



## Continuity and change in patriarchal cultural practices in Ihiala in the modern era

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### Abstract

In most African cultures, patriarchal cultures have remained relevant over the years regardless of the growing global focus on gender equality, which has left people questioning their applicability and effects on women in the modern societies. This research paper will look at continuity and transformation of patriarchal cultural practices of Ihiala during the modern era on how the traditional norms have been maintained, altered or even dropped with regards to modernization. It examines widowhood ceremonies, disinheritance, favoring male offspring, bride price, female circumcision and puts them in their historical and socio-cultural perspective. The paper will take a qualitative and historical approach, and it will use both primary sources, such as oral interviews, as well as secondary academic resources to examine these dynamics. The results indicate that although some patriarchal behaviours still exist in altered forms, there have been great changes with the impact of the western education, Christianity, legal reforms, media activism and globalisation. Evil customs like the observation of widowhood ceremonies and cutting of female genitals have been either dropped or criminalized and women have increasingly been allowed to get education, inheritance and even participate in decision making. Nevertheless, some forms of discrimination are still perpetuated by other entrenched cultural beliefs, financial reliance, and poor enforcement of institutions. The research findings conclude that the patriarchal cultural practices in Ihiala do not remain the same but are currently being negotiable between the tradition and modernity. Gender equality must be achieved through long-term efforts which may combine cultural sensitivity, legal and social reforms.

### 1. Introduction

The cultural practices in the Igbo society are patriarchal, which still illustrates a dynamic process between continuity and change, to be determined by the influence of past and contemporary socio-economic realities. Although gender relations have always been organized by these practices, current scholarship underscores that gender relations are not fixed or uniformly oppressive but that they are always negotiated within the context of the changing environment (Norcahyo & Addiansyah, 2026). Traditionally, the Igbo society was a patriarchal society with men holding predominant roles in political power, inheritance and making of decisions. The structure has contributed greatly to the allocation of resources and opportunities and usually denied women land, leadership and economic independence (Chikwendu et al., 2025). Although this is the case, women have always been critical in the agricultural, trade and family activities, which bring out a system of patriarchy and functional interdependence.

Current researches however point out that patriarchal practices are still present in one way or another especially in other aspects like inheritance, widowhood ceremonies and even social expectations of the gender. As an example, the institution of widowhood in the Igbo societies has

been subjected to critical analysis as an expression of deep patriarchal ideology that perpetuates the dominance of males and exposes women to social and psychological problems (Farias et al., 2023). These rites are usually used to preserve the status quo and restrict the independence and self-respect of women. Concurrently, there have been drastic developments with the growing modernization, law reforms and the changing societal values. Modern studies indicate that the gender roles in the Igbo society are turning out to be more flexible especially in family and economic life. To illustrate, the historical separation of roles in the upbringing of children is slowly changing, and there is an increasing number of men, who are becoming more caregivers, which means increasing gender cooperation (Meeussen et al., 2020). This change represents more widespread changes in social demands and the power of education and urbanization.

In addition, researchers have attracted concerns with how women effectively negotiate and defy patriarchal restrictions. Onyebueke et al. (2024) is of the view that Igbo women resort to adaptive mechanisms, including socio-cultural negotiations and alternative marital arrangements to seek access to resources and seek agency in the confining systems. This shows that women are not mere victims but they are involved in the restructuring of gender relations. Patriarchal norms are also perpetuated by culture including proverbs and language. According to the recent studies, some of the Igbo proverbs indirectly support gender inequality by depicting females as inferior or negative characters, thus continuing to perpetuate the discriminatory attitude (Oboko & Ikechukwu, 2025). Nevertheless, efforts have been made to advocate redefinition of such aspects of culture to ensure gender equality. Although these transformations are observed, it is possible to conclude that despite them, the patriarchal norms remain and thus, the change may be uneven and even incomplete. Traditional gender roles are still entrenched in deep-rooted cultural beliefs, social expectations and institutional constraints. The continuity and change coexist because of the cultural continuity and the difficulties of changing the existing social structure that is long-standing.

Moreover, these dynamics have been greatly influenced by colonial and post-colonial influences. The colonial oppression of native gender systems by introducing western patriarchal systems eroded the pre-colonial gender systems and increased the dominance of men in the political and economic spheres (Vishwakarma, 2025). Globalization and human rights discourse has helped to undermine these structures in the modern society resulting in slow reforms. The significance of the given study is the possibility to fill the gap between the old cultural traditions of patriarchy and the modern socio-economical realities in Ihiala. The literature on governance, institutional efficiency, and productivity of the public sector has paid a lot of attention to structural and administrative aspects, without thoroughly discussing the effects of cultural norms, particularly patriarchy, in social relations and development outcomes (Chukwurah et al., 2020; Obi et al., 2026). This oversight restricts a holistic argumentation of the development issues at the grassroots level where cultures are still very potent.

The studies on insecurity and underdevelopment in the South-East have also focused on the issues of political instability and armed conflict but not much was done regarding the role of gender inequality and deep-rooted patriarchal structures in perpetuating the problems (Iwuno & Odum, 2025; Ezeogidi et al., 2020; Okezie, 2026). Long-standing problems like domestic violence and social marginalization of widows indicate that the norms of patriarchy still determine the lived experiences, yet little is known about how these practices are perpetuated or modified (Okezie, 2022; Okezie et al., 2023). Despite the research on the topic of colonial legacies and socio-cultural changes in Igbo society, there remains a lack of localized research on how these historical effects interplay with current realities in such communities as Ihiala (Molokwu et al., 2023; Okezie, 2021). Moreover, the modern studies of the organizational performance, innovation, and sustainability do not tend to consider gender as one of the most significant socio-cultural variables influencing the participation and productivity (Muogbo et al., 2025a; Muogbo et al., 2025b; Muogbo et al., 2025c). The piece of work is thus a historically informed and context-sensitive interpretation of the ways in which patriarchal practices are reproduced and transformed to provide a piece of knowledge that is indispensable in enhancing the inclusive development and gender sensitive policy regimes.

## **2. Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a historical perspective to analyze the continuity and transformation of patriarchal cultural practices in Ihiala in the modern era. The qualitative approach is chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their cultural and contextual settings.

The data used in this study consist of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are obtained through oral interviews with individuals who possess relevant knowledge and experiences regarding patriarchal cultural practices in Ihiala. Secondary data are gathered from academic sources such as journal articles, books, and other relevant documents related to the research topic.

Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews and literature review. The collected data are analyzed using a descriptive qualitative method, emphasizing historical interpretation to examine how patriarchal practices have been maintained, modified, or abandoned under the influence of modernization.

The analysis process involves categorizing the data into key themes, such as widowhood practices, inheritance systems, male child preference, and other cultural practices. These themes are then interpreted to identify patterns of change and the factors influencing the interaction between tradition and modernity in Ihiala society.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1. Change of Patriarchal Cultural Practices in Traditional Ihiala**

Traditional practices of Ihiala culture are highly patriarchal and therefore, embedded in the indigenous belief structures that are generationally passed. According to Beaman (2021), these belief systems are constituted of customs, norms, and values that exist in the historical legacy of a people. Although these practices used to be significant in ensuring social order and continuity of culture, most have had negative connotations to women, strengthening inequality and constrain socio-economic and political contribution. But with time, there have been a lot of changes to these practices because of the westernization and the impact of the modernization agents such as Western education, Christianity, urbanization, legal changes, media and government intervention. As Shahin (2022) notes, barbaric customs like oppressive widowhood ceremonies have been slowly fading away due to a growing amount of knowledge, legal provisions, and women empowerment. This section will discuss the dynamics of these changes in cultural practices of patriarchy in Ihiala and the factors that contribute to the changes.

#### **3.2. Getting Rid of Core Widowhood Practices**

One of the most oppressive cultures to women in the Igbo society has been widowhood practices. These rituals that involve seclusion, compelled rites and humiliation in the streets were commonly defended as being needed to cleanse the spirit and maintain social order. They have however been heavily criticized by scholars as inhumane and against the rights of women (Novaković, 2024). The society was patriarchal and hence the women were the ones who were affected the most by these practices. Over the past few decades, widowhood practices have changed greatly in Igboland. According to Chukwuma-Offor (2023), adherence to such practices has in most cases been given up or altered in various communities. These changes can be seen in Ihiala especially in the decrease in mourning period. Conventionally, widows had to spend the next up to one year in seclusion which limited their movement and economic participation. This is something that has been eased a lot today where widows can decide on the time that they want to mourn.

Moreover, certain rites of widowhood that are the most degrading and demeaning, like consuming water to wash the corpse and forceful inheritance of a wife have been obsolete. Hair shaving among others is not mandatory but optional. These developments demonstrate an increased awareness of women rights and the necessity to do away with negative cultures. Legal interventions have also been very instrumental in this change. The Anambra State Widowhood Rights Law gives legal safeguards to widows and also restricts bad practices. The necessity to eliminate discriminatory traditions has also been strengthened by the public campaigns of the government officials and traditional leaders. Widows are considered as equal members of the society with dignity and protection, especially as it has been mentioned in recent policy statements (Aibangbee, 2025; Chukwu et al., 2025).

#### **3.3. De-escalation in Male Child Preference**

Preference towards males has been a characteristic of patriarchal societies such as Ihiala. In the traditional society, the male child was considered as the heir and the protector of the lineage whereas

the female child was a mere temporal member of the birth families. This taste impacted on educational, inheritance, and social position choices. Current trends, however, have resulted in a progressive decrease in this preference. The article by Al-Bakr et al. (2017) asserts that the historical concept of women being less valuable than men is getting starting to be questioned. The alteration of the role of women in sustaining their families is one of the significant factors that have led to this shift. As opposed to the earlier assumptions, most daughters have been able to offer significant economic and social contributions to their parents even to an extent of surpassing their male counterparts.

Education has been very instrumental in changing the attitude towards the girl child. Historically, girls had been out of school, since their functions were considered domestic. In the modern world, education of girl-children is being given more focus now than before and the number of girls in schools is on the rise as well as the gender balance (Nigeria Statistical Development Project, n.d.). This has helped women to be empowered and also gender roles in the family have been redefined. There is also a change in social attitude towards women who do not bear male children. Women are no longer stigmatized who have daughters only and families are becoming more aware of the importance of female children. These alterations mark the shift in the social values and the slow extinction of the patriarchal principles.

### **3.4. Changes in Land Ownership and Inheritance Practices**

One of the most engraved forms of gender inequality in the Igbo society has been the denial of women their rights to own and inherit land. Historically, the male family lineage inherited the land, and females were deprived of their right to own property. Nevertheless, the practice has been tremendously transformed in the past few years. Olomjobi (2015) notes that the practice of discrimination in inheritance has decreased due to the rise in awareness of women rights. Females are now obtaining land in different ways such as by buying, inheritance and by way of gift. In Ihiala, there have been incidences of women inheriting property and becoming the leaders in their families (Agbasiere, 2025).

These changes have been brought about by legal reforms. Such landmark cases as *Mojekwu v. Mojekwu* and *Ukeje v. Ukeje* have proclaimed the discriminatory practices of inheritance as unconstitutional. The rulings have defininheritancets of women to inherit property, and that has been a challenge to the traditional norms (Azuakor, 2021; Eche, 2019). With these developments, there are still problems. The resistance of the culture and the attitude of the society remain to be the obstacle to the complete achievement of the inheritance rights of women. However, the slow evolution of these practices signifies the changing process towards the increased gender equality.

### **3.5. Feminine Circumcision is Criminalized**

Female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM) has received a lot of criticism because of its detrimental impact on the well-being and health condition of women. Being a customary procedure of passage used traditionally, FGM was thought to preserve chastity and make marriages more likely. Recent literature has established that FGM is not beneficial to health, but it is dangerous, and long-lasting psychological effects and physical trauma are its serious consequences (Kinsley & Franklin, 2023). Consequently, most of the communities such as the Ihiala community have criminalized the practice. The legislation by the government and the advocacy campaigns have been significant in creating awareness and deterring its practice. The reduction of FGM is an indication of a general change in the attitude towards the promotion of human rights and health of the population rather than the male-harming traditions. Nevertheless, it should be worked to have it fully eradicated.

### **3.6. Drivers of Transformation**

Various factors that interact have shaped the change in the patriarchal cultural practices in Ihiala.

#### **3.6.1. Education**

Education has played a crucial role of change as it has given the women knowledge and awareness of their rights. Educated women can struggle against discriminatory practices and fight to promote equality better (Nwogu & Okonkwo, 2023). Education is also a way of critical thinking, which makes people challenge traditional rules and embrace more liberal values.

### **3.6.2. Christianity**

Christianity has contributed a lot in transforming cultural practices as it has advanced equality, compassion, and human dignity. Religious organisations have been on the frontline to do anti-harmful practices campaigns, and offer avenues to assist the affected women (Oreh, 2014). Ihiala, the churches have intervened in widowhood abuse and sensitized on the rights of women.

### **3.6.3. Judicial Interventions**

The courts have played a significant role in eradicating the discriminatory practices by passing historic decisions. The decisions of courts have fortified the constitutional values of equality and objected to the conventional standards that contravene the rights of women (Eyongndi et al., 2024). These judicial precedents have offered grounds of additional reforms.

### **3.6.4. Media and Advocacy**

The media has been very instrumental in creating awareness about the bad practices as well as bringing social change. The media has shaped the opinion of the people and urged them to abandon discriminatory practices through educational programs and advocacy campaigns (Ihechu et al., 2022). These have been further enhanced by social media platforms which allow a platform to discuss and be activist.

### **3.6.5. Government Policies and International Structures**

Government intervention, such as subscribing to international laws, like CEDAW, has enhanced the fight towards gender equality. These frameworks require the removal of discriminatory practices and give the guidelines of implementing the policies (Udu et al., 2023). The laws in a nation, including the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, have served in ensuring the rights of women are safeguarded.

## **3.7. The Law, Institutional and Socio-Cultural Drivers of the Change in the Patriarchal Practices in Ihiala**

The change in the old Ihiala culture of patriarchal cultural practices has not happened naturally but can be greatly attributed to the conscious legal, institutional, and socio-cultural interventions. Although in the traditional belief systems women were previously marginalized by the practices promoted, current advances in the world especially in legal reforms, activism, and advocacy have led to major changes in such practices. These shifts are a response to increased understanding of the rights of women and necessity to adjust the cultural traditions to the current standards of justice, equality, and human dignity.

## **3.8. Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAW) Act is Enacted and Domesticated**

One of the biggest achievements in dealing with gender-based violence and the pernicious customs in Nigeria is the passage of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in 2015. President Goodluck Jonathan, who signed the Act, was aimed at combating all kinds of violence, including physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional abuse (Udu et al., 2023). Notably, it penalizes the negative cultural practices that have a disproportionate impact on women. The Act (Section 20) clearly outlines that it is illegal to engage in harmful traditional practices and gives penalties such as imprisonment and fines to the offenders (Nwogu & Okonkwo, 2023). In the same way, Section 6(1) makes female circumcision and female genital mutilation (FGM) a crime, punishable to the violators (Okongwu, 2021). These provisions indicate a huge turnaround to a culture that tolerates such practices to one that condemns the act of law.

Nevertheless, the first use of VAPP Act was restricted to the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Its application in other states had to be domesticated by the state legislatures. According to Anyogu and Okpalaobi (2024), the opposition to such laws is usually caused by the attachment of the community to rural life that is regarded as sacrosanct. Nevertheless, in 2017, the Anambra State domesticated the VAPP Act, hence making it applicable in communities like Ihiala (Charles-Okeke, 2024). The domestication of the Act has helped to eradicate most of the evil practices that included female genital mutilation, widowhood customs, and gender-based violence among others. It has also given a legal platform through which criminals can be prosecuted and victims safeguarded hence enhancing the enforcement of the rights of women.

### **3.9. Malpractices Against Widows and Widowers (Prohibition) Law 2005**

Besides the VAPP Act, the Malpractices against Widows and Widowers (Prohibition) Law was accorded in the year 2005 by Anambra State Government. This act focuses specifically on the abuse of widows and widowers to provide human dignity and end discrimination towards them. The legislation has outlawed many types of abuse, such as compelling widows to drink water used to wash the body of their husband, putting them through abusive practices, or keeping them locked up upon the death of their husband (Okpalaobi & Akorah, 2023). It also safeguards the property of widows, and they cannot be deprived of their assets of the husband without justifiable reasons.

Moreover, the legislation stipulates the punishment of those who breach the law (such as fines and jail terms) (Ugwukah & Ume-Ezeoke, 2024). These steps are a deterrence to the repetition of bad habits. This legislation in Ihiala has had a great influence. The practice of widowhood that was formerly regarded as compulsory has been left to be discarded or altered in many aspects. There is more autonomy and legal protection of widows which can be described as a change to more humane and equal treatment.

### **3.10. Activism and Advocacy Role**

In addition to the legal changes, there is the role of activism and advocacy in changing patriarchal practices in Ihiala. The leading role in these endeavors has been taken by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) applying different strategies to gain gender equality and human rights. A prominent one is the Women Aid Collective (WACOL) that, together with the Anambra State Traditional Rulers Council and the appropriate ministries, held a multi-stakeholder conference in 2022. The conference led to a communique in which traditional rulers were pledged to rid the area of bad practices like widowhood rites, denial of inheritance, forced marriage and gender-based violence (Iwu et al., 2024).

The communique also focused on the necessity to honor the rights of women according to the rules of the law in the country and international levels, encourage women to take part in leadership and apply the judicial rulings to favor female inheritance rights. These promises signify the increased readiness of conventional institutions to adopt change. On the same note, the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) has contributed to the rights advocacy of women in Anambra State. FIDA has also sensitized people and highlighted the discriminatory behavior through education campaigns and legal support and mobilized women to pursue justice (Onujiogu, 2024). Its weekly radio programs have been successful especially to rural areas like Ihiala. Such advocacy programs have helped to transform the attitudes of the society and promote the denunciation of bad practices. They have also offered victim support systems where they can fight injustice.

### **3.11. Impeding Factors in Transformation**

Though this has been realized, there are still a number of elements that have been limiting the total eradication of the negative traditional practices in Ihiala.

#### **3.11.1. Illiteracy and Lack of Awareness**

Illiteracy is still one of the major obstacles to change. Most women are poorly informed about their rights as well as the legal safeguards that they have. According to Emodi (2024), low literacy rates restrict the capacity of women against discriminatory practices and court redress. Some women do not know how to go about legal processes even when they know their rights, thus demoralizing them to take action. Elochukwu (2024) also stresses the fact that the absence of education does not allow widows to fight against cultural pressure and exploitation. To cope with this problem, it is necessary to make long-term efforts to increase the access to education and bring awareness about the rights of women.

#### **3.11.2. Fear and Superstitious Beliefs**

Cultural beliefs and superstitions are also very important in propagating the practices that are harmful. Most widows are afraid that going against traditional rites will lead to spiritual repercussions, through curses or other bad things (Adedara, 2024). The beliefs are so entrenched and hard to argue. According to Akpulu (2022), there are women who are willing to go through these rites voluntarily because of fear of supernatural consequences. It brings to the fore the necessity of culturally sensitive reforms that are responsive to both the legal and spiritual aspects.

### **3.11.3. Economic Dependence**

The other critical challenge is Economic Dependence on men. Most women are not financially independent, and thus, they find it hard to oppose or dispute any form of discrimination. I, like Mabsout and Van-Staveren. Women are economically dependent on men, which strengthens their inferiority and prevents them to bargain. Economic vulnerability in Ihiala has a tendency of forcing women to adapt to the traditional norms even in situations where they are conscious of their rights. Women should be empowered economically thus to bring about significant change.

### **3.11.4. Weak Institutional Enforcement**

When law reforms are weakly implemented, there are strong chances that these reforms would be weak. Nwogu and Okonkwo (2024) conclude that laws that have no proper monitoring and enforcement would not likely attain their intended purpose. In most societies such as Ihiala, the lack of local law enforcement agencies and unwillingness of security institutions to take action has enabled offenders to go unpunished.

### **3.11.5. Patriarchy Internalization**

Surprisingly, women themselves can be the cause of upholding bad practices. According to Oreh (2014), women tend to be the enforcers of the traditional norms especially through organizations like umuada. This assimilation of patriarchal values points to the sophistication of cultural transformation.

## **4. Conclusion**

This paper has discussed how patriarchal cultural practices in Ihiala have continued and changed in the contemporary times, and found out that there is a dynamic relationship between tradition and change. Although most forms of patriarchy like widowhood rituals, women disinheritance, preference of male children, bride price and gender social restrictions were firmly entrenched in the traditional belief systems of the people, they have not been fixed. Rather, they have been modified, adapted or decreased to different extents in response to the forces of modernity. The results reveal that there have been major transformations that have been brought about by the influence of Western education, Christianity, urbanization, legal reforms, advocacy by the media, and government interventions. Practices that are harmful like female circumcision and extreme widowhood practices have been diminished or eradicated in most of the instances, and the accessibility of education, property ownership, and decision-making process by women has been enhanced. These changes indicate the slow transition to even more gender awareness and the acknowledgement of women rights in the society.

Nevertheless, the research also indicates that elements of patriarchy also exist, usually in indirect/repackaged forms. Some discriminatory practices are perpetuated by the cultural beliefs, the fear of social sanctions, economic dependence, and the weak enforcing of the law. Some of these practices have in other cases been modified to suit the modern times instead of being completely eradicated thus perpetrating gender disparities.

### ***Data Availability***

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

### ***Conflicts of Interest***

All authors in this publication declare no conflict of interest regarding the title, data, location, and results of the research.

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### Supplementary Materials

This study does not include any supplementary materials.

### Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. AI were used only to improve readability and language under strict human oversight; no content, ideas, analyses, or conclusions were generated by AI.

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