

Beyond Patriarchy: A Contextual Theoretical Exploration of Gender Discrimination Among Women in Yoruba Society

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Abstract

Dominant feminist narratives often conceptualize gender discrimination primarily as male-dominated oppression. This paper challenges such unidirectional frameworks by theorizing how gender-based hierarchies also operate among women within Yoruba society in Nigeria. Drawing on intersectionality, African womanist thought, and postcolonial feminist theory, the study offers a critical examination of intra-gender discrimination—how women participate in the marginalization of other women based on age, marital status, fertility, economic capital, and social positioning. Employing a critical-interpretive methodology rooted in qualitative cultural analysis, the paper interrogates Yoruba kinship structures, religious practices, and gendered norms to reveal how symbolic and socio-economic hierarchies are internalized and reproduced by women themselves. Findings illustrate that seniority, motherhood, and material privilege serve as tools through which women exert exclusionary power over other women, particularly in domestic, religious, and market spaces. These practices not only fracture female solidarity but also sustain patriarchal orders through divided and competitive female agency. By repositioning the lens of gender analysis to include intra-female relations of power and exclusion, the paper contributes to broader feminist conversations on intersectionality and the politics of difference. It concludes by advocating for indigenous feminist approaches that prioritize collective healing, intergenerational dialogue, and solidarity across the diverse lived experiences of women.

Keywords: Gender Hierarchies, Intra-Gender Discrimination, Yoruba Women, Intersectionality, African Feminist Thought

Introduction

Gender discrimination in African societies is a complex and historically layered phenomenon, shaped by indigenous traditions, colonial legacies, religious ideologies, and contemporary socio-economic structures. While African cultures are often portrayed as rigidly patriarchal, this view oversimplifies the realities of gender relations across the continent. Pre-colonial African societies featured diverse gender systems, some of which afforded women considerable power in spiritual, economic, and political domains (Amadiume, 1987). However, the introduction of colonial rule and Western norms systematically restructured African gender hierarchies by privileging male authority in state, church, and family systems (Oyěwùmí, 1997).

Contemporary forms of gender discrimination in Africa reflect both traditional and modern influences. In many communities, women continue to face exclusion in property ownership, political participation, and decision-making, despite formal legal protections. More subtly, cultural practices such as bride price, widow inheritance, or fertility expectations sustain power imbalances and reinforce women's subordination (Akinbobola, 2019). Moreover, gender roles are not only imposed by men but also policed and perpetuated by women themselves, especially through age, marital status, and motherhood hierarchies.

Understanding gender discrimination in African societies requires a contextual lens that recognizes the coexistence of resistance, adaptation, and internal contradiction. Feminist scholars argue for culturally grounded approaches that critique patriarchy while also acknowledging indigenous sources of female agency and relational power (Nnaemeka, 2004). In this light, gender is not static but constantly negotiated within specific historical, social, and symbolic contexts.

Statement of the Problem

Gender discrimination is typically understood as the domination of women by men within patriarchal systems. While this is a valid and widespread reality, such a framework can obscure the ways in which gender-based exclusion also occurs among women themselves. In many societies, including among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, women do not form a single, unified category of shared oppression. Instead, social hierarchies—based on age, marital status, fertility, economic status, and seniority—often shape how women relate to and discriminate against one another (Amadiume, 1997; Oyěwùmí, 1997). For instance, older or married women may exclude or shame younger, unmarried, or childless women in family or community settings. Similarly, women in polygynous marriages may assert dominance based on their order of entry into the marriage or number

of children (Nzegwu, 2006). These forms of intra-gender discrimination challenge the assumption that women's oppression is solely external, revealing that women can also reproduce patriarchal logic and exclusionary practices in culturally specific ways. This problem remains underexplored in mainstream gender discourse, especially from African perspectives. Addressing it requires a more nuanced, intersectional understanding of gender that includes the power women can hold over one another (Crenshaw, 1991). Acknowledging and analyzing these dynamics is essential to building authentic solidarity and transformative feminist responses within Yoruba society and beyond.

The Importance of Exploring Intra-Gender Discrimination

While gender discrimination is typically viewed through the lens of male dominance over women, this perspective often overlooks how women themselves can become agents of exclusion and hierarchy. Intra-gender discrimination—discrimination among women—plays a critical role in shaping lived experiences, especially in culturally complex societies like the Yoruba of Nigeria. Exploring this dynamic is essential because it exposes the nuanced layers of power that operate within the category of "womanhood" itself. Women are not a homogeneous group; they differ in age, class, marital status, fertility, and social standing. These differences often become the basis for subtle and overt forms of exclusion among women (Crenshaw, 1991). For instance, in Yoruba society, older women may exert authority over younger women, while married or fertile women may stigmatize single or childless women (Oyěwùmí, 1997). These internal hierarchies complicate the collective struggle for gender justice and reveal how patriarchy is sometimes reinforced, not just resisted, by women. By studying intra-gender discrimination, scholars can move beyond binary gender models and develop a more intersectional understanding of oppression. This exploration is not about blaming women but about unpacking how cultural scripts, economic roles, and historical forces shape female relationships and identities. Such knowledge is crucial for designing inclusive feminist movements and policies that reflect the real-life dynamics women face across social, cultural, and generational divides.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to critically examine how gender discrimination operates among women within Yoruba society, moving beyond traditional views that center men as the sole agents of gender-based oppression. Specifically, the study seeks to understand the cultural, social, and symbolic factors that shape power relations among women, particularly in areas such as age, marital status, fertility, and economic class. It aims to explore how these internal hierarchies are formed, sustained, and justified within

everyday social interactions, family structures, religious spaces, and market environments. Another key objective is to theorize these patterns using intersectional and African feminist frameworks, providing a culturally grounded analysis that reflects the unique realities of Yoruba society. Ultimately, the study intends to contribute to more inclusive and context-sensitive gender discourses, encouraging a rethinking of feminist solidarity and justice to address the full complexity of women's experiences within their own gender group.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the central question: *How does gender discrimination manifest among women in Yoruba society, and what cultural, social, and symbolic systems sustain it?* To answer this, the study further asks:

1. What are the specific forms of discrimination women experience from other women within Yoruba cultural settings?
2. How do age, marital status, fertility, and socio-economic class shape intra-gender hierarchies?
3. In what ways do women internalize and reproduce patriarchal values in their relationships with other women?
4. What roles do institutions such as religion, family, and marketplaces play in maintaining these power dynamics?
5. How can African feminist and intersectional theories help us better understand and challenge these forms of intra-gender discrimination?

These questions aim to uncover both the overt and subtle mechanisms through which women navigate and sometimes reinforce systems of exclusion within their own gender group.

Scope of the Paper

This paper focuses on the underexplored phenomenon of gender discrimination among women within Yoruba society in Nigeria. While traditional gender studies often emphasize male-to-female oppression, this work shifts attention to the internal hierarchies and exclusions that occur among women themselves. The study specifically examines how factors such as age, marital status, fertility, motherhood, economic class, and seniority contribute to layered forms of discrimination within female relationships. Rather than seeking to generalize across all African societies, the paper situates its analysis within the unique cultural, spiritual, and social frameworks of the Yoruba people. It engages with symbolic practices, domestic spaces, market systems, and religious settings

as key sites where intra-gender power dynamics unfold. The goal is to provide a nuanced understanding of how women both resist and reproduce systems of inequality in their everyday interactions. This scope allows for a context-sensitive and culturally rooted theoretical reflection on gender, identity, and power.

Structure of the Paper

The paper is organized into nine interconnected sections. It begins with an introduction that outlines the central problem and rationale for studying intra-gender discrimination in Yoruba society. The next section presents the theoretical framework, drawing from intersectionality, African feminist thought, and postcolonial perspectives. Following this is a conceptual clarification, defining key terms and categories of analysis. The cultural and historical context of Yoruba gender relations is then explored to ground the discussion. The core of the paper examines the manifestations of discrimination among women, with examples drawn from family structures, economic life, and religious spaces. The following section analyzes the mechanisms that sustain these patterns, including cultural narratives and institutional norms. The paper then reflects on the consequences of intra-gender exclusion and proposes transformative feminist pathways rooted in indigenous values. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the insights and underscores the need to rethink gender justice beyond male-female binaries.

Theoretical Framework

1. *Intersectionality Theory (Kimberlé Crenshaw)*: Intersectionality was first introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to explain how systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, and classism—interact to produce unique experiences of discrimination, especially for Black women. Rather than viewing gender or race in isolation, Crenshaw argued that multiple identities overlap to shape how people are treated in society. This theory is highly suitable for a study on intra-gender discrimination among Yoruba women because it helps unpack how not all women experience womanhood the same way. A wealthy married mother, for instance, may hold power over a younger, single, childless woman—despite both being women. Intersectionality allows the study to move beyond simplistic male-vs-female frameworks and instead focus on how power works *within* the category of "woman." It is relevant to the study's objectives by offering a lens to examine the layered and intersecting social forces that shape women's relationships, hierarchies, and exclusions in Yoruba society.

2. *African Womanist Theory (Clenora Hudson-Weems)*: African Womanism, developed by Clenora Hudson-Weems in the early 1990s, offers a culturally rooted alternative to Western feminism. Unlike traditional feminism, which often centers

individual autonomy and Western ideals of liberation, African Womanism emphasizes community, family, motherhood, spirituality, and harmony in the struggle against oppression. Hudson-Weems argued that African women face unique socio-cultural realities that require frameworks developed from their own histories and experiences. This theory is especially appropriate for this study because it values the indigenous experiences of Yoruba women and recognizes the cultural contexts that shape their interactions and hierarchies. African Womanism helps the study avoid imposing Western assumptions about patriarchy and gender roles, allowing for a more authentic and respectful understanding of Yoruba women's lives. It aligns with the study's objective to explore intra-gender discrimination in a way that honors local values, while also pushing toward transformative possibilities grounded in African traditions and feminist ethics.

3. Postcolonial Feminist Theory (Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, etc.): Postcolonial feminist theory emerged in the late 20th century through thinkers like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who critiqued how mainstream feminism often portrayed women in the Global South as voiceless victims needing Western rescue. These theorists argue that colonialism not only reshaped economies and governments but also influenced gender relations and cultural identities in complex ways. In the context of Yoruba society, postcolonial feminist theory helps reveal how colonial legacies and Western religious systems disrupted indigenous gender norms and introduced new hierarchies that continue to shape relationships among women today. This theory is highly relevant for analyzing how women may internalize colonial ideas of morality, respectability, and womanhood, using them to exclude or judge others. It aligns with the study's goal to uncover how inherited cultural and colonial histories inform current intra-gender discrimination. Ultimately, it supports a decolonized and context-sensitive vision of gender justice among Yoruba women.

Conceptual Clarifications

Defining Gender Discrimination: Conventional vs. Intra-Gender

Gender discrimination is conventionally defined as the unequal treatment of individuals based on their gender, typically focusing on the systemic disadvantages women face in relation to men in areas such as employment, education, leadership, and legal rights (UN Women, 2020; Connell, 2009). This traditional framing often places men as the sole agents of oppression and women as uniform victims. Scholars like Walby (1990) and hooks (2000) have emphasized how patriarchy is institutionalized in societal structures, creating barriers to women's full participation in public and private life. However, recent feminist discourses have expanded this view, arguing that discrimination can also occur

among women themselves. This phenomenon—intra-gender discrimination—refers to the ways women marginalize or exclude other women based on factors such as age, fertility, marital status, social class, or religious roles. African feminist scholars like Nnaemeka (2004) and Oyěwùmí (1997) critique Western gender binaries and highlight how internal hierarchies among women are often shaped by indigenous cultural frameworks, not just patriarchal systems. Despite these insights, many gender studies still overlook how these internal dynamics reinforce broader systems of oppression. The literature often lacks contextual specificity, especially in non-Western societies like the Yoruba, where women may simultaneously experience marginalization and exercise dominance. This study addresses that gap by theorizing intra-gender discrimination within Yoruba society, showing how women both experience and perpetuate gender hierarchies.

Yoruba socio-cultural structure—covering gender roles, seniority, kinship, and religion: The Yoruba socio-cultural structure is deeply rooted in hierarchy, communalism, and symbolic order. Gender roles are traditionally complementary yet unequal, with men occupying public leadership while women wield domestic, spiritual, and economic influence—especially in market systems (Awe, 1992). However, while scholars like Sudarkasa (1986) argue that precolonial Yoruba society allowed for fluid and functional gender roles, others like Oyěwùmí (1997) challenge this, asserting that the gender binary itself was imposed by colonial and Western epistemologies. Oyěwùmí contends that Yoruba social organization prioritized seniority over gender, meaning that age, status, and position in kinship hierarchies were more consequential than sex distinctions. Kinship remains central to Yoruba identity, defining rights, responsibilities, and social mobility. Familial seniority—especially among women—can translate into real power, yet it also reproduces exclusionary practices (Amadiume, 1987). Religion, too, reflects this duality. Yoruba traditional religion afforded women sacred roles (e.g., priestesses and diviners), but modern Christianity and Islam have reshaped religious gender norms, often subordinating women to male authority (Oduyoye, 2001). Despite rich contributions, a gap persists in scholarship on *intra-gender discrimination*—how these socio-cultural structures enable some women to marginalize others. While existing literature addresses male-female power dynamics, few studies theorize how women enforce hierarchy among themselves based on age, fertility, or marital status. This paper seeks to fill that gap by interrogating how Yoruba women navigate and reproduce systems of exclusion within their own gendered spaces.

Categories of Women in Yoruba Society

In Yoruba society, women's identities are often shaped by deeply embedded cultural categories that intersect with age, fertility, marital status, and economic function. Older women are frequently accorded authority and respect, yet may also become gatekeepers of tradition, reinforcing gender hierarchies that marginalize younger or unmarried women (Amadiume, 1987). Fertile women, especially mothers, are celebrated as custodians of lineage, while infertile women often face exclusion, stigma, or even spiritual suspicion (Falola & Afolabi, 2020). Similarly, wives, particularly those in patriarchal family structures, are often perceived as more 'complete' than single or divorced women, who may be seen as socially unstable or morally suspect (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Among married women, co-wives and first wives in polygynous households navigate complex power dynamics, where seniority may grant authority but also breed rivalry (Ekechi, 1995). Economic identity also matters: traders, often with informal education, may command local respect and wealth, while female professionals may face double scrutiny for stepping beyond traditional gender roles (Nzegwu, 2006). While these categories are well-documented, most studies focus either on male-female power imbalances or static portrayals of Yoruba womanhood. What remains underexplored is how women themselves use these categories to include, exclude, or dominate other women, especially in contemporary, urban, or religious contexts. This study aims to fill that gap by providing a theoretical account of intra-gender discrimination, using Yoruba society as a case study.

Historical and Cultural Context of Yoruba Society

Traditional gender constructs in Yoruba cosmology

In traditional Yoruba cosmology, gender roles were not strictly binary nor entirely patriarchal. Rather, Yoruba worldview embedded gender in a fluid interplay of spiritual, social, and symbolic roles. Scholars like Oyěwùmí (1997) argue that precolonial Yoruba society did not organize its social world around Western gender binaries. She contends that seniority and age, not biological sex, were the primary social organizing principles, and that the introduction of colonialism and Christianity distorted this indigenous order by imposing rigid gender hierarchies. Contrastingly, scholars such as Matory (2005) and Falola and Akinyemi (2016) acknowledge the importance of seniority but assert that gender distinctions did exist in certain religious, political, and domestic spheres. For instance, while women served as priestesses, market leaders, and spiritual custodians, men were still more often vested with political authority, suggesting a subtle but present gendered ordering. However, both schools agree that Yoruba cosmology allowed for a more complex, complementary view of gender than typically seen in Western

frameworks. Deities like Ọṣun (feminine) and Ṣàngó (masculine) symbolize the dynamic interdependence of male and female principles in Yoruba thought.

Despite these rich insights, few studies focus on how these traditional constructs shape contemporary intra-gender dynamics among women. Most existing literature focuses on male-female relations, leaving a gap in understanding how women themselves perpetuate or resist traditional hierarchies within a modern Yoruba context. This study addresses that gap by examining how gender constructs within Yoruba cosmology inform current practices of intra-gender discrimination.

Role of women in indigenous Yoruba society

In indigenous Yoruba society, women occupied multifaceted roles that were both respected and strategically powerful. As mothers, they were seen as life-givers and moral anchors within the family, wielding symbolic and spiritual authority (Oyěwùmí, 1997). The title of “Ìyá” (mother) conferred not just biological but also communal respect, often positioning women as custodians of social norms and lineage continuity. As priestesses, women held sacred offices such as the Ìyálóde or the priestess of Ọṣun, mediating between the spiritual and material worlds. These roles, according to Falola and Adebayo (2000), provided religious and political influence, allowing women to participate in decision-making processes within both traditional religion and community life. In the economic realm, Yoruba women were also renowned traders. They dominated local markets, controlling food distribution and commodity exchange. Afonja (1981) notes that these market women not only created wealth but also formed powerful coalitions, such as the Ègbé, which could influence kings and chiefs.

However, some scholars offer conflicting views. Oyěwùmí (1997) challenges romanticized portrayals, arguing that many of these roles are filtered through Western gender binaries, which distort pre-colonial realities. Similarly, Amadiume (1987) critiques the imposition of patriarchal interpretations onto what may have been more fluid gender systems. While these studies highlight women’s importance, they often underexplore intra-gender dynamics—how some women exercised dominance over others. This study fills that gap by theorizing gender discrimination among women, focusing on social stratifications like age, fertility, and class.

Effects of Colonialism and Christianity/Islam on female agency and gender roles

Colonialism and the spread of Christianity and Islam significantly altered traditional gender roles and female agency in African societies, particularly among the Yoruba. Precolonial Yoruba society, though patriarchal in some respects, recognized women’s

roles in politics, commerce, religion, and kinship networks. Scholars like Oyěwùmí (1997) argue that gender was not the primary organizing principle in Yoruba culture before colonialism; rather, social roles were structured more around seniority and lineage. However, colonial rule imposed Western gender binaries and hierarchies that devalued female leadership. British administrators, for example, sidelined powerful Yoruba women such as market leaders and priestesses, enforcing male-only political structures (Amadiume, 1987). Christianity reinforced these changes, promoting Victorian ideals of womanhood centered on domesticity and submission, while Islam, particularly in its reformist expressions, introduced stricter gender segregation and redefined modesty codes that restricted women's mobility (Mahmood, 2005; Salami, 2018). Yet, some scholars caution against viewing these shifts as entirely oppressive. For instance, Akintunde (2001) notes that Christian missions also expanded access to education for girls, enabling new forms of empowerment. Similarly, some Muslim women reinterpreted religious roles to reclaim moral and social influence within their communities (Mahmood, 2005). Despite these insights, current scholarship often analyzes either religious or colonial impacts in isolation, overlooking how the combined forces of colonialism and religion transformed intra-female relations and stratified agency among women themselves. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how these external forces disrupted indigenous systems and deepened intra-gender discrimination in Yoruba society.

Manifestations of Gender Discrimination among Women

Seniority and Ageism: In Yoruba society, marital status remains a significant marker of female worth, often shaping how women relate to one another. Unmarried women, single mothers, widows, and divorced women frequently face stigma—not only from broader society but also from other women. For instance, Oduyoye (2001) notes that women often internalize patriarchal norms, using marital status to assert moral or social superiority. Similarly, Amadiume (1997) observes that older or married women may shame single or divorced women as deviant or irresponsible. However, Okeke-Ihejirika (2004) offers a counterview, suggesting that increasing female education and urbanization have weakened some of these intra-gender biases.

Yet, most of these works focus on patriarchy as external male domination, offering limited attention to how women themselves sustain these hierarchies. This study addresses that gap by theorizing intra-gender discrimination as a layered and culturally situated system of power among Yoruba women.

Marital Status

In Yoruba society, marital status significantly shapes women's social value, often leading to stigma against unmarried women, single mothers, widows, and divorcees—not only from men but from fellow women. Scholars like Amadiume (1997) and Oyěwùmí (1997) argue that marriage and motherhood confer legitimacy on women, positioning unmarried or non-traditional women as social outsiders. Others, such as Nzegwu (2006), challenge this by highlighting matrifocal traditions where women without husbands still wield influence. Yet, even within such systems, widows and divorced women often face exclusion from communal rituals and women's associations, enforced by other women (Akinbobola, 2021). This reveals a tension: while some indigenous models empower women, prevailing socio-cultural norms reinforce discrimination based on marital status. However, few studies focus on how *women themselves* reproduce these stigmas. This paper addresses that gap by theorizing intra-gender discrimination through an intersectional, culturally situated lens.

Motherhood and Fertility

In many African societies, including Yoruba communities, motherhood remains a central marker of womanhood. Women who are unable or choose not to bear children often face subtle and overt forms of exclusion from other women, particularly mothers and grandmothers who view childbearing as a communal duty and a source of identity (Amadiume, 1997; Nnaemeka, 2004). While scholars like Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) affirm the social power older women hold in defining womanhood, others, such as Tamale (2011), challenge these essentialist views, arguing for broader definitions of feminine identity beyond reproduction. Yet, few studies critically explore how these intra-gender exclusions are perpetuated within everyday female relationships, especially among generations. This study addresses that gap by theorizing how motherhood-based hierarchies marginalize childless women, not merely through patriarchal impositions but via peer and matriarchal enforcement. It thus reframes gender discrimination as not only top-down but also lateral and internalized.

Polygyny and Rivalry

In polygynous Yoruba households, power is not equally distributed among wives. Senior wives often enjoy elevated status, controlling household decisions, inheritance claims, and access to resources. Adeyemi (2004) argues that this hierarchy fosters rivalry and resentment, especially where property rights and child-rearing roles intersect. Conversely, Oladeji and Oyelere (2008) suggest that some co-wives form cooperative networks, navigating shared domestic life with pragmatism. However, Odebiyi and Lawal (2011)

highlight that such cooperation often masks underlying tensions reinforced by cultural norms and legal ambiguity around inheritance rights. These contrasting views show that while some women find solidarity within polygynous settings, others face deep emotional and material inequalities. Yet, existing literature often overlooks how these intra-female dynamics constitute a form of gendered power struggle. This study addresses that gap by theorizing polygyny not merely as a patriarchal institution, but as a complex site of intra-gender discrimination among women.

Economic Class and Prestige

In Yoruba society, class-based discrimination among women often manifests subtly through prestige, economic power, and education. While scholars like Amadiume (1997) affirm the authority of elite women—especially educated professionals—in shaping gender dynamics, others, like Sudarkasa (2005), argue that market women, despite lacking formal education, wield significant influence through indigenous economic networks. Yet, these groups often view each other with suspicion: professionals may dismiss traders as “unrefined,” while market women may perceive elites as disconnected from communal realities. Akinwumi (2011) notes that class distinctions deepen intra-gender tensions, especially in religious and civic associations where leadership is often tied to educational status. However, few studies interrogate how these internal divides actively reinforce broader patriarchal systems. This study fills the gap by critically examining how prestige-driven hierarchies among Yoruba women themselves challenge collective female empowerment and solidarity.

Religious and Traditional Roles

Access to spiritual leadership among Yoruba women remains contested. Some scholars argue that Yoruba tradition historically granted women significant religious roles—such as priestesses, diviners, and custodians of sacred groves—challenging the notion that patriarchy was always dominant (Oduyoye, 2001; Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). These roles were spiritually authoritative and socially recognized. However, others argue that colonialism and Christianity restructured these spaces, reinforcing male dominance and marginalizing women’s traditional spiritual authority (Adedibu, 2020; Okome, 2002). Contemporary Pentecostal churches also reflect this shift, where women are visible but often excluded from top-tier leadership. While existing literature explores women’s spiritual roles separately in either indigenous or Christian contexts, few studies critically examine how women navigate *both spaces concurrently* and how intra-gender dynamics affect access to spiritual leadership. This study addresses that gap by investigating how

Yoruba women negotiate spiritual authority within overlapping traditional and modern religious frameworks.

Mechanisms of Reproduction and Justification

Cultural Narratives and Proverbs Reinforcing Intra-Gender Discrimination: In Yoruba society, cultural narratives and proverbs often reinforce intra-gender discrimination by valorizing motherhood, seniority, and marital status. Sayings like “*Obinrin ki i ju obinrin lo, iya ni ju iya lo*” (no woman is greater than another, but a mother is greater than a woman) elevate mothers over childless women, subtly excluding the latter from social reverence (Oduyoye, 2001). Similarly, “*Iya agba l’o nko’mo l’eko*” (only elderly women teach younger ones morals) reflects hierarchical age-based dominance, legitimizing senior women’s control over younger ones (Oyěwùmí, 1997). While scholars like Amadiume (1987) argue such traditions once upheld female agency, others contend they now reproduce exclusionary structures among women (Nzegwu, 2006). However, most studies emphasize patriarchy as external male domination, overlooking how women enforce these hierarchies themselves. This study addresses that gap by theorizing how Yoruba women actively participate in reproducing gendered exclusions within female spaces.

Role of social institutions

Social institutions such as the family, women’s associations, and religious groups play a significant role in shaping gender relations among Yoruba women. Scholars like Oyěwùmí (1997) argue that the Yoruba social world, traditionally organized by seniority rather than gender, has been restructured under colonial and religious influences to reinforce gendered hierarchies. Conversely, Amadiume (1987) suggests that women’s associations historically served as counterforces to male-dominated institutions, enabling collective resistance and empowerment. However, others like Nnaemeka (2004) caution that these same associations can reproduce intra-gender exclusion, often privileging older, married, or economically powerful women. Religious groups similarly empower and constrain, offering spiritual status while reinforcing traditional norms (Oduyoye, 2001). Despite these insights, few studies explore how these institutions actively sustain discrimination among women themselves. This study addresses that gap by theorizing intra-female hierarchies as maintained through everyday practices within these institutions.

Internalized Patriarchy and Respectability Politics

Internalized patriarchy refers to the subtle ways women absorb and reproduce patriarchal values, often policing themselves and others based on male-defined norms (Hooks, 2000). Respectability politics, as Higginbotham (1993) explains, involves marginalized groups—especially women—conforming to moral and behavioral standards to gain social approval, which often reinforces dominant power structures. While scholars like Arndt (2002) argue that African women's agency resists these norms, others such as Nzegwu (2006) show that women often enforce gender hierarchies through kinship roles and cultural rites. These perspectives reveal both empowerment and complicity. However, many studies overlook how intra-gender discrimination—rooted in age, fertility, and marital status—emerges from these internalized norms, especially in African contexts like Yorubaland. This study addresses that gap by theorizing how Yoruba women reproduce patriarchal values through symbolic and social exclusions among themselves.

Consequences of Intra-Gender Discrimination: Studies affirm that intra-gender discrimination among women often leads to deep psychological distress marked by shame, silence, and social exclusion. According to Nnaemeka (2004), women excluded on the basis of infertility, widowhood, or economic status often internalizes societal rejection, leading to withdrawal and diminished self-worth. Similarly, Amadiume (1997) argues that intra-female hostility in patriarchal contexts reinforces shame and erodes solidarity. However, Oyěwùmí (1997) challenges these perspectives, suggesting that Yoruba gender structures are less rigidly oppressive than Western feminist interpretations imply, and that exclusion is more relational than hierarchical. This tension in literature reveals a conceptual gap: few studies critically explore how Yoruba women themselves both experience and perpetuate these psychological effects within intra-gender power structures. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the emotional toll of discrimination among women through culturally grounded feminist lenses that move beyond binary victim-perpetrator models.

Impacts on Solidarity and Collective Advocacy among Women: Intra-gender discrimination significantly affects women's solidarity and collective advocacy, particularly in communal and feminist organizing. Scholars like Tripp (2001) argue that shared oppression can foster unity, yet this unity is often undermined by internal hierarchies based on class, age, or marital status. Mama (1995) highlights how social divisions among African women—especially in patriarchal and postcolonial contexts—dilute the potential for unified resistance. Conversely, Tamale (2004) contends that African women's movements have historically navigated these differences through culturally rooted mechanisms of cooperation. Despite these insights, many studies fail to deeply theorize the emotional and symbolic injuries that fractured solidarity causes,

especially among Yoruba women. This study addresses this gap by exploring how intra-gender discrimination not only divides women socially but also weakens their collective voice and political agency.

Reinforcement of Patriarchal Structures through Divided Female Agency: Scholars have increasingly acknowledged that women, often unknowingly, reinforce patriarchal norms through their interactions with one another. For instance, Amadiume (1987) argues that colonial disruptions of matriarchal structures led women to internalize male-dominated hierarchies, while Oyěwùmí (1997) challenges the universality of gender binaries, noting that precolonial Yoruba society organized identity more around seniority than gender. However, even within such frameworks, senior women often wield authority that marginalizes younger or unmarried women, sustaining unequal power dynamics (Nnaemeka, 2004). Critics like hooks (2000) caution against blaming women for patriarchal systems they did not create, emphasizing structural over individual agency. This study addresses the tension between complicity and constraint, revealing how cultural legitimacy granted to some women enables them to replicate exclusion. The gap lies in contextualizing intra-gender power relations within indigenous settings like Yorubaland, where cultural authority and hierarchy among women remain under-theorized in gender discourse.

Toward a Transformative Theoretical Vision

Re-imagining Sisterhood in Yoruba Society: The notion of sisterhood in Yoruba society, traditionally rooted in communal female solidarity, is complex and layered. Scholars like Amadiume (1997) celebrate precolonial Yoruba women's networks as egalitarian and spiritually empowered, emphasizing mutual support and collective agency. However, Oyěwùmí (1997) challenges this romanticized view, arguing that gender and power among Yoruba women are mediated more by seniority, lineage, and social roles than by a shared feminist consciousness. Furthermore, Aina (2012) contends that contemporary socio-economic changes have eroded the bonds of traditional sisterhood, fostering competition rather than unity. These views expose a gap: while the discourse acknowledges both cooperation and stratification among women, it rarely theorizes how intra-gender discrimination affects possibilities for renewed solidarity. This study addresses that gap by critically reimagining sisterhood as a dynamic, inclusive ethic that acknowledges differences while fostering collective empowerment among Yoruba women today.

The potential of intergenerational dialogue and indigenous feminist ethics

Intergenerational dialogue and indigenous feminist ethics offer vital tools for addressing intra-gender discrimination, especially within culturally rooted societies like the Yoruba. Scholars like Amadiume (1997) and Nnaemeka (2004) advocate for indigenous feminist approaches that value communal wisdom, relationality, and respect for elders, arguing that these can heal generational and gender-based rifts. Similarly, Tamale (2020) supports feminist ethics grounded in African cosmologies as a way to rebuild solidarity among women. However, others caution that such traditions may reinforce hierarchical norms (Oyěwùmí, 1997), especially when elders use their authority to exclude younger or unmarried women. This tension reveals a gap: while indigenous ethics and dialogue are promising, few studies theorize how they can be transformed into *egalitarian*, rather than *paternalistic*, frameworks of gender justice. This study addresses that gap by exploring how intergenerational dialogue, reimaged through intersectional and decolonial lenses, can foster inclusive solidarity among Yoruba women.

Clarifying and Reviewing the Decolonization of Gender Relations among Women

Decolonizing gender relations among women involves dismantling colonial legacies that reshaped indigenous female identities, power structures, and social hierarchies. Scholars like Oyěwùmí (1997) argue that precolonial Yoruba society was not structured around Western gender binaries; instead, social roles were based on seniority and lineage, not sex. This view challenges Western feminist frameworks that often assume universal female subordination. However, scholars such as Amadiume (1987) agree that colonialism introduced rigid patriarchal norms but also caution against romanticizing precolonial gender relations, as power among women was never evenly distributed. While both authors provide valuable insights, they largely overlook how women themselves internalize and reproduce these hierarchical structures post-colonially. This study fills that gap by examining intra-gender discrimination among Yoruba women, showing how tradition, age, fertility, and class create new layers of exclusion beyond male dominance.

Conclusion

This paper argues that gender discrimination in Yoruba society isn't just about men oppressing women—it also happens among women themselves. Within cultural, religious, and social spaces, some women hold more power and privilege than others based on factors like age, marital status, fertility, or economic status. For instance, older married women or mothers may marginalize younger, unmarried, or childless women, often justifying their actions through tradition or moral expectations. By applying intersectional and African feminist theories, the paper shows that these patterns of exclusion are not

accidental—they are deeply embedded in Yoruba cultural norms and are actively maintained by women as much as men. This challenges the common assumption that all women in patriarchal societies are equally oppressed. The study calls for a rethinking of gender justice that addresses not only how men dominate women but also how women, knowingly or not, participate in sustaining systems of inequality among themselves.

In many gender justice discussions, the focus tends to rest solely on power imbalances between men and women. While this is crucial, such a narrow lens often overlooks the subtle but deeply impactful ways women discriminate against other women—based on age, fertility, marital status, class, or social roles. Intra-gender dynamics shape daily experiences just as profoundly as male-dominated oppression. For example, older women may silence younger women, or mothers may exclude childless women from community spaces. These hierarchies fracture solidarity and perpetuate exclusion, even within movements meant to empower women. A broader definition of gender justice must therefore recognize that true equity also demands accountability and transformation within gendered groups themselves. It must engage the complexities of power not just between, but also among women. Only then can justice become more inclusive, more honest, and more capable of addressing the full reality of lived gendered experiences.

Directions for Further Theoretical and Empirical Research

Future research should deepen theoretical inquiry into intra-gender power relations by examining how age, class, fertility, and religious roles shape women's experiences within specific African cultural settings. Scholars can expand existing feminist theories by integrating indigenous worldviews and social structures, which are often overlooked in mainstream gender discourse. Empirically, field-based studies involving interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observations among Yoruba women—from market traders to religious leaders—can offer grounded insights into how discrimination is lived, justified, or resisted in everyday life. Comparative studies across ethnic or religious groups in Nigeria and West Africa could also illuminate broader patterns of intra-gender inequality. Furthermore, there is a need to explore how education, digital platforms, and social activism are reshaping intergenerational relationships among women. These research directions will help create more inclusive gender theories and provide culturally relevant pathways for solidarity, empowerment, and justice among African women.

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