# Perspectives of Rural older adults on Gender and Equality of Opportunities in South-Eastern Nigeria: Practice Implication for Social Workers in Nigeria

**Patricia U. Agbawodikeizu, Prince C. Ekoh & George O. Elizabeth**
Department of Social Work, Faculty of the Social Sciences
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

**Abstract**
Despite all efforts targeted at creating a gender-balanced society around the globe; with equal opportunity for all citizens through research, intervention programmes and advocacy, there has been a persistent occurrence of gender discrimination and inequality in access to opportunities in some rural areas in Nigeria. This paper aims to examine how rural men and women understand the equality of opportunity for all citizens regardless of gender disparity and highlight the barriers to achieving inclusive gender equity and national integration as this can help inform interventions and policy. Data were obtained from a sample of 38 participants in Enugu-Ezike using In-depth Interviews (IDI) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The collected data was transcribed as verbatim as possible and analysed thematically. Findings from the study showed that majority of the male participants expressed strong disapproval of giving equal opportunity to males and females, and offered traditional notions backing their stance. In addition, the female participants indicated that their local traditional justice system is unfair to women and desired redress in that regard. The study recommends continued education/sensitization programmes for the rural communities in Nigeria on value re-orientation pertaining to gender issues to be carried out by social workers and civil societies/organizations.

**Keywords:** gender, equality, opportunities, national integration, social work practice

## Introduction

Equality of opportunity among individuals is a global and human right concern. Achieving equality of opportunity and strengthening the position of women and girls has been recognised as a gendered issue and a crosscutting theme in the global development agenda for quite a few decades (Dekker, 2013; Kolbe & Büttner, 2020; Scott-Storey et al., 2022; United Nations, 2015). Promoting gender equality is seen as a development strategy both in low, middle and high-income countries targeting the eradication of violence against women and improvement of their living standards (United Nations, 2018). Hence, the attainment of gender equality is not only seen as an end in itself but as a

prerequisite for inclusive growth and the achievement of sustainable development (Mshweshwe, 2020; Rollè et al., 2019).

Conceptually, gender is a social construct involving culture-bound conventions, roles, and behaviours, as well as relations between and among women and men; boys and girls (Krieger, 2003; Mshweshwe, 2020). In other words, the term refers to a classification based on the social construction of cultural distinctions between males and females. The concept, gender, is often misconstrued to mean sex which is a classification based on biological differences (Gender in Nigeria report, 2012). Equality of opportunity as described by Kolbe and Büttner (2020) connotes fairness among individuals or groups. Further, gender in Nigeria report defined the term as similar treatment of all people; equal access to available opportunities unhampered by barriers, prejudices, or preferences. Thus, equality of opportunity in this context can be referred to as equal treatment and access to all opportunities among all individuals regardless of gender, residence, and any other prejudices.

Several efforts targeting the creation of gender-balanced societies with equal opportunity for all citizens have been noted to be put in place through research, intervention programmes and advocacy tools (Alvarez & Lopez, 2013; Australian Association of social workers, 2015; Naganag, 2014; Gebru & Demeke, 2015; UN Women, 2015; USAID, 2022). These efforts were evident in the United Nations' adoption and ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women- CEDAW (Women Advocates' Research and Documentation Centre, 2017). Furthermore, the world development report on gender equality and development documents had over the past 25 years shown unprecedented progress made in women's legal rights, education, life expectancy and access to jobs and livelihood globally (World Bank, 2011). Again, recent research (Cardinali et al., 2018; Gerino et al., 2018; Mshweshwe, 2020; Rollè et al., 2019; Scott-Storey et al., 2022) have identified and suggested diverse social responses and approaches including addressing the local - system level barriers as well as gendered hierarchy and normative masculinity in determining access to opportunities and eliminating all other forms of exclusion. However, anticipated progress has not been achieved at the same rate by all countries or all women, as women in low-income countries and Sub-Saharan African countries like Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Gambia are still lagging behind (Mshweshwe, 2020; Rollè et al., 2019).

Achieving gender equity by 2030 may be a mirage especially when poverty intersects with other factors of exclusion such as ethnicity, remoteness, continued emphasis on male assertiveness and domination of women (Mshweshwe, 2020), and poor conceptualization of/ lack of attention given to sex and gender identity (Scott-Storey, 2022). Other limiting factors of equal

opportunity include large gender gaps in access to education, health; sexual and reproductive health rights (Dekker, 2013). Divorce or widowhood still causes many women to lose their assets,  many women continue to work in sectors with low pay and still find it difficult to access formal employment as a result of gender differences in time use (primarily resulting from differences in care responsibilities), gender differences in access to productive inputs (particularly land and credit), and gender differences stemming from market and institutional failures; women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence; and their representation in politics, business and governance remain lower than that of men (Kolbe & Büttner, 2020; World Bank, 2011). This backward position of women vis-à-vis men can be related to existing socio-economic power differentials between women and men (World Bank, 2011).

Since the inception of the Nigerian nation, Nigerian governments, past and present, have made serious efforts to propagate policies and programmes that are geared toward national integration (Onifade & Imhonopi, 2013). Nigeria's efforts at achieving national integration have remained largely unrealised. The history of democratisation in Nigeria has remained the history of national disintegration. Thus, the integration crisis facing Nigeria is manifest in the minority question, religious fundamentalism and conflicts, ethnic politics, indigene-settler dialectic, resource control, youth restiveness and gender issues (Ikezue & Ezeah, 2017; Obarisiagbon & Omage, 2019). However, in spite of the widespread intervention efforts to achieve gender equity and national integration, their impact is little known. The United Nations Development Programme (2009) and Atama et al. (2016) observed that progress toward sustainable development will be difficult, if not downright impossible, to achieve without adequate gender considerations, hence the need for gender mainstreaming. However, Nigeria is reawakening its efforts at achieving national integration and gender equality in the political and economic mainstream of the nation (Olasupo et al., 2017). It, therefore, becomes clear that an overarching strategy for gender equality in the development process is likely to be that which takes women and men as partners in development, and more importantly, that which challenges the structure that continually produce gender-based inequalities in the society, and balances power relations between women and men for growth and development both at micro and macro levels (Atena & Tiron-Tudo, 2020; Scott-Storey et al., 2022).

Ending unequal access to opportunities among males and females is also an aspect of the grand focus of the social work profession. Social work is designed to stand at the forefront of efforts aimed to end compelling and critical issues affecting the day-to-day functioning of individuals, groups, communities and societies (Carlson et al., 2015). The field of social work is devoted to reducing gender inequality by focusing efforts on eradicating social isolation, achieving equal opportunity and social justice (Edleson et al., 2016), and uncovering the

underlying socio-bio-physical factors driving the widening inequities based on gender (Agbawodikeizu et al., 2019). It is therefore imperative for the expertise of social work scholars and practitioners to be brought to bear in identifying the dividing factors and suggesting newer interventions to enhance the achievement of equality of opportunity for all citizens.

The theoretical framework for this study adopts the radical feminist theory which locates the root cause of women's oppression in patriarchal gender relations. Radical feminists describe women's situation as the consequences of a direct power relationship between men and women in which men have fundamental and concrete interests in controlling, using, subjugating and oppressing women (Ritzer, 2008). Thus, the patriarchal cultural construct which was described by the radical feminist theory as the key explanatory variable of women's oppression may likely be the enabling factor of inequity among the female gender in Nigerian society. Patriarchy was also perceived to be instrumental in creating structural factors that work directly and/or indirectly to validate a male-dominated social order and family structure that often result in men exercising power and control over women (Antai, 2011). Ezeah and Achonwa (2015) noted that patriarchy is the prime obstacle to women's advancement and development. Ezeah and Achonwa (2015) further suggested that it is necessary to understand the system which keeps women dominated and subordinated and unravel its functioning to work for women's development systematically. The Nigerian culture, which is patriarchal has been identified to regard men as superior to women, thus, engendering unequal treatment to females and males (Inyang-Etoh & Ekanem, 2016).

Although several researchers have investigated various dimensions of issues of gender inequality within/outside Nigerian society including domestic violence and its implications (Atama et al., 2016; Ezeah & Achonwa, 2015; Mshweshwe, 2020; Obarisiagbon & Omage, 2019; Rollè et al., 2019; Wekwete et al. 2014), violence against women (Oli et al., 2013), ethnic characterization of domestic violence against women (Oyekale, 2014), amongst others. However, only Voices 4 Change (2015) assessed gender-related perceptions and behaviours, focusing on ascertaining the views and behaviours of men on such themes as equal opportunities for women, women as leaders, and women's decision-making roles. This shows that there is very little research that specifically documents gender dynamics with regards to perceptions of equal access to opportunities and national integration from the point of view of rural men and women. The aim of this paper is therefore to examine what equality of opportunity for all citizens mean from the perspectives of rural men and women in Enugu State and highlight the barriers to achieving inclusive gender equity and national integration. This paper also has a distinctive interest in suggesting how social workers in Nigeria can align themselves with the goals of the post-2015 development agenda and the African Union Agenda 2063 (African Union,

2015) to contribute to the agitation for equality of opportunity through culture re-orientation and sensitisation programmes in the rural areas to change gender perceptions and stereotypes, promote women's rights, advocate for the review of legislations supporting violence against women and promoting the empowerment of women. Additionally, understanding perceptions about equality of opportunity from the viewpoints of rural men and women will help to gain insight into their knowledge and attitudes towards achieving gender equality in Nigeria as well as aid in the promotion of people's driven development with a special focus on women, which will foster inclusive growth and sustainable development (African Union, 2015).

## Materials and methods
*Study area and target population*
The study was conducted in Enugu-Ezike, Igbo-Eze North LGA in Enugu State. The target population for the study was all married males and females who are 18 years and above and reside in Enugu-Ezike community. We purposively selected Aji and Umuogbu-agu villages for the study due to their notable cultural practices and norms that promote gender imbalance in rights and privileges including a preference for the male child, discriminating and depriving women with only female children access to rights, and other forms of violence against women (Agbawodikeizu et al., 2019; Atama *et al.* 2016).

*Sampling*
To recruit participants for the study, we adopted the availability sampling technique taking cognizance of their ages and sex. We recruited 47 participants for the study but only 38 participants obliged and participated in the study. Reasons for the unwillingness of the participants who chose not to participate in our study were not disclosed to the authors; though we envisaged it may be associated with the subject matter of the study as most of the male residents in the villages were observed to utter comments denoting disapproval during the consenting process. The participants were duly informed about the aim of the study, the benefits and risks involved in taking part in the study. We selected 38 participants, 21 from Aji and 17 from Umuogbo-agu. The participants comprised 14 persons for In-Depth interviews (IDI) and 24 persons for Focused Group Discussions (FGD).

*Data collection*
Data for the study were obtained from 38 participants who had no filial relationship and were willing to participate in the study. Four focus group discussion sessions; that is, two sessions in each village (one for males and one for females) were conducted. Each of the sessions consisted of 6 participants. The rationale for having the same gender in each session was to provide a platform that can stimulate the participants to air their views freely without interference or fear of the opposite sex. We conducted 14 interviews, nine in

Aji and five in Umuogbo-agu, and the participants were selected in alternate forms to avoid bias in sex composition. The FGDs and IDIs were conducted using FGD and IDI protocols. The protocols were vetted by experts in gender studies and are experienced in social research methodology. The focus group discussion sessions and interviews were moderated by two of the authors while two field assistants helped with note-taking. The FGD sessions and interviews were conducted at locations including homes, town halls, beer parlours, shops, school premises, mechanic workshops, and as preferred by the respondents. All the interviews and discussions were audio recorded and the notes were supplemented as backups in case of technical failure.

*Data analysis*
The audio-taped responses were transcribed verbatim into English with the help of the field assistants. The transcripts were subsequently edited for sentence structure by the authors. Samples of the transcripts were independently discussed with co-authors who made useful suggestions that helped to refine, validate, and establish themes in the data. Analysis of the data was done in themes, and we identified and discussed key issues and emerging themes from the expressions of the participants. Narratives are quoted verbatim to illustrate participants' responses on those key issues.

*Ethical considerations*
The study instruments and methodology were approved by the Ethical Review Board of the department of psychology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Oral informed consent was sought and obtained from each participant before recruitment.

**Results**
*Demographic characteristics of participants in FGDs and IDIs*
Findings from this study show that greater number of the FGD participants (11) were between 35-44 years old while more of those aged 18-24 years participated in the interviews. Majority of the participants (19 & 11 respectively) are currently married while a few of them (5 & 3) indicated that they had ever been married. Farming may be considered as the participants' major occupation as more of them are farmers (13 & 5) while only a few of them engaged in civil service (2 & 2). A greater number of the FGD participants (10) acquired secondary education while majority of the participants in the interviews (8) acquired primary education. (See table 1 for a detailed presentation).

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants in the FGDs and IDIs.**

| Responses | FGD | IDI |
|---|---|---|
| **Sex** | | |
| Male | 12 | 03 |
| Female | 12 | 11 |
| **Age** | | |
| 18-24 years | - | 05 |
| 25-34 years | 07 | 03 |
| 35-44 years | 11 | 01 |
| 45-54 years | 03 | 04 |
| 55+ | 03 | 01 |
| **Marital status** | | |
| Currently married | 19 | 11 |
| Ever married | 05 | 03 |
| **Occupation** | | |
| Trading | 06 | 04 |
| Farming | 13 | 05 |
| Civil servant | 02 | 01 |
| Unemployed | 01 | 04 |
| Retirees | 02 | - |
| **Level of education** | | |
| No formal education | 09 | 03 |
| Primary education | 02 | 08 |
| Secondary education | 10 | 03 |
| University education | 03 | 0 |
| **Religion** | | |
| Christianity | 21 | 13 |
| African Tradition Religion | 03 | 01 |

*Source: Fieldwork, 2022*

***Participants' views on gender and equality of opportunities***
Findings from this study reveal that almost all the participants unanimously perceive gender to mean the sex of an individual. The participants' explanation of the terms "gender and equality of opportunity" show a classification based on character exhibited by an individual (which could be feminine or masculine), rights, and responsibilities. Also, their views on gender equality show an established and acceptable gender-imbalanced way of living that appears to be enshrined into the customs of the people in their daily lives. Some of the views expressed by the participants on this issue are as follow:

> The answer is clear and we don't need to waste our time talking about it. What I understand as gender is if someone is a man, the person must have all the features that show he is a man like the male organ, beards,

the way the person talks and other things. The same explanation goes for a woman. (FGD: Umuogbu-agu, Female, P6)

A male knows his right and has rights more than a female, and when a male fails to stand for his right, to me, he is a female. For example, if someone/some people stop a man and start arresting him, and he fails to ask for the reason(s) why he is being arrested, rather, he starts crying like a woman, we term that kind of man a woman. (FGD :Umuogbu-agu, Male, P5)

What I can say is that we all know a man is the head of the family in every place and a woman is supposed to be under a man be it father or husband. So, a man is supposed to work hard to provide all that his family needs while a woman should know that her job is to take care of her family, cook for them and keep all her surroundings clean. (FGD: Aji, Female, P5)

The narratives above show the participants' understanding of the meaning of gender, though they painted a patriarchal picture of gender differences. Apart from the physical features distinguishing males and females, the participants opined that men who show signs of weakness such as crying over things they consider trivial are perceived as women. Again, our analysis indicates that the respondents believe that men are above women and that women should be relegated to managers of households while the man works to earn a living for the family.

On the issue of equality of opportunity for males and females, majority of the male participants expressed strong disapproval of giving equal opportunity to males and females. The male participants who were non-supporting of equality of opportunity offered biblical backing to their stance; arguing that God created man first and made a woman a man's supporter. They further stated that the origin of the imbalance in gender relations and access to economic resources and inheritance in their community is traceable to the custom handed over to them by their forefathers which they described as undisputable. On the other hand, almost all the female participants did not support the opinions of the male participants and insisted that they should have equal opportunities with the men. Opinions indicated by the participants include:

> God forbid that! How can a man and woman be equal? I can never support that; the day such a thing happens in this life; it means that the world has come to its end. A man and a woman should never be given equal opportunity in anything because that is disregarding the place God himself has given to a man, the head of household and the head in everything. Read the book of Genesis, it is stated in chapter 2 vs 18 and 21 to understand my point. (IDI: Aji, Male, P1)

How can you ask if a man and a woman should be given equal opportunity, let me tell you, our custom forbids that. It is what our fore-fathers handed over to us and we must protect it. A man does not go for Omugwo *[a visit paid to a woman that gives birth to a child by her mother which usually lasts for one to three months].* Also, in our place, a married woman does not sleep with another man except her husband else she will get mad and die while such do not happen to men who married more than one woman. A woman does not spend her money on anything without the consent of her husband, and if she does that she will become mad. (IDI: Umuogbu-agu, Male, P6)

In sincerity, we know that men and women are not supposed to have equal rights due to our culture and tradition but the problem is that some men do take advantage of that to be treating women bad. Many things happen in this our community, and they all show how our men discriminate against us. Some organizations have visited us to teach us about our rights as women. They also trained some of our men on effects of these discriminatory practices. I have hope that if such trainings for the men continue, especially for the young ones, all these bad treatments they are giving to us will be reduced and they will have change of mind about the way they see women in our place. (IDI: Umuogbu-agu, Female, P4)

Religion and culture form the bases of the male participants' argument of disapproval for gender equality with many of them making reference to God as the architect of gender inequality. They also insinuated that it is the will of their forbearers for men to be above women citing some diabolic practices embedded in their culture which permit men to be promiscuous and prescribe punishment to women who do the same (for instance the gods inflicting mental illness on married women who are promiscuous and does nothing to the male partners with whom they engaged in the promiscuous act). The female participants are uncomfortable with the widening gap in gender inequality leading to their oppression and discrimination, and they hoped things will change for the better .

***Community justice system as one of the drivers of unequal opportunity***
Additionally, the participants were asked to give their views on the justice system in their community as regards to it guaranteeing gender equity for males and females. The participants' responses show that almost all the female participants indicated that their community justice system is not fair to women and that men and women do not belong to the same community groups except for religious organizations.

If it is like now in my village, you may be quarrelling with a man about land issue, the man will know that he is at fault, yet he will go and bribe people and the people will take nka *[bribe].* They will come and judge

the woman ikpe afufu *[judging someone wrongly or unjustly]*. They will give the land to the man just because he is a man. (FGD: Aji, Female, P9).

The justice systems that are unfair to women in this our community are many. For instance, if we go out of here now, and maybe I jam a man with my motorcycle in an accident, people that will gather there will be judging the case against me. They will be blaming me saying that women are always stupid. They will begin their ikpe afufu *[judging someone wrongly or unjustly]*. Instead of them to scold the man that is at fault, they will be saying that women are stupid. In every issue, women are always seen in this village as stupid people. In our village, there is nothing a woman does that will be seen as a good thing. (FGD: Aji, Female, P7).

If a woman is married and she has a male child, then all the properties of the husband is going to be handed over to the male child(ren) but if she has no male child, then everything her husband has will be taken from her. That is our tradition. (FGD: Aji, Male, P4)

Women do not take leadership positions in our community. It is only men that take elective positions in Umuaogbu-agu here. Women can only lead their fellow women in their group meetings like Umuada *[daughters]* and Inyomdi *[association of married women]*. (FGD: Umuogbu-agu, Male, P7).

The narratives above show how women are judged on the issue of ownership of properties because women do not own properties in the community. The participants also stated an assumption within the community that women are less intelligent than men, predisposing women to making wrong decisions and mistakes that may lead to an accident. Gender mainstreaming is also lacking in the community as women are not allowed to participate in decision makings that affect their lives and do not take up leadership positions.

Commenting on why men and women do not participate in the same meeting in the community, one of the participants in the interview said: "Men and women do not participate in the same group. Why should we do that; what do women know that they will tell us. That is not considered normal in our community" (IDI: Umuogb-agu, Male, P5).

No, the way we do it here is, it is only women that gather to have their meeting separately, and when men want to have their meeting, they gather separately and do that. A man does not belong to women's group meeting likewise a woman. The reason is because men have their group meetings regularly, and have several things they meet for. Women have

enormous work they do in their families, and they will not have the chance to do all that men would do due to family responsibilities. (FGD: Aji, Female, P3).

Men in this village do not regard women as anything. Men and women have their meetings separately, except for church group meetings. It is only in church group meetings that men and women sit, discuss together and participate in the same group. (FGD: Umuogbu-agu, Female, P7)

The result above revealed that women and men engage in political and social meetings separately in the community, and part of the reason for the divide is that the men feel that women cannot make important contributions to their meetings as they are perceived to be of lower intelligence. Secondly, they believe that it is the woman's responsibility to care for the family, therefore women cannot attend important community meetings while also taking care of the family. Religion was the only uniting factor that enabled women and men to sit together and engage in the same discourse.

### *Hope for gender equality with the inception of national integration*
Considering the wave of gender inequality in almost every aspect of the lifestyle in the community; endeared by their tradition, this study further sought to find out the participants' views on ways of achieving gender equality in the future. The participants were asked to indicate whether there is a possibility of women being in political and leadership positions in their community in times to come. Their responses are presented below:

Women do not contest for political elective positions presently in Umuogbu-agu community and I don't see that happening in the near future. They can only contest for positions in their women groups' meetings and not for general community leadership. Men are the ones allowed to contest for community leadership positions such as the president general. Igwe *[traditional ruler]* and traditional council members. (FGD: Umuogbu-agu, Female, P4)

Women do not take up leadership positions! Do women lead men in your place? We don't permit women to attain leadership positions be it political or communal, and I don't see the necessity of allowing them to do that anytime here. The only recognized position here for the women is 'Onyishi' *[eldest woman]*. (FGD: Aji, Male, P10)

Well, I haven't heard that anywhere let alone in our community, it is not easy! Unless if all the men die. How can a woman become a community leader? Has it happened anywhere in Nigeria? I am sure it won't even happen in your own area. A woman can be appointed into public offices in the city or vie for political positions if she has her husband's support

and is well educated. She may win if she has good support but for community leadership in this our village, no way! (FGD: Umuogbu-agu, Male, P5)

These results show that a greater number of male community members do not support a future with women as community leaders. They are not willing to support women taking up political/leadership positions in the community, and they believe it is the same in other parts of Nigeria. This shows that there is an urgent need for sensitization and re-orientation of the community members to change the identified driver of gender inequity; starting with perceiving women as less intelligent than men and educating the men on the importance of gender mainstreaming.

**Discussion**
This study examined perceptions about gender, equality of opportunity, and barriers to achieving inclusive gender equity and national integration among rural men and women in Enugu State, Nigeria. Findings from the study revealed that the participants in this study perceived gender to mean sexuality, depicting a classification based on the rights and responsibilities of the female and male gender, and this is similar to the observation in the review by Mshweshwe (2020). Another similar observation was noted in the Gender in Nigeria report (2012) which revealed that the concept 'gender' is often misconstrued to mean sexuality, a classification based on biological differences. The reason for the misconstrued conceptualization of gender, reflecting the rights of males and females and their roles may be attributable to the type of orientation both gender are exposed to; that is, such that engender conceptualization of gender as a social construct concerning culture-bound conventions (Mshweshwe, 2020; Krieger, 2003; Scott-Storey et al., 2022). This perception may be influenced by the Igbo culture and belief and supported by the doctrine of major religious groups in Nigeria (Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religions). The implication of this finding is that achieving gender equality by 2030 may be an impracticable agenda given the perception that men should have rights more than women and that a man's inability to claim his right is synonymous with being a woman.

Again, findings from this study revealed that majority of the male participants expressed strong disapproval of giving equal opportunity to males and females, and they offered traditional and religious notions backing their stance. A similar observation was noted in other climes (Ekoh et al., 2021; Kolbe & Büttner, 2020; Mshweshwe, 2020; Scott-Storey et al., 2022; United Nations, 2015) and reports abound on achieving inclusive growth and equality of opportunity for both men and women being a gendered issue. Further, the study revealed that the origin of the imbalance in gender relations and access to economic resources and inheritance is traceable to the custom of the people which was handed over

to them by their forefathers. Thus, these findings highlight the effects of the people's inherent pattern as a key barrier opposing advocacy efforts and intervention programmes by the government and organizations geared toward establishing gender-balanced relations in the community. This identified barrier can be reduced only if there is value re-orientation for the male gender who are the custodians of the custom.

Additionally, the female participants in this study indicated that the justice system in their community is not fair to women when compared to men. This finding is in tandem with the reports from the studies by Voices 4 Change (2015) in Nigeria, Cardinali et al. (2018) in Italy and Mshweshwe (2020) in South Africa that noted the absence of a gender-specific intervention and preventive efforts, and prevalence of rigid/complex patriarchal gender norms, culture, beliefs, traditions and negative masculine construct that still hold sway on issues affecting the women. Inyang-Etoh and Ekanem (2016) also noted that Nigerian culture, which is patriarchal, perceives and treats men as superior to women, and observed that it manifests in the 'son preference syndrome. Impliedly, the absence of gender-specific intervention and preventive efforts can be another risk factor of the unending gender inequality, therefore, revealing the necessity of a focused sensitization and value re-orientation programme/effort for the male gender. Addressing the local - system level barriers and gendered hierarchy and normative masculinity in determining access to opportunities have been observed in previous studies (Cardinali et al., 2018; Gerino et al., 2018; Mshweshwe, 2020; Rollè et al., 2019; Scott-Storey et al., 2022) as gender-specific interventions and approaches to eliminating all forms of gendered exclusion. The government of Nigeria, organizations and social service providers are hereby availed with specific promising approaches to eradicating imbalance in gender relations and promote equal access to opportunities in Nigeria.

The radical feminist theory provides a clear explanation of perspectives and insights shared by the participants in this study. The theory described patriarchal cultural construct as the root cause of oppression of women and the key factor promoting gender inequality in societies where it is operational. Earlier, Atama et al. (2016) and Agbawodikeizu et al. (2019) observed that Patriarchy was the most significant structure promoting gender inequality in some rural communities in Southern Nigeria and concluded that the construct which is enforced through culture in Nigeria arms the men in their dominant disposition regarding promoting gender equity. Likewise, results from this study revealed unanimous disapproval from men on giving equal opportunity to males and females. Also, the expressed absence of the possibility of integrating women into political and community leadership positions in the future by almost all the male participants in this study showed an established

and acceptable gender-imbalanced way of living that may likely be enshrined into the tradition of the people.

This study's indication of disapproval of gender mainstreaming has several implications. The first being that there is need for the government, social workers and organizations propagating gender equality agenda to set up machineries for intensified public enlightenment programmes on equal opportunity for all citizens of Nigeria as gender equality is one of the most significant tools for economic development and overall advancement in any given society, and can remove barriers to access and enhance productivity gains in a competitive society (Littlefield et al. 2015; Mshweshwe, 2020; Rollè et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the Nigerian government has made noteworthy efforts to promulgate policies and programmes that are geared toward national integration (Onifade & Imhonopi, 2013). However, regardless of the unity orientation of the programmes and policies, Nigeria's unity has continued to be threatened by embedded socio-cultural factors. The divisive factors appear to continuously be stronger than the unifying ones; some of whose elements are traceable to rural communities as evidenced in the findings of this study. Unless efforts are made to checkmate the gendered divisive trends that forestall equal and fair treatment of all citizens in some rural communities by the government of Nigeria, agencies and organizations clamouring for gender equality in the 21st Century, achieving a sustainable gender-balanced society will remain a mirage. Also, from the findings in this study, it can be deduced that inclusive growth and sustainable development which is one of the core agenda of African Union 2063 will be difficult, if not downright impossible to achieve without giving women greater opportunities and responsibilities. Findings from this study show that the situation of some women in the rural area calls for growing interest and concern as it has been established that sustainable development can only be achieved in an atmosphere of cooperation and unity; where everybody feels a sense of belonging and wants to contribute his/her quota to their development.

Findings from this study equally have implications for social work practice in Nigeria. The social work profession has been described to have a distinctive interest in promoting equity and social justice and considers ending all forms of discrimination against women as its grand challenge (Edleson et al., 2016). The strengths perspective of social work emphasizes gender equality as opposed to inequality and values the significance of womanhood as well as manhood. An important finding from this study is strong disapproval of giving equal opportunity to male and female gender and an expression of lack of hope for the integration of women into leadership positions in the future. This points out the need to challenge traditional notions of gender, and the interplay of

patriarchy in the construction of masculinity and femineity (Littlefield *et al.* 2015; Mshweshwe, 2020). An exemplary approach towards achieving gender equality in rural communities is by engaging in mass sensitization focusing on deconstructing the characteristics governing the understanding of sexuality and gender, and how the relationship between women and men and the power differences existing among them impact their choices. Social workers can therefore contribute to the agitation for equality of opportunity through sensitization for change in the divisive characteristics and traditional notion of gender and stereotypes, and culture re-orientation as well as supporting review of legislations enforcing and promoting violence against women in Nigeria.

**Conclusion**
This study has revealed how rural men and women view gender and equality of opportunities and highlighted the drivers of gender inequity. The rural men showed strong disapproval of giving both male and female gender equal opportunity, citing tradition and religious principles as the bases for their perspective. This shows the need for more education and sensitization which will bring about culture re-orientation leading to the emergence of revamped perspectives on gender equality and national development.

A major limitation of the study is that it was conducted in only one community and could have benefited from other communities within the studied state, however, the findings remain valid. There is, therefore, a need for further studies on issues of gender equality and national integration in other communities and States in Southern Nigeria. Also, understudying the perspectives of adherents of other religious groups on the subject matter of the study will help to enrich the identified dearth of literature on gender equality and mainstreaming, as well as contribute diverse perspectives on gender equity.

**References**
African Union (2015). *Agenda 2063: The Africa we want- A shared strategic framework for inclusive growth and sustainable development.* https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-01_background_note.pdf
Agbawodikeizu, P. U., Ekoh, P. C., Ebue, M. E., Ajibo, H. T., Atama, C. S., & Okoye, U.O. (2019). Knowledge of what constitutes gender-based violence among adult residents of Igbo-Eze North LGA, Enugu state, Nigeria and practice implications for social workers. *Journal of Social Work in Developing Societies, 1*(2), 42-58.
Alvarez, D., & Lopez, M. (2013). From unheard screams to powerful voices: a case study of women's political empowerment in the Philippines. In: 12th National Convention on Statistics (NCS) EDSA Shangri-la Hotel, Mandaluyong City October 1e2.

Antai, D. (2011). Traumatic physical health consequences of intimate partner violence against women: What is the role of community-level factors*? BMC Women's Health, 11*(56). DOI: 10.1186/1472-6874-11-56.

Atama, C.S., Agbawodikeizu, P.U., & Ogbonne, I. (2016). Gender discrimination and domestic violence in Enugu State, Nigeria: Implications for sustainable development. *Nigerian Journal of Social Sciences, 12*(1), 29-41.

Atena, F.W., & Tiron-Tudor, A. (2019). Gender as a dimension of inequality in accounting organizations and developmental HR Strategies. Adm. Sci. 2020, *10*(1), 1-24. DOI: 10.3390/admsci10010001.

Australian Association of Social Workers (2015). *Position statement: Violence against women*. https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/7652.

Cardinali, P., Migliorini, L., Giribone, F., Bizzi, F., & Cavanna, D. (2018). Domestic Violence in Separated Couples in Italian Context: Communalities and Singularities of Women and Men Experiences. Frontiers in Psychology, 9:1602. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01602.

Carlson, J., Casey, E., Edleson, J. L., Tolman, R.M., Walsh, T.B., & Kimball, E. (2015). Strategies to engage men and boys in violence prevention: A global organizational perspective. *Violence Against Women, 21*. doi:10.1177/1077801215594888.

Dekker, M. (2013). *Promoting gender equality and female empowerment: A systematic review of the evidence on property righs, labour markets, political participation and violence against women.* ASC Working paper 111. http://www.ascleiden.nl/?q=content/asc-working-papers.

Edleson, J.L., Lindhorst, T. & Kanuha, V.K. (2016). *Ending Gender-Based Violence: A Grand Challenge for Social Work.* Cleveland, OH: American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare.

Ekoh, P.C., Chukwu, N.E., & Okoye, U. O. (2021). Aging in rural Nigeria: gendered exclusion of rural older adults and its impact on their perceived life satisfaction in South-East Nigeria. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2021.1999734.

Ezeah, P., & Achonwa, C. (2015). Gender inequality in reproductive health services and sustainable development in Nigeria: a theoretical analysis. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, *7*(2), 46-53. DOI:105897/IJSA2014.05.77S.

Gebru, S.G., & Demeke, M.A. (2015). The Millennium Development Goals and the Status of Gender Disparity in Ethiopia: Achievements and Challenges. *American Academic Scientific Research Journal for Engineering, Technology, and Sciences*, *8*(1), 56–78.

Gender in Nigeria Report (2012). *Improving the lives of girls and women in Nigeria: Issues, policies, action*. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/ british-council-gender-nigeria2012.pdf.

Gerino, E., Caldarera, A.M., Curti, L., Brustia, P., & Rollè, L. (2018). Intimate partner violence in the golden age: Systematic review of risk and protective factors. *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*(1595). DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01595.

Ikezue, C.E., & Ezeah, P. (2017). Recurrent conflicts among migrants Fulani herdsmen and indigenous communities of Southern Nigeria: A review of literature. *International Journal of Health and Social Inquiry, 3*(1), 152-169.

Inyang-Etoh, E., & Ekanem, A. (2016). Child-sex preference and factors that influence such choices among women in an Obstetric population in Nigeria. *Open Access Library Journal, 3*(10), 1–10. DOI: 10.4236/oalib. Mshweshwe 1103005.

Kolbe, V., & Büttner, A. (2020). Domestic violence against men-prevalence and risk factors. *Deutsches Arzteblatt International*, *117*(31-32), 534–541. DOI: 10.3238/arztebl .2020.0534.

Krieger, N. (2003). Genders, sexes, and health: What are the connections - and why does it matter? *International Journal of Epidemiology, 32*(4), 652 – 657.

Littlefield, M. B., McLane-Davison, D., & Vakalahi, H.F.O. (2015). *Global gender inequality.*
http://socialwork.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/978019 9975839.001.0001/acrefore-9780199975839-e-932.

Mshweshwe, L. (2020). Understanding domestic violence: masculinity, culture, traditions. *Heliyon, 6,* 1-5. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e05334

Naganag, E.M. (2014). The role of indigenous women in forest conservation in upland Kalinga province, Northern Philippines. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences, 3*, 75-89.

Obarisiagbon, E.I., & Omage, M. I. (2019). Emerging trend in the culture of domestic violence against men in southern Nigeria. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 9(3). DOI: *oi:10.30845/ijhss.v9n3p7*.

Olasupo, O., Oladeji, I. O., & Ijeoma, O. C. (2017). Nationalism and nationalist agitation in Africa: the Nigerian trajectory. *The Review of Black Political Economy*, *44*(3), 261-283. DOI: 10.1007/s12114-017-9257-x.

Oli, N. P., Igbo, E.U.M., & Okoye, U. O., (2013). Perception of what acts constitute violence against women among adult residents of Onitsha metropolis, Anambra State, Nigeria', *International Journal of Development Research, 3*(12), 021-026.

Onifade, C.A., & Imhonopi, D. (2013). Towards national integration in Nigeria: Jumping the hurdles. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, *3*(9), 75 – 82.

Oyekale, A.S. (2014). Ethnic characterization of gender-inequality and domestic violence against women of reproductive ages in Nigeria. *Studies of Tribes and Tribals, 12*(1), 31–41.

Ritzer, G. (2008). *Sociological theory* (7th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Rollè, L., Ramon, S., & Brustia, P. (2019). Editorial: New perspectives on domestic violence: From research to intervention. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*(641). Doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00641.

Scott-Storey, K., O'Donnell, S., Ford-Gilboe, M., Varcoe, C., Wathen, N., Malcolm, J., & Vincent, C. (2022). What About the Men? A Critical Review of Men's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 0*(0), 1–15. DOI: 10.1177/15248380211043827.

UN Women (2015). *Annual report 2014-2015*. *https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/6/annual-report-2014-2015*.

United Nations (2015). *United Nations sustainable development summit 2015*. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/summit.

United Nations (2018). *Highlights 2018-2019: Towards sustainable development for all.* https://esa.un.org/desa-highlight-2018-2019.

United Nations Development Programme (2009). *Resource guide on gender and climate change*. http://www.undp.org/content/dam/aplaws/publication/en/publications/womens-empowerment/resource-guide-on-gender-and-climate-change/Resource.pdf.

USAID (2022). *Gender equality and women's empowerment*. https://www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment.

Voices 4 Change (2015). *Nigeria men and gender equality survey: NiMAGES*. http://www.genderhub.org/get-in-the-know/resource-library/nigeria-men-and-gender-equality-survey-nimages/.

Wekwete, N., Sanhokwe, H., Murenjekwa, W., Takavarasha, F. & Madzingira, N. (2014). The association between spousal gender based violence and women's empowerment among currently married women aged 15-49 in Zimbabwe: Evidence from the 2010-11 Zimbabwe demographic and health survey. *African Population Studies, 28*(3), 1413-1431.

Women Advocates' Research and Documentation Centre (2017). *NGO coalition shadow report to the 7th & 8th periodic: Report of Nigeria on Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).* http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/NGA/INT_CEDAW_NGO_NGA_27702E.pdf.

World Bank (2011). *Gender equality and development: World Development Report*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank.