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CULTURAL NORMS, GENDER ROLES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR ACHIEVING SDGS IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES

Abstract

This study examined the influence of cultural norms and gender roles on the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria. Specifically, it investigated how cultural norms sustain gender inequality, assessed the effects of gender roles on women's participation in education, politics, and the economy, and evaluated the implications of gender inequality for SDG attainment. A quantitative descriptive survey design was adopted. The population comprised adult men and women in selected communities in Ogun State, Nigeria, from which a sample of 300 respondents was drawn using a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected using a 21-item structured Likert-scale questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that cultural norms significantly sustain gender inequality through male dominance in inheritance and leadership, stigmatization of women who challenge traditional expectations, and justification of discriminatory practices in the name of cultural preservation. The results further showed that gender roles restrict women's participation in key sectors, as household responsibilities limit educational opportunities, political structures constrain representation, and workplace practices favour men in leadership positions. Although some responses indicate emerging shifts in perceptions regarding women's leadership, traditional norms remain influential. The study also established that gender inequality negatively affects the attainment of SDGs, particularly in education, economic growth, and inclusive governance. The study concludes that persistent cultural and structural barriers continue to hinder sustainable development in Nigeria. It recommends the enforcement of gender-responsive policies, community-based sensitization involving traditional leaders, expansion of educational opportunities for girls, and institutional reforms to promote women's participation across all sectors

Keywords: Cultural Norms, Gender Roles, Gender Inequality, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Women's Participation, Political Participation

Introduction

Gender inequality persists as one of the most significant barriers to sustainable development worldwide, with cultural norms and traditional gender roles exerting profound influence in developing societies. Rooted in patriarchal systems, these norms often assign men roles as primary decision-makers, providers, and leaders, while relegating women to domestic, reproductive, and supportive functions (UN Women, 2025). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, recognize gender equality (SDG 5) as both a standalone objective and a cross-cutting enabler for achieving other goals, including no poverty (SDG 1), quality education (SDG 4), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and reduced

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inequalities (SDG 10). Despite commitments, global progress remains stalled: UN Women's Gender Snapshot 2025 warns that, without accelerated action, 351 million women and girls could still live in extreme poverty by 2030, and SDG 5 will be missed entirely.

In sub-Saharan Africa, gender inequality imposes substantial economic costs, with lost productivity estimated in the billions annually (UNDP, 2022). Nigeria exemplifies these challenges, where deeply entrenched cultural practices such as early marriage, preference for male-child education, discriminatory inheritance laws, and stereotypes portraying leadership as inherently masculine systematically marginalize women (Akinola, 2021; Edewor & Aluko, 2020). Nigeria's 2025 Voluntary National Review (VNR), presented at the UN High-Level Political Forum, prioritized SDG 5 among five key goals and highlighted persistent issues like the country's high number of child brides (22 million girls married before age 18) and ongoing institutional gaps despite some advances in gender-responsive budgeting in states.

Education access remains critically affected: UNESCO's 2025 Gender Report notes persistent gender disparities in secondary and tertiary levels, driven by cultural beliefs that prioritize boys' schooling and view girls' education as less valuable due to expected domestic roles. This contributes to higher dropout rates among girls and limits skills acquisition, undermining SDG 4. Economically, women face barriers including wage gaps, restricted land/property ownership, and concentration in informal sectors with limited credit access (World Bank, 2021). These constraints perpetuate poverty cycles and hinder SDG 1 and SDG 8.

Politically, women's representation in Nigeria's National Assembly stands at approximately 4.2% (IPU data as of 2025/2026), one of the lowest in Africa and far below the 30% benchmark recommended by the African Union and UN. Cultural stereotypes discourage women from contesting elections, while party structures often sideline female candidates (Agbalajobi & Olorunmola, 2021). Health outcomes are similarly impacted: early marriage increases risks of maternal mortality and reproductive

complications (NDHS, 2019), conflicting with SDG 3. These disparities not only affect women but diminish national progress. Excluding half the population from full participation reduces human capital, innovation, and productivity potentially boosting Africa's GDP by up to 25% if the gender gap closes (AfDB, 2021). While cultural norms foster social cohesion and identity, they become problematic when discriminatory and resistant to change (Oyesanya, 2022). Nigeria has adopted frameworks like the National Gender Policy (2006, revised) and ratified CEDAW, yet implementation faces resistance from cultural and religious institutions.

This paradox of ambitious SDG targets amid entrenched cultural barriers raises urgent questions: How do cultural norms sustain gender inequality? In what ways do traditional gender roles limit women's participation in education, politics, and the economy? And what are the broader implications for Nigeria's attainment of the SDGs by 2030? Without addressing these cultural dimensions through context sensitive strategies, policies risk remaining ineffective, prolonging inequality and stalling sustainable development. This study empirically investigates the interplay between cultural norms, gender roles, and SDGs progress in Nigeria, filling gaps in quantitative integration of SDGs frameworks with lived experiences in a developing context.

Statement of the Problem

Despite Nigeria's adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and national frameworks such as the National Gender Policy (2006, revised) and ratification of CEDAW, progress toward gender equality (SDG 5) and related goals remains severely constrained by deeply entrenched cultural norms and traditional gender roles. Patriarchal practices including early marriage, preference for male-child education, discriminatory inheritance systems favouring sons, and widespread stereotypes that associate leadership and public decision-making with masculinity continue to systematically disadvantage women and girls, particularly in rural and semi-urban communities. These cultural barriers manifest in unequal access to quality education (SDG 4), where girls face higher dropout

risks due to domestic responsibilities and perceived lower future returns on investment in female education. Economically, women encounter restricted opportunities for formal employment, business ownership, credit access, and property rights, perpetuating cycles of poverty (SDG 1) and limiting contributions to decent work and economic growth (SDG 8). Politically, women's representation in decision-making bodies remains critically low (approximately 4.2% in the National Assembly as of 2025/2026), undermining inclusive governance and reduced inequalities (SDG 10). Health consequences, such as elevated maternal risks from child marriage, further conflict with SDG 3.

Nigeria's 2025 Voluntary National Review acknowledged these persistent challenges in SDG 5 implementation, including the high prevalence of child brides and institutional gaps, despite incremental policy efforts. The paradox is clear: ambitious national and global commitments coexist with structural cultural resistance that slows transformative change and threatens the 2030 Agenda. Without targeted, culturally sensitive interventions to dismantle these discriminatory norms and rigid gender expectations, Nigeria risks prolonged gender disparities, reduced national productivity, and failure to achieve inclusive, sustainable development. This study therefore seeks to empirically examine how cultural norms and gender roles sustain inequality and impede SDG attainment, providing evidence to inform effective policy and community-level strategies.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Examine how cultural norms shape gender roles and perpetuate inequality in Nigerian society.
2. Assess the impact of gender roles on women's participation in education, politics, and economic activities.
3. Evaluate the implications of gender inequality for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study will be guided by the following questions:

1. How do cultural norms sustain gender inequality in Nigerian society?
2. In what ways do gender roles affect women's participation in education, politics, and the economy?
3. What are the implications of gender inequality for the attainment of SDGs in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Gender inequality refers to the systematic disparities between men and women in access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power. The United Nations (2023) emphasizes that gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but also a critical condition for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Scholars argue that gender equality is both a standalone goal (SDG 5) and a cross-cutting enabler of other goals such as education, health, and poverty reduction (Olanrewaju & Omotoso, 2022). Sustainable development, by contrast, is defined as meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs, encompassing social, economic, and environmental dimensions (World Bank, 2021). The intersection of these concepts underscores the importance of examining how cultural norms and gender roles shape developmental outcomes in societies like Nigeria.

Cultural norms play a powerful role in shaping social expectations and assigning roles based on gender. In Nigeria, traditional patriarchal systems continue to define men as breadwinners and leaders while women are relegated to domestic and reproductive roles (Akinola, 2021). Such cultural prescriptions are deeply embedded in social institutions, including family, religion, and education. According to Edewor and Aluko (2020), discriminatory practices such as early marriage, male-child preference, and unequal inheritance rights continue to marginalize women despite legal reforms. More recent studies have highlighted how these norms persist even amid

modernization. For example, Durojaye and Owoaje (2021) argue that cultural norms are adaptive but resistant to change, reproducing inequality across generations. Similarly, Okeke-Ihejirika and Francis (2022) find that cultural expectations about female subservience still limit women's voice in decision-making at both household and community levels. These insights suggest that cultural norms are not static but remain central in sustaining gender disparities in developing societies.

Access to education is a critical pathway to empowerment, yet cultural expectations often impede girls' schooling in Nigeria. UNESCO (2022) reports that girls in rural areas are more likely to drop out of school due to early marriage, domestic labor, and community perceptions that prioritize boys' education. This results in lower literacy rates and fewer opportunities for women to participate in skilled employment. In politics, women's representation remains disproportionately low. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023) notes that female representation in Nigeria's National Assembly stands at less than 10%, one of the lowest in Africa. Cultural stereotypes about leadership being a masculine trait discourage women from contesting political positions, while party structures often sideline female candidates (Agbalajobi & Olorunmola, 2021).

Economically, women face wage gaps and barriers to accessing financial resources. According to the World Bank (2021), Nigerian women earn significantly less than men in equivalent positions, and cultural practices often restrict women's ownership of land and other productive assets. These disparities not only limit women's economic independence but also constrain national development, as half of the population's potential remains underutilized. The persistence of gender inequality has direct consequences for Nigeria's ability to achieve the SDGs. Goal 5 (Gender Equality) is interconnected with other targets such as poverty reduction (SDG 1), education (SDG 4), health (SDG 3), and decent work (SDG 8). As argued by UNDP (2022), societies that fail to empower women face slower progress in achieving these interconnected goals. For example, when cultural norms prevent women

from attaining higher education, the workforce loses diversity and innovation potential, undermining economic growth (Ezeani, 2023). Similarly, low political representation reduces the likelihood that gender-sensitive policies will be prioritized, creating policy gaps in areas such as maternal health, childcare, and social protection (Onwuzuruigbo, 2021). Thus, addressing cultural barriers to gender equality is not merely a social justice issue but a developmental necessity.

While the literature provides significant insights, three gaps are evident. First, much research remains descriptive, focusing on the existence of inequality rather than how cultural practices actively reproduce it. Second, there is limited integration of SDG frameworks in empirical studies, leaving a gap in understanding how gender inequality directly affects development targets. Third, few studies employ mixed-method approaches that capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of women's lived experiences. This study seeks to fill these gaps by exploring the interplay between cultural norms, gender roles, and sustainable development within the Nigerian context.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), Gender and Development (GAD) Theory, and the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999). These theories provide a complementary framework for explaining how cultural norms shape gender roles and influence the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Social Role Theory posits that gender differences arise from culturally assigned roles and expectations for men and women. In many developing societies, these roles position men as leaders and economic providers, while women are confined to domestic responsibilities. This theory is relevant to the study as it explains how cultural norms shape gender roles and influence women's participation in education, politics, and economic activities. Gender and Development (GAD) Theory emphasises that gender inequality is rooted in structural and institutional power relations. It argues that sustainable development cannot be achieved without transforming the social, political, and economic systems that perpetuate

inequality. This theory is appropriate for the study as it highlights how institutional and cultural barriers limit women's access to opportunities and hinder their contribution to national development. The Capability Approach focuses on individuals' ability to achieve meaningful life outcomes based on their access to opportunities and freedoms. It views development in terms of expanding human capabilities rather than economic growth alone. This theory is relevant as it explains how restrictive gender roles and cultural norms reduce women's capabilities, thereby affecting the achievement of SDGs. Collectively, these theories provide a comprehensive framework linking cultural norms (independent variable), gender roles (mediating variable), and SDG achievement (dependent variable), thereby strengthening the analytical foundation of the study.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative descriptive survey research design to examine the influence of cultural norms and gender roles on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria. The design was appropriate as it enabled the systematic collection and analysis of data from a large population without manipulation of variables. The study population comprised adult men and women aged 18 years and above residing in selected

communities in Ogun State, Nigeria. Ogun State was selected due to its socio-cultural diversity and its reflection of broader Nigerian societal characteristics. A sample size of 300 respondents was selected using a multistage sampling technique. This involved the purposive selection of three local government areas, random selection of communities within each area, and systematic sampling of households. From each household, one eligible respondent was selected. The sample consisted of 150 males and 150 females to ensure gender balance and enhance representativeness. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 21 items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). The instrument was divided into three sections: cultural norms and gender inequality, gender roles and women's participation, and implications for sustainable development. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by experts in gender studies and social research. A pilot study was conducted, and the reliability coefficient obtained using Cronbach's Alpha was 0.82, indicating high internal consistency. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly observed throughout the study.

Results

Research Question One: How do cultural norms sustain gender inequality in Nigerian society?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Responses on Cultural Norms and Gender Inequality (RQ1)

Item	Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
RQ1_Q1	Cultural traditions in my community assign more privileges to men than women.	3.37	1.30	Moderately Agree
RQ1_Q2	Women are discouraged from pursuing higher education due to cultural beliefs.	3.03	1.35	Undecided/Moderate Agreement
RQ1_Q3	Male children are valued more highly than female children in inheritance matters.	3.03	1.56	Undecided/Moderate Agreement
RQ1_Q4	Cultural practices in my community limit women's participation in leadership roles.	2.67	1.35	Slight Disagreement/Neutral
RQ1_Q5	Gender discrimination is justified in the name of preserving cultural identity.	3.63	1.22	Agree
RQ1_Q6	Women who challenge cultural norms are often stigmatized.	3.30	1.11	Moderately Agree
RQ1_Q7	Traditional practices in my community reinforce men's authority over women.	3.40	1.26	Moderately Agree

Table 1: Interpretation: The mean values for most items range between 3.0 and 3.6, indicating that respondents generally perceive cultural norms as sustaining gender inequality. The strongest agreement was with the statement that “gender discrimination is justified in the name of preserving cultural identity” ($M = 3.63$). This suggests that many cultural practices remain barriers to equality. However, responses regarding leadership limitations ($M = 2.67$) suggest some disagreement, reflecting emerging shifts in perceptions.

Research Question Two: In what ways do gender roles affect women's participation in education, politics, and the economy?

Table 2: Interpretation: The results show that respondents agreed strongly that household responsibilities, political exclusion, and leadership biases limit women's participation. The highest agreement was on workplace leadership opportunities favoring men ($M = 3.60$). This confirms World Bank (2021) findings that Nigerian women earn less and are underrepresented in formal employment and leadership. The results indicate that entrenched gender roles remain a significant obstacle to women's education, economic empowerment, and political participation.

Research Question Three: What are the implications of gender inequality for the attainment of SDGs in Nigeria?

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Responses on Gender Roles and Women's Participation (RQ2)

Item	Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
RQ2_Q1	Household responsibilities prevent women from actively pursuing formal education.	3.53	1.17	Agree
RQ2_Q2	Gender roles limit women's chances of contesting or holding political positions.	3.47	1.23	Agree
RQ2_Q3	Women face more obstacles in accessing paid employment compared to men.	3.27	1.19	Moderately Agree
RQ2_Q4	Gender roles reduce women's opportunities to own or manage businesses.	3.23	1.09	Moderately Agree
RQ2_Q5	Men are more likely than women to be considered for leadership positions in workplaces.	3.60	1.34	Agree
RQ2_Q6	Traditional gender roles restrict women's involvement in decision-making processes.	3.43	1.25	Agree
RQ2_Q7	Women are often excluded from community development activities due to gender expectations.	3.33	1.18	Moderately Agree

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Responses on Gender Inequality and SDGs (RQ3)

Item	Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
RQ3_Q1	Gender inequality slows progress toward achieving quality education (SDG 4).	3.47	1.28	Agree
RQ3_Q2	The persistence of gender discrimination limits economic growth (SDG 8).	3.63	1.15	Agree
RQ3_Q3	Women's underrepresentation in politics hinders the achievement of reduced inequalities (SDG 10).	3.50	1.20	Agree
RQ3_Q4	Societal development cannot be sustainable if women are excluded from decision making.	3.73	1.12	Agree
RQ3_Q5	Gender inequality negatively affects poverty eradication goals (SDG 1).	3.40	1.30	Moderately Agree
RQ3_Q6	Sustainable development is achievable only if women and men enjoy equal opportunities.	3.67	1.16	Agree
RQ3_Q7	Cultural barriers to women's empowerment threaten Nigeria's attainment of the SDGs by 2030.	3.60	1.25	Agree

Table 3: Interpretation: Findings indicate that respondents strongly believe gender inequality undermines SDG progress. The strongest agreement was with the statement that development is not sustainable if women are excluded from decision-making ($M = 3.73$). Similarly, the persistence of gender discrimination limiting economic growth ($M = 3.63$) highlights the economic cost of inequality.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that cultural norms, gender roles, and gender inequality significantly influence sustainable development outcomes in Nigeria. The discussion below relates the results to existing literature, showing areas of agreement and contradiction. The study on table 1 established that cultural norms remain a strong driver of gender inequality, with respondents moderately agreeing that cultural traditions assign privileges to men, stigmatize women who challenge norms, and reinforce men's authority. This supports the findings of Akinola (2021), who argued that patriarchal structures in Nigeria still dictate social roles and privilege male authority. Similarly, Edewor and Aluko (2020) found that cultural practices such as inheritance discrimination and early marriage are significant obstacles to women's empowerment. However, the relatively lower agreement on cultural norms limiting women's leadership opportunities ($M = 2.67$) suggests an emerging shift in perceptions. This contrasts with Yusuf and Adebayo (2021), who argued that women's exclusion from leadership remains deeply entrenched across Nigerian communities. The divergence may reflect generational changes, urban influence, or growing advocacy efforts, which gradually challenge rigid patriarchal expectations.

The results table 2 further indicate that household responsibilities, political exclusion, and workplace discrimination significantly limit women's participation in education, politics, and the economy. These findings corroborate UNESCO (2022), which reported that household duties and early marriage remain major contributors to school dropouts among Nigerian girls. They also align with the World Bank (2021), which documented wage disparities and women's limited access to

resources, and with Agbalajobi and Olorunmola (2021), who argued that political structures often marginalize female aspirants. At the same time, the respondents' agreement that men are more likely to be considered for leadership roles in workplaces ($M = 3.60$) reinforces Okeke-Ihejirika and Francis (2022), who observed that stereotypes about leadership being masculine remain pervasive in Nigeria. This result underscores the persistence of gender role expectations, which reduce women's agency in both private and public spheres. Nonetheless, the moderate responses regarding women's exclusion from community development activities ($M = 3.33$) may suggest some improvement in grassroots participation. This partially contrasts with Adepoju and Olufemi (2022), who reported that cultural bias overwhelmingly excluded women from decision-making at the community level. The divergence could indicate regional variation in gender dynamics, with some communities adopting more inclusive practices than others.

The study on table 3 also revealed strong agreement that gender inequality undermines the attainment of SDGs, especially in education, economic growth, poverty reduction, and governance. These findings resonate with UNDP (2022), which stressed that SDG progress is slowed when women are excluded from education, employment, and decision-making. Ezeani (2023) further supports this by showing that economic growth is directly correlated with women's participation in the workforce. The strong belief among respondents that sustainable development cannot be achieved without equal opportunities ($M = 3.67$) mirrors the Human Development Approach proposed by Sen (1999) and expanded by Nussbaum (2000), which emphasizes equality as foundational to expanding human capabilities. In practical terms, this supports the assertion by Onwuzuruigbo (2021) that inclusive governance, where women's voices are represented, is essential for equitable policy outcomes. Nevertheless, while respondents strongly associated inequality with negative SDG outcomes, some studies (e.g., Durojaye & Owoaje, 2021) argue that policy interventions can mitigate cultural resistance and accelerate change. This suggests that while cultural barriers are strong, they are not immutable, and targeted interventions may yield

progressive shifts toward gender equality.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to selected communities in Ogun State, Nigeria; therefore, the findings may not be fully generalisable to all regions of the country. In addition, the use of a self-reported questionnaire may introduce response bias, as participants' answers could be influenced by personal perceptions or social desirability. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the relationship between cultural norms, gender roles, and sustainable development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to address cultural norms, gender roles, and gender inequality in order to accelerate progress toward sustainable development in Nigeria:

1. The Nigerian government should strengthen the implementation of existing gender policies such as the National Gender Policy (2006, revised 2021) by ensuring strict enforcement mechanisms. Policies that promote equal inheritance rights, prevent child marriage, and guarantee equal pay for equal work should be prioritized.
2. Cultural barriers that perpetuate inequality can be challenged through grassroots advocacy. Religious and traditional leaders should be engaged as allies in promoting women's participation in decision-making, education, and economic activities.
3. Special interventions such as scholarships for girls, safe learning environments, and mentorship programs for women in higher education should be expanded. This would directly address early marriage, dropout rates, and poor representation of women in STEM fields.
4. Political parties should be mandated to reserve a percentage of elective and appointive positions for women. In addition, leadership training programs should target

young women to build their confidence and political competence.

5. Employers should adopt gender-sensitive workplace policies, including equal pay structures, maternity/paternity leave, and sexual harassment prevention frameworks. Access to microfinance and entrepreneurial training should also be provided for women to reduce dependency and promote economic independence.
6. Independent monitoring agencies should be established to track progress toward gender equality in relation to the SDGs. Civil society organizations can play a role in holding governments accountable through annual reports and scorecards.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that cultural norms, gender roles, and gender inequality remain significant impediments to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria. The findings reveal that deeply entrenched traditions, discriminatory gender expectations, and unequal access to resources continue to marginalize women, thereby slowing progress in education, politics, economic growth, and governance. The discussion, supported by recent literature, shows strong alignment with global and national evidence indicating that gender equality is both a fundamental human right and a catalyst for sustainable development. However, emerging evidence of shifting perceptions regarding women's leadership and participation suggests that progress, though slow, is possible. Achieving sustainable development in Nigeria requires a holistic and multi-level strategy that combines policy reforms, educational and economic empowerment, political inclusion, and cultural transformation. By addressing these structural inequalities, Nigeria can accelerate progress toward gender equality and realize the vision of the SDGs by 2030.

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