

# PEOPLES PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN IN AFIKPO CULTURE IN EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how Afikpo people in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, view women, paying special emphasis to traditional gender roles, land ownership, and sociocultural engagement. Because inheritance rights are passed down through the male line, women in Afikpo are typically excluded from discussions, land inheritance, and decision-making procedures. Despite their substantial contributions to home economies, agriculture, and communal life, women are not allowed to buy or sell land due to cultural constraints, and male elders continue to be the only ones who may settle disputes. These behaviors institutionalize gender inequity and support male control over resources. Using historical, anthropological, and sociological viewpoints, the study places these practices within larger Igbo cultural traditions and examines how long-standing traditions maintain communal cohesiveness while also maintaining female marginalization. The study also looks at the expanding impact of modern forces that oppose patriarchal systems and progressively create new avenues for women's engagement, such as gender activism, education, and legislative reforms. The results show that although educated groups and younger generations are becoming more supportive of women's rights, traditional beliefs are still firmly held, requiring many women to balance traditional expectations with contemporary chances. The study comes to the conclusion that comprehending how people in Afikpo view women necessitates a nuanced strategy that strikes a balance between the pressing need for gender parity and traditional preservation. It emphasizes the need for ongoing discussions between tradition and reform, highlighting the part that educators, legislators, and community leaders may play in changing perceptions of women while upholding cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Afikpo, culture, Women, Ebonyi

## Introduction

Afikpo is a culturally vibrant town in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, with long-standing customs and rituals that are deeply embedded in the broader Igbo legacy (Moghalu, 2015). By combining communal governance, spiritual beliefs, and respect for ancestors, Afikpo, one of Igboland's oldest villages, has managed to maintain a strong sense of cultural identity. Like many Igbo communities, Afikpo society is patriarchal, with men ruling over most facets of governance, customs, and decision-making (Khelghat-Doost & Sibly, 2020). This system defines the duties and responsibilities of men and women in many areas of life, influencing social interactions and expectations (Goffman, 2024). Women are sometimes restricted by society in activities that are perceived as solely masculine, even though they are appreciated for their contributions to the family and business.

The significance of gender roles in Afikpo cannot be overstated, since they sustain cultural continuity and provide social order. In everything from religious and political activity to marriage rites, men and women are assigned specific responsibilities that reflect traditional Igbo beliefs (Agbasiere, 2015). Women are excluded from certain cultural benefits, including as political decision-making, masquerade participation, and kola nut rites, despite their crucial roles in childrearing, caring for others, and trading (Chukwuma-Ali, 2019; Nduka & Ozioma, 2019; Obi-Nwosu, 2020). Understanding these positions is crucial to appreciating the strengths and limitations imposed on women by the cultural environment. This essay aims to critically examine the roles that women play in Afikpo society, with a focus on what they are permitted to do and what they are culturally forbidden from doing. By means of this analysis,

## Historical and Cultural Background of Gender Roles in Afikpo

Within the patriarchal framework of traditional Igbo society, including Afikpo, gender roles are deeply embedded in cultural practices and social organization (Amadiume, 2015; Mills, 2017). In pre-colonial times, Igbo communities functioned in accordance with a system of government, religious rites, and labor division that clearly defined the roles of men and women. Men were traditionally seen as the heads of households, warriors, decision-makers, and stewards of family traditions. On the other hand, women were vital to domestic life, trade, and agriculture. Despite the male dominance in leadership positions, Igbo women were not entirely defenseless (Ikegbu, 2018). They were influential in several fields, particularly in economic endeavors including market trading, artisan manufacture, and farming. Women also had their own social groups, such as the Umuada, a council of women from the same lineage, and the Otu Odu, a well-known women's society, to exert authority over family and community matters.

The status of women in Afikpo is significantly influenced by cultural beliefs, customs, and practices. Women are regarded as the cornerstone of the family because of their contributions to raising children, upholding family customs, and meeting the family's financial demands (Ghoroghchian et al., 2024; Ikegbu, 2018; Youvan, 2024). However, traditional customs restrict their capacity to participate in specific activities. For instance, women are not allowed to bless or cut kola nuts because it is considered a religious task that is exclusively done

by men. They are also forbidden from engaging in activities that are considered to be physically and spiritually demanding, such as climbing trees, tapping palm wine, and performing in masquerades (Peters, 2019). These cultural restraints ensure that social norms are upheld by men continue to control important facets of politics, culture, and decision-making, while women stay in their designated roles. These gender roles have influenced Afikpo society's collective identity over time, maintaining customs while also posing issues regarding women's position in the contemporary world.

## **Activities Women Are Not Allowed to Do in Afikpo Culture**

### **1. Cola Nut Customs**

In Afikpo tradition, women are not allowed to cut or bless kola nuts because these customs are considered sacred and should only be carried out by men. The kola nut has deep cultural and spiritual significance in Igbo culture as a representation of harmony, hospitality, and ancestor communication (Odo et al., 2023; Unya, 2021). In traditional events, elders or male heads of households present and bless the kola nut before it is served to attendees. This practice reinforces the notion that men are spiritual intermediaries between the living and the dead, a role that women are not permitted to do.

Women are not allowed to participate in kola nut ceremonies primarily because of the concept of ceremonial purity and gender-specific spiritual obligations (Obineche, 2017). It is stated that women should not partake in these sacred rituals due to their biological characteristics (e.g., menstruation), since kola nut blessings are often associated with calling upon ancestor spirits and seeking their guidance. This restriction highlights the deeply ingrained patriarchal structure in Afikpo society, where men maintain their cultural and religious authority while women are restricted to supporting roles during traditional rituals.

### **2. Tree Climbing Restrictions**

Women have long been forbidden from climbing trees in Afikpo, particularly when it comes to collecting kola nuts or fruits. This restriction has both a functional and symbolic function. From a symbolic perspective, tree climbing is perceived as a physically demanding and hazardous activity that is typically associated with male strength and endurance (Komyathy, 2024). This view holds that women shouldn't engage in activities that endanger their physical safety or jeopardize their perceived delicacy and modesty.

In addition to its symbolic importance, this restriction serves to maintain gender standards. While men are expected to provide and carry out hard labor, women are expected to focus on household and caring duties (Finch & Groves, 2022). Even when kola nuts and fruits are needed for ceremonies, men are responsible for climbing and obtaining them. Even though this practice has been around for a while, it nevertheless limits women's freedom in various areas of daily life and business.

### **3. Marriage Customs**

In Afikpo, women don't negotiate marriages with other women or pay for their own brides. The bride price, which is a deal between the family of the bride and groom, is a crucial

part of Igbo marriage customs. Men handle all financial and negotiating aspects of the transaction. This practice reinforces the notion that women are considered family property and that male relatives determine their marriage fate.

Women are also prohibited from participating in the marriage talks of another woman. The terms of the marriage contract are decided by the bride's male relatives, such as her father, uncles, or older brothers, who lead these conversations. Despite being essential to marriage, women in Afikpo community have limited power over the process, which is shown in their exclusion from these conversations. Even when a woman's opinion is sought, the choice is ultimately made by her male relatives (Williams, 2023).

#### **4. Leadership and Decision-Making**

In Afikpo, women are not permitted to serve on the council of elders or make important decisions for the community. Elders and titled men make up the decision-making bodies that settle conflicts, uphold traditions, and oversee community affairs (Aiyedun & Ordor, 2016) under Afikpo's traditional governance, which is male-dominated like in many other Igbo communities. Despite the reality that women are essential to maintaining the community, their exclusion from these councils serves to perpetuate the idea that men are better suited for positions of leadership and wisdom.

Women do not have official decision-making authority, but they may have an informal effect through conversations in women's groups or through their husbands. Women's capacity to actively represent their interests within (Bako & Syed, 2018). Though traditional limitations still exist, there are increasing initiatives to promote women's participation in community leadership due to modern influences and lobbying for gender inclusion.

#### **5. Palm Wine Tapping and Palm Nut Harvesting**

In Afikpo, women are not allowed to harvest palm nuts or tap palm wine since these tasks are seen as the sole domain of men. Tapping palm wine entails scaling large palm trees to harvest the sap, which is subsequently fermented to create the alcoholic beverage frequently used in customary rituals (McGovern, 2019). Women are already culturally prohibited from climbing trees, thus their exclusion from palm wine tapping is a logical progression of this prohibition.

Furthermore, it is believed that harvesting palm nuts is physically taxing work that is consistent with men's traditional position as breadwinners. Women do not participate in the actual harvesting process, although they may help with the processing of palm oil or the sale of palm products. Beliefs that some activities, particularly those involving instruments like machetes, are too risky or improper for women serve to further restrict them (Makaza & Chimuzinga, 2020). The gender-based division of labor in Afikpo society is further highlighted by these cultural constraints.

#### **6. Masquerade Participation**

In Afikpo, women are strictly prohibited from participating in masquerade performances, which hold great spiritual and cultural significance in Igbo culture. Because they are believed to be ancient spirits, only initiated men are allowed to wear the masks, perform, or organize masquerade parties (Njoku, 2020). Women are even prohibited from examining some

masquerades up close since it is believed that doing so could harm their spiritual well-being or bring them ill luck.

Women are not permitted to participate in masquerades because of the belief that these spirits talk to the male ancestry and that women should not interfere with such sacred ceremonies as they are considered contaminants (Van Beek & Leyten, 2023). This order is maintained in traditional religion, where men operate as a link between the spiritual and material worlds. Modernization has increased the number of women attending cultural festivals, but direct involvement in masquerade performances is still forbidden.

## **7. Land Matters**

In Afikpo, women are not allowed to take part in debates or decisions pertaining to the distribution and ownership of land. Traditionally, women are not allowed to inherit land; it is passed down through the male line (Akinola, 2018; Rao, 2017). Since it is thought that land should stay in the male line, a woman cannot inherit or sell family or communal land. Furthermore, as only male elders and community leaders are permitted to settle land disputes, women are not permitted to mark or delineate boundaries on land. A woman must rely on male family members to advocate her interests, even if she is personally impacted by a land dispute (Siegel, 2018). This restriction strengthens male dominance over wealth and property while limiting women's economic independence. Even though women's land rights are acknowledged by contemporary legal systems, customs still prevent females from owning land or having a say in decisions. The limitations imposed on women in Afikpo culture serve as a stark reminder of the profoundly ingrained gender standards that have long characterized Igbo society. Women make substantial contributions to the family and the economy, but they are routinely left out of important cultural practices, religious rites, and governmental processes (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Klingorová & Havlíček, 2015). These restrictions, which have their roots in history, uphold male dominance and power over social systems. However, some of these traditions are progressively changing as a result of the increasing impact of gender activism, legislative reforms, and education. Traditional views are still prevalent, though, and many women still have to work around these limitations in order to be more accepted in contemporary society.

## **Activities Women Are Allowed to Do in Afikpo Culture**

### **1. Women's Roles in Family, Domestic Life, and Child-Rearing**

Women are essential to preserving family structure and guaranteeing the survival of traditional values in Afikpo culture. They are in charge of raising children, establishing cultural standards, and running the home as the primary caregivers (Glenn, 2016). Girls are taught household chores like cooking, cleaning, and looking after younger siblings from a young age, which reinforces the idea that women should put their families first.

Women are the family's moral and emotional pillars in addition to their domestic responsibilities. In times of family strife, they frequently mediate disputes by offering their husbands and kids support and direction. Despite the fact that males are typically thought of as the heads of households, women have a big say on how future generations will behave and what

they value. Respect for older women, especially grandmothers, is a reflection of their valued position as stewards of knowledge and family history (Rowley, 2024).

## **2. Women's Participation in Farming, Trade, and Economic Activities**

Women in Afikpo are actively involved in economic activities, especially in trade and agriculture, despite social constraints on their ability to hold positions of leadership and spirituality. While males concentrate on more labor-intensive farming duties like clearing land and gathering palm produce, women engage in farming, mostly growing crops like cassava, vegetables, and maize (Adeniyi et al., 2023). Due to their contributions to local food markets and subsistence farming, women play a critical role in the production of food.

Women also predominate in the trading industry, where they purchase and sell products at neighborhood marketplaces. Market women organize into cooperative groups that help one another out financially and socially, enabling them to overcome obstacles in the commercial world and grow their companies. Women are financially empowered by these economic endeavors, which allow them to fund their children's education and help with family expenses (Jabeen et al., 2020). Although women's access to property ownership is still restricted by traditional gender conventions, their impact in trade and commerce is nevertheless considerable.

## **3. Women's Involvement in Cultural and Religious Festivals (Excluding Masquerades)**

Despite being barred from masquerade performances, women in Afikpo actively engage in religious and cultural events. During festivals, they participate by playing musical instruments, planning dancing routines, and cooking food (McClinchey, 2020). Women's dances play a significant role in Afikpo festivities, as different groups display their grace, solidarity, and cultural pride through traditional moves.

Women might also revere ancestral spirits and deities during religious celebrations. They are involved in leading female-centered rites, especially those pertaining to marriage, conception, and delivery, as well as in preparing sacred offerings. In order to maintain the balance of cultural traditions, women's spiritual responsibilities supplement those of men (Bonvillain, 2020). These events demonstrate how women have helped to preserve Afikpo's rich legacy, even if their roles are still primarily supportive.

## **4. The Role of Women in Traditional Healing and Spiritual Practices**

Afikpo culture places a high value on traditional healing, and women have traditionally been essential as herbalists, midwives, and spiritual healers. Using the knowledge that has been passed down through the generations, female herbalists specialize in using medicinal plants to treat ailments (Romm, 2017). These women are well-respected for their capacity to treat illnesses and counsel community members on health issues.

Another important field where women thrive is midwifery. Using herbal medicines and spiritual instruction, traditional birth attendants help expectant mothers before, during, and after labor, guaranteeing a healthy delivery. In addition, women participate in spiritual activities like prayer and divination, especially in ceremonies related to childbearing and fertility. Women still have esteemed positions in formal religious settings, notwithstanding the predominance of male spiritual leaders (Finau, 2017).

## **5. Women's Contributions to Education and Modern Professions in Contemporary Afikpo**

Women in Afikpo are breaking down conventional boundaries and pursuing new careers as a result of greater access to education. Gender roles in society have been gradually redefined as a result of the large number of people pursuing jobs in teaching, healthcare, law, and business (Crompton & Sanderson, 2024). Female educators are essential in educating young girls because they encourage them to pursue goals beyond financial dependence and household duties. Women in modern Afikpo are also advancing in occupations including public administration, engineering, and medicine. Despite ongoing obstacles, especially in fields where males predominate, educated women are demonstrating their ability and advocating for more gender inclusion (Hill et al., 2016; Williams, 2023). As more families see the need of empowering and educating their daughters, the number of female professionals and entrepreneurs is increasing, signifying a cultural shift.

### **Changing Perspectives and Modern Influence**

#### **1. The Impact of Education and Modernization on Women's Roles**

In Afikpo, gender roles have changed as a result of education. Women are pushing for greater inclusion in leadership, business, and community development as more of them pursue formal education, breaking long-standing barriers. Women are being given the knowledge and abilities by schools and colleges to compete in the workforce and make more active contributions to the advancement of society (Muberekwa & Nkomo, 2016).

Cultural views on gender equality have also changed as a result of modernization (Inglehart et al., 2017). Media, technology, and urbanization have exposed people to ideas from around the world, which has sparked conversations about women's rights and empowerment. Though societal expectations are still influenced by deeply ingrained traditions, there is a growing understanding that women's duties should extend beyond the home and workplace.

#### **2. Women's Increasing Participation in Leadership, Politics, and Decision-Making**

Despite their historical exclusion from Afikpo's political and decision-making positions, women are gradually becoming more involved. These days, several women have positions as municipal council members, political representatives, and community leaders (Baskaran & Hessami, 2018; Paxton et al., 2020). Women's organizations and associations have also grown in number, fighting for legislative changes that support gender inclusion and defending their rights.

The idea that only men should have power is being challenged at the household level as educated women are claiming greater involvement in family decision-making. In some instances, women are assuming leadership roles in religious institutions and family enterprises, proving their capacity for successful leadership (Afridi et al., 2017). The involvement of women in public affairs and governance indicates a shift toward a more balanced society, even though traditionalists continue to oppose this.

#### **3. The Role of Advocacy Groups in Promoting Gender Equality**

In Afikpo, advocacy groups and organizations dedicated to women's rights have been instrumental in dismantling traditional constraints and advancing gender equality. These

organizations offer leadership development, economic empowerment initiatives, and legal assistance to women. They aid in bridging the gap between tradition and modernity by promoting policy reforms and increasing public awareness of gender discrimination.

Advocacy organizations both domestically and internationally have also played a significant role in tackling issues including access to education, domestic violence, and land inheritance rights (García-Moreno et al., 2015; Green & Nnatuanya, 2024). The way society views gender roles is changing as a result of campaigns that empower young girls and give women mentorship opportunities. While upholding the fundamental principles of Afikpo tradition, the growing agitation for women's rights is encouraging a slow cultural shift.

#### **4. Cases of Cultural Adaptation and Shifts in Afikpo Gender Roles**

Even while Afikpo is still firmly anchored in tradition, there are certain noteworthy instances when traditional customs have changed to conform to evolving gender norms. For instance, some families now acknowledge the economic need to empower women by allowing daughters to inherit land. A change toward more inclusive family dynamics is reflected in some households where women take part in marriage negotiations.

Furthermore, several conventional limitations are being reexamined, particularly in urban settings. Women are becoming more independent in their decision-making, higher education, and life mate selection (Ahinkorah et al., 2018). These modifications show that although Afikpo culture is still robust, it is progressively changing to conform to contemporary standards.

The roles of women in Afikpo culture are deeply influenced by tradition, yet they are not entirely static. While women continue to face restrictions in leadership, religious rituals, and land ownership, they actively contribute to family life, economic activities, and cultural preservation. The growing impact of education, modernization, and advocacy efforts is challenging gender norms and fostering greater inclusivity (Benería et al., 2015).

As Afikpo society progresses, it must find a balance between preserving its rich cultural heritage and embracing gender equality. By recognizing and valuing the contributions of women beyond traditional roles, Afikpo can create a more inclusive and progressive future where both men and women play equal roles in shaping the community.

The roles of women in Afikpo culture have been examined in this paper, with particular attention paid to the activities in which they actively participate as well as those in which they are prohibited. Certain cultural and spiritual customs, such as kola nut ceremonies, masquerade shows, land inheritance, and political decision-making, have historically excluded women. These limitations are a result of ingrained social hierarchies, spiritual taboos, and gender role assumptions. However, women play significant roles in family life, farming, trading, traditional medicine, cultural festivals, and economic activity. Modernization, education, and advocacy efforts are beginning to challenge these long-standing norms, resulting in more women participating in leadership, politics, and the workforce. Despite these developments, women's complete integration into society is still constrained by cultural norms (Bonvillain, 2020).

### **Reflection on the Significance of Cultural Traditions and the Evolving Role of Women**

The Afikpo people's identity and values are preserved through cultural traditions. The established gender roles are a reflection of the structure and values of society that have governed the community for many centuries. These customs provide society structure, but they also perpetuate injustices that prevent women from fully engaging in society. Women's changing roles in Afikpo are a reflection of larger cultural shifts brought about by modernity, education, and international campaigns for gender equality. Women's contributions to society keep growing as they have greater access to economic and educational possibilities. Afikpo society appears to be heading toward a more inclusive future, despite the resistance of some traditionalists to these reforms.

### **Recommendations**

A balanced approach is required to promote gender inclusion and conserve cultural heritage. The suggestions listed below can assist in achieving this:

1. Women can make significant contributions to their societies without totally eliminating traditional values if education for women is encouraged and gender equality is raised.
2. Women should be given the chance to participate in community decision-making, particularly on matters that directly impact them, but also honoring cultural leadership structures.
3. Women will become more economically independent and have more societal influence if they have greater access to financial resources, business possibilities, and land ownership.
4. Without sacrificing fundamental cultural values, some restrictions, like involvement in marriage negotiations and land inheritance, might be reviewed to suit modern circumstances.
5. Ongoing support for women's rights, backed by legislative frameworks and community involvement, will aid in addressing detrimental gender norms and advance equity and inclusivity.

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