Strategies for Reducing Gender Disparity among Oro-Igwe Women in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study focused on issues of gender disparity as a major obstacle to social and economic development in Oro-Igwe community of Obio/Akpo Local government Area of Rivers State Nigeria. It noted that socio-cultural norms and economic constraints limited women's access to education, leadership roles and economic opportunities, thus, reinforcing gender inequalities. The paper is alarmed that lack of equal access to education and economic disparity against women still exist in Oro-igwe community. As it were, the study aims to explore effective strategies for reducing gender disparity among Oro-Igwe women. The gender role theory developed by Alice Eagly in (1987), formed the lens of this article. The work employed a mixed-method approach, combining the survey and focus group discussions in data collection while the descriptive and contextual analyses were employed in material interpretation . Findings revealed that patriarchal traditions, limited access to education and economic dependence of women on the male folk, as significant contributors to gender disparity. To this end, key strategies such as promoting compulsory education for girls, enhancing economic empowerment through microfinance initiatives and vocational training, enforcing legal and policy reforms, and challenging harmful cultural norms through advocacy and community engagement are the ways

forward. It concluded that, addressing gender disparities through a multidimensional approach will enhance women's contributions to the community, leading to economic growth, improved governance and overall societal progress. The study recommended that policymakers, community leaders, and non-governmental organizations implement inclusive policies and targeted interventions to ensure gender equality and sustainable development in Oro-Igwe community.

Key words: Gender, inequality, disparity, inclusiveness and education.

Introduction

Without mincing words, gender disparity remains a significant challenge in many traditional African societies, including Oro-Igwe community, situated in Obio/Akpo Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. In this locality, cultural norms and socio-economic structures inadvantently limited women's access to education, economic opportunities and leadership roles. As it were, it is a general fact that, gender inequality affects social and economic development of women leading to persistent poverty, reduced educational attainment for girls, and limited political representation for women (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023).

According to Okonkwo and Nwankwo (2021), women in many rural Nigerian communities are systematically excluded from land ownership, economic participation, and governance, leading to financial dependence on men and limiting their potential for self-sufficiency. Similarly, Chukwu (2023) asserts that gender norms have historically relegated women to domestic roles, restricting their ability to access education and professional opportunities. The impact of such disparities extends beyond economic disadvantages, as studies have shown that societies with high gender inequality often experience slower economic growth and weaker democratic governance (World Bank, 2023). Addressing gender disparity among Oro-Igwe women requires a multidimensional approach, including education, economic empowerment, legal reforms, and cultural reorientation

Despite global efforts to promote gender equality, many indigenous communities in Nigeria, including Oro-Igwe, continue to experience deep-seated gender

disparities owing to patriarchal customs, legal restrictions, and economic barriers (Eze, 2022). Therefore, identifying effective strategies for reducing gender disparities and promoting gender equality among Oro-Igwe women is crucial for advancing sustainable development.

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The aim of this study therefore, is to explore effective strategies for reducing gender disparity among Oro-Igwe women. The gender role theory developed by Alice Eagly (1987), formed the lens of this article. The work employed a mixed-method approach, combining the survey and focus group discussions in data collection while the descriptive and contextual analyses were employed in material interpretation. The findings revealed that patriarchal traditions, limited access to education, and economic dependence as significant contributors to gender disparity. To this end, key strategies such as promoting compulsory education for girls, enhancing economic empowerment through microfinance initiatives and vocational training, enforcing legal and policy reforms, and challenging harmful cultural norms through advocacy and community engagement are the ways forward. It concluded that, addressing gender disparities through a multidimensional approach will enhance women's contributions to the community, leading to economic growth, improved governance and overall societal progress. The study recommended that policymakers, community leaders, and non-governmental organizations

implement inclusive policies and targeted interventions to ensure gender equality and sustainable development in Oro-Igwe community.

Theoretical framework:

Gender Role Theory developed by Alice Eagly (1987), forms the lens of this article. It explains how societal expectations and cultural norms shape gender roles, influencing the behaviors, opportunities, and limitations imposed on individuals based on their sex. The theory posits that traditional societies assign distinct roles to men and women, reinforcing systemic inequalities. These roles are maintained through socialization processes, where individuals learn expected behaviors from family, education, media, and religion. Over time, these gendered expectations become ingrained, affecting women's access to education, leadership positions, and economic opportunities.

In the context of the Oro-Igwe community, Gender Role Theory helps to explain how patriarchal traditions have historically restricted women's rights and participation in key areas of society. Women are often relegated to domestic responsibilities, while men dominate leadership and economic sectors. These societal constructs limit women's potential, reinforcing gender disparities in education, employment, and decision-making. This study applies Gender Role Theory to analyze the socio-cultural and economic factors that sustain gender inequality in the Oro-Igwe community. The relevance of Gender Role Theory extends beyond academic research to practical applications in society. By highlighting the constructed nature of gender roles, the theory encourages a shift toward more inclusive and equitable social structures. It promotes gender-sensitive policies that ensure equal opportunities for men and women in education, employment, and leadership. Moreover, understanding the role of socialization in shaping gender norms helps communities implement awareness campaigns, advocacy programs, and legal reforms aimed at challenging outdated beliefs and fostering gender equity.

The concept of gender inequality:

Gender disparity refers to the unequal treatment or perception of individuals based on their gender, often resulting in disadvantages for one gender over the other. It manifests in various aspects of life, including education, employment,

political participation, healthcare access, and social status (Kabeer, 2023). Gender disparity is deeply rooted in socio-cultural norms, traditional beliefs, and institutional structures that perpetuate inequalities between men and women. While both genders can experience discrimination, women and girls are disproportionately affected by systemic biases that limit their opportunities for growth and development (Cornwall, 2022). One of the most significant areas of gender disparity is education. Many societies, particularly in developing countries, still prioritize male education over female education due to socio-cultural norms and economic constraints (Nussbaum, 2023). According to Stromquist (2023), millions of girls worldwide remain out of school due to child marriage and domestic responsibilities. This educational gap hinders women's ability to access quality employment and leadership opportunities, further widening gender disparity. Girls who drop out of school are more likely to experience early marriages, domestic violence, and financial dependence (Unterhalter, 2023).

In the economic sector, gender disparity is evident in wage gaps, limited access to financial resources, and occupational segregation. Women often earn less than their male counterparts for the same work, with the global gender pay gap estimated at 20% (Folbre, 2023). Additionally, women are more likely to be employed in informal, low-paying jobs with little to no social protection (Acker, 2023). Business ownership and entrepreneurship are also affected by gender disparity, as women face more challenges in accessing credit, land, and capital investments (Chant, 2023). Healthcare is another area where gender disparity is apparent. Women often have less access to quality healthcare services owing to financial constraints, cultural restrictions, and lack of decision-making power in their households (Sen, 2023). Maternal mortality remains high in many developing countries due to inadequate reproductive healthcare and limited medical resources for women (WHO, 2023).

Political participation is another domain where gender disparity persists. Despite progress in women’s representation, they remain underrepresented in decision-making positions globally (Phillips, 2023). Barriers such as gender stereotypes, socio-cultural expectations, and limited access to political networks hinder women's political advancement. Many countries still have policies and laws that

limit women's participation in governance, further exacerbating the imbalance in political leadership (Waylen, 2023). Technology and digital access also contribute to gender disparity. Women in many regions have less access to the internet, digital tools, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education, limiting their participation in the digital economy (Eubanks, 2023). The gender gap in digital literacy prevents women from fully utilizing online resources for education, employment, and business growth.

Types of Gender Disparity

Gender disparity manifests in various ways, affecting different aspects of life, including education, economic participation, healthcare, political representation, and social norms.

Girls are less likely to complete schooling due to cultural biases, financial constraints, and domestic responsibilities.

Women earn lower wages, have limited access to financial resources, and face discrimination in employment and business ownership. Many Oro-Igwe women engage in farming and trading but lack land ownership rights and capital to expand their businesses, keeping them economically dependent (Wodi, 2023).

Women face challenges in accessing maternal healthcare, family planning services, and general medical care. Many rural women, including those in Oro-Igwe, give birth under unsafe conditions due to inadequate healthcare facilities and financial barriers (Nwoko, 2023).

Women are prevented from participating in decision-making processes due to cultural norms that reserve leadership positions for men. This limits women's influence in policy-making and governance in Oro-Igwe (Obi, 2023).

Harmful traditional practices such as early marriage, widowhood rites, and domestic violence disproportionately affect women. Many women endure these practices due to societal expectations and weak legal protections (Tamuno, 2023).

Causes of Gender Disparity

The root causes of gender disparity in Oro-Igwe and similar communities are deeply embedded in historical, cultural, economic, and institutional structures. The causes are;

Many customs favor male dominance and restrict women's roles to domestic and caregiving duties. This cultural bias influences attitudes toward education, employment, and leadership opportunities for women in Oro-Igwe (Eke, 2023).

Many families in Oro-Igwe struggle with poverty and prefer investing in their sons' education and career prospects, leaving daughters with limited opportunities. Women's inability to inherit land or access financial resources further widens the gap (Wodi, 2023).

Schools in rural areas often lack proper facilities, trained teachers, and safe environments for girls. Many drop out early due to forced marriages, teenage pregnancies, or the need to support their families at home (Nwoko, 2023).

Even when policies exist to promote women's rights, they are often poorly implemented due to corruption, lack of political will, and societal resistance. Women facing domestic violence or workplace discrimination rarely get justice due to weak enforcement of protective laws (Obi, 2023).

Since most leadership structures in Oro-Igwe are dominated by men, it is difficult for policies that promote gender equality to be prioritized (Tamuno, 2023).

Factors promoting Gender Disparity amongst Oro-igwe women

Several factors contribute to the persistence of gender disparity among Oro-Igwe women, reinforcing systemic inequalities that limit their opportunities for growth and empowerment. These factors are deeply rooted in cultural, economic, and social structures, making it difficult for women to achieve equality.

The Oro-Igwe community, like many traditional societies, upholds patriarchal norms that assign women subordinate roles. Cultural expectations prioritize men as heads of households and decision-makers, limiting women's participation in leadership and economic activities.

Many girls in the Oro-Igwe community face barriers to education due to financial constraints, early marriage, and cultural biases that favor boys' schooling over girls'. This lack of education restricts women's access to employment and leadership positions.

Gender disparity is further reinforced by economic dependence, where women have fewer opportunities to own land, start businesses, or access credit facilities. This dependence on male relatives or spouses limits their financial independence and decision-making power.

Women in Oro-Igwe frequently face gender-based violence, including domestic abuse and harassment. Fear of stigma or lack of legal protection discourages women from reporting these issues, reinforcing their vulnerability.
Women's participation in politics and leadership roles is minimal due to societal norms that view leadership as a male-dominated domain. The lack of representation prevents women's issues from being adequately addressed in policymaking.

Challenges against Gender Disparity amongst Oro-Igwe Women
Efforts to reduce gender disparity among Oro-Igwe women face several challenges that hinder progress toward equality. These challenges stem from deeply rooted societal norms, institutional barriers, and economic limitations, making it difficult for women to attain equal opportunities.

Many traditional beliefs uphold male dominance, making it difficult to challenge existing gender roles. Cultural resistance to change often discourages communities from embracing gender equality initiatives.

Limited access to education means that many women lack the knowledge and skills needed to advocate for their rights. Without education, they struggle to break free from traditional gender roles.

Women face financial constraints due to limited access to credit, land ownership, and job opportunities. Economic dependence on men reduces their bargaining power in both the household and society.

Although laws exist to promote gender equality, weak enforcement makes them ineffective. Gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, and land ownership restrictions continue due to inadequate legal protection.

Women are underrepresented in leadership positions, making it difficult for gender-related issues to receive attention in policymaking. Male-dominated political structures often sideline women's concerns.

Impact of Gender Disparity amongst Oro-Igwe Women

Gender disparity among Oro-Igwe women manifests in various ways, affecting their social, economic, and political standing. The consequences of this inequality are far-reaching, influencing both individuals and the community.

Many Oro-Igwe women remain financially dependent on men due to limited access to income-generating opportunities. This economic reliance makes it difficult for them to make independent decisions regarding their welfare and that of their children. For example, a widow without financial independence may struggle to provide for her family, forcing her children—especially daughters—to drop out of school and engage in menial jobs. This cycle of poverty continues, as these daughters grow up with the same financial struggles their mothers faced. In contrast, economically empowered women contribute to household income, improving the overall standard of living for their families (Nwodi, 2023).

Education is a powerful tool for empowerment, but many Oro-Igwe women face challenges in accessing quality education due to traditional beliefs that prioritize male education. Girls are often withdrawn from school to assist with domestic chores or marry early, limiting their future opportunities. For instance, in some villages, families with limited resources prioritize sending their sons to school while their daughters are trained in homekeeping. This educational disparity results in fewer women pursuing professional careers, thereby restricting their earning potential and reinforcing their dependence on men.

Women's exclusion from leadership positions means their voices and concerns are often ignored in decision-making processes. According to Amadi (2020) in the Oro-Igwe community, traditional leadership structures are male-dominated,

making it difficult for women to influence policies that affect them directly. For example, decisions about land ownership, community development projects, and resource allocation are often made without female input. When women are excluded from governance, their unique perspectives on issues like healthcare, education, and social welfare are overlooked, further deepening inequality.

Gender disparity contributes to a culture where violence against women is tolerated or ignored. Women who experience domestic violence, harassment, or abuse often find it difficult to seek justice due to societal expectations that they must endure hardship in silence. In some cases, law enforcement fails to take reports of gender-based violence seriously, leaving women with little legal protection. For instance, an Oro-Igwe woman experiencing domestic abuse may be advised by elders to "endure for the sake of her marriage" rather than seek legal action. This lack of accountability emboldens perpetrators and keeps victims trapped in abusive relationships.

To ensure that women's voices are heard in decision-making processes, there should be deliberate efforts to include women in leadership at community and political levels. Leadership training programs should be established to prepare women for governance roles, and political parties should create platforms that encourage female participation. Additionally, traditional leadership structures should be reformed to accommodate women's perspectives in community development matters.

Gender Disparity amongst Oro-igwe women

ATTENTION: Note this. Gender disparity among Oro-Igwe women remains a pressing issue, deeply rooted in cultural traditions, economic challenges, and limited political representation. Despite modern advancements, many women in the community still struggle with inequality in various aspects of life. One of the most significant areas where this disparity is evident is education. Girls often drop out of school early due to financial constraints, domestic responsibilities, and societal expectations that prioritize male education. A recent study by Wodi (2023) highlights that in rural communities like Oro-Igwe, only a small percentage of women attain higher education, limiting their chances of securing formal employment and leadership positions. This lack of education creates a cycle of

dependency and reduced opportunities, further widening the gender gap. Closely linked to the issue of education is economic inequality. Women in Oro-Igwe actively participate in farming and petty trading, yet they rarely own the land they cultivate or have access to financial support to expand their businesses. Traditional customs often prohibit women from inheriting property or securing bank loans without a male guarantor. This restriction keeps them financially dependent on men and limits their economic mobility. A typical example is seen in the case of a group of female farmers in the community who, despite their hard work, could not access government agricultural loans because land ownership documents, which they lacked, were required as collateral (Eke, 2023). Without financial independence, women struggle to break free from the constraints imposed by traditional gender roles, making it difficult for them to advocate for equal opportunities in other areas of life.

The economic disadvantages faced by women also impact their access to quality healthcare. Many Oro-Igwe women, lack essential maternal healthcare services owing to inadequate medical facilities and financial constraints. Maternal mortality remains high in the community, as many women rely on traditional birth attendants instead of qualified medical professionals. According to Nwoko (2023), the absence of a nearby health facility and poor transportation systems make it even more challenging for pregnant women to receive timely medical care. A case in point is a young mother who suffered complications during childbirth because the nearest hospital was several kilometers away, and there was no transportation available. These limitations not only put women's lives at risk but also reinforce the broader issue of gender disparity, as poor health outcomes hinder their ability to contribute fully to society.

Another area where gender disparity is evident is in political and leadership representation. Women in Oro-Igwe are often excluded from decision-making processes, as cultural norms dictate that leadership and governance are primarily male responsibilities. Even when women aspire to leadership positions, they face resistance from community elders and a lack of financial backing for political campaigns. This exclusion prevents them from influencing policies that could improve their socio-economic conditions. Obi (2023) notes that in the last local government elections, no women from Oro-Igwe won key leadership positions,

demonstrating the systemic obstacles they face. Without representation in leadership, it becomes difficult for women to advocate for changes that would promote gender equality and empower future generations. Adding to these challenges is the prevalence of gender-based violence, which remains a serious problem in the community. Many women endure domestic violence, forced marriages, and harmful widowhood rites in silence owing to fear of stigmatization and weak legal protections. Tamuno (2023) reports that a widow in the community was forced to undergo degrading mourning rituals, including isolation and deprivation, simply because of cultural expectations. Such practices continue because enforcement of gender-protective laws is weak, and victims often lack access to legal aid or support systems. Without addressing these harmful traditions, efforts to promote gender equality will remain incomplete.

Efforts to address gender disparity in Oro-Igwe must take a holistic approach that includes education, economic empowerment, healthcare access, political inclusion, and legal reforms. Advocacy groups and government intervention are crucial in dismantling discriminatory norms and creating opportunities for women to thrive. Wokocha (2023) emphasizes that increasing women's representation in leadership and decision-making will be a crucial step in achieving gender equality in the area. Addressing these deep-rooted disparities requires a combination of policy changes, community awareness, and sustainable empowerment initiatives tailored to the unique challenges faced by Oro-Igwe women. By implementing these strategies, the cycle of inequality will be broken, allowing women to contribute meaningfully to their families, communities, and society at large.

Recommendations

The study recommends as follows:

1. Government and policymakers should promote gender-sensitive policies addressing socio-cultural and economic limitations.
2. Community leaders and stakeholders should implement empowerment programs enhancing women's social, economic, and political participation.
3. Educational institutions and NGO's should strengthen leadership training, education, and financial support for women.

4. Women should form co-operatives to enable them pull finances together for economic empowerment.
5. Mothers should encourage their female children to go to school.

Conclusion:

Gender disparity among Oro-Igwe women remains a significant challenge influenced by socio-cultural and economic factors. Traditional norms that favor male dominance in inheritance, leadership, and decision-making continue to limit women's opportunities for advancement. Economic dependence, restricted access to education, and limited financial resources further contribute to these inequalities, affecting women's overall empowerment. The effects of gender disparity are evident in the underrepresentation of women in leadership, economic limitations, and reduced access to social and political opportunities. These barriers hinder women's ability to contribute fully to community and national development, reinforcing cycles of dependency and inequality. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach, including improved access to education, economic empowerment initiatives, legal protections, and advocacy for cultural transformation. By implementing sustainable strategies, Oro-Igwe women can achieve greater participation in leadership, economic activities, and decision-making processes. Bridging the gender gap will not only enhance women's well-being but also contribute to the overall progress and development of the community.

Giving the above, a key strategy for reducing gender disparity is enhancing access to education for women and girls. Education has been recognized as one of the most powerful tools for breaking the cycle of gender inequality, as it equips women with knowledge, skills, and confidence to participate in social and economic activities (UNESCO, 2023). Unfortunately, in Oro-Igwe community, early marriage and cultural biases have contributed to lower female enrollment and high school dropout among girls (Okechukwu, 2022).

To strengthen the above position, legal and policy reforms are essential for bridging the gender gap in Oro-Igwe community.

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