RELIGION, CULTURE, AND THE QUEST FOR EQUITY: CONFRONTING GENDER AND ECONOMIC INSTABILITY IN OGUN STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Research Problem: *Women are vital to societal progress and reforms. Nevertheless, gender inequality and economic instability impact them in Ogun State, Nigeria, despite their significant contributions to the State' s development.*
Methods/Theory: *The study used descriptive and qualitative methods guided by Akanle's (2014) theory on religion, sociology, and economic development in Nigeria. It drew insights from Nigerian gender studies, with analysis informed by Aina (2012) and Makama (2013) on gender issues and culture. Literature, policy documents, reports, and historical records examined how religious and cultural practices impact women's socio-economic opportunities in Ogun State. Data collection involved observations and secondary sources like the National Bureau of Statistics, World Bank, journals, texts, policy reports, government publications, and online databases.*
Results: *The findings indicate that religion and cultural traditions in Ogun State have reinforced patriarchal systems that limit women' s access to education, property, formal employment, and economic independence, thereby impeding their social and familial roles. The results suggest potential avenues for fostering positive change through the progressive adoption of gender- supportive initiatives.*
Conclusion: *Addressing gender- based social and economic disparities in Ogun State necessitates coordinated efforts across social, religious, and economic sectors.*
Key Contribution to Knowledge: *Ogun State seeks to accelerate economic and social development by ensuring that religion and culture support gender equity and women' s empowerment, thereby fostering growth within the State. This approach will benefit society, the economy, families, and human capital development.*
Recommendations: *Implement key initiatives to promote gender equality, such as reorienting traditions, recognising women's economic contributions, interpreting religious texts gender-sensitively, reforming discriminatory norms, adopting inclusive economic policies, and launching targeted empowerment programs.*

These steps are vital for reducing inequalities and fostering sustainable development.

Introduction

Ogun State, located in the south-western region of Nigeria, is culturally rich and religiously diverse, with Christianity, Islam, and traditional beliefs deeply embedded in everyday life (Akanle, 2014). The state's economy is characterised by both industrial activity—particularly in manufacturing and quarrying and a vibrant informal sector, where petty trading, artisanal work, and subsistence farming are prevalent (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023). Despite these economic activities, poverty levels remain high, unemployment rates are rising, and a significant proportion of the population remains economically vulnerable (World Bank, 2022).

Within this socio-economic context, religion and culture play a central role in shaping social norms, gender relations, and economic participation. In many communities, cultural expectations and religious interpretations influence educational attainment, property rights, and occupational choices, often to the disadvantage of women (Makama, 2013). While women have historically contributed significantly to agricultural production and market trade in the Yoruba cultural setting (Aina, 2012), patriarchal systems and restrictive religious norms continue to limit their full integration into the formal economy.

Despite ongoing development interventions and policy initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, Ogun State continues to face entrenched disparities in economic participation and access to resources. Women are disproportionately represented in informal, low-paying jobs and have limited access to credit, land, and formal employment opportunities (Eze, 2020). Religious and cultural traditions—when interpreted rigidly—can reinforce patriarchal power structures, thereby restricting women's autonomy in decision-making and limiting their ability to contribute meaningfully to economic development (Pereira, 2018). These constraints not only perpetuate gender inequality but also exacerbate economic instability, as the productive potential of a significant portion of the population remains underutilised.

The primary aim of this study is to analyse how religion and culture influence gender equity and economic stability in Ogun State. By synthesising insights from existing academic literature, policy documents, and socio-economic reports, the paper seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how these socio-cultural forces interact with economic realities. It also aims to identify strategies that could harness religion and culture as vehicles for positive change rather than as barriers to equity and growth.

The scope of the study is limited to Ogun State, with a focus on the intersections between religious beliefs, cultural practices, and economic conditions affecting gender equity. The research does not conduct primary fieldwork but relies on secondary sources, making it a conceptual analysis informed by library research. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policy formulation, advocacy efforts, and community engagement strategies. Policymakers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based institutions, and community leaders can draw from its findings to design interventions that are culturally sensitive, religiously informed, and economically inclusive (Hooks,

2000). By framing religion and culture not solely as obstacles but as possible enablers of reform, the study contributes to broader debates on sustainable development and social justice in Nigeria.

The library research method was selected because the study aims to provide a conceptual and contextual analysis rather than an empirical measurement of specific variables. This method is appropriate for synthesising diverse perspectives, comparing theoretical frameworks, and situating the discussion within both Nigerian and global gender equity debates. It also offers efficiency in gathering a wide breadth of information while maintaining academic rigour through reliance on credible and verifiable sources (Neuman, 2014).

Religion and Gender Relations

Religious belief systems, Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions, play a significant role in shaping gender relations in Ogun State. Christian doctrine, depending on denomination, may reinforce traditional gender roles through interpretations of scriptures such as Eph. 5:22–24, which emphasise women's submission to men, while other theological perspectives advocate for mutual respect and gender equality (Oduyoye, 2004). Islamic teachings, as practised in parts of Ogun State, often derive from Qur'anic injunctions that prescribe distinct roles for men and women, particularly in leadership and inheritance (Ali, 2016). However, progressive Islamic scholarship increasingly argues for the reinterpretation of these texts in ways that promote equity (Saeed, 2013). Traditional Yoruba religion and customs historically assigned women both economic and domestic roles, yet often excluded them from key decision-making councils (Falola & Genova, 2006). Across all faiths, interpretations that emphasise fairness, shared responsibility, and the dignity of all individuals have been shown to positively impact women's participation in public and economic life (Aina, 2012).

Cultural Practices and Economic Participation

Norms in Ogun State are strongly influenced by patriarchal systems, where male dominance is reinforced through inheritance laws and lineage-based property rights (Olawoye, 2015). In many Yoruba communities, land and other significant resources are traditionally transferred through the male line, limiting women's access to agricultural inputs and capital (Okunlola, 2017). Marriage customs often place decision-making power in the hands of men, further restricting women's autonomy in economic matters. Such structures create a cyclical pattern where women's contributions are undervalued, and their access to credit, technology, and market networks remains limited (Adebayo & Adepoju, 2019). However, there is growing evidence that cultural adaptation, such as joint land titling, women's cooperatives, and inclusive community leadership, can dismantle barriers to women's economic participation (Olawale, 2021).

Economic Instability in Ogun State

Ogun State faces persistent economic instability characterised by unemployment, underemployment, and wage disparities, all of which have gendered impacts (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Women are disproportionately represented in the informal economy, particularly in petty trading, small-scale farming, and artisanal work, which often lack social protection and income stability (Ehinomen & Adeleke, 2020). Limited access to formal financial services, combined with socio-cultural constraints, has created barriers to entrepreneurship for women (Adegbite et al., 2018). Even when women enter business, they often face gender-based discrimination in market access, credit acquisition, and contract opportunities (World Bank, 2021). Such

challenges hinder their ability to contribute fully to economic growth and deepen existing inequality.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory serves as the central analytical lens for examining systemic gender inequality in Ogun State. It posits that social, economic, and political structures are historically shaped to favour men, thereby institutionalising women's subordination (Hooks, 2015; Tong, 2014). In the Ogun State context, this theoretical approach helps unpack how religious interpretations, cultural practices, and economic arrangements collectively reinforce patriarchal norms. By recognising gender inequality as a structural rather than an individual problem, feminist theory provides a pathway for challenging discriminatory policies and customs. Furthermore, it advocates for the redistribution of resources, opportunities, and power between genders in a manner that is both equitable and sustainable.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is crucial for evaluating local traditions within the unique socio-cultural context of Yoruba society in Ogun State. Rooted in anthropological thought, it encourages understanding cultural practices on their own terms rather than judging them solely through external value systems (Herskovits, 1955; Kuper, 2000). In this study, cultural relativism allows for a nuanced assessment of inheritance customs, marriage arrangements, and community decision-making structures without dismissing their historical and social significance. However, the framework also recognises that some traditions, while socially embedded, may perpetuate inequality and require transformation to align with contemporary human rights principles (UNESCO, 2015).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as developed by Crenshaw (1989), offers a multidimensional framework for understanding how various social categories, such as gender, religion, culture, ethnicity, and economic class, intersect to shape lived experiences. In Ogun State, this means recognising that a woman's economic opportunity is not determined by her gender alone, but also by factors such as her religious affiliation, marital status, community location (urban or rural), and level of education. Intersectionality ensures that interventions targeting gender equity address the complex and overlapping systems of oppression, rather than treating each factor in isolation (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Findings from Literature

Religion as Both Barrier and Tool for Empowerment

Religious systems in Ogun State, including Christianity, Islam, and traditional beliefs, are not monolithic in their influence. In some cases, interpretations of sacred texts reinforce gender hierarchies by restricting leadership roles for women or prescribing domestic submission (Oduyoye, 2004; Ali, 2016). Conversely, progressive theological movements within these same traditions are increasingly using faith-based arguments to promote gender equality, community leadership for women, and equitable inheritance rights (Saeed, 2013; Aina, 2012).

Cultural Norms as Structural Constraints on Women's Economic Agency

Patriarchal inheritance laws, coupled with marriage customs that prioritise male decision-making authority, limit women's access to land, credit, and market opportunities (Olawoye, 2015; Okunlola, 2017). Such exclusion from productive resources reinforces women's

dependence on male relatives and confines them to low-income activities in the informal sector (Adebayo & Adepoju, 2019).

Economic Instability and Entrenched Gender Inequalities

Ogun State faces high unemployment and underemployment rates, with women overrepresented in the most precarious forms of labour, such as petty trading and subsistence farming (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022; Ehinomen & Adeleke, 2020). Economic instability magnifies existing gender disparities, making it harder for women to accumulate assets, expand enterprises, or break free from poverty cycles (Adegbite, Ayinde, & Omotayo, 2018).

Discussion

The interplay between religion, culture, and economics in Ogun State presents a complex socio-economic landscape. Religious frameworks often act as both gatekeepers and gateways—restricting women through conservative interpretations, yet also offering moral and institutional support for gender advocacy when interpreted through egalitarian lenses (Oduyoye, 2004; Saeed, 2013). For example, faith-based women's groups have successfully mobilised around microfinance initiatives, demonstrating religion's potential as a platform for empowerment.

Culturally, Yoruba traditions have historically acknowledged women as vital economic actors in markets and trade (Falola & Genova, 2006). However, these traditions also maintain male dominance in political and land ownership structures, limiting women's influence in resource allocation and governance (Olawoye, 2015). persistence of male lineage inheritance in many communities effectively sidelines women from agricultural and entrepreneurial expansion (Okunlola, 2017).

From an economic perspective, the limited formal employment opportunities in Ogun State push many women into low-income informal sector activities (Ehinomen & Adeleke, 2020). Without access to stable income, credit facilities, or market networks, women are caught in a cycle where economic dependency reinforces cultural and religious subordination (Adegbite et al., 2018).

Comparatively, other Nigerian states, such as Lagos, have made strides in promoting women's economic participation through legal reforms and entrepreneurial grants, though cultural resistance remains (UN Women, 2020). Beyond Nigeria, case studies from Kenya and Rwanda illustrate that integrating cultural reform with economic empowerment programmes significantly accelerates gender equity outcomes (UN Women, 2020).

Recommendations

Promote Gender-Sensitive Religious Interpretations

Collaborate with religious leaders across Christian, Islamic, and traditional institutions to produce doctrinal guidance and sermons that affirm women's equal participation in leadership, economic activity, and community decision-making (Aina, 2012).

Reform Discriminatory Cultural Practices

Engage traditional councils, women's groups, and youth associations in community-based education to address inheritance laws and marriage customs that limit women's autonomy (Olawoye, 2015). Such initiatives should respect cultural heritage while aligning with constitutional and human rights standards (UNESCO, 2015).

Enhance Women's Economic Participation

Expand women's access to microfinance and cooperative credit systems. Invest in vocational and entrepreneurial training that links directly to market demands, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing, and digital services (Adegbite et al., 2018).

Implement Gender-Responsive Public Policies

Advocate for state-level policies that enforce wage equality, provide maternity protections, expand childcare infrastructure, and ensure that women are represented in economic planning bodies (UN Women, 2020). Regular gender audits should be conducted to monitor progress and accountability.

Conclusion

The analysis of Ogun State's gender dynamics underscores that religion, culture, and economic structures are deeply intertwined in shaping women's social and economic status. While religious and cultural systems can perpetuate gender inequality, they also hold transformative potential when approached through inclusive, equity-focused frameworks (Hooks, 2015; Saeed, 2013). Economic instability, by disproportionately affecting women, acts as a reinforcing mechanism that sustains existing disparities (NBS, 2022).

Addressing these challenges requires an integrated strategy, one that combines gender-sensitive religious education, cultural reform, targeted economic empowerment programmes, and gender-responsive public policy. Such an approach must be locally grounded, participatory, and designed to address the intersectional realities faced by women in Ogun State. By harnessing the strengths of cultural heritage and religious community, while reforming inequitable practices, the state can move towards a more inclusive and economically vibrant future (UN Women, 2020).

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