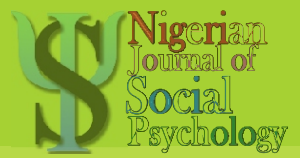


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Gender Norms and Leadership Exclusion with a Focus on Women's Pathways to Power in Southern Nigeria

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Abstract

Women's participation in leadership in Southern Nigeria remains severely constrained despite gains in education, economic engagement, and civic involvement. This study examines how social norms and patriarchal structures limit women's access to leadership across family, community, religious, and workplace contexts in Ebonyi and Cross River States. Using qualitative data from 20 Key Informant Interviews, the study explores both men's and women's perceptions of female leadership, with particular attention to how women themselves reinforce restrictive gender norms. Findings reveal that leadership is widely coded as masculine, and women frequently act as gatekeepers, policing the ambitions of other women and discouraging leadership aspirations to maintain social conformity and uphold patriarchal hierarchies. The Women-Against-Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) is applied as a supporting lens to interpret these intra-gender dynamics. The study highlights the relational and normative barriers that perpetuate women's exclusion from leadership and underscores the need for interventions that address women's role as enforcers of restrictive norms.

1. Introduction

Women's participation in leadership across family, community, workplace, and religious contexts is widely recognized as essential for inclusive decision-making, social cohesion, and equitable development. Globally, studies demonstrate that women's leadership improves governance, enhances social welfare outcomes, and strengthens institutions (Waylen et al., 2013; UN Women, 2020). Despite these benefits, women in many societies—including Nigeria—remain underrepresented in leadership positions, not only in formal politics but also in family enterprises, community organizations, religious groups, and workplaces.

In Southern Nigeria, Ebonyi and Cross River States present compelling contexts for examining women's leadership exclusion. Women in these states often display high educational attainment, active participation in economic activities, and involvement in community development initiatives. Nevertheless, formal and informal leadership spaces remain dominated by men, and women's participation is frequently restricted to supportive or auxiliary roles. Existing explanations—such as limited access to resources, education, and political networks—do not fully account for these persistent patterns.

Social norms are a key mechanism shaping women's leadership opportunities. Social Norms Theory conceptualizes norms as socially constructed rules that define appropriate behaviors for men and women, enforced through social approval, sanctions, and expectations (Bicchieri, 2017). Similarly, Patriarchy Theory highlights the structural and cultural systems that institutionalize male dominance and shape gendered power relations (Connell, 2005).

Together, these frameworks help explain why leadership is culturally coded as masculine, while women are expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities, obedience, and moral propriety.

Importantly, the enforcement of restrictive norms is not limited to men. Drawing on the Women-Against-Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) (Ajah-Okohu, 2025), women themselves may actively reinforce social norms that limit other women's well-being. For instance, mothers, senior female family members, religious women leaders, and women's associations may discourage ambitious women, legitimize male authority, and sanction those who challenge established expectations. Understanding these relational dynamics is essential for identifying both barriers and potential allies in the promotion of women's leadership.

This study, therefore, examines how social norms and patriarchal structures shape women's participation in leadership across multiple domains in Ebonyi and Cross River States, and how women themselves may contribute to sustaining these barriers. By focusing on family, family businesses, property ownership, community structures, religious organizations, and workplaces, the study provides a comprehensive empirical understanding of the complex social forces limiting women's pathways to leadership.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Despite global and national commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment, women's participation in leadership across family, community, religious, and workplace settings in Nigeria remains persistently low, particularly in deeply patriarchal contexts such as Ebonyi and Cross River States. While structural barriers such as limited access to education, economic resources, and political opportunities have been widely documented (Acker, 1990; World Bank, 2023), growing evidence suggests that social norms and everyday patriarchal practices play a more decisive role in shaping women's exclusion from leadership than formal institutional constraints alone (Kabeer, 2016; Marcus & Harper, 2015).

Social norms—shared expectations about appropriate roles and behaviors for men and women—continue to define leadership as inherently masculine, positioning women primarily as supporters, caregivers, and moral enforcers of tradition rather than as decision-makers (Connell, 2005; Jayachandran, 2021). In many Nigerian communities, these norms are reinforced within families, religious institutions, customary governance systems, and workplaces, where women's authority is routinely questioned, restricted, or subordinated to male control (Amadiume, 2015; Aina, 2020). Consequently, women who aspire to leadership are often perceived as deviating from accepted gender roles, attracting social sanctions, ridicule, or outright resistance.

Critically, existing literature has increasingly shown that women themselves may actively participate in sustaining these exclusionary norms, either by policing other women's behavior, legitimizing male dominance, or discouraging female leadership aspirations to preserve social acceptance or family stability (Bicchieri, 2017; Ajah-Okohu, 2023). Mothers, mothers-in-law, female religious leaders, and women's peer groups have been identified as influential actors in reproducing gendered expectations that limit women's access to authority and public decision-making (Chant & Sweetman, 2012; Cornwall, 2016). Yet, this complex

role of women as both victims and agents of patriarchal norm reproduction remains underexplored in empirical leadership studies in Nigeria.

Furthermore, perceptions of women's leadership capabilities continue to be shaped by deeply embedded beliefs about competence, morality, and authority. Both men and women may internalize assumptions that women lack the emotional strength, rationality, or legitimacy required for leadership, particularly in arenas involving land, politics, or religious authority (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ridgeway, 2011). These perceptions not only restrict women's leadership opportunities but also normalize their exclusion, making inequality appear natural and unquestionable.

Although prior studies have examined women's political participation and workplace leadership in Nigeria, few have adopted a multi-level, norm-centered approach that simultaneously interrogates family, community, religious, and workplace contexts, or that foregrounds women's own roles in sustaining or challenging leadership exclusion. This gap limits the effectiveness of gender interventions that focus primarily on policy reform or economic empowerment while neglecting the normative foundations of inequality.

Therefore, there is a critical need for empirical research that examines how social norms and patriarchal structures influence women's leadership participation, identifies the specific norms that constrain women across multiple social spaces, explores women's complicity and resistance in norm reproduction, and interrogates prevailing perceptions of women's leadership roles and capacities. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing contextually grounded strategies that move beyond formal equality to challenge the everyday social processes that sustain women's leadership exclusion in Ebonyi and Cross River States.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

General Objective

- To examine how social norms and patriarchal structures influence women's participation in leadership at family, community, religious, and workplace levels in Ebonyi and Cross River States.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify the key social norms that limit women's leadership across family, community, religious, and workplace contexts.
2. To explore how women themselves may reinforce or challenge these norms in restricting leadership opportunities for other women.
3. To examine men's and women's perceptions of women's leadership roles and capabilities in these contexts.

2.1 Social Norms and Women's Leadership Participation

Social norms play a central role in shaping women's access to leadership across societies. Defined as collectively shared expectations about appropriate roles, behaviours, and responsibilities for men and women, social norms are enforced through social approval, sanctions, and informal regulation (Bicchieri, 2017). In many patriarchal contexts, leadership is culturally constructed as a masculine domain, while women are expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities, caregiving, moral conformity, and supportive roles, limiting their legitimacy as leaders (Waylen et al., 2013).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, social norms constitute one of the most persistent barriers to women's leadership across family, community, religious, and workplace settings (Alokwu et al., 2024; Adesoye et al., 2025). Unlike formal legal barriers, these norms are deeply embedded in everyday practices and are often internalized by both men and women, making them difficult to challenge. At the family level, norms that prioritize male authority constrain women's participation in decision-making related to finances, property ownership, and family businesses, shaping leadership aspirations from early socialization (Adebayo et al., 2024).

At the community and religious levels, leadership structures are commonly male-dominated, with women relegated to auxiliary or supportive roles despite their contributions to development and social cohesion (Tukura & Suleiman, 2024). Normative interpretations of religious doctrine further reinforce male authority by framing leadership as divinely sanctioned for men, restricting women's access to formal leadership positions and legitimizing their exclusion (Crumbley, 2003; Adesoye et al., 2025). These religious norms frequently spill over into community and political leadership expectations.

In the workplace, gendered norms shape leadership trajectories by defining acceptable behaviours for women and men. Assertive or authoritative behaviour by women may be viewed as inappropriate or disruptive, while similar behaviours are rewarded in men, limiting women's career advancement (Racheal, 2025). Empirical studies conducted between 2024 and 2025 show that these norms intersect across family, community, religious, and workplace domains, reinforcing women's leadership exclusion simultaneously (Alokwu et al., 2024; Tukura & Suleiman, 2024). In Ebonyi and Cross River States, where kinship systems, religious influence, and community governance remain strong, understanding these norms is essential for identifying the key barriers to women's leadership participation, in line with the objectives of this study.

2.2 Women's Roles in Reinforcing or Challenging Gender Norms in Leadership

Although patriarchy is often portrayed as a male-dominated system, feminist and social norms scholarship increasingly emphasizes that women are not merely passive victims of gender inequality. Rather, women frequently act as norm carriers, enforcers, and negotiators of the very social norms that restrict their collective leadership opportunities. Understanding women's roles in sustaining or contesting leadership exclusion is therefore critical to explaining the persistence of gender inequality across family, community, religious, and organizational spaces.

Social norms theory explains that norms are maintained through shared expectations and social sanctions, not solely through male authority or formal institutions (Bicchieri, 2017). In many contexts in Southern Nigeria, women play central roles in transmitting and enforcing

gender norms through socialization, moral policing, and peer regulation. Mothers, mothers-in-law, elder women, religious women leaders, and leaders of women's associations often function as normative gatekeepers, defining acceptable ambition, authority, and public visibility for other women.

Empirical studies show that at the family and community levels, women frequently discourage daughters and daughters-in-law from asserting leadership in household decision-making, inheritance claims, politics, and community governance, framing such aspirations as disrespectful, unfeminine, or socially destabilizing (Adebayo et al., 2024; Waylen et al., 2013). In political and religious spaces, female aspirants often face stricter moral scrutiny, gossip, and withdrawal of support from other women, reinforcing leadership exclusion and discouraging future participation (Nwano & Akhirome-Omonfuegbe, 2024; Adesoye et al., 2025).

Feminist scholars conceptualize these dynamics as internalized patriarchy, whereby women absorb and reproduce patriarchal values as moral common sense or social necessity (Connell, 2005). From a social norms perspective, women may enforce restrictive leadership norms because the costs of norm violation—such as social isolation, reputational damage, marital conflict, or religious condemnation—are high (Bicchieri, 2017). As a result, women may police one another's behavior to maintain conformity and social stability, even when such actions undermine long-term gender equity in leadership.

The Women-Against-Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) offers a valuable interpretive lens for understanding these dynamics. As advanced by Ajah-Okohu (2025), the theory explains how women, as embedded actors within patriarchal systems, may simultaneously experience oppression and participate in sustaining harmful norms against other women. Applied to leadership exclusion, WAW-HCP highlights how women's actions—through discouragement, silence, or sanctioning—can reproduce normative barriers to women's leadership across domains. This perspective shifts the analysis beyond a simplistic male–female binary, emphasizing that sustainable leadership inclusion in Ebonyi and Cross River States requires engaging women not only as beneficiaries of change but as critical agents of norm transformation.

2.3 Men's and Women's Perceptions of Women's Leadership Roles and Capabilities

Perceptions of women's leadership roles and capabilities play a critical role in shaping women's access to power and authority. Beyond formal exclusion, leadership participation is strongly influenced by shared beliefs about who can lead, how leadership should be exercised, and whose authority is considered legitimate. These perceptions are socially constructed, culturally embedded, and reinforced through everyday interactions between men and women.

Social norms theory explains that such perceptions function as collective expectations about appropriate gender roles and leadership capacity (Bicchieri, 2017). In Southern Nigeria, leadership is commonly perceived as masculine—associated with authority, rationality, and control—while femininity is linked to caregiving, emotional restraint, and submission. These gendered perceptions shape how both men and women evaluate women's leadership potential across family, community, religious, and workplace contexts.

Empirical studies in Nigeria show that many men view women's leadership as secondary or conditional, particularly at the family and community levels where male authority over property, inheritance, and decision-making is considered natural (Aina, 2012; Tukura & Suleiman, 2024). In political and religious spaces, women are often perceived as unsuited for leadership due to assumptions about emotional weakness or moral vulnerability, with doctrinal interpretations reinforcing male dominance (Adesoye et al., 2025).

Importantly, women also internalize and reproduce these perceptions. Feminist scholarship documents how women may question other women's leadership abilities, police moral conduct, or distance themselves from female leaders to conform to dominant norms (Connell, 2005; Waylen et al., 2013). In workplaces, this may manifest as limited support for female leaders or alignment with male-dominated leadership cultures (Racheal, 2025).

These perceptions directly affect leadership legitimacy. In Ebonyi and Cross River States, women's authority is often contingent on male endorsement, marital status, age, or religious approval rather than competence alone. The interaction between men's skepticism and women's internalized norms creates a feedback loop that sustains leadership exclusion across domains, even where formal policies promote gender inclusion. Examining both men's and women's perceptions therefore provides critical insight into the normative and relational mechanisms that continue to constrain women's leadership pathways

2.4 Theoretical Review

2.4.1 Social Norms Theory

Social Norms Theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how shared expectations, informal rules, and collective beliefs shape individual behavior and social outcomes. Social norms are understood as socially constructed rules of behavior that are maintained through approval, disapproval, rewards, and sanctions within a reference group (Bicchieri, 2017). Unlike formal laws or institutional policies, social norms operate subtly through everyday interactions and are often internalized as "common sense" or cultural expectations.

In the context of gender and leadership, social norms define who is expected to lead, how leadership should be exercised, and whose authority is considered legitimate. Leadership norms are therefore not neutral; they are gendered and historically embedded within cultural and social systems. In many African societies, including Southern Nigeria, leadership is normatively associated with masculinity, authority, assertiveness, and public visibility, while femininity is linked to domesticity, obedience, moral restraint, and relational support.

Social norms operate through descriptive norms (beliefs about what others do) and injunctive norms (beliefs about what others approve or disapprove of) (Bicchieri, 2017). In Ebonyi and Cross River States, descriptive norms may reinforce the belief that "men lead" because leadership positions are visibly male-dominated, while injunctive norms reinforce sanctions against women who attempt to lead, such as gossip, moral policing, social exclusion, or withdrawal of support.

Social Norms Theory is particularly useful for this study because it explains why women's leadership exclusion persists even in contexts where women possess education, competence,

and legal rights. The theory highlights that individual willingness or capacity is insufficient when collective expectations discourage norm deviation. Women who challenge leadership norms may face social costs that outweigh potential benefits, leading to self-regulation, withdrawal, or compliance.

By applying Social Norms Theory, this study examines how leadership exclusion is reproduced across family, community, religious, and workplace contexts, and how both men and women contribute to the maintenance or contestation of these norms. The theory provides a strong analytical lens for interpreting Key Informant Interview data, particularly narratives relating to expectations, sanctions, legitimacy, and social approval.

2.4.2 Patriarchal Theory

Patriarchal Theory complements Social Norms Theory by providing a structural and ideological explanation for gender inequality. Patriarchy refers to a system of social organization in which men hold dominant positions of power and authority in political, economic, religious, and familial institutions, while women are systematically subordinated (Connell, 2005).

Unlike social norms, which operate at the level of everyday behavior, patriarchy functions as a macro-level system that institutionalizes male dominance through laws, customs, inheritance systems, kinship arrangements, and organizational hierarchies. In Nigeria, patriarchal power is embedded in customary law, land tenure systems, religious institutions, and political structures, shaping women's access to leadership and resources.

Patriarchal Theory is particularly relevant for understanding leadership exclusion in Ebonyi and Cross River States, where authority is traditionally vested in male elders, male household heads, and male religious leaders. Women's exclusion from leadership is often justified through appeals to tradition, culture, and religious doctrine, framing male dominance as natural, divinely ordained, or culturally inevitable.

At the family level, patriarchy legitimizes male headship and control over property, inheritance, and decision-making, limiting women's autonomy and leadership pathways. At the community level, patriarchal structures exclude women from traditional councils and political leadership, even when women are central to community mobilization and development. In religious institutions, patriarchal interpretations of doctrine reinforce gender hierarchies and restrict women's leadership roles. In the workplace, patriarchal cultures privilege male leadership styles and networks, marginalizing women from positions of authority.

Patriarchal Theory strengthens this study by explaining why leadership norms are gendered in the first place. It situates social norms within a broader power structure that systematically advantages men and constrains women. Together with Social Norms Theory, patriarchy helps explain the persistence, legitimacy, and resistance to change of gendered leadership arrangements.

2.4.3 Women-Against-Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) as a Supporting Lens

The Women-Against-Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) offers a complementary lens for understanding intra-gender dynamics in the reproduction of gender inequality. Developed by Ajah-Okohu (2025), the theory argues that women, as social actors embedded within patriarchal systems, may actively or passively participate in sustaining harmful cultural practices and norms against other women.

While WAW-HCP was originally articulated to explain women's roles in sustaining harmful cultural practices, its core insight is relevant to leadership exclusion: women can function as agents of norm reinforcement as well as agents of resistance. The theory does not frame women as inherently antagonistic to one another, but rather as actors navigating social constraints, power relations, and survival strategies within patriarchal contexts.

In this study, WAW-HCP is not applied as a political theory, but as an interpretive framework to understand how women—such as mothers, mothers-in-law, religious women leaders, and leaders of women's associations—may discourage leadership ambition, legitimize male dominance, or sanction women who transgress leadership norms. At the same time, the theory accommodates women's roles as norm challengers who support, mentor, and advocate for women's leadership inclusion.

Positioning WAW-HCP as a supporting lens allows this study to capture the complex and sometimes contradictory roles women play in shaping leadership outcomes, without displacing Social Norms Theory and Patriarchal Theory as the primary analytical anchors.

Together, Social Norms Theory and Patriarchal Theory provide the core analytical foundation for understanding women's leadership exclusion as both a normative and structural phenomenon, while WAW-HCP deepens the analysis by illuminating women's intra-gender dynamics. This integrated theoretical approach is well suited to an empirical qualitative design using Key Informant Interviews, enabling a nuanced exploration of how leadership norms are produced, enforced, contested, and transformed in Ebonyi and Cross River States

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how social norms and patriarchal structures influence women's leadership participation across family, community, religious, and workplace contexts in Ebonyi and Cross River States. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture in-depth perspectives, lived experiences, and contextual nuances that cannot be fully understood through quantitative methods.

The study population consisted of men and women identified as knowledgeable about leadership dynamics in their communities, workplaces, families, and religious or social groups. Participants included community leaders, family heads, religious leaders, women in formal or informal leadership roles, and other individuals recognized for their experience in leadership decision-making.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who could provide rich, detailed insights relevant to the research objectives. The study conducted 10 Key Informant Interviews in Ebonyi State and 10 in Cross River State, for a total of 20 participants. This sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation and ensure representation of diverse perspectives within each state.

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides designed around the research questions and theoretical framework. The guides explored participants' perceptions of:

- Leadership roles and opportunities for women in family, community, religious, and workplace contexts
- Social norms that facilitate or hinder women's participation
- The role of women in enforcing or challenging these norms (drawing on WAW-HCP as a supporting lens)

All interviews were conducted in person, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes each. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues, contextual information, and emerging themes.

Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. An inductive coding approach was applied to identify patterns, themes, and sub-themes related to social norms, patriarchal structures, and women's relational roles in sustaining or challenging leadership barriers. Social Norms Theory and Patriarchy Theory provided the analytical lens, while insights from WAW-HCP helped interpret women's influence in reinforcing or reducing restrictive norms.

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutional review boards. Participants provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality, and informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms were used in reporting to protect participants' identities.

4. Findings

The analysis of 20 Key Informant Interviews (10 from Ebonyi State and 10 from Cross River State) revealed a complex interplay of social norms, patriarchal structures, and intra-gender dynamics that restrict women's leadership participation in family, community, religious, and workplace contexts. Findings are organized by research objectives.

4.1 Social Norms and Patriarchal Constraints on Women's Leadership

Leadership is socially and culturally coded as masculine. Participants reported that men are viewed as natural leaders, while women are expected to remain obedient, domestic, and supportive.

Illustrative Quotes:

1. "In our community, only men can contest for local council positions. Women are expected to assist from behind, not lead." – Female participant, Ebonyi State
2. "My wife wanted to run for the LGA council, but the husband of her sister, along with other family and community members, prevented her, saying a woman cannot rule while her husband is alive." – Male participant, Cross River State

3. “Even in family meetings, men speak first, decide on property, and make all major decisions. Women are heard only if they ask politely.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State
4. “Leadership is linked with masculinity. A woman who tries to lead is often labeled rebellious or disrespectful.” – Male participant, Cross River State
5. “People do not expect women to take high positions; it is seen as inappropriate, almost like she is going against nature.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State

Theme 2: Patriarchal Control at Family and Property Levels

Women’s participation in family businesses, land management, and inheritance is restricted due to patriarchal structures.

Illustrative Quotes:

1. “If a man dies, the son automatically becomes head of the family, even if a daughter is older, because women cannot demarcate land.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State
2. “Women are rarely allowed to participate in family business decisions; men say it is not a woman’s duty to make such calls.” – Male participant, Cross River State
3. “In town unions, women cannot speak on land issues, no matter their knowledge or experience. Only men decide.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State
4. “Even if a woman inherits property, the male members control the land and decisions regarding it.” – Male participant, Cross River State
5. “Our family business has always been male-led. When my sister tried to manage it, elders said women cannot hold authority over productive land.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State

Theme 3: Restricted Leadership in Religious and Workplace Contexts

Religious doctrines and workplace hierarchies limit women’s leadership opportunities.

Illustrative Quotes:

1. “In Catholic churches, a Rev. Fr. always leads over a Rev. Sr., no matter her years of experience. She cannot say Mass.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State
2. “I know one female catechist in the whole of Ebonyi, and many people consider it an abomination to see her on the altar.” – Male participant, Ebonyi State
3. “Before seeing a female pastor, you must have seen hundreds of male pastors. When a woman leads, her husband must have a permanent seat on the pulpit.” – Female participant, Cross River State

4. “In offices, men head departments. Women are given supporting roles even if they have more experience or education.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State
5. “Women are often excluded from boards or committees in both public and private organizations; leadership is still seen as a male privilege.” – Male participant, Cross River State

4.2 Women as Reinforcers and Gatekeepers of Leadership Exclusion (Objective 2)

Theme 1: Women Discouraging Female Leadership

Women sometimes enforce restrictive norms, discouraging other women from aspiring to leadership roles.

Illustrative Quotes:

1. “My mother told me not to contest for the PTA chair; she said it would be shameful for a woman to lead in front of men.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State
2. “Older women in women’s groups often oppose younger women taking leadership because it upsets the accepted order.” – Female participant, Cross River State
3. “A woman in our community tried to lead a cooperative society, but other women warned her she might be socially isolated if she persisted.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State
4. “Some women do not want others to be leaders because they fear losing influence or respect among men.” – Female participant, Cross River State
5. “When my sister wanted to run for town union office, her female relatives said she would bring disgrace to the family.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State

Theme 2: Women Supporting Leadership Aspirants

Some women actively mentor and support female leadership despite social sanctions.

Illustrative Quotes:

1. “My aunt encouraged me to join the community youth committee; she said women must show capability to inspire others.” – Female participant, Cross River State
2. “Certain women’s associations help aspiring women leaders with training and networking opportunities.” – Male participant, Ebonyi State
3. “A few women in our town have funded female candidates to contest for leadership positions.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State
4. “Some older women act as role models, showing that women can lead without causing conflict.” – Female participant, Cross River State

5. "I have seen women lobbying and mentoring other women to take leadership in local cooperatives and committees." – Male participant, Cross River State

Theme 3: Intra-Gender Norm Enforcement

Women enforce norms for social survival, respectability, and cultural conformity.

Illustrative Quotes:

1. "Women often warn younger women not to challenge men because it might bring shame or gossip." – Female participant, Ebonyi State
2. "A woman contesting for leadership was told by her female peers that she would create family tension if she persisted." – Female participant, Cross River State
3. "Older women sometimes act as moral gatekeepers to ensure social order is maintained." – Male participant, Ebonyi State
4. "Women in our town monitor others' behavior to make sure they conform to expected gender roles." – Female participant, Cross River State
5. "Even when women support change, they do so carefully to avoid being ostracized or criticized." – Female participant, Ebonyi State

4.3 Perceptions of Women's Leadership and Legitimacy (Objective 3)

Theme 1: Male Skepticism of Female Leadership

Men's perceptions often question women's authority and ability to lead.

Illustrative Quotes:

1. "Men think women are too emotional to lead; they prefer male leadership in every context." – Male participant, Ebonyi State
2. "Even competent women are doubted. People say women cannot handle responsibilities that involve finances or property." – Male participant, Cross River State
3. "A man in my community said a woman cannot be the Igwe's cabinet member; only men discuss land and productive matters." – Female participant, Ebonyi State
4. "Men resist women in politics; they argue that women will prioritize family over community governance." – Male participant, Cross River State
5. "Even if a woman is elected to lead a cooperative, men interfere, claiming it is their right to manage." – Male participant, Ebonyi State

Theme 2: Female Internalization of Leadership Norms

Women often self-limit due to social pressure and fear of sanctions.

Illustrative Quotes:

1. "I hesitated to contest for a women's group leadership because other women might gossip about me." – Female participant, Ebonyi State

2. “I know capable women who refuse to speak at meetings because it is frowned upon.” – Female participant, Cross River State
3. “Some women accept male leadership as natural, even when they have the skills to lead.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State
4. “Female teachers sometimes avoid committee positions to escape criticism from colleagues.” – Female participant, Cross River State
5. “I once wanted to run for town union office but didn’t; older women and men discouraged me.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State

Theme 3: Leadership Legitimacy Tied to Social Approval

Women’s leadership legitimacy is often conditional on men’s endorsement, marital status, and adherence to norms.

Illustrative Quotes:

1. “When a woman is a pastor or leader, her husband must be recognized and honored publicly.” – Female participant, Cross River State
2. “A female catechist is seen as exceptional; many consider it an abomination because it challenges norms.” – Male participant, Ebonyi State
3. “Married women are more accepted in leadership, but single women struggle to gain legitimacy.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State
4. “A woman can only lead a cooperative if her husband or male relative supports her.” – Male participant, Cross River State
5. “Community approval is everything. Women who challenge tradition face social backlash.” – Female participant, Ebonyi State

5. Discussion of findings

This study examined how social norms and patriarchal structures shape women’s participation in leadership across family, community, religious, and workplace contexts in Ebonyi and Cross River States, with particular attention to women’s own roles in reinforcing or challenging these norms. The findings reveal that women’s leadership exclusion is deeply embedded in normative belief systems, patriarchal authority, and socially enforced gender expectations, rather than a lack of competence or interest among women.

5.1 Leadership as a Masculine Social Construct

The findings that leadership is widely perceived as a male domain align strongly with **Social Norms Theory**, which emphasizes that behavior is regulated by shared expectations and sanctions rather than individual preferences (Bicchieri, 2017). Across both states, leadership is culturally coded as masculine, while femininity is associated with obedience, domesticity, and moral restraint. Women who aspire to leadership are therefore perceived as violating accepted gender norms.

This resonates with Acker’s (1990) theory of **gendered organizations**, which argues that leadership structures are implicitly designed around male norms and life patterns. The belief that a woman “cannot rule an LGA while her husband is alive” reflects what Kandiyoti

(1988) describes as the **patriarchal bargain**, where male authority is preserved through marriage and kinship systems that regulate women's public power.

Similar findings have been reported across Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa, where leadership legitimacy is closely tied to masculinity and senior male status (Aina, 2012; Waylen et al., 2013). This study extends this literature by showing how such norms operate simultaneously at family, community, and political levels, creating a continuum of exclusion.

5.2 Patriarchy, Property, and Gendered Control of Land

The exclusion of women from leadership in land-related decision-making spaces—such as town unions, Igwe's cabinets, and family headship—highlights the central role of **land as both economic and symbolic power**. Feminist political economy scholars argue that control over land is a key mechanism through which patriarchy is reproduced (Agarwal, 1994; Doss et al., 2015).

The belief that women cannot “demarcate land” reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal ideologies that equate land ownership, boundary-making, and lineage authority with masculinity. This aligns with findings by Lastarria-Cornhiel (1997) and Tsikata (2003), who show that customary land tenure systems across Africa systematically exclude women from leadership and inheritance, regardless of their economic contributions.

The automatic elevation of male children to family headship—irrespective of age or competence—further illustrates how patriarchy overrides merit and experience. As Walby (1990) argues, patriarchy operates through both private (family) and public (community and institutional) spheres, ensuring the intergenerational reproduction of male dominance.

5.3 Religion as a Normative Institution of Gender Exclusion

Religious institutions emerged as powerful enforcers of gendered leadership norms. The Catholic Church examples—where Rev. Fathers lead Rev. Sisters regardless of experience and women are barred from presiding over sacraments—reflect what Chitando and Chirongoma (2012) describe as **the masculinization of religious authority** in African Christianity.

The perception of female catechists as an “abomination” illustrates how religious norms are not only doctrinal but socially enforced, aligning with Durkheim's notion of religion as a moral regulator of social order. From a social norms perspective, congregational disapproval functions as a sanction mechanism that discourages women from aspiring to visible leadership roles (Bicchieri & Mercier, 2014).

In Pentecostal contexts, the requirement that husbands be publicly honored when women lead reflects what Oyěwùmí (1997) calls the **relational construction of female authority**, where women's legitimacy is derived from their association with men. This reinforces the idea that women's leadership remains conditional and mediated, rather than autonomous.

5.4 Women as Reinforcers and Gatekeepers of Leadership Norms

One of the most significant contributions of this study is its empirical demonstration of women's dual roles as both reinforcers and challengers of leadership exclusion. The discouragement of female leadership by mothers, older women, and women's associations reflects internalized patriarchy, where women adopt dominant gender norms as strategies for social survival (Kandiyoti, 1988).

This finding aligns with Ajah-Okohu's (2025) Women-Against-Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP), which explains how women may sustain gendered oppression by policing other women's behavior in order to protect social order, family reputation, or personal status. Importantly, this study extends WAW-HCP beyond harmful cultural practices to leadership exclusion, showing how women act as normative gatekeepers in political, religious, and community spaces.

At the same time, the presence of women who mentor, fund, and mobilize support for female leaders demonstrates that women's networks can also function as sites of resistance. This supports feminist social movement literature, which emphasizes the transformative potential of women's collective agency when normative constraints are challenged (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005).

5.5 Perceptions, Internalization, and Conditional Legitimacy

The skepticism expressed by men regarding women's emotionality, competence, and authority reflects longstanding gender stereotypes documented in leadership studies (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Such perceptions undermine women's authority even after they attain leadership positions, as evidenced by male interference in women-led cooperatives and organizations.

Equally critical is women's internalization of these norms. Fear of gossip, stigma, and social backlash leads many women to self-exclude from leadership opportunities, a phenomenon widely discussed in feminist psychology and sociology as normative self-regulation (Bourdieu, 2001; Ridgeway, 2011).

Leadership legitimacy for women is therefore conditional—dependent on marital status, male endorsement, age, and conformity to gender expectations. This finding aligns with Acker's (2006) argument that inequality regimes persist because legitimacy is socially constructed and unevenly distributed.

5.6 Implications for Gender and Leadership Interventions

The findings suggest that interventions aimed at increasing women's leadership must move beyond skills training and numerical representation to address the social norms and patriarchal structures that define leadership legitimacy. As Marcus and Harper (2014) argue, norm change requires engaging not only individuals but reference groups, institutions, and belief systems.

Efforts must therefore:

- Engage men as gatekeepers of land, family authority, and religious leadership

- Address women's intra-gender norm enforcement through dialogue and collective reflection
- Challenge religious and cultural narratives that naturalize male leadership
- Strengthen women-led mentorship and solidarity networks as counter-normative spaces

Conclusion of the Discussion

This study demonstrates that women's leadership exclusion in Ebonyi and Cross River States is sustained through a dense web of social norms, patriarchal authority, and relational legitimacy. Leadership is denied not because women lack capacity, but because power itself is gendered. Addressing these normative foundations is essential for transforming women's pathways to leadership in Southern Nigeria.

6. Summary of Findings

This study examined how social norms and patriarchal structures influence women's participation in leadership across family, community, religious, and workplace contexts in Ebonyi and Cross River States. Drawing on qualitative evidence from Key Informant Interviews with men and women, the study reveals that women's leadership exclusion is deeply rooted in socially enforced gender norms rather than deficiencies in women's competence or interest.

The findings show that leadership is widely constructed as a masculine domain, with women expected to remain supportive, obedient, and domestically oriented. Patriarchal authority is most evident in family and community governance, particularly in land ownership, inheritance, and decision-making, where women are systematically excluded regardless of age, experience, or economic contribution. Religious institutions—especially Christian denominations—emerge as powerful normative spaces where male spiritual authority is institutionalized, limiting women's leadership visibility and legitimacy.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that women play dual roles in sustaining and challenging leadership exclusion. While some women discourage female leadership to preserve social respectability, family harmony, or cultural order, others actively mentor, fund, and support aspiring women leaders. Men's skepticism toward women's leadership, combined with women's internalization of gender norms, further reinforces exclusion, making women's leadership legitimacy conditional on male endorsement, marital status, and conformity to accepted gender roles.

7. Conclusion

This study concludes that women's exclusion from leadership in Ebonyi and Cross River States is not accidental or incidental, but the outcome of deeply entrenched social norms and patriarchal systems that define leadership as male, authority as masculine, and public decision-making as inappropriate for women. These norms are reproduced across multiple spheres—family, land governance, religion, community associations, and workplaces—creating a continuum of exclusion that begins at the household level and extends into formal leadership structures.

By highlighting the role of both men and women in sustaining these norms, the study moves beyond simplistic explanations that frame women solely as victims of patriarchy. Instead, it shows that women's leadership exclusion is a **relational and normative process**, maintained through social expectations, sanctions, and internalized beliefs. The findings further demonstrate that increasing women's leadership participation requires more than legal reforms or numerical inclusion; it demands a transformation of the social norms that determine who is seen as a legitimate leader.

Ultimately, the study underscores that women's leadership in Southern Nigeria remains constrained not by lack of capacity, but by the gendered construction of power itself.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following practical and low-cost recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Promote Family-Level Dialogue on Leadership Roles**
Families should be encouraged to consciously include women in decision-making related to property, businesses, and community affairs, recognizing that leadership exclusion often begins within the household.
- 2. Encourage Women to Support Other Women's Leadership**
Women's groups, religious women's associations, and community networks should intentionally discourage practices that shame or silence aspiring women leaders and instead promote mutual support and mentorship.
- 3. Engage Traditional and Community Leaders in Norm Reflection**
Traditional rulers and community leaders should initiate conversations within town unions and community meetings to question long-held beliefs that exclude women from leadership and land-related discussions.
- 4. Use Religious Platforms for Gender-Inclusive Messaging**
Religious leaders should emphasize messages of shared responsibility and moral equality in sermons, teachings, and fellowship discussions, even within existing doctrinal limits.
- 5. Normalize Women's Participation in Formal and Informal Leadership Spaces**
Communities should consciously include women in committees, cooperatives, and advisory roles where leadership skills can be practiced and normalized without formal structural changes.
- 6. Encourage Women's Voice in Meetings and Public Discussions**
Meeting facilitators in schools, churches, cooperatives, and offices should create space for women to speak and contribute, helping to gradually shift perceptions about women's authority and competence.

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