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On: 31 March 2015, At: 20:16

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Community, Work & Family

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccwf20>

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Published online: 24 Nov 2014.



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To cite this article: Uchendu Eugene Chigbu (2014): Repositioning culture for development: women and development in a Nigerian rural community, *Community, Work & Family*, DOI: [10.1080/13668803.2014.981506](https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2014.981506)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2014.981506>

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## Repositioning culture for development: women and development in a Nigerian rural community

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*(Received 21 October 2013; accepted 23 July 2014)*

Most studies on women have ignored women's view of themselves in relation to their roles in community development. This study uses interview and ethnographic data from Nigeria to investigate women's narratives of themselves concerning their position in a rural cultural space in relation to community development. It explores ways of repositioning patriarchal or gender unresponsive cultures for eliciting women's potentials in community development. It emphasises how women's cultural constraints in a patriarchal community have led to a rare survival strategy – that is, the evolution of an invisible matriarchy. As a recommendation, it presents a framework for culture repositioning and a map of actors' responsibilities for its achievement. It contributes to ongoing debates on women in rural community development. It raises conceptual questions about customary practices that affect women's values in communities in Nigeria's rural areas. Finally, it presents three main lessons that can be drawn by women (and men) in traditional communities in non-Western societies.

**Keywords:** community development; culture; gender; Nigeria; rural development; women

En la mayoría de los estudios sobre las mujeres no se ha considerado la opinión que ellas tienen sobre sí mismas en relación con el rol que ejercen en el desarrollo comunitario. Este estudio utiliza entrevistas y datos etnográficos de Nigeria para investigar la visión que tienen mujeres sobre ellas mismas, con respecto a su posición en un espacio cultural rural en relación al desarrollo comunitario. El documento también explora maneras en las cuáles culturas patriarcales, insensibles a los desafíos relacionados con el género, puedan permitir la realización de los potenciales de las mujeres en el desarrollo comunitario. Se hace hincapié en cómo limitaciones culturales de la mujer en una comunidad patriarcal han dado lugar a una estrategia de supervivencia peculiar – es decir, la evolución de un matriarcado invisible. Como recomendación, se presenta un marco para el reposicionamiento cultural y un mapa de responsabilidades de los principales actores. Se hace también una contribución a los debates actuales sobre el rol de la mujer en el desarrollo comunitario rural y se plantean preguntas conceptuales sobre las prácticas tradicionales que afectan a los valores de las mujeres en las comunidades en zonas rurales de Nigeria. Finalmente, se presentan tres lecciones primordiales que pueden ser extraídas por mujeres (y hombres) en comunidades tradicionales en las sociedades no occidentales.

**Palabras claves:** desarrollo comunitario; cultura; genero; Nigeria; desarrollo rural; mujeres

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## Introduction

The field of women's studies has generated profound insights into community development, especially at the rural level. Unlike issues concerning, 'men, masculinity, and community development' (Izugbara, Tikkanen, & Barron, 2014), most studies on women have ignored women's view of themselves in relation to their role in community development. In this research, we investigate women's view of their identity, cultural situation and role in community development within a patriarchal society. The main purpose of this research was to identify the cultural challenges faced by women at the local-level development. It investigates these as issues (encountered by women) that affect women's roles in development within a community in Nigeria.

Nigeria is one of the countries where women's contribution to national development has become indispensable. Although they are involved in the most important economic activities, women's activities remain the least acknowledged in the country. They make up 60–80% of Nigeria's agricultural labour force (Ogunlela & Mukhtar, 2009, p. 20) and actively participate in other non-agricultural activities. However, their potentials for development remain largely untapped because of discriminatory cultural practices that militate against gender balance. According to the World Health Organisation (2013), Nigeria is one of the countries with high rates of violence against women. This does not necessarily imply physical violence, but alludes to all forms of cultures that deprive women of their natural positions (as respectable persons) in their respective communities. Repositioning these cultural practices, in conformity to universally acceptable standards, has potentials for community development. As a way forward, we argue for a transformation that enables women to exercise their potentials at the community level. We begin by briefly surveying the concept of woman and pertinent issues related to women in development. Using case study analysis, we then present the situation of women in a rural Nigerian community and then make suggestions for improvements.

## Women in rural household community structures

### *Woman as a changing concept*

From a general perspective, advances in Internet technology and the field of medical surgery have affected the concept of woman. Through medical surgery, transgenderism provides evidence that the idea of womanhood is no more static. It has widened the biological identity that defines the woman by pushing the concept of woman into a state of flux. Furthermore, the Internet provides a platform for flexible woman identity. In online communities, a man can adopt the identity of a woman at any time, for an indefinite or a specific period. Such a person can participate, interact and make decisions concerning women in the cyberspace. This is possible in webinars, non-video web conferences and social networking websites. In situations like these, it can be difficult to ascertain males or females because biological identities are concealable behind computer screens. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the biological concept of woman is no more the same everywhere. It is wider in legal systems with established sex reassignment cultures. From the aspect of community, it is broader within the cyberspace than in the real world. Considering this changing context of woman, one may view woman as anyone identified to be legally or biologically a female gender of adult age in any society. This very broad definition recognises that the concept of woman is no more entirely biological issue, but has stronger legal (sex reassignment rights) undertones. It recognises

the transgender (or transsexual) and virtual woman, as well as the biological woman as a part of womanhood. It recognises that people's gender can possibly be altered during their lifetimes. It even takes into account, the geographical perspective of womanhood. For instance, a transgender woman in Germany may not be accepted as a woman in Nigeria due to differences in legal and social systems. That means – a man in one country can be a woman in another. About this issue in Africa, there is a lack of data available on transgender populations due to lack of endorsement of gender alteration by National governments. The only exception is South Africa, whose law, *Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act of 2003*, recognises sex reassignment, and its Constitutional Court has indicated that sexual orientation includes transsexuality. In Nigeria, just as in many African countries, the legal system is transphobic. However, this issue is worth mentioning. Although transgender women may be *invisible* in Nigerian communities today, overtime or as the legal systems change, communities may face the challenges of incorporating them in women's community development affairs. This status of the issue in Africa means that the changing concept of woman has community development implications only in countries like South Africa.

Since our research focuses on Nigeria, we take a more traditional view of a woman's identity – that is, the biological, social roles and cultural perspectives of womanhood. This is in accordance with the situation of women in Nigerian societies. We have adapted to this concept of woman because it matches the traditional view of womanhood in Nigerian rural communities. Within this context, women are at the heart of the social construction of the family. Their reproductive capacity and marital status is important in community development (Okejiri, 2012). In addition, there are behavioural and cultural conditions that guide the identity of womanhood. These social conditions shape women's identity in Nigeria.

### ***Women and matriarchy in the rural household community structures***

Moser (1993, p. 15) asserts that there are three generalised assumptions on rural household structures. First, it consists of a nuclear family. Second, the household functions as a socio-economic unit in which women and men share equal decision-making powers. Third, there is a clear division of labour in the household – where husbands serve as the 'breadwinner' and their wives serve as 'homemaker'. Generally, in rural Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, the breadwinner and homemaker assumption is commonplace. This perception of women in Africa is attributable to the failure to acknowledge the contributions of women in community development. In fact, some scholars have failed to acknowledge the power that lies within women's pressure groups and matriarchies. The few who acknowledged them, did it by constructing 'images, symbols, and ideologies' of women from the point of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Shelley, Morabito, & Tobin-Gurley, 2011, p. 352). However, there are exceptions to this notion. Chinweizu (1990) challenged this position by arguing that women rule men and went on to prescribe what men might do to reduce women's power over them. Chinweizu's (1990) argument can be summarised to mean that men rule the world, but women rule the men who rule the world. We align to this view and consider it worth noting in the role of women in the development process. Chinweizu (1990) categorises matriarchists in three forms –core matriarchists, tomboys and termagants. Core matriarchists are made up of women who rule men by submitting to them. Tomboys are women who wish they were men. Transgender or transsexual men fall into this group. Termagants are women who

acknowledge their womanpower and openly rule men. We have not introduced Chinweizu's views here to show that it is a matriarchal world in Africa, but rather to show that it may not completely be a patriarchal one. We think that African women have developmental powers in the current state of affairs, hence, have strong potential for contributing to development at all levels. Evidences from some matriarchal societies show that they have effective and efficient political and developmental governance. Goettner-Abendroth (1999) identified some existing matriarchal societies. They include the *Mosuo*, *Yao*, *Miao* and *Tan* peoples (in China). The *Chiang* (Tibet), the *Ainu* (Japan) and the *Khasi*, *Garo* and *Nayar* (of India) are few others. In Africa, the *Ashanti*, *Berbers* and *Tuareg*, *Bantu* and *Akan* have matriarchal communities. The *Arawak* (South America), the *Cuna* and *Juchitanians* (in Central America) and the *Iroquois* and *Hopi* of North America have matriarchal societies. According to Goettner-Abendroth (2005, p. 2), these matriarchies do not have

Hierarchies, classes and the domination of one gender by the other are all unknown to them. They are societies that are free of domination, but they still have their guidelines and codes. Moreover, this is what makes them so attractive to those looking for a new philosophy to support the creation of a just society.

Goettner-Abendroth's (2005) research presents matriarchal societies in a very positive manner – as more peaceful and development-oriented societies. However, further examination of literature suggests that this may not be the case. Agarwal (1994) acknowledged that matriarchies are no more than positive but blamed it on the intrusion of patriarchal ideologies and practices, and because of colonisation and modernisation. Joseph (2013) specifically pointed out that men in *Nayar* matriarchies (in India) did not generally own land by inheritance. Even at death, their self-acquired properties could not be disposed as they wished. It took the enactment of the Travancore Nair Act of India (from the 1930s) to enable the self-acquired property of a male to be disposed of by him as he wished. On his death, the self-acquired property could revert to the joint family property, rather to the matriarchy. This is evidence that matriarchal societies can be discriminatory to men as much as patriarchal societies can be to women. Despite this, the positive aspects of matriarchal societies provide evidence that women, despite the homemaker image attached to them, have potential to perform community development roles. These alone are strong reasons why women are important in development at all levels.

### ***Women and rural (community) development***

Interest in women and community development emerged in the 1970s, in the quest to address gender inequality and inequity. It took Boserup's (1970) work on 'women's role in economic development' for the issue of women to become entrenched in the global development agenda. Peet and Hartwick (2010, p. 255) note that 'Boserup's revelation helped to produce a new phenomenon, which was first termed "women in development" by the Women's Committee of the Washington D.C. chapter of the Society of International Development'. The whole idea was to bring women into the development process (Peet & Hartwick, 2010). However, there is a misconception about women in development. We define development as any improvement in parts or all aspects of life within communities, and we acknowledge that women have been part of it. Furthermore,

we view community from place-and-space, political and cultural dimensions. These dimensions apply to Nigeria – manifesting in the form of grouped human system enclosed within a political and cultural space, and visible in ethnic or multicultural terms. From this perspective, we think that women have always played significant roles in the formation (through their reproductive capacity) and development of communities. Goettner-Abendroth (2005) believes that women invented development. We consider this view to radical as it negates the efforts of men in the dark ages. It is purely derived from feminist agenda, which ignores the role of men. We believe that humanity (both men and women) invented development and that women have been central to this invention from prehistoric era in both matriarchal and patriarchal societies. They are still largely involved in it, as much as their male community members are. The challenge is that, unlike men, women encounter problems in gaining the required recognition for the parts they play in the development process. That is why Yi (2012, p. 35) called for ‘overcoming the barriers within structuralist analyses’ and for ‘creative transformation based on the culture of community development’ and more ‘representational strategies’. In the current state of affairs, the understanding and recognition of women’s position and contributions to development is lacking in Nigeria. Attaining a gender-balanced culture in local communities is important.

A key objective of our research is not only to identify women’s roles, but also to identify a process for attaining the needed cultural change in local communities. This is important because well-intended policies have not translated into actions to make the needed changes. Understanding women’s situation is important for its improvement and for cultivating a ‘sense of place’ in their community (Chigbu, 2013, p. 267).

## Research methodology

### Case study

Our research followed a qualitative case study approach. The case study was the community of Uturu, located within latitudes 05.33°N and 06.03°N, in south-eastern Nigeria. Uturu was selected as a case study due to its uniqueness in capturing the cultural conditions and experiences of local development in southern Nigeria. It is a place in transition from rural to urban status; hence, it is witnessing many development activities – especially debates on cultural issues. The Uturu case qualitatively presents an experience of women’s cultural environment in local development in Nigeria.

This research was part of a scoping study for a proposed rural development project to be undertaken in Uturu by a Germany-based NGO, *Uturu International e.V.* Its goal was to ascertain the position of women and their development potential in Uturu, with the aim of making suggestions for greater integration of women in the development of the community. The issue of women in Uturu’s development remains largely uninvestigated. The only existing literature on the issue is Okejiri’s (2012) thesis on ‘understanding women’s struggle regarding reproduction of life and livelihoods’ in Uturu Community. Our research takes a broader perspective of community development by focusing on general issues of in Uturu. Although our major objective is not to generalise the result to the entire country, our findings have strong degree of applicability to other communities in southern Nigeria, especially those in the south-eastern part of the country. This is because communities in south-eastern Nigeria are 100% ethnic *Igbo* and share similar cultures and local development experiences. However, our recommendation has some

level of transferability to communities that share similar cultures or experiences elsewhere within and outside Nigeria.

### **Methods**

Data were collected using formal interviews and secondary data analysis. Purposeful sampling was used for the selection of interviewees. We interviewed 23 persons in the months of February and March 2012. Our respondents consisted of 14 women, 5 teenage girls and 4 men. Our criteria for inclusion in the sample were that they (1) were in a decision-making position in the community; (2) were local gender activists; (3) have in-depth knowledge of women's affairs in the community; or (4) involved in women's or Girls' interest groups in the community. The interviews were discursive in nature, lasting 30–60 minutes, and comprised of open-ended questions. The *Igbo* language was used in the interviews – a language spoken by the *Igbo* ethnic group of Nigeria. Translating the interview transcripts (into English for analysis) did not pose a challenge since we understand *Igbo* to a native level. All respondents preferred anonymity in the citation of their opinions in this research. The interviews focused on discerning the cultural situations and worldview of women (and girls) and their role in development in Uturu. Interviews were recorded in audio format, transcribed and analysed 'using the constant comparison method', whereby each transcript was compared with the rest for ascertaining validity and reliability of data (Chigbu, 2012, p. 215).

### **Description of respondents**

The respondents consisted of people with diverse backgrounds. Out of the 23 respondents, 19 of them (all the men and women) were married. Concerning their level of education, seven were uneducated; three were educated at primary level; six were educated at secondary level; one was a secondary school dropout; four were secondary-level students (all the girls); and two (a man and a woman) had bachelor's degrees. Concerning their occupation, three were women's NGOs leaders, eight were farmers, three were business owners, two were public officials and three were community elders. Each of them was selected independently so that they would typically be unknown to each other. This prevented a bias that might have emerged from shared views developed among those of a similar background. Out of the 23 respondents, 19 self-reported (2 men, 3 teenage girls and all women) as economically insecure. All of our sample were natives and resided within the community. They ranged in age from 13 to 73 years, averaging 47 years old. Evidence from their various responses showed that they were culturally informed individuals with knowledge of the cultural challenges facing women or girls, and their struggle to overcome them.

## **Gendered findings**

### ***Woman and community in Uturu***

The notion of community in Uturu centres on the people as group with common ancestry, cultural and place heritage. Most people conceived community as an agglomeration of the people, geography; traditional norms inherited from their ancestry – that is, the social/ethnic system with informal structures related to kinship. In addition, their political unit within the decentralised, local (formal) structures of administrative authority in Nigeria is

conceived to be an important aspect of community. Borrowing from the words of a respondent (a man), 'Uturu is a socio-political and ethno-cultural community', where 'women for their child-bearing nature are considered to be the engine of lineage continuity'. However, the community is bedevilled with challenges related to lack of cohesion in the context of gender and uncoordinated cultural development.

In Uturu community, the concept of woman is viewed from biological and social angles. First, the term relates strictly to only those born as females then have attained the age of puberty before being recognised as women. Second, what defines her as an important member of her community is her childbearing capacity. Lineage and social roles are strongly linked to womanhood. Analysis of respondents' views indicates that the woman is viewed from five core categories: ' *ndi iyom*, *ndi ikom*, *uṃṃada*, *ndi nne* and *ndi nne kele oshie*'. *Ndi iyom* (or *ṃṃ nwanyị*) is a general term for all women, whether married, unmarried, divorced or widowed and irrespective of their lineage. *Ndi ikom* are unmarried women. *ṃṃada* represents a social group of daughters of the same lineage. Members of *ṃṃada* may be married, unmarried, divorced or widowed but must be women born to the same kindred. *Ndi nne* represents women who are mothers. *Ndi nne kele oshie* are elderly women, who have long passed their menopause. This social stratification of women's identity plays a strong role in community affairs. For instance, *ndi nne kele oshie* are highly respected and play advisory roles to other women in the community. *ṃṃada* represent a socio-political setup of the womenfolk and play the role of a pressure group for women and children's development. *Ndi nne* are looked up with reverence due to their child-rearing roles. *ṃṃokpu* connotes a lineage of women. *Ndi ikom* get least respect and importance, as they do not feature prominently in community matters because they are expected to become married in order to be considered full women. Speaking on the changing context of womanhood as it applies to women in Uturu, one respondent (a woman) said, 'there is no expression for a transgender woman, so we cannot identify such a person as a woman'. 'A person is a woman only by nature and not by choice', another respondent (a teenage girl) noted.

### ***Inferiorisation of women – the place of women in the cultural space***

Issues concerning women's identity and their roles in relation to making Uturu a better place dominated the narratives. From respondents' accounts and observations, all respondents wanted their place to become qualitatively better. The gender structure in the community consists of men, senior men (elders), women and senior women (elders) and youths (comprising of boys and girls). Elder men are highly respected and form the core decisions makers in the community. In our quest to understand the position of women in Uturu's culture, we asked questions concerning her place in the cultural space. All respondents (including the girls) noted that women's full potentials for development were hindered by their position as inferior gender to men in the community. As an instance, a respondent (an elderly woman) noted that '*omenala*' hinders women from 'the sale or ownership and access to land', except through 'their husbands, fathers and brothers'. Another respondent lamented, 'we cannot occupy the throne as traditional ruler in any of our villages ... Does this tell you anything about our position in this community?' *Omenala* is an Igbo word for culture. From this perspective, women are inert participants in a male-dominated cultural space. Land is a cardinal aspect of livelihood in Uturu. Since women cannot expressly own land, they are impeded from buying and selling it – or accessing. Their dependence on men for access to land is a disempowerment to livelihood

and makes them dependent on the menfolk. They are generally the impoverished ones. Additionally, since they ‘cannot occupy the throne of a traditional ruler’ in any of the villages, they are political disempowerment. This makes them followers of men within the political spectrum of their community. This situation makes women insecure and marginalised. ‘Patriarchy runs in the veins of our body of cultures’, a respondent said. This setup, ‘excludes our voices from being heard ... it is where the problem lies’, another respondent noted.

The Uturu scenario denotes a cultural ‘inferiorisation’ of women through the imposition of lower gender identity on them (Meo, 2011, p. 852). This inferior placement of women in the cultural space reflects in various aspects of social life in Uturu. From a sociolinguistic lens, the inferiorisation of women is obvious in the daily use of proverbs in *Igbo* conversations. In our interviews with the male respondents, we identified some proverbs used by them that derogate women’s identity in the community. Among seven others, we specifically noted four of them. (1) *Nwanyị di ya kpọrọ asịi, i si nri oma agaghị enyere ya aka* (a woman who is hated by her husband, can never regain his love by cooking delicious meals for him). (2) *Nkita nwanị zuru la atagbu mmadu* (a female-trained dog bites people to death). (3) *Eri ago mere nwanị agbaghị awaonu* (women have no beards due to their false character). (4) *Ndi ji ndu nwanị vuru ivu ha la igba isi ukporo* (those who rely on women will be disappointed). These *Igbo* proverbs reflect the idea of womanhood as conceived by the men in Uturu’s traditional life. When interviewed on the impact of these proverbs on their image, one woman said ‘day in, day out, we hear, listen to and live with these sorts of statements and notions’. Another woman noted,

These sayings are only one aspect of the insults meted out to women through proverbs in normal discussions. It makes us feel untrusted and undervalued. It is harassing to women’s image, and leaves some of us wondering what the woman must have done to inherit this sort of place in our culture.

The entire cultural scenario of Uturu constitutes of a theatre of bad experiences for women – fundamentally created by a continual restriction of opportunities to women in the community. The enormity of this situation is captured in the words of a respondent (17-year-old girl) who while reflecting on the perspective of young girls said, ‘I wish I was a boy, their life is easier, more straightforward and they have more freedom to decide on how to go about their own future’.

### ***The quadripartite role of women in ‘contributing their own quota’***

Despite the patriarchal system in which women have to live in, they nevertheless play very important roles and participate strongly in community development activities. Their quest to livelihood earning is linked mainly to informal sector, such as farming, petty trading and mat making. Only a very few are employed in the formal sector – e.g. in teaching and office administration. However, contrary to Moser’s (1993) tripartite roles of women, the Uturu women play a quadripartite role in their community. They have reproductive, productive, community management and social change responsibilities. The reproductive role of women is centred on their family responsibilities in childbearing and child rearing. The women consider this as their natural task. Even where husbands are

irresponsible, women continue to bear the burden of child rearing because they consider it their natural as well as cultural responsibility.

The productive role of women centres on their involvement in farming, small-scale trading and craft activities. According to data from a women's community leader, more than 67% of all farmers in Uturu are women, making them major contributors to community's agriculture-based economy. The farming of some particular crops is the speciality of women. According to our respondents, 'ede' and 'igboro' are specialities of women farmers. *Ede* is cocoyam (*Colocasia esculenta*) and *igboro* is cassava (*Manihot esculenta*). These two crops, especially the cassava constitutes the staple food for the community. They serve many nutritional purposes and dominate the cuisine culture of the community. A respondent (male) noted that more women are into small-scale trading than the men in the community, at least, at the ration of '3 to 1 man'. Another aspect of the community industry that is entirely (100%) women's affair is the traditional 'o ru aka' (manufacturing) industry. One of the main manufacturing culture in Uturu is 'ikpukpa ute' (mat-weaving) industry. This industry, the biggest in the traditional Uturu community, is a speciality of women. They weave mats for purposes such as bed sheets, ceiling sheets, funeral sheets, etc. A respondent (woman, and a mat weaver) explained that they make the mats from screw pine leaves, noting, 'we scrape the pine leaves, dry them in the sun, split them into small strips then weave them in weft and warp patterns'. Concerning the earning power of these mats, another respondent (a woman and mat maker) estimated that on the average, 'a woman makes 10 mats in a week and can sell it in the market for a sum enough to cater for children and their family feeding for the whole week'. Another respondent noted that most women could weave up to two dozen mats in a week if their time were not taken by other responsibilities like 'homemaking and farming responsibilities'.

On their community management roles, a respondent (a Women's group leader) said, 'we go out there, and like the men, we do our own projects ... we contribute our own quota to improving our community'. She went on to summarise their approach to contributing their quota to, as well as some of the women's achievements in community development:

We have our own organisational platform for development. The men use *Uturu Development Association*; we use the *Uturu Development Association Women's wing*. The men are building a town hall for the community; we are building one for the women, we call it Uturu Women Civic Centre. In fact, as we are speaking now we have roofed our hall, while the men are yet to reach that stage. It is on record that we have built a home economics laboratory and equipped it at the Uturu Secondary School. We have renovated classrooms in many of our schools and donated funds and materials for community development projects.

From the narrative, it is obvious that women and men are in separate worlds in their efforts towards community development. The consequence appears to be a replication of development efforts. For instance, despite what the last respondent said, Uturu does not have a fully functional community hall for its social activities. Both men and women's halls are yet to be completed, despite that construction activities were initiated on them more than a decade ago. However, at its current (roofed) level, the community can use these halls temporarily, pending the installation of key facilities. If the men and women's resources were combined into building a single multigender and multipurpose community hall, they would have had a fully functional hall for all to date. Current arrangements mean that men and women would have separate forums for planning development

matters. It further implies that decisions reached are not always all embracing – since men and women plan differently, implement differently and monitor similar projects differently. A male respondent noted that the men are ‘very comfortable with this arrangement’ because it enables them to focus more on men’s affairs, knowing that the women would cater for their own needs.

In the past decade, the women have served as agents of change in some aspects of the social and cultural issues within the community. In the words of a woman (women organisation leader):

When our men could not manage the security situation in Uturu, we stepped on stage to protest against armed robbery and killings. Ask around, we took to the street some time on the 7 May 2002 and carried out the biggest protest in the history of Uturu ... We were able to use our own powers as women to secure sanity to the community. We have even cautioned erring *ezes* and chiefs here. You know, apart from being women, we are *umụada* who are imbued with the spirit of motherhood; this is in itself a leadership spirit. We take up leadership at crucial times in order to protect our children and homes.

When we made enquiries concerning the issues raised in the above statement, it was confirmed that the women set precedence by taking the helms of leadership from the men during the periods indicated above. Considering the patriarchal structure of the community, women are culturally prohibited from challenging established leadership structures or taking up leadership over men in any form. Our respondents confirmed that during the period of insecurity and social disturbances, the women protested openly and were able to bring decorum in Uturu.

### ***The survival strategy of women – ‘invisible matriarchy’ or ‘homepower’***

The implication of ‘*umunna*’ (kinship) cultural life in Uturu is that land tenure system, marriage; naming, titling and major aspects of social life are viewed and practised from patrilineal lenses. Men in the customary leadership councils, in all cases, have the duty to represent women’s views. When asked about the relevance of patrilineality in Uturu, a male respondent (or respondent) responded that:

Patriarchy is an essential part of our culture. If we lose it, we lose our culture. It is part of our history and heritage that women stay submissive to us. Women should accept it as a part of life; our wise mothers lived life this way. From history, I know they had more peaceful families and households than we have today. Men suffer a lot to cater for the family. Our culture bestowed so many responsibilities on men, including taking care of the woman. If the man has to take care of the woman, why do you ask why a woman should have less power than the man has in the society? Is it not common sense that the man should have a superior authority? It is common sense. In fact, our women are happy with us for being protective of them.

This respondent presented patrilineality as ‘common sense’ practice in Uturu. Note the respondent’s use of words or phrases such as ‘culture’, ‘bestowed so many responsibilities on men’, ‘power’ and ‘superior authority’. Most of the male respondents used similar words. From cultural dimensional analysis, this notion indicates evidence of high ‘power distance’ and ‘masculinity’ (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 1). Another respondent (a woman), reacting to the previous comment noted women generally ‘wish this could change, just for the sake of their daughters...’. One major point from the

response is that patriarchy is a system women wish could be stopped. We did not find any evidence to insinuate that women could be happy with a system that disrespects their nature. We therefore concluded that they are simply putting up with it (as inferred from the response of the last respondent). This is probably why the men in the community assume that the women are not complaining. As a way forward, we investigated on their mode of handling this situation. Further enquiries revealed women's approach to emancipating themselves from the patriarchal system. This is summarised in a respondent's (a woman) statement that:

Women, at least in my case, I try my best possible to influence my husband or son in making the right decisions. I do not think there is a better way to change this situation, than through changing the man. If wives and girls can remould their men through marriage or courtships, women's voices would be heard ... it does not really matter that our voices are heard through the men's mouths. For me, ruling in the home is more important to ruling outside the home. The important thing is that we, the women, should never underestimate the influence we have in our families and at home.

In their responses, they all acknowledged their power in the 'family' by making references to their roles in the lives of their 'husbands' or 'men', 'their children' and 'households'. In *Igbo*, communities' leadership is rooted in family ties (Brown, 2011). This makes 'any degree of separation between the decisions made in family or town councils and the people they impacted practically impossible' (Brown, 2011, p. 15). Uturu is an *Igbo* community, and from the previous respondent's statement, the 'women are doing their best at home' to lead from there. They are doing it because they understand that whoever leads at home has greater influence in the community. They are very conscious of the influence they can have at home. We consider this emerging social order to be an invisible matriarchy. When fully established, the men will serve as women's figureheads in operating women's formal machinery of authority in the community. It presents a situation whereby community affairs are guided by invisible matriarchy operating from the words and actions of men. As identified in literature, this situation manifests in the form of 'mother power', 'bride power' and 'wife power' (Chinweizu, 1990, p. 25). From our study, we posit that this manifests in the form of *home power* in Uturu – based on mother or maternal authority.

This emerging matriarchy in Uturu works like an invisible institution operating alongside a patrilineal institution. It was evident that this social organisation is emerging from the horrors of a very dominant patrimonial system, practised over centuries within the community. Higher exposure of women and girls to education and the changing social system is probably a major factor in this invisible household revolution happening within the rural households of Uturu. The emerging invisible matriarchy, as found in Uturu has potentials of causing an outward transformation in the development of the community. Currently, it is fast jettisoning the traditional dominance of men at the home front. At the community level, it will slowly erode the age-long mental submissiveness associated with womanhood in the community. Consciously or unconsciously, the women are using this somewhat secret institution to either negotiate community powers from the men or narrow men's power base. It is a household-based mental approach to women's empowerment. It may not necessarily signify a shift of power from men to women, but it does indicate reclamation of agency by women and their rejection of the male domination. The women tend to base their guidelines and codes of practice on the future of their children (both daughters and sons). From the perspective of sustainability, this is

rational because children are the future generation. More so, it is more embracing – unlike the patrilineal system that focuses more on boys than girls. The adoption of invisible matriarchy is a strategy women have adopted to resist the cultural *inferiorisation* imposed on them by men based on gender inequalities.

## **Discussion**

### ***Reflections on key issues***

The findings raise some conceptual issues in literature. We observed some deviations from some literatures on gender and matriarchy. First, we could not find Chinweizu's (1990) category of matriarchists in Uturu. Most of the women fall within the core matriarchists' category. Our respondents could not identify anyone that falls within the tomboys and termagants categories. Second, Goettner-Abendroth's (2005, p. 2) definition of matriarchies does not fully apply to Uturu. The emerging matriarchy in Uturu features 'hierarchies' and 'classes'. Both men and women promote and take advantage of divided development for separate reasons. The women do it to make their development contribution visible while the men do it to retain patriarchal authority through the isolation of the women. In general, five notable issues are inferable from the Uturu case. (1) Cultural factors, such as the inferiorisation of women contribute to their poverty and hinder them from realising their full individual potential. The gender patterning, as it currently is, limits opportunities of women. Women have higher potentials for development, but their inferior placements within the cultural space of traditional societies make it difficult for them to elicit their potentials. (2) Women play more prominent roles in community development than is acknowledged. They serve as breadwinners and homemakers, change agents, etc. For instance, through their crop-farming and mat-making industries, women cater for, invisibly, their household. (3) One of the downsides of the women's stratification system is that it accords strongest community regards to *nnekele oshie* (elderly women), thereby, offering very few opportunities to pre-menopause women. This means that younger women with development potentials and motivation for change are mostly ignored. (4) Women have their coping and survival strategy for dealing with their inferiorised position within their cultural space – e.g. the issue of invisible matriarchy. However, this strategy, while effective for getting what they want, does not address their inferior position openly and may not change. (5) Women, in some cases, contribute to their own disempowerment by playing weak and dependent, even where they are more efficient than or as efficient as men within their households are.

### ***Recommendation***

Repositioning patriarchal cultures (or any sort of cultures that demean the position of women) are important for eliciting women's development potentials at its highest level. We argue that addressing the aforementioned five issues can provide a way forward. By culture repositioning, we mean the reconstruction of the cultural concept of a society to focus on eliciting positive heritage, identity and improvement of or satisfaction of public interests devoid of gender discrimination. We deem culture-repositioning necessary because rural communities need to respond quickly to changes at all levels of the society – local, regional, national, as well as to global development objectives. As a precondition, the different actors (women, men, youths, government, local organisations

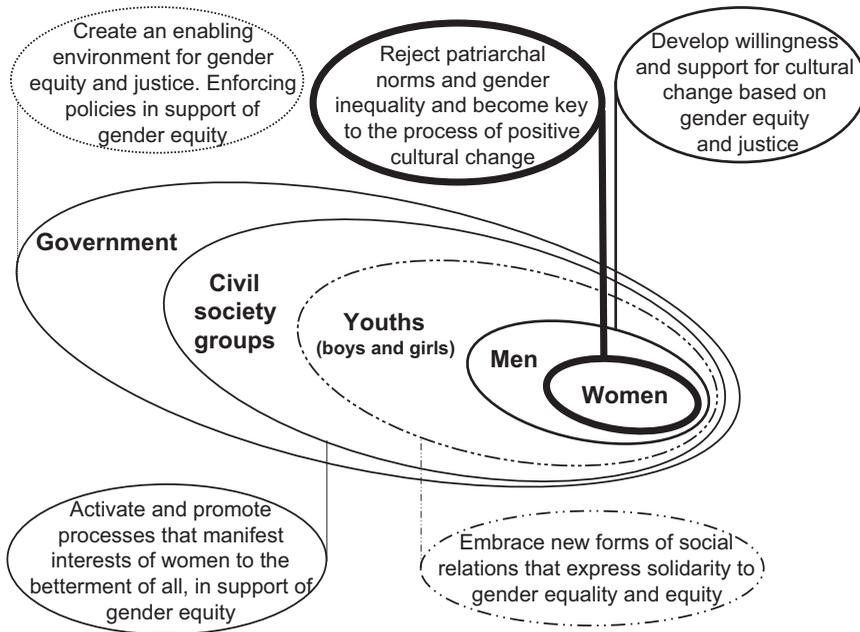


Figure 1. Map of actors' responsibilities for culture repositioning (own illustration).

and development agencies) in community development have roles to play in repositioning cultures for women and community development. Figure 1 is our map of responsibilities expected from identified key actors as a precondition for attaining culture repositioning.

We mapped the important actors for culture positioning within five main categories – women, men, youths (boys and girls), civil society groups, and the government. Any framework for repositioning patriarchal or gender unresponsive cultures to a gender-responsive one (that is, to embrace gender equity and equality) must integrate the responsibilities of these actors for success. Each of the actors would face some challenges. The governments (national, regional and local) must prove to be fair in creating an enabling environment for culture repositioning through good governance. The civil society must work for public interest with focus on eradicating gender ignorance. Women take the position of primary actors to help widen men's narrow valuation of their roles and responsibilities within patriarchal communities. The men would have to follow government policies that recognise gender equality and adopt gender equitable cultural practices. The youths would have to improve on their social engagements with men and women on equal basis. This way, our proposed processes or framework (see Figure 2) for culture repositioning would be effective.

In our framework, we argue that culture repositioning should involve processes of community planning, culture inventory, gender checking – leading to a repositioning of culture. This will be effective only when done within an environment strictly adhering to fundamental human rights and good cultural governance. In the diagram, the solid arrows show direct stage-to-stage transition of processes, the line arrows show activity transitions within stages. The dotted arrows show feedback mechanisms or indirect stage-by-stage transition of processes. From the diagram, we posit that the first step is to recognise that there is a need for repositioning existing culture to be development responsive.

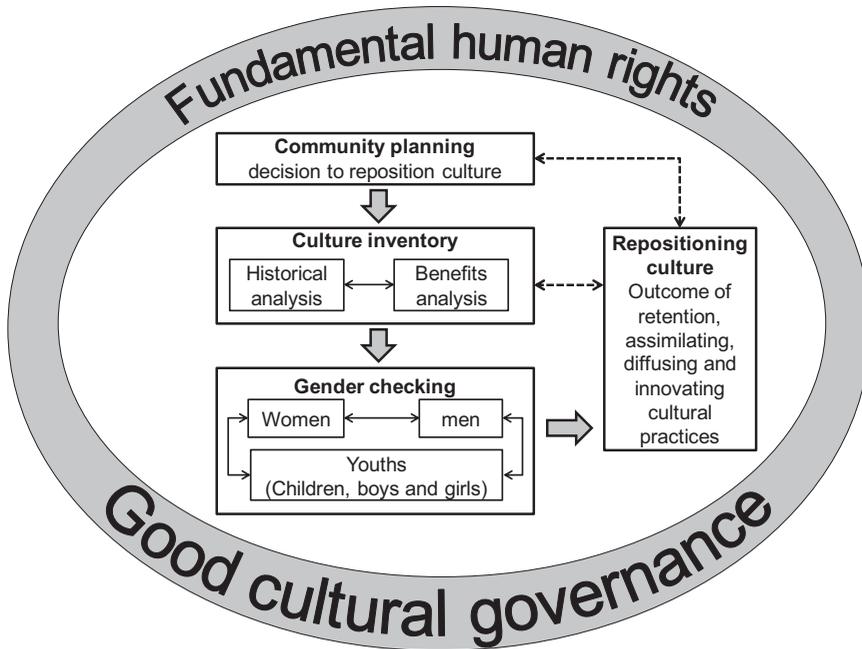


Figure 2. A framework for culture repositioning (own illustration).

For a start, the people must embark on community planning with the target of achieving cultural change as highest priority. Having integrated this goal in planning, it should lead to carrying out a culture inventory within the community. We consider a culture inventory as an assessment of cultural practices and values that guide community behaviours and decision-making for development. The culture inventory should involve conducting historical and benefit analysis of different aspects of the cultures that have impact on general community development. This may shed 'new light on recurring cultural themes' embedded in life within the community (Wyche, Sengers, & Grinter, 2006, p. 36). The elders in the community can provide historical accounts of cultural practices for evaluation during this aspect of the process. This means that criteria for cultural adoption should be created based on fundamental principles of human rights and good governance. During historical analysis, abandoned positive cultures can be recalled (and revitalised to suit current practices), and better understanding can be attained on why some existing cultures should be abandoned.

Historical analysis can be supported by a benefits analysis of the cultural scenarios. Critical cultural questions should be evaluated at this point in relation to realistic development needs. For instance, what is the benefit of conceptualising women as inferior to men? What is the benefit of placing boys over girls in cultural scales of preference? Questions such as these are addressable during benefit analysis during culture inventory. Different contentious practices, when subjected to these analyses should be discontinued by the community if they fail to meet fundamental human rights or good governance principles. At the end of a culture inventory, a *gender check* should be done to strengthen men and women's roles and provide room for children's (boys and girls or youths) roles within the community. This involves addressing aspects of the cultures that

discriminate against genders (men, female and children) to align towards fair and development-oriented paths. A well-conducted gender check will lead to the retention, assimilation, diffusion and innovation of cultural practices that are development-oriented.

In general, the implication of culture repositioning is that it will ensure that small interventions lead to significant behavioural changes that strengthen development actions. Through a thorough gender check, understanding the gaps in gender will help in the realignment of development goals to elicit dynamic human capital of the community. This way, community members will find ways to improve their lives – leading to community benefits. Even after culture has been repositioned, further planning continues for the future. It is an ever-ending process because culture is in a state of flux. Culture repositioning should be able to ‘delineate settlement, social, cultural and working spaces within the community’ to make culture an effective catalyst in rural community development (Chigbu, 2012, p. 219).

### **Conclusion**

Our study does not suggest that women led societies are without problems. We know they do come with many problems. What we have done here is to emphasise the challenges of women within a traditional men-led community, and the need for change. It is well known that in most traditional communities, people are resistant to culture change, especially concerning women. What we have done is to present how such cultures can be repositioned to suit development, from a rural perspective. This means that visions of community development should take women and cultural realignment into account. This is possible by creating an enabling environment for development practitioners and other stakeholders to reposition culture in their community. The women factor is important because they are strong catalysts to development. This is because by improving women’s situation in communities, they will be more empowered to improve households. Improvement in households would lead to improvements in communities. The process of culture repositioning involves changing habits and changing counter-productive cultural norms as a means of changing lives. This process cannot begin, if a community does not take a decision on starting it. It requires drive and participation from those educated in gender issues within the community. They have a strong role to play in redefining current cultures so that they are able to elicit the gender and development potentials in the overall development process. Most importantly, development must entail consideration of women’s roles and the barriers they face in their daily lives – because the freer women are from all forms of discriminations, the more developed communities become.

Finally, it is important to note that the case presented in this research is not peculiar to Nigeria alone. Most Asian and other sub-Saharan African rural communities share some of the experiences identified in this research. In summary, there are three main lessons that can be drawn by women and men in traditional communities in non-Western societies. (1) Societal (especially men’s) denunciation of patriarchy is key to eliciting the potentials of women and optimising their contributions to transforming rural communities. (2) The development of communities will be poorly coordinated and optimised when men-to-women relations are gender inequitable and unjust. (3) Repositioning of culture is not only an issue of denouncing (diffusing) cultural practices, it can involve retention,

assimilation and innovation of cultural practices to suit new community visions for development.

### Notes on contributor

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