arowolo, 2020).

Another significant strand within Feminist Theory is radical feminism, which takes a more transformative approach to addressing gender inequality. The major figures of this wave of feminism include Shulamith Firestone, Carol Hanisch and Robin Morgan. Radical feminists argue that gender oppression is deeply rooted in patriarchal structures and call for fundamental societal changes to dismantle these structures (Burrell & Flood, 2019). They critique the idea of gender as a social construct and emphasise the need to challenge and redefine traditional gender norms and roles. In the Nigerian context, radical feminism provides a critical lens through which to analyse and challenge the socio-cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequality. This includes practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, and restrictive gender roles that limit women's agency and autonomy (Shibles, 1989).

Social Constructionist Theory

To Burr and Dick (2017), Social Constructionist Theory views gender norms and socio-cultural practices as social constructs rather than innate or fixed attributes. The theory of social constructionism was propounded by Thomas Luckman and Peter L. Berger in 1966. The theory posits that gender is not determined by biology but is rather shaped by social processes, cultural beliefs, and institutional practices (Burr, 2015). At the core of Social Constructionist Theory is the recognition that gender is a product of social interactions, language, and discourse. It emphasises that individuals learn and internalise gender norms and roles through socialisation processes. In Nigeria, these processes occur within families, schools, religious institutions, and broader cultural contexts. Social constructionist theories highlight the ways in which gender is constantly negotiated and expressed in everyday interactions, shaping individuals' understanding of themselves and their place in society (Ward & Grower, 2020).

Language plays a crucial role in the social construction of gender. Words, terms, and linguistic conventions associated with gender create and reinforce societal expectations and stereotypes. For example, the use of gender-specific pronouns or the assignment of certain qualities to masculinity or femininity reflects and perpetuates gender norms. Social Constructionist Theory also emphasises the agency and resistance of individuals in challenging and reshaping gender norms (Nicholas, 2018). It recognises that individuals have the power to contest, renegotiate, and subvert societal expectations. In the Nigerian context, individuals and groups challenge gender norms through various forms of activism, advocacy, and artistic expression. By highlighting these acts of resistance, social constructionist theories provide a framework for understanding the

transformative potential of individuals and communities in promoting more inclusive and equitable gender norms.

Moreover, social constructionist perspectives draw attention to the role of institutions and systems in shaping and reinforcing gender norms (Geppert, 2022). Institutions such as education, media, and the legal system play a significant role in socialising individuals into specific gender roles and perpetuating societal expectations. For instance, the education system may reinforce traditional gender roles by promoting gendered subjects and career choices. By recognising the influence of institutions, social constructionist theories call for critical examination and reform of these systems to promote more equitable and inclusive gender norms.

Intersectionality Theory

This theory was propounded by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality Theory recognises that gender cannot be examined in isolation from other social categories (Collins et al., 2021). This theoretical perspective acknowledges that individuals' experiences of gender are influenced by intersecting identities such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, and geography (Veenstra, 2011). In the context of Nigeria, Intersectionality Theory allows for a more nuanced exploration of how various social categories intersect with gender to produce unique experiences and challenges (Gueta, 2020). For example, gender expectations and opportunities may vary depending on factors such as ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status. Intersectional Theory underscores the need to consider the diverse experiences of individuals who belong to multiple marginalised groups and the ways in which their intersecting identities interact to shape their lived realities.

Intersectionality Theory uncovers the ways in which multiple systems of power and oppression intersect to produce specific forms of discrimination and inequality (Bešić, 2020). For instance, the experiences of a woman from a marginalised ethnic group may differ significantly from those of a woman from a dominant ethnic group because of the intersecting influences of gender and ethnicity. Intersectional analysis allows the understanding of the unique challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of multiple marginalised identities and to develop more targeted and inclusive approaches to addressing gender inequality.

Moreover, Intersectionality Theory emphasises the importance of considering both structural and interpersonal dimensions of power. It recognises that gender norms and socio-cultural practices are not solely shaped by individual experiences but are also influenced by broader social structures and systems of oppression (Veenstra, 2011). Veenstra

(2011) believes that in relation to the socio-cultural landscape of Nigeria, Intersectionality Theory helps critically examine the ways in which gender norms intersect with other social categories to produce differential access to resources, opportunities, and rights. Maroto et al. (2018) advance that the understanding of these intersecting dynamics ordinarily helps policymakers, activists, and scholars to develop more comprehensive strategies to address gender inequality that take into account the diverse experiences and challenges faced by individuals at various intersections of identity.

Furthermore, Intersectionality Theory encourages an inclusive and intersectional approach to feminist activism and advocacy (Woods et al., 2022). It calls for recognising and centring the experiences and voices of marginalised groups, including women who may face intersecting forms of discrimination. By adopting an intersectional lens, feminist movements in Nigeria can work towards a more inclusive and equitable society that recognises and addresses the intersecting systems of oppression that perpetuate gender inequality.

Gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria

Gender norms in Nigeria often prescribe distinct roles and responsibilities for men and women. These roles are often centred around the division of labour, where men are typically assigned tasks related to income-generation and public life, while women are expected to take care of domestic chores and child-rearing (Olonade et al., 2021). This division can be observed in various spheres, including the household, workplace, and community. Men are typically encouraged to pursue careers and assume positions of authority, while women are often socialised to prioritise nurturing and caretaking roles. The Social Constructionist Theory is the most apposite theory that supports this societal arrangement. The theory posits that gender roles are shaped by social processes as well as cultural beliefs (Burr, 2015). Thus, the roles and expectations assigned to each gender are often reflections of customary beliefs and norms.

Gender norms in Nigeria have far-reaching implications for women's access to and control over resources (Benebo et al., 2018). In many instances, women encounter significant barriers when it comes to obtaining land, securing financial resources, and attaining decision-making power (Akinola, 2018).³ These challenges not only restrict their economic opportunities but

3 Traditionally, land is often passed down through male lineage, leading to limited land ownership rights for women. Cultural and customary practices reinforce this gender bias, resulting in women being excluded from land ownership and control. As a consequence, women may face difficulties in starting businesses, securing loans, or using land as collateral for economic

also perpetuate gender inequality within society. Moreover, the limited access to education and healthcare that women experience further exacerbates gender disparities in these critical areas. This view is reinforced by the Intersectionality Theory, which states that gender norms intersect with other social categories to produce differential access to resources, opportunities, and rights (Veenstra, 2011).

In Nigeria, socio-cultural practices, deeply rooted in traditions and customs, play a significant role in shaping gender norms (Ajayi et al., 2022). These practices can vary across ethnic groups and regions but often include rituals, ceremonies, and rites of passage that reinforce gender roles and expectations. For instance, certain cultural practices limit women's mobility, restrict their participation in public spaces, and subject them to harmful traditional norms, such as female genital mutilation (Makama, 2013). These practices were notably more prevalent in the South Eastern and South Western regions of Nigeria (Omoniyi, 2020). In the Northern region of Nigeria, child marriage is most common, with approximately 52% of women aged 20 to 24 married off before the age of 18 (NBS, 2022). Religion can be linked as a supportive framework that validates this enduring cultural practice. Religious leaders argue, based on Islamic teachings, that a girl's readiness for marriage is gauged by physical attributes and menstruation (NBS, 2022). This reasoning underlies some of the highest rates of child marriages in Kano State, where sharia law permits such unions based on religious and traditional justifications, linking adulthood to puberty (NBS, 2022). Similarly, in Imo State under Christian influence, societal pressure leads to the coerced marriage of girls who have children out of wedlock, deeming it dishonourable within the community (NBS, 2022). However, over the years, because of concerted efforts of governments and NGOs aimed at combatting and reducing the prevalence of these practices, there has been a noticeable decline in the prevalence of these practices.

Despite this progress, remnants of these harmful practices still persist in various communities. For instance, according to a recent analysis by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), while some regions have seen a reduction in the prevalence of female genital mutilation, such as the South-South (25.8% to 17.7%), South West (47.5% to 30%), and South East (49% to 35%), other regions have witnessed an increase, notably the North East (2.9% to 6.1%) (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2021). The South East currently maintains the highest prevalence (Omoniyi, 2020). This backdrop indicates that there is still more work to be performed to make a positive

activities. Their ability to make independent decisions regarding land use, investment, and property ownership is constrained, limiting their economic empowerment and perpetuating gender inequality.

impact, thereby underscoring the radical feminist position that there is a need to challenge gender disparities through a transformative approach. This could involve collaboration of NGOs with government bodies and community leaders for intensified efforts. The collaboration can include culturally sensitive educational programmes, community dialogues, and advocacy campaigns to dispel myths and misconceptions surrounding FGM (female genital mutilation). Additionally, engaging traditional healers, birth attendants, and community members as agents of change is crucial, as they often play a significant role in propagating these harmful practices.

Furthermore, Eke (2023) opines that patriarchy is a pervasive dimension of gender norms in Nigeria. Patriarchy is the social system in which men hold primary power and authority, leading to the subordination of women. Patriarchal power structures manifest in various forms, such as male dominance in decision-making processes, limited representation of women in political positions, and unequal distribution of resources and opportunities.

Gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria contribute to the prevalence of gender-based violence (Mensah, 2023). This includes various forms of violence, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and harmful traditional practices like child marriage and dowry-related violence. These practices not only violate the rights of women but also perpetuate a cycle of violence and reinforce unequal power dynamics.

Gender norms in Nigeria dictate specific behavioural expectations and norms for men and women. These expectations encompass areas such as appearance, dress, communication styles, and emotional expression (Onyeizugbo, 2003). For instance, men are often expected to demonstrate strength, assertiveness, and emotional restraint, while women may be expected to conform to ideals of modesty, nurturance, and obedience (Cislaghi et al., 2022). The Social Constructivist Theory is the most apposite in this regard.

Ultimately, these norms, rooted in historical, cultural, and patriarchal foundations, significantly influence roles, opportunities, and experiences of men and women across various domains. The prevalence of harmful practices, albeit showing signs of decline because of targeted interventions, remains a persistent concern (Omoniyi, 2020). Therefore, efforts to challenge and transform these norms are imperative to foster a more equitable society, eradicate gender-based violence, and promote inclusive environments where individuals can transcend restrictive gender expectations.

Forms of Gender Norms and Socio-Cultural Practices in Nigeria

Gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria encompass a wide range of traditions and expectations that significantly influence the roles that individuals are expected to assume based on their gender. These traditions and expectations include traditional occupational roles, family dynamics, female genital mutilation, early forced marriage and nutritional practices. These practices have implications beyond healthcare and impact various aspects of society. The following are identified as major amongst the forms of gender norms and socio-cultural practices prevalent in Nigeria and their broader effects on individuals and communities (Ugwu & de Kok, 2015; Offiong et al., 2021).

Gender norms

Traditional occupational roles

Historically, Nigeria has been influenced by traditional gender roles that assign distinct career paths based on gender (Offiong et al., 2021). Men have traditionally been directed towards careers perceived as requiring physical strength, technical skills, and assertiveness, aligning with societal expectations of masculinity (Ugwu & de Kok, 2015). Sectors such as engineering, technology, and leadership positions have traditionally been viewed as suitable for men, reflecting the prevailing gender biases. The delineation of roles for men and women in specific career paths reflects socially constructed gender norms and expectations concerning masculinity and femininity.

On the other hand, women in Nigeria have often faced societal pressure to pursue professions that are perceived as nurturing or caregiving in nature, aligning with traditional roles as caregivers and homemakers (Offiong et al., 2021). Education, healthcare, and administrative roles have historically been seen as more suitable for women because of assumptions about their nurturing abilities and attention to detail. These traditional occupational roles have significantly contributed to the perpetuation of gender disparities in various professional spheres (Ajayi & Omosule, 2017). The restrictions imposed by these gendered vocational expectations limit individuals' opportunities to explore diverse career paths and break free from traditional moulds. The differential opportunities and limitations faced by men and women in career paths intersect with social, economic, and cultural factors, showing the challenges that individuals face based on their gender and other social categories.

Marital expectations

Marital expectations are significantly influenced by entrenched gender norms that prescribe specific roles and responsibilities for men and women within the family structure. These norms perpetuate traditional gender roles, shaping the dynamics of marriage and family life. Women in Nigeria often face societal expectations that prioritise family responsibilities above personal and professional aspirations (Adedini et al., 2014). Traditional gender norms dictate that a woman's primary role revolves around caregiving, household chores, and nurturing children. Consequently, women are encouraged to prioritise their family's needs over their individual pursuits, including education, career advancement, and personal growth.

Dress codes and appearance

In Nigeria, dress codes and appearance standards are heavily influenced by societal expectations based on gender (Ozor & Onuoha, 2018). Men are frequently expected to maintain a 'strong and stoic' image through their choice of clothing. This often translates to attire that emphasises physical strength or professional stature, reinforcing societal expectations regarding what is considered 'masculine.' Conversely, women are encouraged to adhere to ideals of 'modesty and grace' in their dress and appearance (Ikegbu et al., 2019). This usually entails clothing that covers more of the body and is deemed as modest, reflecting traditional perceptions of femininity. These gendered dress codes and appearance standards further perpetuate gender norms and stereotypes within Nigerian society (Omoniyi, 2020).

Expression of emotions

Societal norms in Nigeria often dictate the acceptable expression of emotions based on gender (Onyeizugbo, 2003). This expectation aligns with traditional ideals of masculinity, associating emotional resilience and stoicism with strength. Men feel compelled to hide feelings of sadness, fear, or emotional struggles, fearing that expressing such emotions may be seen as a sign of weakness. On the other hand, women are encouraged to express a broader range of emotions, especially those associated with nurturing roles such as empathy, kindness, and compassion (Onyeizugbo, 2003). Societal expectations dictate that women should openly exhibit their feelings, showcasing empathy and understanding in various situations. For men, the pressure to suppress vulnerability and emotions may lead to emotional suppression or bottling up feelings, potentially resulting in stress, anxiety, or depression (Levant & Richmond, 2008). The reluctance to seek emotional support because of societal expectations can further exacerbate mental health issues.

Socio-cultural practices

Female genital mutilation (FGM)

One prominent socio-cultural practice in Nigeria is female genital mutilation, which involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia. Nigeria has one of the highest rates of FGM in the world. According to UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) (2020), approximately 20% of women aged 15 to 49 in Nigeria have undergone FGM. However, the prevalence varies across different regions within the country. States such as Osun, Ebonyi, Ekiti, and Oyo have reported higher rates of FGM, while states like Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River have lower prevalence rates (Okeke et al., 2012). FGM in Nigeria is often justified based on cultural beliefs surrounding purity, modesty, and marriageability. Some communities view FGM as a rite of passage into womanhood and a way to ensure virginity and fidelity. It is believed to promote cultural identity, enhance marriage prospects, and maintain social acceptance within the community. FGM encompasses various procedures, ranging from partial to total removal of the external female genitalia (WHO, 2023).⁴

FGM has severe physical and psychological health consequences for women and girls (Knipscheer et al., 2015). Immediate risks include severe pain, bleeding, infections, urinary problems, and even death. Long-term complications can include difficulties during childbirth, sexual dysfunction, psychological trauma, and increased vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections. While the consequences of FGM on women's health are severe, it is essential to recognise that this practice extends beyond healthcare. FGM is deeply rooted in cultural norms and taboos that perpetuate gender inequality and restrict women's autonomy and bodily integrity (Khosla et al., 2017).

Nutritional practices and gender disparities

Socio-cultural norms regarding food distribution and dietary practices also contribute to gender disparities in Nigeria. In many Nigerian communities, gender-based preferences and biases shape food distribution within households (Ashagidigbi et al., 2022). Men and male children are often given preferential treatment, receiving larger portions and priority access

4 The World Health Organization (WHO) categorises FGM into four types: a. Type I: Clitoridectomy - Partial or total removal of the clitoris. b. Type II: Excision - Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora. c. Type III: Infibulation - Narrowing of the vaginal opening by creating a seal, often by cutting and repositioning the labia majora. d. Type IV: Other harmful procedures - This includes pricking, piercing, incising, scraping, or cauterising the genital area.

to nutritious food (Okoli, 2001). This practice stems from traditional gender roles and beliefs that prioritise the nutritional needs of men over women. Consequently, women and girls are left with limited access to essential nutrients, leading to inadequate nutrition and potential health implications.

The nutritional disparities resulting from gendered food distribution can have significant health consequences for women and girls in Nigeria. Insufficient intake of vital nutrients such as proteins, vitamins, and minerals can lead to malnutrition, weakened immune systems, and increased susceptibility to illnesses (Foolchand et al., 2022). This can further contribute to complications during pregnancy, poor maternal health outcomes, and hindered child development. Over time, these disparities perpetuate a cycle of poor health and reinforce gender inequalities.

Cultural beliefs and norms also influence dietary practices in Nigeria. Some communities hold traditional beliefs that certain foods are ‘male-oriented’ or ‘female-oriented’. For instance, in some cultural distributions in the South Eastern region of Nigeria, it is believed that yam, which is considered a staple crop, is associated with masculinity and is often regarded as a male-oriented food. On the other hand, certain leafy greens like *ugu* (fluted pumpkin) and bitter leaf are considered female-oriented foods (Kaedi Africa, 2018). Women and girls may be discouraged from consuming protein-rich foods or specific nutrient-dense foods, especially during reproductive phases, because of cultural taboos. These restrictions further exacerbate the nutritional disparities faced by women and contribute to their overall health vulnerabilities.

Mortuary indignities and widowhood practices

Widowhood practices in Nigeria, influenced by socio-cultural beliefs, have significant detrimental effects on women’s health and overall well-being. Widows face multiple challenges, including extreme poverty, violence, homelessness, and discrimination. These hardships can have profound physical and mental health consequences for widows, exacerbating their vulnerability and leading to increased rates of illness and mortality. Moreover, during the mourning period, widows are subjected to dehumanising rituals and seclusion, denying them access to essential resources such as personal hygiene, proper nutrition, and healthcare services (Wuraola, 2016). This lack of access to basic necessities further compounds their health risks and hinders their ability to seek necessary healthcare during a period when support is crucial.

Mortuary indignities and widowhood practices in Nigeria constitute a violation of fundamental human rights and dignity. These especially

contravene the rights to dignity and human persons, liberty and freedom from discrimination, as enshrined in Sections 34, 35 and 42 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, as amended (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). These practices deny widows their autonomy, infringe upon their bodily integrity, and perpetuate gender-based discrimination (Okoye, 1995). Widowhood practices that include degrading rituals, physical and psychological abuses, and enforced isolation disregard the rights of widows to live free from violence, discrimination, and inhumane treatment. Such practices contribute to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of widows within society, hindering their access to healthcare and exacerbating their health vulnerabilities (Babalola, 1997).

Instances of mortuary indignities and widowhood practices can be found across Nigeria, spanning different regions, ethnic groups, and religions. For example, in some communities in Northern Nigeria, widows experience 'purification rites' that involve wearing black attire, shaving their hair, and observing a prolonged period of seclusion (Akinyemi, 2018). In South Eastern Nigeria, widows face practices such as being ostracised from their communities, forced eviction from their homes, or being denied inheritance rights (Akinyemi, 2018). These practices persist because of deeply entrenched cultural and traditional beliefs that perpetuate gender inequality and restrict widows' rights and freedoms. In some parts of Southern and Western Nigeria, widows also experience mortuary indignities in the form of being compelled to consume the water utilised to cleanse the deceased's body as a means to demonstrate her innocence (Eteng, 2022). Alternatively, a widow might be coerced to swim beneath the boat carrying her husband's remains, submerged in a river, or forcibly thrown over her late husband's coffin to test if her legs make contact with it (Eteng, 2022). Another practice involves taking an oath by walking across the deceased's body (Iheanacho, 2006). These actions are imposed upon grieving widows, adding to their distress and suffering, all in the name of verifying their innocence (Eteng, 2022).

Early forced marriage

Adeyemi, Gidado and Adeyemi (2023) hold that early forced marriage is a socio-cultural practice prevalent in Nigeria and it disproportionately impacts girls and poses significant health hazards. When girls are married off at a young age, they often face limited educational opportunities, which can impede their ability to make informed decisions regarding their health.

Early marriage also increases girls' vulnerability to various health risks, including early pregnancy, complications during childbirth, and limited access to reproductive healthcare. Girls who marry early often experience physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, leading to adverse mental

health outcomes (Nour, 2009). Early forced marriage presents several health challenges for girls in Nigeria. Girls who marry at a young age are at higher risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth, including obstetric fistula, maternal mortality, and adverse birth outcomes. They may also face challenges in accessing appropriate reproductive healthcare services, such as family planning and antenatal care. Limited decision-making power and lack of autonomy in healthcare choices further contribute to inadequate medical care for young couples. Moreover, traditional beliefs and practices may influence treatment choices, resulting in suboptimal healthcare for young couples (Aduradola, 2013). Additionally, early marriage disrupts girls' educational opportunities, which is crucial for their overall development, including health literacy and awareness of their reproductive rights.

Implications of gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria

The foregoing gender norms and socio-cultural practices extend their reach into crucial domains of Nigerian society such as education, healthcare, employment and political engagement. These deeply rooted practices have profound implications that shape opportunities, health outcomes, economic participation, and political representation in several ways. Understanding and analysing these practices can provide valuable insights into the specific areas where discriminatory practices occur and enable the design of targeted interventions to address them. This section will elaborate on the implications of gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria in relation to education, healthcare, employment, and political participation.

In the context of education, gender norms and socio-cultural practices can create barriers to girls' access to education and limit their educational opportunities (Kainuwa & Yusuf, 2013). Traditional beliefs and gender roles often prioritise boys' education over girls', leading to lower enrolment rates and higher dropout rates amongst girls. This perpetuates gender disparities in education and hampers the overall development of girls and women. It is therefore crucial to recognise that education for girls transcends mere access to school. Instead, it is about creating an enabling environment where girls feel safe in classrooms and are supported in the subjects and careers that they choose to pursue, even those in which they are often under-represented. Investing in girls' education transforms and strengthens economies, reduces inequality, and benefits not just individuals but communities, countries, and the entire world. Girls who receive an education are less likely to marry young and are more likely to lead healthy, productive lives. They earn higher incomes, participate in the decisions that most affect them, and build better futures for themselves and their families.

Gender norms and socio-cultural practices also significantly influence women's access to healthcare services (Nour, 2009). Discriminatory practices restrict women's access to essential reproductive healthcare, including family planning, antenatal care, and safe childbirth. This lack of access can result in adverse health outcomes for women and hinder their overall well-being. In addressing this issue, it becomes imperative not only to focus on healthcare provision but also to challenge and transform the societal norms and practices that perpetuate gender disparities in accessing essential healthcare services. Investing in overcoming these barriers contributes to healthier societies and a more equitable world, where every woman can access the healthcare that she needs for a prosperous and fulfilling life.

In the realm of employment, gender norms and socio-cultural practices often create barriers that limit women's access to economic opportunities and financial independence (Ugwu & de Kok, 2015). Traditional gender roles and expectations confine women to certain occupations or sectors and perpetuate gender-based occupational segregation. These practices not only contribute to the persistent gender wage gap but also obstruct women's complete and meaningful economic participation (Ugwu & de Kok, 2015). Overcoming these barriers is integral to challenging gender norms and promoting inclusivity within the workforce, where women have equal access to diverse economic opportunities, enabling them to thrive and contribute meaningfully to their communities and economies. A concerted effort towards dismantling these barriers is fundamental for a more equitable society and robust economic growth.

In the political sphere, gender norms and socio-cultural practices play a significant role in hindering women's participation and representation in decision-making processes (Okafor & Akokuwebe, 2015). Discriminatory practices, such as limited political rights and biases against women in politics undermine democratic principles and impede the inclusive governance of a nation. Thus, concerted efforts by the governments and relevant stakeholders in addressing these systemic biases, fostering a more gender-equitable political environment, and amplifying women's voices and roles in politics are crucial steps towards realising a democratic society that embraces diversity and effectively addresses the needs and concerns of all its citizens.

Gender norms and socio-cultural practices vis-à-vis gender equality in Nigeria

Gender norms and socio-cultural practices play a significant role in shaping the status and experiences of women in Nigeria, and their implications for gender equality are of paramount importance. Nigeria, like many other countries, has deep-rooted societal expectations, beliefs, and behaviours

that contribute to the perpetuation of gender disparities. In Nigeria, traditional gender norms often prescribe distinct roles and responsibilities for men and women, perpetuating inequalities and limiting opportunities for women's advancement in various spheres of life. For instance, women are often expected to prioritise their roles as wives and mothers, while men are expected to be the primary providers for their families (Olonade et al., 2021). These expectations are deeply entrenched in societal structures and influence various aspects of individuals' lives, from education and employment to access to resources and decision-making power.

Socio-cultural practices in Nigeria further reinforce gender norms and contribute to the marginalisation of women. Practices such as early marriage, female genital mutilation, and limited access to education for girls are prevalent in many parts of the country. Early marriage, in particular, remains a significant challenge, with a considerable number of girls being married off before the age of 18 (Adeyemi et al., 2023). Data from the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) in 2013 reported that 58.2% of Nigerian girls are married before they turn 18 years old (NPC & ICF International, 2014). According to a projection by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Nigeria is expected to have 29 million underage brides by the year 2050 (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2021). This practice hampers girls' educational opportunities, perpetuates cycles of poverty, and contributes to high rates of maternal mortality and complications because of early childbirth.

Moreover, women in Nigeria face gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and rape, which are deeply rooted in socio-cultural practices and norms (Ekpe et al., 2014). These practices not only violate women's rights but also perpetuate a culture of silence and impunity, making it difficult for survivors to seek justice and support. Gender-based violence not only affects individual women but also has broader societal implications, inhibiting their participation in public life and hindering progress towards gender equality.

The implications of gender norms and socio-cultural practices on gender equality in Nigeria are profound and multifaceted. Gender inequality limits women's access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and participation in decision-making processes. Limited educational opportunities for girls perpetuate a cycle of poverty and hinder their socio-economic advancement. Unequal access to healthcare services, including reproductive health, exacerbates health disparities and increases vulnerability to maternal mortality and morbidity. Gender-based occupational segregation and the gender pay gap restrict women's economic empowerment and limit their contributions to the formal economy.

Furthermore, gender inequality in Nigeria perpetuates power imbalances, leading to limited representation of women in political and leadership positions (Msuva, 2019). Women's voices and perspectives are often marginalised or excluded from decision-making processes, undermining the democratic principles of inclusivity and equitable governance. The proportion of women's involvement in political roles in Nigeria stands at a national average of 6.7%, a figure significantly below the global average of 22.5% (Oluyemi, 2016). This percentage also falls short of the regional averages, with Africa at 23.4% and West Africa at 15% (Olaboopo, 2022). A concrete example of this disparity is evident in the 2015 ministerial appointments, where out of 36 confirmations, only six individuals, or 16.7%, were women (Oluyemi, 2016). In the National Assembly, the representation of women is even lower, constituting 5.6% of members in the House of Representatives and 6.5% in the Senate (Olaboopo, 2022). Despite twenty-three years of uninterrupted democratic governance (1999-2023), Nigeria has yet to witness a female governor in any of its 36 states. By upholding patriarchal norms and practices, Nigeria not only denies women their rights but also hampers social progress and sustainable development. These traditional norms, rooted in historical and cultural biases, maintain a rigid power structure that systematically marginalises women, restricting their access to opportunities and decision-making roles in both the public and private spheres. This imbalance of power not only adversely affects women but also impedes the advancement of society as a whole, stunting its potential for inclusive growth and equitable development.

Challenges in eliminating gender norms and socio-cultural practices perpetuating gender inequity in Nigeria

One of the primary challenges in eliminating gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria are the deeply rooted cultural beliefs that support and perpetuate gender inequality. Many of these practices are justified based on traditional values, religious interpretations, and the preservation of cultural identity (Farina et al., 2022). Challenging these beliefs requires a comprehensive and sustained effort to engage with communities, religious leaders, and opinion-shapers to promote alternative narratives that prioritise gender equity and women's rights. However, such processes are complex and time-consuming, requiring extensive dialogue, education, and cultural sensitivity.

In Nigeria, the prevalence of harmful gender norms and socio-cultural practices is exacerbated by a significant lack of awareness and education about gender equality and women's rights, a challenge particularly pronounced in rural areas because of limited access to formal

education and information (Neuman, 2016). This knowledge gap allows these harmful practices to persist, perpetuating gender inequality and discrimination (Galbiati et al., 2021). Efforts by NGOs, CBOs (community-based organisations), and donor agencies are instrumental in addressing this gap by conducting awareness campaigns and educational programmes, especially in rural regions, to enlighten individuals about gender equality and women's rights. However, challenges such as logistical limitations and cultural resistance still impede their comprehensive reach. This backdrop necessitates a continual enhancement of strategies to ensure broader impact and contribute to the overall goal of achieving gender equity in Nigeria. Without effective awareness and education, the cycle of gender inequality will persist and continue to impede social, economic, and political development for individuals, communities, and the nation. Resistance by gatekeepers to change is a significant hurdle in eliminating gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria (Okoli, 2007). Gatekeepers are individuals or entities within a community or society who hold influence, power, or authority over the maintenance and continuation of established norms and practices (Koloji-Keaikitse et al., 2021). They play a role in maintaining the status quo by upholding traditional practices that reinforce gender disparities. Their influence extends to decision-making processes, including those related to marriage, education, healthcare, and participation in public life. Resistance to change often stems from the fear of losing control, power, or influence that these gatekeepers possess within the existing social structures. They view attempts to challenge traditional norms as a threat to their authority and the stability of the community (Adamu, 2019). Consequently, they actively resist change, sometimes employing persuasive rhetoric, sanctions, or shaming to discourage individuals from deviating from established gender norms. While Nigeria has laws and policies that aim to protect women's rights and promote gender equality, the enforcement and implementation of these laws remain a challenge. In some cases, legal frameworks may not adequately address specific gender-based practices or may lack sufficient mechanisms for enforcement. For instance, Nigeria has the National Gender Policy, which was revised in 2021. Nigeria is also a signatory to several international conventions related to gender equality. These represent a critical foundation for advancing gender equity. However, the challenge lies in effectively translating these policies into tangible actions that result in substantive change within Nigerian society. The gap between policy and practice arises from various factors, including limited resources, capacity constraints, and a lack of political will. Additionally, while being signatories to international conventions is a significant step, compliance and enforcement within the domestic context require concerted efforts and alignment with national laws and customs. Another example of Nigeria's law on gender equality is Section

17 of the Constitution (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999), which establishes the fundamental objective of the state as freedom, equality, and justice, and prohibits discrimination based on gender. However, this provision is in Chapter II of the Constitution. By virtue of Section 6(6)(c) of the Constitution, Chapter II has been rendered non-justiciable. In other words, the lofty provision of Section 17 on gender equality cannot be enforced in the court of law because the jurisdiction of the court to entertain cases on the provision has been ousted. Additionally, societal attitudes and cultural norms often undermine the effectiveness of legal measures. For instance, the strong inclination to resolve disputes within the community through elders and gatekeepers rather than resorting to formal legal mechanisms like courts, act as significant impediments to the enforcement and efficacy of legal measures in addressing gender-based violence and harmful cultural practices.

Socio-economic factors also contribute to the persistence of gender norms and practices in Nigeria. Poverty, limited access to resources, and economic disparities disproportionately affect women and perpetuate gender inequality (Gruneau, 2022). In 2019, the national poverty headcount ratio at the national poverty line was estimated to be 40.1% (World Bank, 2020). According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021, Nigeria ranked 136 out of 156 countries in terms of gender parity in economic participation and opportunity (World Economic Forum, 2021). Women are disproportionately affected by poverty, and they often experience higher rates of poverty compared to men (World Bank, 2020). This economic vulnerability limits their ability to challenge traditional gender norms and practices that perpetuate gender inequalities. Addressing gender inequity requires comprehensive poverty alleviation strategies, access to quality education and healthcare, and economic empowerment initiatives that specifically target women.

Findings

The multifaceted dimensions of gender inequality are deeply ingrained in Nigerian society. The study revealed a pervasive patriarchal system that perpetuates and reinforces discriminatory gender norms. These norms dictate distinct roles, responsibilities, and behaviours for men and women, resulting in imbalanced power dynamics and limited agency for women. Moreover, the research has indicated the prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM), and child marriage, particularly in the South Eastern and South Western regions of Nigeria. FGM, in particular, emerged as a critical concern, affecting a significant percentage of women and girls in the country, subjecting them to severe physical and psychological consequences.

The research also shed light on the compounding effect of intersectionality, where gender norms intersect with other social categories such as ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status, creating unique experiences of discrimination and inequality. The study supports the need for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to addressing gender inequality. Additionally, the study found a correlation between gender norms and limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for women. These barriers hinder progress towards achieving gender equality and overall development in Nigeria (Ashagidigbi et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the research revealed that despite efforts to promote gender equality and enact legislation to protect women's rights, the deeply entrenched gender norms and socio-cultural practices continue to persist. Society's overall reluctance or resistance to change these norms underscores the necessity for a more comprehensive and sustained approach to challenge and transform the existing gender paradigm. The findings underscore the urgency for targeted interventions, policy reforms, and educational campaigns to challenge and change these norms, thereby fostering a more equitable society for all.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion highlights the complex and interconnected factors that perpetuate gender inequity. Deeply rooted cultural beliefs, limited awareness and education, resistance to change, legal and enforcement gaps, and socio-economic factors all contribute to the persistence of harmful practices and gender disparities. To address these challenges, a comprehensive and multi-sectorial approach is needed. This includes promoting gender-responsive healthcare, institutionalising gender mainstreaming, collecting gender-disaggregated data, engaging media and communication channels, and strengthening monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can move towards dismantling harmful gender norms, empowering women, and fostering a more equitable and inclusive society.

Recommendations

Integrating gender education into the curriculum is crucial for promoting gender equality in Nigeria. Comprehensive gender education programmes should be introduced in schools at all levels, addressing topics such as gender equality, women's rights, and the harmful effects of gender norms and practices. Additionally, community-based awareness campaigns should be conducted to reach areas with limited formal education. Utilising traditional

and digital media platforms to disseminate information and promote positive gender norms will help raise awareness and foster understanding.

In the same vein, it is important to address the socio-economic factors that contribute to gender inequity. Policies and programmes should be implemented to facilitate women's access to economic resources such as credit, land ownership, and entrepreneurship opportunities. Supporting vocational training and skills development programmes will enhance women's economic empowerment. Additionally, social protection programmes should be established to provide support to vulnerable women, including widows, survivors of gender-based violence, and those living in poverty. Access to healthcare services, legal aid, and counselling support should be integral components of these programmes.

Establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is essential to track progress, identify gaps, and make informed decisions regarding interventions addressing gender inequity. Regular monitoring and evaluation should be conducted to assess the effectiveness and impact of policies, programmes, and initiatives. This involves setting clear indicators, collecting relevant data, and analysing the outcomes. Findings from monitoring and evaluation exercises should inform policy adjustments and programme improvements to ensure continuous learning and improvement in addressing gender norms and practices.

To ensure sustainable progress in addressing gender norms and practices, gender mainstreaming⁵ should be institutionalised across all sectors of society (Archibong et al., 2018). Government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and institutions should develop gender mainstreaming policies and guidelines that prioritise gender equity and women's empowerment. This involves integrating gender considerations into policy development, programme design, budget allocation, and monitoring and evaluation processes. Establishing gender focal points within organisations and promoting gender-responsive governance structures will help facilitate the implementation of gender mainstreaming initiatives.

Improving access to gender-responsive healthcare services is crucial for addressing gender norms and socio-cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequity. Healthcare providers should be trained to deliver services that are sensitive to the unique health needs and challenges faced by women. This includes addressing reproductive health, maternal healthcare, and addressing the consequences of harmful practices such as female genital

5 Gender mainstreaming is the process of integrating a gender perspective into all policies, programmes, and activities to promote gender equality and address gender disparities.

mutilation. Health education programmes should also be developed to empower women with knowledge about their rights, sexual and reproductive health, and available healthcare services. Furthermore, efforts should be made to reduce barriers to healthcare access, such as distance, cost, and cultural stigmas, through the establishment of more healthcare facilities and outreach programmes in underserved areas.

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Chapter 2

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