

Fu Length Research Paper

Higher Education as an Empowering Tool for Nigerian Women

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Abstract

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Nigerian women experience shades of ill-treatment due to patriarchy because of what Ogbu (1981) calls cultural tasks in human competence. Nineteen Nigerian females participated in a study concerned with Nigerian women and higher education. Participants shared their voices regarding the socio-cultural challenges coming from a patriarchic society in obtaining higher education and how their education helped them to form their identity. Using Ogbu's cultural-ecological perspective and Erikson's psychosocial development as the theoretical framework, the participants revealed that with strong educational aspirations toward higher education, most overcame the cultural and structural barriers that subsumed them under male dominance. We suggest that gender disparity should be avoided at home, and that a supportive family, especially through a fathers' support, is the foundation of empowering Nigerian females' identity and human agency. Their higher education experiences empowered them to gain competence and autonomy, and they are dedicated to fight to protect African girls' rights.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Cultural Tasks and Barriers, Cultural-Ecological Theory, Identity and Human Agency, Higher Education, Nigerian Women.

INTRODUCTION

Growing up in Nigeria, the first author met friends and classmates who shared their challenges of financial constraints, experiences of sexual harassment, domestic violence, and gender disparity. The first author accepted the socialization experience into Nigerian society and associated gendered societal roles and related *cultural competences* as normal. Cultural competence (Ogbu, 1981) entails the need for an individual to interactively understand the society's cultural norms and values to be accepted. In most cases where understanding the cultural values is needed, one is socialized into the various cultural norms and values from childhood. In the context of Nigeria, such norms include the belief that a male child's education is a priority at the detriment of females, an acceptance of a gendered allocation of domestic chores, and an acknowledgement of wielding inheritance rights to the boy child (Oni, 2014).

Many countries have recognized education as an instrument for promoting not only economic development, but also fundamental human rights (Evans-Obinna, 2016). Nigeria for instance recognizes education as a major instrument for national development, including social, economic, and political advancement (Asiyai, 2013). Fafunwa (1994), as cited in Boyi (2013), sees education as "the aggregate of all the processes by which a child or young adult develops abilities, attitudes, and other forms of behaviors which are of positive value to the society in which he lives" (p. 148). This implies that education has to do with the totality of what an individual is exposed to both in and out of school to bring about a desirable change in an individual's behavior, thereby enabling a meaningful and positive contribution to the world.

The study explores the sociocultural barriers placed on females in Nigerian society, and how the women, through

their successes in higher education, have been able to navigate these challenges, carve a niche for themselves, and become successful individuals in society. The study further validates the importance of higher education as an empowering tool for marginalized and disempowered women. It also provides a workable strategy for identity building through higher education for Nigerian females.

Theoretical Framework

Ogbu's (1981) cultural-ecology theory and Erikson's (1963) psychosocial theory provide the theoretical frameworks for this study. According to Ogbu (1981), family child-rearing in a micro-environmental setting and subsequent adolescent socialization into the wider society affects the development of the instrumental competencies needed for adult economic, political, and social roles. As these cultural imperatives and competencies vary according to culture, a cross-cultural comparison is not only possible but also informative with respect to cultural competence development in the Nigerian context. Various limits that Nigerian culture places on Nigerian females in their socialization are hence visible using Ogbu's cultural-ecology model. Our use of Erikson in turn concentrates on processes of healthy personal development, with attention to crises, and how resolving crises at each developmental stage affects the child's future development and identity (Erikson, 1963).

Ogbu's Cultural-Ecology Theory

Cultural Task and Competence. Ogbu (1981) emphasizes the instrumental competences that meet societal needs, thereby influencing child-rearing techniques to inculcate these needs. In Nigeria, a child is socialized to accept instrumental competences from childhood, and based on sex, the girl child mostly suffers ill-treatment. Because of the Nigerian patriarchal society, "women are regarded as less[er] human beings" (Nwogu, 2015 p. 79) in many tribes in Nigeria. It is commonly accepted that access to education is inhibited by socio-cultural beliefs and underfunding in Nigeria (Ewubare & Ogbuagu, 2017; Nwogu, 2015). Often, female children suffer from hardship when the family has limited financial means. As such, the male child is sent to the formal school while the female child is sent to learn vocations such as tailoring, trading, and hairdressing. Within and during such vocational trainings, quite often young girls are abused sexually, physically, and even emotionally (Aborisade, 2020).

Effective Environment. Ogbu's (1981) discussion of an effective environment includes a population's level of technology and knowledge of available resources. Netting (1968) in turn sees knowledge as the people's understanding of their environment, and the techniques for exploiting its resources. In the Nigerian context, environment and technique includes various educational

processes and content exposed to the girl. Here the girl child must see herself as a relevant human being and not any less human than her male counterpart. Nigerian girls may also harness the provision of the country's constitution regarding their fundamental human rights, and this may be augmented via their exposure to the country's commitment to fulfilling Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Ogbu's Theory of Success. Ogbu's "Native Theory of Success" refers to people's thought what success is and imposed on children or members of their society the type of adults they want their children /member to be in their society. Although John Ogbu sees the Native Theory of Success as an important element that influences child-rearing, this may not help the female child within the Nigerian context because the society sets success for males as educated leaders, and females as housekeepers with no necessity for education. This may well result in low educations, and low chances of social and economic advancement for females. McFadden (2018) mentions how poverty silences women. This is because women are generally not paid on an equal basis with men. Women are also restricted with respect to the kinds of work they may engage in and in the Northern part of Nigeria, and secluded females are not even allowed to engage in any money-making activities (McFadden). As a result of this, even if Nigerian women had the willpower to participate in leading roles at home, communities, and the country at large, it would not make much of a difference due to the structural violence against women. Even when leading important roles at the local level, women leaders have no funding made available to publicize what they are doing, and this of course restricts their empowerment. Further, Agbaje (2019) writes that Nigerian women suffer from political illiteracy, which is related to their seclusion from the political arena and sphere of decision-making. Unsurprisingly then, a higher proportion of Nigerian men goes to a school than women, and thus with respect to politics and leadership, neither female participation in forming nor administering the government has matured.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory

Erikson (1968) emphasizes the developmental process of a healthy personality, and the positive as well as negative resolutions of crises that affects a child's life span development (Erikson, 1963). He also acknowledged the importance of social interactions at each developmental stage that can be expanded to the entire life span (Authors, 2014). While this theory lacks testability, and characterizes female identity only in young adulthood, the relevance of the theory to the study cannot be overemphasized. For example, at the infant stage of Trust vs. Mistrust (1st stage), a girl child may be given maximum comfort but with minimal trust

because she is a girl. This would prevent the child from having hope in herself and the environment, which will affect the next stage of Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (2nd). The preschooler age encompasses the ability of the child to initiate ideas and activities, identify with parents, and develop a conscience and gender identity to attain purpose and direction. The crisis in this stage is between Initiative vs. Guilt (3rd), which the child takes to the next stage of either being Industrious or having an Inferiority (4th) complex at the school-age (Erikson). These stages will lead to Identity vs. Role Confusion (5th) during adolescent period, and Intimacy vs. Isolation (6th) stage in an emerging and early adulthood (Erikson).

In Nigeria, due to the collective nature of the society, their extended family is regarded as significant in their lives. This makes it challenging for a woman to enjoy her matrimonial home because of the prying eyes and demands of their extended family members. This situation develops to either Generativity or Stagnation (7th) in middle-age adulthood, where one seeks satisfaction and productivity in career and family. The success at this stage leads to care and production and prepares the individual for older adulthood—Ego-Integrity vs. Despair (8th) stage. If a child did not obtain trust early on, her or his positive resolution on identity and integrity crises as an older adult will suffer. The eight-crisis periods build on one another in a chronological but also interrelated manner (Erikson, 1963).

Literature Review

Nigerian History and Patriarchy

Nigeria is known officially as the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN). It is a country of rich ethnocultural diversity, with over 250 ethnic groups and over 500 Indigenous languages spoken with an estimated population of 219.5 million (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Before the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates by Frederick Lugard, the former British Governor-General of Nigeria (1st of January 1914), pre-colonial Nigeria consisted of different ethnic called tribes with distinct languages and cultures (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The Southern part of the country was and is still mostly dominated by the Yorubas and the Igbos, while the Northern part was and is still dominated by the Hausas (Falola & Heaton). According to Burns (1929), Northern and Southern Nigeria had separate and different traditions, histories, and administrations. Because of these differences, the British used a ruling system to penetrate the different protectorates' respective religions and cultures (Burns). A common and expected experience in Nigeria is that patriarchy encompasses the social relations that subsume females under male hegemony (Makama, 2013). Etymologically, the word *patriarchy* is from the Greek *patriarkhēs*, meaning *father* or *chief of a race*

(Ferguson, 1999). Under patriarchal systems, fathers are typically seen as the household head, providing essential needs to the family, and possessing the final authority on home affairs. Men maintain this authority by silencing women (Asiyanbola, 2005; Kramarae, 1992; Stacey, 1993; Makama, 2013). Kramarae (1992), Stacey (1993), and Makama (2013) characterize patriarchy as an unjust social system that is inherently oppressive to women. In Nigeria, power and authority are vested in men because male-centeredness permeates the society. Hence, power resides with men across family systems, clans, and tribes (Asiyanbola, 2005; Makama, 2013). Power and possession are then transmitted from father to son in a generational manner, and the cycle continues (Makama). Walby (1990) sees this phenomenon as a "Double D"; namely, as *Discrimination* and *Domination* over women. Thus, patriarchy primarily contributes to the marginalization of women in education, wealth possession, property ownership, domestic matters and inheritance rights, as well as within industry and business involvement (Makama, 2013). In Nigeria, especially among the Igbos, a male child has the right to inherit his father's property while a female child does not as she is expected to marry and join another household (Nnadi, 2013).

The formal education of the female child into a virtuous woman is an important value in Nigeria. The female child is to be prepared to become a contributing member of society in all ramifications (Anugwom, 2009). Yet there are various sociocultural challenges that Nigerian females face in the path to obtaining higher education in Nigeria including unequal power relationships, harassment, violence, a lack of primary and secondary education, low income at work, (forced) passive political involvement, and an inability to inherit or own valuable properties such as land and cars.

National Policy on Education in Nigeria

Until 1977, Nigeria's education policy followed forms established by Great Britain, the former colonial power. However, the shortcomings of the policy to meet the national aspirations of the country made the policy largely unpopular (Okoroma, 2006). An effort to address this reality led to the 1969 National Curriculum Conference, which was organized to review the inherited British curriculum, and charter a new national educational goal for Nigeria's education system. Following this, in 1973 a National Seminar was organized by the National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) under the Chairmanship of Chief S. O. Adebayo (Okoroma, 2006). This gave birth to the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977.

The NPE is solely anchored in Nigeria's philosophy on education, which is synonymous with the nation's development objectives (Okoroma, 2006). These objectives are provided by the Second National Development

Plan (SNDP) and are widely accepted as the key structure for the NPE. The five objectives include: 1. The building of a free and democratic society, 2. The building of a just and egalitarian society, 3. The building of a united strong and self-reliant nation, 4. The building of a great and dynamic economy, and 5. The building of a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens (Federal Ministry of Education. *National Policy on Education*, 2004). The beginning of formal education in Nigeria signaled the articulation of these objectives.

Education in Nigeria

Lack of access to education is one of the greatest challenges caused by gender issues, socio-cultural beliefs, and cultural practices (Ewubare & Ogbuagu, 2017). In the Nigerian context, female children are often denied education when the family has limited financial means. As such, the male child is sent to formal school while the female is sent to learn vocations like tailoring, trading, hairdressing (Robson, 2004). As apprentices, young girls are often abused sexually, physically, and even emotionally. Fawole, Ajuwon, and Osungbade (2004) conducted four studies on hawkers and apprentices in southwest, Nigeria between 1997 and 2003, evaluating the effectiveness of interventions for preventing HIV infection and gender-based violence (GBV). They found that after five months of the intervention programs (e.g., education materials and training programs for the police, judiciary, instructors, drivers, traders and apprentices/hawkers), there were 22.7% of sexual harassment cases among the female apprentices as compared to about 70% before the intervention. This example showed that education can help people to build consciousness to protect women's rights, further it can boost female emotional, psychological, and social well-being and esteem for their personal development. It only requires that everyone develop consciousness to achieve this aim to empower Nigerian women.

In Nigeria, education is explicitly geared toward being an instrument for national development; it is meant to foster the development of the individual, for everyone's sake, and the general development of the society. The training of the mind in the understanding of the world is key, and along with it the acquisition of appropriate skills and competencies as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of the society (Adaralegbe, 1972). The system of education in Nigeria is structured into Early Childhood/Primary education, Secondary education, and Tertiary education (Federal Ministry of Education. *National Policy on Education*, 2004). The education system, while logically structured, is nevertheless faced with a plethora of challenges – infrastructural decay, neglect, waste of resources, and a sordid condition of service (Adekunle, 2019). Statistically, Nigeria currently has over 10 million out-of-school children, with double the figure performing poorly in school (Adekunle, 2019). More children are

out of school and the number is still increasing in Nigeria compared to other countries: from 6.4 million in 2000 to 9.6 million in 2020 (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2022).

Higher Education in Nigeria

Higher education in Nigeria is described as follows by the Federal Ministry of Education (FME): “post-secondary or tertiary education is the education given after secondary education in colleges of education, monotech, polytechnics, universities and those institutions offering correspondence courses” (2004, P.30). Until 1999, federal universities had a near-monopoly in providing higher education in Nigeria (Ajadi, 2010). Currently, both federal and state governments oversee higher education. Currently, there are 147 federal public higher institutions, 277 state-owned public higher institutions, and 237 privately-owned institutions in the country (Ifedili & Ifedili, 2016). In terms of administration and quality control, the National Universities Commission (NUC) accredits courses and monitor universities in the country. The goal of Nigerian higher education includes contributions to national development, manpower training, and inculcation of values to foster intellectual capability. Additionally, intellectual skills are geared towards individual self-reliance and to enhance international understanding.

Access and Equity of Higher Education to Nigerian Females. Since higher education helps in developing not only individual human capital, but also the human resource for the nation (Durowaiye & Khan, 2017; Lebeau, 2008; Teferra & Altbach, 2003), the various goals of education in Nigeria are achievable only if there is quality delivery of curriculum content, provision of resources, and access and equity regardless of gender and financial background (Durowaiye & Khan, 2017; Lewin, 2009). Higher education of good quality in Nigeria is necessary and critical to becoming competitive on a global scale (Asiyai, 2013). This is because education helps in achieving the socio-cultural, economic, and political development of a nation locally and internationally (Asiyai, 2013; Durowaiye & Khan, 2017). Yet success has not occurred yet because of the many constraints that beset it in Nigeria.

The many constraints that beset higher education are not peculiar to Nigeria but include Africa as a whole (Teferra & Altbach, 2003). Some of these challenges include inadequate financial resources, an unprecedented demand for access, the legacy of colonialism, brain drain, an unstable curriculum, and overcrowded classrooms (Teferra & Altbach, 2003; Jibril, 2003; Durowaiye & Khan, 2017). Access as a constraint within the African context is for example underpinned by Teferra and Altbach (2004) here; “54 countries in Africa have no more than 300 institutions that fit the definition of a university” (Teferra & Altbach, 2004 p.3). Looking at this situation in Africa and placing

Nigeria as a part of the whole, the extent to which the challenges will be greater and constitute an encumbrance to not just the country but the individuals in it are worrisome.

Nigerian higher education has similar challenges to what is evident in the whole of Africa, however the focus in this paper is on how the challenges affect females' access to higher education. According to Jibril (2003), funding is one of the major challenges of higher education in Nigeria. With this, the resources are simply not available. Students are made to pay fees (e.g., tuition fees), which many families are unable to afford because of their economic limitations. As above, this invariably affects females' access to education; many may be asked to learn a trade so that the male child can be sponsored to attend school (Lewin, 2009; Durowaiye & Khan, 2017). Durowaiye and Khan (2017) argue that existing socio-cultural gender norms in the Nigerian context prevent girls' access to education since all their education ends in the kitchen and childbearing. Eweniyi and Usman (2013) mention in turn how the female child is denied access to education in the northern Nigeria due to dominantly Muslim with Islamic morality, which forces primarily domestic roles for women. Hence, the family's socioeconomic status, sociocultural background, religious beliefs, experience, and exposure are key factors that prevent Nigerian females' equity and access to higher education. The interplay of gender-biased forces and role stereotyping with widespread poverty not only keeps many females out of school, but also fosters oppression and exploitation (Makama, 2013).

Sexual Harassment. Sexual harassment is another challenge facing girls and women in Nigeria. Harassment is not only in school but also at home, places of work, and in religious places. An example is the recent "sex for grade" and "sex for admission" hashtag video published by the BBC World Service TV (2019) by Africa Eye Undercover, which reveals a professor in a prestigious university in Nigeria who harassed females in exchange for the delivery of grades, especially high school students seeking admission into the university. The professor mentioned that the staff club where they ought to have academic deliberations is regarded as the cold room for sexual harassment activities. With this, there were other revelations about all the acts of harassment on female students in Nigerian universities on social media, especially Facebook and Twitter. In another instance, a common practice is for employers to make it a condition for female job seekers to lay in bed with them before offering them a job. For promotion and other incentives, females are harassed sexually by their male bosses at work and home from time to time (Aborisade, 2020).

The Present Study

Despite the challenges Nigerian females face regarding access to higher education, some have been able to

break these barriers by engaging in other money-making activities like makeup, modeling, home tutoring, and entrepreneurial skills acquisition (Durowaiye & Khan, 2017). In the same vein, Lebeau (2008) posits that since higher education is an elitist social status symbol marker in Nigeria, people, especially females, are also striving hard to attain this education. Higher education, therefore, is truly an investment that pays (Lebeau, 2008) even though society frowns at the education of females. Thus, this study examines how Nigerian females have built their self-efficacy, identity, and self-esteem through higher education, despite considerable challenges. The study addresses the following questions:

- a. What challenges do female Nigerians face in the Nigerian education system?
- b. What stories do Nigerian women share regarding special steps they have taken to empower themselves?
- c. What do Nigerian women see as the role of education in their identity development?

METHODOLOGY

Procedure and Participants

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (IRB approval (1629766-3)), we used convenience sampling to recruit participants through email, chats, texts, and calls. We interviewed 19 Nigerian women living overseas. Due to the then Covid pandemic, we conducted and recorded the interviews remotely through Zoom. The interview was semi-structured, and it covered the upbringing of the participants, the purpose of attaining higher education, challenges the participants encountered as Nigerian women, and how education has helped in their identity development. Appendix A has the complete list of the interview questions.

Methods

We conducted this qualitative study using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. A phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of several individuals about a phenomenon by focusing on what the research participants have in common about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This entails how people perceive and understand an experienced phenomenon (Husserl, 1999), mostly with the use of interviews to explore the details of how the participants are experiencing the phenomenon (Christensen & Johnson, 2016; Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019). Phenomenological research aims to describe what people experience and how it was experienced (Creswell, 2007; Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019) to make it a reflective, intentional activity (Smith, 2006). In this study, the phenomenon is identity-building through higher education. The choice of pheno-

menological study was made so as to delve into how higher education has helped build Nigerian women's identity and self-esteem despite the sociocultural barriers they face.

Since the phenomenological method requires participants' reflection on their lived experiences, the primary author needed to suspend every possible form of assumption regarding the phenomenon so as to attain the true essence of the phenomenon as propounded by Husserl (Schmitt, 1959). The primary author reflected on the phenomenon of identity-building by Nigerian females (including the author's own experiences), but the author allowed the participants to be expressive and share their lived experiences by making the interview open-ended.

Coding and Analysis Process

Based on descriptive and thematic analysis following the theoretical framework and the literature review of identity building (Creswell, 2007), the initial codes including "home environment", "literacy", "upbringing", and "cultural beliefs" were generated. Subsequently, common themes emerged, and were sorted and used for the discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on our study, the analysis and discussion revealed that despite the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society, individual family upbringings and educational attainment are the key components of identity development for Nigerian women. The findings in this study show how education has helped Nigerian women build competence and strengthen their human agency, which has in turn enabled them to form a strong sense of self.

The below table provides participants' names (pseudonyms are used to protect identities), their ages, a summary of each of their life backgrounds, their educational level, and their occupation at the time of the interview.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Theme 1: Home Environment and Upbringing

In traditional Nigerian society, sweeping the floor, staying in the kitchen, and doing laundry are regarded as females' chores, while the males follow the father to the farm. Children are socialized into the mentioned different gendered-cultural tasks. These tasks impacted the agency of our study participants. Reflectively, the participants talked about how cultural tasks have made them who they are. In their culture, cultural tasks include seeing the father as a head figure and all instructions as coming from him (Ogbu, 1981). The stories from the participants showed that the home environment is where instrumental competence and hope are first developed in the child. When talking

about their home environment and upbringing, many of the participants talked about how they are made to see their gender and position in the family as a big deal. Some also referred to the socioeconomic status of their parents as a factor that affected their upbringing in terms of privilege, exposure, human agency, and social interaction throughout their life. For instance, Yora used her father's education as a determinant of where she was born and bred. She feels that his level of education allowed him the opportunity to rise to the position of a renowned professor in Nigeria, thereby enabling him to obtain a professorial accommodation on campus and in a way raising her and her siblings in a closely knitted nuclear family manner as against the extended polygynous family set-up that the culture otherwise proclaims.

"I grew up in a fairly closely knitted nuclear family. We're a family of five; three girls, and our parents. No extended family was living with us or around us. I also grew up on campus, the University of Ibadan, so it was very quiet, you know how a campus setting would be, so I did my primary and secondary education on the campus, also I went (sic) did tertiary education on the same campus. Though I was exposed to life outside campus, most of my learning and childhood orientation and initiative were formed on campus" (Yora, personal communication, September 25, 2020).

According to Salaam (2003), patriarchy enables the marginalization of women in terms of education, but with the higher education that Yora's father had, he provided adequate schooling experience for Yora, which helped greatly in Yora's human identity development. Because her parents lived as a closely knitted nuclear family, Yora shared how her family structure enabled her parents to manage the tension of having three girls with no male child. While the socio-cultural environment still follows patriarchy, her father's value on education for his children made her and her siblings feel unaffected by patriarchy prevalent in the society, thus able to focus on their education and development as female children.

To Babs, her father is educated with a strict authoritarian parenting style thereby making him be fully involved in the children's education and career path by setting high expectations with limited flexibility. Her father wanted the best for her in her career path, especially as a female. Although she appreciated how he set a target to meet specific goals and trained her to be *resilient* as a female for her, his involvement also prevented her from attaining a higher education due to the traditional female role (getting married and marital challenges with mother-in-law). In the end, she was able to speak for herself and get on the right track in higher education. Similarly, Deea's parents' education also influenced her upbringing in terms of their authoritative parenting style. Her mom was a nurse while her father was a teacher and she referred to them as semiliterate parents. Their value on education is beyond the gender line and they were raised in very

Table 1: Participants' Demographics.

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Current Residency	Highest Degree	Field of Study	Occupation
Olam s	28	Yoruba	Married	Osun, Nigeria	B.Sc., MSc. Obtaining	Biochemistry	Schooling
Chia	Late 20s	Igbo	Single	Ohio, USA	M.Ed.; Ph.D. obtaining	Education	Schooling
Deea	33	Yoruba	Single	Ohio, USA	M.A; 2nd MA obtaining	English Literature/Arts Education	Schooling; Teaching Ass. Teaching
Dula	37	Yoruba	Single	Port- Harcourt, Nigeria	M.Ed.		
Iwao	26	Yoruba	Single	Ohio, USA	B.Sc.; MSc. Obtaining	Biochemistry	Schooling
Onon s	36	Igbo	Married	Scotland	M.Ed.	Education	Teaching
Babs	32	Edo	Married	Florida	SSCE	Sciences	Nurse
Eyis	N/A	Yoruba	Single	Lagos, Nigeria	M.A; Second MA obtaining	Arts; English	Schooling
Alew	33	Yoruba	Married	New Jersey, USA	B.Ed.	Education; Special Edu.; Guidance & Counselling	Behavior Technician
Yora	25	Yoruba	Single	Ohio, USA	M.A; Second MA obtaining	Arts; English	Schooling
Eme m	N/A	Yoruba	Married	Lagos, Nigeria	HND	Accounting	Accountant
Owok	N/A	Yoruba	Married	Lagos, Nigeria	B.Sc.	Economics	Economist
Neko	N/A	Igbo	Single	Ohio, USA	M.Sc.	Statistics	Statistician
Shia	24	Yoruba	Single	Ohio, USA	B.Sc.; M.Sc. obtaining	Sciences; Biochemistry	Schooling
Funo	N/A	Yoruba	Married	Florida, USA	M.A; Ph.D. obtaining	Arts; English Literature	Schooling&tea ching
Mijo	26	Warri/ Delta	Single	Lagos, Nigeria	B.Ed.	Education	N/A
Lata	30s	Yoruba	Single	Louisiana, USA	B.A; M.A obtaining	Arts; Linguistic Anthropology	Schooling
Math	N/A	Yoruba	Married	Lagos, Nigeria	M.Sc.	Sciences; Math; Computer S.	Proprietress
Oyins	N/A	Yoruba	Married	Ibadan, Nigeria	B. A	Arts; Theater Arts	Freelance communicator

nurturing environment with appropriate communication and guidance suitable. Funo, Eyis, Math, and Dula saw their parents' education as playing a role in their upbringing as well. They shared a similar experience of how they appreciated their parenting style of communicating appropriately with them thereby enhancing their self-worth as females in the home. The participants' experiences of Ogbu's (1981) cultural tasks and native theory of success that are prevailing in Nigerian families had influenced them positively or negatively in their upbringing. Some participants had educated parents or extended family with a supporting

environment (positive and protective) that provided opportunities and helped them to see the importance of obtaining education, while others had to grow up in a patriarchic environment (negative and risky) where they had to overcome challenges to stand up for themselves.

Theme 2: Human Agency Overcoming Educational Challenges

In our study, the participants expressed the motivation of attaining education as both general and specific because their career choice was determined by their

educational attainment goal. According to Bandura (2010), self-efficacy involves people's beliefs, perceptions, and abilities to embark on personal activities that influence their life affairs. For example, Lata's belief and perception about moving away from her poor neighborhood to be a better person made her focus on her education, specifically to attain university education. Lata said that the educated males in her extended family were her motivator to acquire education. As an orphan whose extended families were *maltreating* and used her as a *housemaid* seeing privileged boys in her big family made her determined to get an education so that she could stand up for herself, and she strived hard to catch up with the males in her environment. This is because she believed that her educational attainment would change her life for the better. At the end of the interview, she mentioned that her positive belief about education influenced her life and gave her a voice in society. Eyis' belief, in turn, was to make an impact especially for her children and the incoming generation. Therefore, she focused on her education so that she could achieve her goal of making an impact.

In the same vein, Shia, Neko, Mijo, Emem, and Eyis' need for competence and autonomy was also important to them, and this propelled them to focus on their education. According to them, they shared three cogent reasons that motivated them to attain higher education. These motivations seem different, but the explanations given by the participants were related as they attained education for financial sustainability, goal actualization, and career progression. Oyins, Alews, Owoks, Iwao, and Funo explained how their motivation for attaining higher education was for goal actualization. In achieving their goals, these women were careful of their chosen course of study; the women were focused and directed all their efforts to the attainment of the goals. For example, Alewwas well aware of her cognitive process of self-efficacy as knowledge production and teaching thereby making her channel her effort to the teaching profession (Peterson & Wood, 2008). It nevertheless took her a while to understand what she wanted to do because she was keen on studying another major at the university. As a teacher and child psychologist, Alew felt fulfilled as she thought that she has been able to achieve her goal despite the societal restrictions on females.

Hence, the motive of attaining education as explicated in this study and shared by the lived experiences of the participants cannot be overemphasized. Education is a crucial tool in developing a united, strong, and self-nation (Federal Ministry of Education. *National Policy on Education*, 2004). An individual is a microcosm of the larger society and is trained to be self-reliant and later help develop the macrocosm larger society. According to Agba, Nkpoyen, Agba & Ushie, (2010), job security is the guaranteed expectation that employees can keep their job without fear of losing it. This further helped in providing stable job opportunities for qualified Nigerians, and Emem is one of those qualified

Nigerians. In consonance with Udoye and Udum's (2013) assertion that education must equip its beneficiaries with self-reliance tenets, both Emem and Onons experiences validate this. This is because they saw their education as helping them to be financially independent and self-reliant.

The Nigerian education system has its pros and cons. One benefit is that it serves one of the purposes of education – empowerment (Levinson, Cookson, & Sadovnik, 2014). Despite the suppression of the women in our study, they all expressed how education has empowered them by giving them a voice, enabling them to be financially sustaining and stable, and enabling them to make an impact and feel fulfilled. We categorized the participants' motivation for acquiring education into economic stability, goal actualization, and career progression. They all shared how this motivation was geared towards their identity-building and to correct the cultural notion that women are weak. To stop the belief that poverty is a mechanism to silence women (McFadden, 2018), the women in this study saw education as a way of boosting their financial strength and having a voice.

Theme 3: Overcoming Educational Challenges for Career

The setup of Nigerian society has confronted women with many challenges. The participants in this study talked about many challenges they faced and how they overcame them, specifically with the sociocultural challenges they faced in their career inspirations.

Because patriarchy in Nigeria marginalizes women from acquiring education (Makama, 2013),

Math, Emem, Eyis, and Onons talked about how challenging it was for them to wear the hat of a Nigerian woman and a career person at the same time. Math shared how challenging it was to focus on her graduate study and take care of her children. Math's decision to take a gap year and focus on taking care of the children and the home supports the claim that femaleness is characterized by weakness and gentleness, and where the kitchen is seen as the permanent female place regardless of the education level attained (Asiyanbola, 2005; Makama, 2013; Dogo, 2014). Oyins reflected on her decision on discontinuing her education and lived a future she was culturally deemed to live and realized that the kitchen is the last resort for females.

To overcome these challenges, most of the participants stated that they had to stay focused. The act of staying focused and not seeing failure as an option were the steps taken by female participants to overcome the Nigerian socio-cultural challenges they faced. Math for instance mentioned that she was so determined and finally she became the department head. Her determination without any external influence made her empowered (Dattilo, Kleiber, & Williams, 1998). Onons and Math shared how their determination helped them to overcome the sociocultural challenges. For Onons,

she never saw failure as an option. Even when family members were complaining of her age, and that she was not married, she never allowed her environment and social influences to interfere in her career aspiration. This corroborates with Deci and Ryan's assertion (1985) that self-determination deals with autonomy and the ability to choose options. Therefore, Onons was determined against all odds to achieve her aim of getting an education despite her age and the pressure to get married.

In the same vein, Iwao was determined and listened to her inner thoughts. She explained that whenever anyone complained about her decision, she gave them an immediate response and moved on with her life. To her, there was no room for external influence in her decision-making. This demonstrates how autonomy in a male-centered Nigerian society was important to the participants. Because she was determined to fulfill her educational attainment needs, Iwao developed her competence by focusing on her education and she explained that this helped her to be autonomous. From birth, children learn the traits to exhibit in their lifetime through socialization (Mensah, & Kuranchie, 2013). The home environment is the first point of socialization that Eyis capitalized on to overcome her challenge. Eyis explained how her professor was not ready to supervise her for her doctoral degree, and she also talked about how people were complaining that she was not married. However, she was supported at home by her parents, which served as her strength in overcoming the challenge. She also talked about how she had been trained to believe in herself by her parents right from childhood. Therefore, she sees no reason to allow people's opinions to deter her. In sum, Onons, Math, Eyis, and Iwao believe so much in their strength and focus on this. As such, they were able to overcome the challenges that society imposed on them regarding their career and educational attainment.

With the various challenges that the Nigerian females face in their career inspiration, the participants in this study can still share their stories of different things they did to overcome these challenges. The unmarried participants had fewer challenges when compared to the married participants. The married participants in my study shared how they must wear the many hats of a mother, wife, and career person at the same time. Despite these challenges, some of them thought they were fulfilled in their career and family while others thought they were not fulfilled. For the unmarried ones, their challenges were based on non-acceptance to pursue their goal. An instance was Eyis' experience, whose supervisor was reluctant to accept her for the doctoral degree because she was unmarried. However, her focus and determination helped her. She also felt fulfilled because she was content and never felt intimidated.

Theme Four: Education as Empowering Female Identity

Identity stems from childhood upbringing, which relates to values inculcated from home and the community (Erikson, 1963). It is also what the participants saw

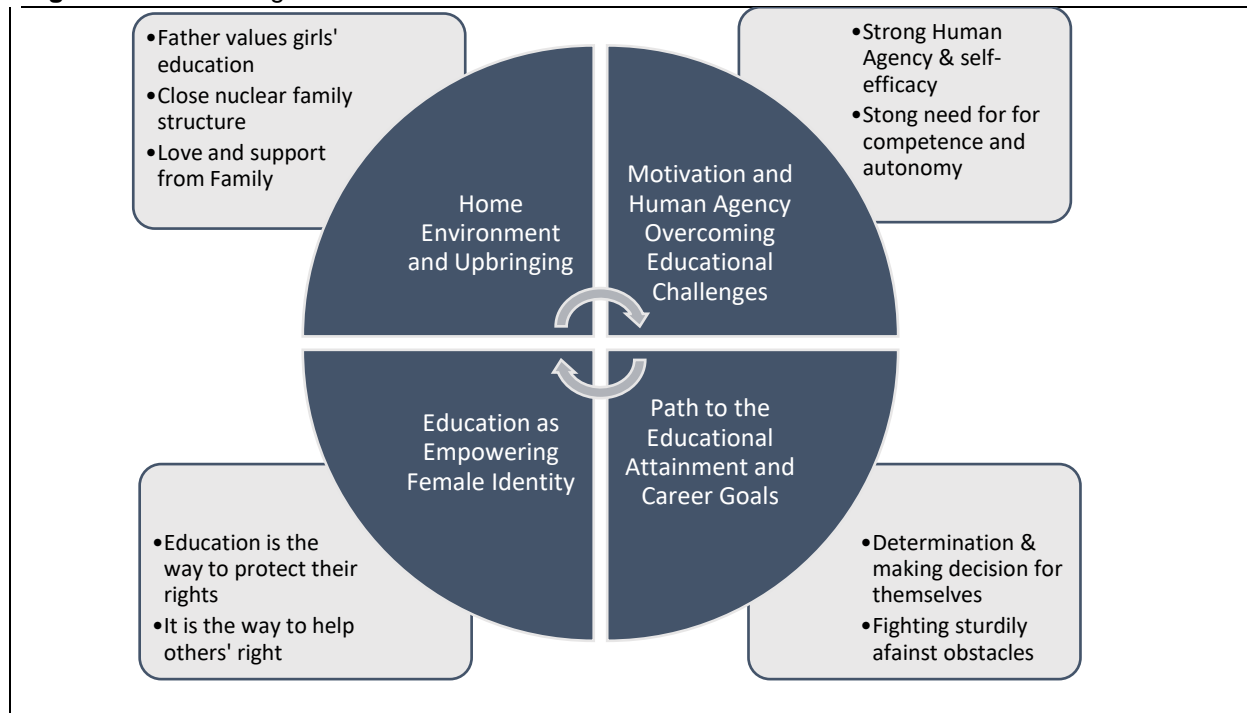
themselves to be in terms of their human agency and perception of self. Human agency is the capacity of a person to make intentional choices for taking a particular action that shapes their lives (Mayr, 2011). This study's participants identified their human agency regarding how they stood for themselves despite the societal dictates on what is expected of Nigerian females. They shared how their education has helped them in enhancing their human agency. As educated and well-exposed women, they expressed their agency in making decisions about their lives, being expressive, being vocal, and maintaining control of their situations regardless of what society expected from them. Deea talked about how education has given her a voice to the point of making herself heard, and Neko on her part related to why her education journey was important to her. She said that it helped her guide others because she had once been on the journey herself. While she felt that the education path was not an easy one, she was willing to use her agency to inform others who want to tow the same path.

In conclusion, the findings in our study shows that the development of identity is a lifetime achievement (Authors, 2014). In a cultural context, this may be subjective, but looking at one's upbringing, identity is also formed (Erikson, 1963). Apart from the home upbringing as a determinant of identity formation, the participants in this study talked about how educational challenges and educational opportunities have helped them in their identity development as well as their human agency. In this context, education is what the participants engaged in as a way of developing their human agency. Their transnational education experiences also paved the way for them, which supports Fawole, Ajuwon, and Osungbade (2004)'s claim that education helps in the identity development of Nigerian females.

Synthesis: Overcoming Culture and Gender Stigma

[Insert Figure 1 here]

For this study, an overarching theme centers on overcoming culture and gender stigma. To expatiate on this overarching theme, Figure 1 shows the different but cyclical paths that Nigerian women take to attain their educational and career goals. From the study, the participants' home environment and upbringing were instrumental to their human agency and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982), even though patriarchy manifests itself in Nigerian society by placing socio-cultural constraints on the girl child while the boy enjoys freedom to explore their potential (Aina, 1998). Girls are also made to see themselves as the weaker ones and victims of socio-cultural expectations (Okpe, 2005; Nnadi, 2013). Although these challenges linger into adulthood, at times they are forced to live up to the patriarchic social norms, they are determined to resolve crisis and form their healthy identity (Erikson, 1963). For the participants in the study, their lived experiences in

Figure 1: Path for Nigerian Women to the Educational and Career Goals.

relation to their strong need for competence and autonomy through education helped them to be resilient, dedicated, and fight sturdily to protect their rights while striving to help others. Deea, Chia and Lata mentioned how they have been serving as spoke persons and mentors to younger females on the importance of education. As transnational females who are in the west acquiring their doctoral studies, the three of them were determined to keep striving for excellence while mentoring other younger females.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

Environment, upbringing, and sociocultural factors play crucial roles in an individuals' life. This is exemplified by the results of this study. Because all the female participants had been born and raised in Nigeria, they were socialized into the societal norms and beliefs of patriarchy as a way of adapting to the cultural task to enhance their human competence as Nigerians (Ogbu, 1981). The participants' lived experiences revealed that each child grows up in a complex interconnected ecosystem, with culture constantly evolving in thoughts and actions (Greene, 1994). The importance of the participants' environment explained the gender norms that pervaded their upbringing as infants on trust, love, and acceptance (Erikson, 1963). Therefore, the training of the female child as not inferior to the male helps in

the development of hope and drive in the child and it enables her to believe in herself, thereby helping in the ego identity and integrity of the child as an older adult (Erikson, 1963).

According to Ogbu (1981), child-rearing is a culturally organized formula for inculcating competencies. The parenting pattern of the participants' parents explains this, as all the participants referred to their parents as playing significant roles in their life trajectories. In the case of Lata, her guardian and the educated people in the under-resourced environment helped shape her perspectives and the need to be a determined person. Despite reporting that they had successfully resolved their identity crisis at different stages of their life (Erikson, 1963), most participants mentioned that they struggled through early crises (Erikson, 1963) due to a lack of opportunities and exposure to education compared to their male counterparts. Their educational aspiration for higher education prevented them from being stagnant and despairing as adults. For example, Deea and other participants who were unmarried mentioned how they were not despairing about being single. Rather, they were focused on their career to prevent stagnation. Therefore, their ego integrity through higher education made them see Nigerian socio-cultural beliefs as something that must not hinder them. This contradicts the interrelatedness of cultural ecology as a way of promoting cultural competence (Ogbu, 1981).

Our study further showed that the participants benefited more from the higher education they acquired as they saw education as an eye-opener that enhanced their creative and critical thinking abilities. This helped them in their advancement, career development, self-esteem, and their social interaction, especially for the participants who were abroad. Finally, these stories from the participants showed the need to treat everyone equally regardless of gender. Everyone is important, and each person should be treated as such. Therefore, the advocates of son preference, especially among the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria, should understand that the men should be blamed if they are in dire need of a son and not frustrating the woman who gives birth to females. Property ownership is also not the prerogative right of men, and in terms of inheritance, equal inheritance rights should be embraced as well.

Practical Implications

After finishing this research, especially the interview transcription, proofreading, and coding, we agreed to the fact that while environment and upbringing play a crucial role in an individual's identity building, the agency and determination of the individual to make a change positively also matters. The present technology age makes it easier for one to learn about what is obtainable in other cultures and adopt the positive aspect of the culture to change one's life for good. Inferiority complex should be avoided as well by females.

Implications for Parents: Considering the various challenges that beset female Nigerians due to the cultural beliefs and tenets of society, it can be argued that each child is affected by the home environment right from childhood. Therefore, parents should endeavor to inculcate desirable norms and values in the children about the children's roles and responsibilities at home. Parents should avoid all forms of gender disparity or favoritism in training and treating their children. We agree that people's failure should not be attributed only to the environment but to developmental deficits which can be corrected through rehabilitation (Ogbu, 1981), Lata and Mijo's cases of their under-resourced environment would have made them see nothing in education and would not have been useful to themselves. However, they chose to have a positive outlook on life, and they are better human beings for that approach. Therefore, rehabilitation helped in this regard. Parents need to be good role models to their children. Owoks' upbringing can be used to portray this. Her parents ensured that everyone pounded yam every other day by taking turns. This she saw as something enhancing her relationship and independence as an adult. Therefore, developing a healthy personality starting from birth is important. This is because it would enable the child to be primarily trusting and aware of environmental signals (Erikson, 1963) that are liberatory.

Implications for Policy and Educational Changes

Females should be well-supported in their academic trajectories. Policymakers should provide financial support for females whose families are in financial crisis and equal educational opportunities should be provided regardless of gender. Additionally, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Education for All (EFA) emphasized the education of the girls. However, financial constraints and socioeconomic status usually prevent parents from sending their girls to school. What this means is that government should endeavor to ensure that education is truly free up to the university level. Where a student is unable to pay certain student fees, the government should make financial aid provisions for indigent students to ensure that no child is left out because of financial constraints. In terms of sexism, the government should ensure that everyone is given an equal right regardless of gender. All forms of glass-ceiling phenomenon on women in the administrative cadre should be avoided. There should also be an awareness that no one is superior to the other because of gender construct in society.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

No study is free from limitations, and there are a few limitations here that needs to be addressed. The first one is related to convenient snowball sampling. A few participants knew the first author initially and were selected and they were willing to share their lived experiences with the first author. However, the familiarity between the researcher and the participants might make it challenging for some participants to share some important aspects of their lived experiences, especially experiences that may seem shameful for them to talk about. Also, the participants did not represent the diversity of Nigeria as most of them were Southerners and Easterners, which can be modifiable in a future study.

Secondly, most of the participants identified themselves as belonging to Gen Y and Z. This made our study more reflective of this narrow demographic. It does not represent the generations before Gen Y and Z. This demographic may have affected a wider perspective of the challenges women face because most of the participants have educated parents who ensured that the participants were educated as well. If there had been participants who were in the previous generations, it may be possible to relate their lived experiences well to the varied challenges women face in traditional Nigerian society.

Although with phenomenological research and any research, it can be challenging for the researcher to remain separate from their study (Christensen & Johnson, 2016). The first author's connection to this research is unique because she is a Nigerian woman and has experienced the phenomenon under study as a Nigerian. Therefore, with epoché, her experience impacted

the analysis because she could relate to the lived experiences of the participants.

Finally, as a phenomenological study, this study sought to capture the essence of the lived experiences of the 19 Nigerian women as they build their identities and self-esteem through acquiring higher education. The findings of this study were not intended for generalizations as people experience similar things in different ways. The experiences are unique and peculiar to each participant. However, their unique experiences and stories will provide insight for many educators, psychologists, and policymakers who are interested in empowering females in Nigeria and possibly globally.

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