



## The Women Against Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP): A Sociological Framework for Understanding Female Complicity in Gendered Harm

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### ABSTRACT

The Women-Against-Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP Theory) presents an original conceptual framework that explains how women, shaped by patriarchal conditioning, gendered socialization, and structural inequality, become active agents in perpetuating harmful practices against other women and girls. Drawing on empirical insights from 169 participants in Ebonyi State, Nigeria—including women who have experienced female genital mutilation (FGM), forced and ghost marriages, and harmful widowhood rites—the theory provides a nuanced understanding that harmful cultural practices (HCPs) are not solely imposed by men but are often sustained and policed by women themselves. Key constructs such as internalized patriarchy, generational transmission, gendered socialization, and horizontal hostility among women illuminate the social mechanisms through which conformity is enforced. Findings reveal that older women, mothers-in-law, peers, and religious women’s networks act as cultural gatekeepers, motivated by the desire to preserve family honor, protect moral reputation, or maintain social belonging. By challenging the conventional victim–oppressor dichotomy, the WAW-HCP Theory reframes gender-based harm as a product of learned complicity within patriarchal systems. It offers both theoretical and practical relevance for feminist scholarship and policy interventions aimed at fostering intra-gender solidarity and transforming the cultural narratives that legitimize gender-based oppression.

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## INTRODUCTION

In many patriarchal societies, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls continue to experience deeply embedded harmful cultural practices (HCPs) that infringe upon their bodily autonomy, human rights, and social agency. Practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), early and forced marriage, ghost marriage, and restrictive widowhood rites remain culturally sanctioned, often disguised as rites of passage or symbols of moral integrity (UNICEF, 2017; WHO, 2020). These practices are typically situated within dominant patriarchal frameworks, wherein men are assumed to be the primary enforcers of cultural oppression. However, growing research suggests that women—especially mothers, mothers-in-law, grandmothers, aunts, and female peer groups—play significant roles in the perpetuation of these practices (Izugbara & Ukwai, 2004; Edewor, 2014; Falola & Adebayo, 2000).

In southeastern Nigeria, and particularly Ebonyi State, many harmful cultural practices are not only tolerated but actively enforced by women as a means of preserving cultural identity, securing social approval, or maintaining family honor (Amadiume, 2015; Oluwafunmilayo, 2020). Within these community networks, women both reproduce and transmit gender norms, often under the influence of internalized patriarchal beliefs and rigid social expectations. Social Norms Theory explains that individuals' behaviors are influenced by their perceptions of what others do (descriptive norms) and what others approve or disapprove of (injunctive norms) (Bicchieri, 2006). In contexts where adherence to harmful practices is expected, non-compliance can lead to shame, stigma, or exclusion, thereby creating powerful incentives for women to conform—and to compel others to do the same.

This paper introduces the Women Against Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) as a sociological framework to explain this phenomenon. Drawing from empirical data collected from 169 participants across Ebonyi State through focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and in-depth interviews, the theory challenges conventional victim-oppressor binaries by highlighting the active role women play in sustaining harmful practices. WAW-HCP theory centers concepts such as internalized oppression, generational transmission, gendered power hierarchies, and community-based norm enforcement mechanisms.

By focusing on how women become both enforcers and victims within patriarchal systems, this theory expands the discourse on gender and cultural violence. It offers critical insights for designing culturally grounded interventions that aim to dismantle harmful norms, promote intra-gender solidarity, and disrupt cycles of gender-based harm within and across generations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of the Women Against Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) is informed by several established sociological and feminist theories that help explain how women, shaped by patriarchal socialization and structural constraints, become both victims and enforcers of harmful cultural practices. This section draws on six foundational theories—

Social Role Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, Intersectionality theory, Patriarchal Theory, the Theory of Internalized Oppression, and Social Norms Theory – to situate the WAW-HCP within a broader analytical context.

### **Social Role Theory**

Proposed by Alice Eagly, Social Role Theory explains how gender roles develop through culturally defined divisions of labor, which shape behavioral expectations and societal norms (Eagly, 1987). According to this theory, women and men are socialized into roles that align with historically ascribed duties – caregiving for women and leadership for men. These roles are reinforced through generational transmission, making compliance with them appear natural and necessary (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Women may therefore engage in or enforce harmful cultural practices such as FGM or forced marriage to fulfill culturally approved roles. The theory helps explain how women’s adherence to traditional roles becomes a form of norm preservation, often leading them to become enforcers of the very norms that disempower them.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic Interactionism, developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, emphasizes the role of social interaction in shaping individual behavior and social meaning. According to Blumer (1969), individuals act based on the meanings that objects, roles, or behaviors hold for them – meanings that are formed and sustained through social interaction. Within cultural contexts where harmful practices are seen as rites of passage or signs of purity, women may view the enforcement of such norms as a form of cultural duty or identity preservation. This theoretical lens helps explain how HCPs like ghost marriage or widowhood rituals are normalized through repeated symbolic exchanges, where conformity earns social approval and deviation invites ostracism.

### **Intersectionality Theory**

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Intersectionality Theory provides an important framework for analyzing how multiple forms of social identity – such as gender, class, age, and marital status – interact to shape experiences of privilege or oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). In rural Nigeria, a widowed woman without male children may face layered marginalization, while another woman with strong family support and sons may exert power over others. The theory helps highlight that women’s complicity in harmful practices is not uniform but varies according to their positioning within complex social hierarchies. This intersectional analysis is central to WAW-HCP theory, which recognizes that motivations for participating in harmful norms are shaped by diverse identities and survival strategies.

### **Patriarchal Theory**

Patriarchal Theory explains how societies are structured around male dominance and control, particularly in areas of property rights, religious authority, and cultural enforcement. Gerda Lerner (1986) describes patriarchy as a historically constructed system where men hold institutional power and women are systematically subordinated. Sylvia Walby (1990) expands on this by identifying six structures that sustain patriarchy: the state, household, paid work, male violence, sexuality, and culture. Within such a system, women’s roles are

defined in ways that often require them to perpetuate traditions that uphold male authority. The WAW-HCP theory builds on this foundation by emphasizing that women are not just passive recipients of patriarchal control but often function as its localized agents – especially within domestic, communal, and ritual contexts.

### **Theory of Internalized Oppression**

The theory of internalized oppression, articulated by Paulo Freire (1970) and later expanded by Bell Hooks (2000), describes how members of marginalized groups may unconsciously adopt the ideologies that oppress them. Freire argued that the oppressed often internalize dominant narratives, adapting to their subjugation and reproducing it in their interactions. Bell Hooks emphasized how this internalization can lead to horizontal hostility, where oppressed individuals turn against each other. In the WAW-HCP framework, internalized oppression explains why women who have suffered under HCPs often become their most ardent defenders – out of a need for acceptance, a belief in tradition, or the fear of exclusion.

### **Social Norms Theory**

Social Norms Theory, popularized by Cristina Bicchieri (2006), posits that individual behavior is shaped by perceptions of what others do (descriptive norms) and what others think should be done (injunctive norms). This theory is especially relevant in understanding practices like FGM and child marriage, which persist due to strong normative expectations. Women who enforce these practices may not necessarily believe in their value but feel compelled to act due to fear of stigma or punishment. In the WAW-HCP theory, social norms are seen as both constraints and tools – where women, knowingly or unknowingly, become norm enforcers through gossip, peer pressure, ritual duties, or status preservation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Synthesis and Relevance to WAW-HCP Theory**

Together, these six theories illuminate the sociocultural mechanisms that make it possible – and sometimes necessary – for women to participate in practices that harm other women. While each theory offers valuable insight, none individually captures the layered realities of female complicity, generational enforcement, and the competition for status and survival within patriarchal communities. The WAW-HCP theory synthesizes and extends these ideas by focusing explicitly on women’s agency within oppression, arguing that any strategy to dismantle harmful practices must confront not only patriarchal structures but also the intra-gender dynamics that sustain them.

### **Analytical Background**

This theoretical development draws from insights generated during qualitative fieldwork conducted in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, in 2024. The data, which involved focus group discussions and key informant interviews with women, religious leaders, and community stakeholders, revealed patterns of female complicity in sustaining harmful cultural practices. The Women Against Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) was subsequently conceptualized in 2025, following critical reflection on these findings and a synthesis of existing gender and social norms literature.

## **Presentation of the Women Against Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP)**

The Women Against Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) is a sociological framework developed to explain how women, within patriarchal societies, can become both enforcers and victims of harmful cultural practices (HCPs). Drawing on qualitative data from Ebonyi State, Nigeria, the theory emerged as a response to the initial hypothesis that men are the primary drivers of such practices. However, the study revealed that women play equally central – if not dominant – roles in sustaining traditions like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), child marriage, widowhood rites, ghost marriage, and arranged marriage. The theory underscores how internalized norms, generational roles, and survival strategies converge to produce intra-gender harm.

Rather than viewing women solely through the lens of victimhood, WAW-HCP recognizes them as active agents in cultural transmission and enforcement, often motivated by social pressure, internalized patriarchy, fear of exclusion, or the pursuit of social acceptance. It calls for a shift in theoretical framing – one that acknowledges the complexity of female agency within oppressive systems and the internal contradictions of patriarchal cultures.

### **Core Concepts of WAW-HCP Theory**

- **Pillar 1: Women as Perpetrators and Enforcers of Harmful Cultural Practices (HCP)**

In many patriarchal communities, including those in Ebonyi State, women – especially older women and those in influential social roles – serve as active enforcers of harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), forced and ghost marriages, and oppressive widowhood practices. They organize, supervise, and pressure younger women into compliance with these norms, often invoking cultural morality, religious tradition, or family honor. This enforcement grants them legitimacy and reinforces their status within community hierarchies.

Rather than viewing these women solely as victims of patriarchy, this pillar highlights their agency – albeit constrained – within traditional power structures. Their roles reflect a form of horizontal oppression where women perpetuate the very systems that oppress them. Recognizing this dynamic is key to transforming gender norms, as it underscores the importance of addressing intra-gender complicity in efforts to end HCP.

“I was circumcised when I was about to get married, and I will circumcise my female children immediately after secondary school.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“When a man dies without a wife, his sisters or mother will look for a girl to marry in his name, so that his lineage will not end. We women usually arrange it because it is our duty to protect the family name.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“It is better to marry off your daughter early before she starts misbehaving. If she gets pregnant in her father’s house, it brings shame to the

family. That is why I encourage my daughters to marry as soon as someone responsible comes.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

- **Pillar 2: Internalization of Patriarchal Norms**

Many women grow up in environments where harmful cultural practices are presented not as violence, but as necessary rites of passage, moral obligations, or signs of proper womanhood. Over time, these patriarchal beliefs become deeply internalized, shaping how women perceive their roles and duties within families and communities. Practices like FGM, widowhood rituals, and child marriage are thus accepted as “normal” and even defended by the very women who undergo or enforce them.

This internalization is reinforced through generational transmission—mothers teach daughters what was once taught to them, creating powerful cultural scripts that equate suffering with virtue and conformity with honor. This pillar emphasizes that harmful practices persist not only through external enforcement but also through learned loyalty to oppressive norms, making change more complex and requiring interventions that confront deeply held belief systems.

“They tag you stubborn and wayward... mothers begin to complain about them, that their mates have all married.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“Our mothers told us that without circumcision, a woman will be wayward and won’t stay in her husband’s house. I did mine and I’m proud of it; it shows I was brought up well.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“When my husband died, I wanted to leave because I was still very young, but my mother insisted that I must stay back in my husband’s house and perform all the burial rituals for the sake of our family name. That is why I am stuck here.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)”

- **Pillar 3: Gendered Socialization and Role Conditioning**

From childhood, girls in many Nigerian communities are socialized into rigid gender roles that prioritize obedience, modesty, endurance, and loyalty to cultural traditions. Through daily practices, language, and social rewards or punishments, they learn that their value is tied to how well they conform to expectations of womanhood—often defined by submission to family, marriage, and community norms. This conditioning lays the foundation for future acceptance and perpetuation of harmful practices.

In this context, cultural rituals like FGM, forced marriage, and widowhood practices are not perceived as violence but as milestones of female identity. Girls are taught to admire women who “endure” and to scorn those who resist. As these norms are internalized, socialization becomes a tool for self-policing and peer enforcement, where women pass on the same restrictive expectations to younger generations. This reinforces compliance, even in the absence of male coercion.

“Influenced by deeply ingrained beliefs about lineage and gender roles, the women in the family encouraged their brother to take a second wife solely because the first wife had not borne a male child.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“My mother always told me that a woman must endure everything in her husband’s house. Even if he beats you, you should not come back home because that is how marriage is.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024).

“When I told my mother that my husband forces himself on me even when I say no, she shouted at me and said I should never speak such words again. She said a wife cannot deny her husband.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024).

“My mother warned me never to talk about what happens between me and my husband in bed. She said it is his right to have me whenever he wants since he paid my bride price.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024”).

- **Pillar 4: Women as Custodians of Tradition**

In many communities, women—especially mothers, grandmothers, and senior female relatives—assume the role of cultural custodians. They are seen as the preservers of family honor, lineage, and ancestral values. This responsibility is passed down through domestic instruction, storytelling, and ritual leadership. By performing naming ceremonies, supervising puberty rites, and guiding marital customs, they transmit and protect the cultural norms that define group identity and social order.

This sense of duty often places women at the center of perpetuating harmful practices such as FGM, forced marriages, and oppressive widowhood practices—not necessarily out of malice, but out of loyalty to perceived cultural integrity. Their agency is exercised within the boundaries of tradition, where resisting change is viewed as protecting heritage. As custodians of culture, they become powerful social actors who shape what is remembered, repeated, and revered.

“It is the duty of the older women in the family to ensure daughters and daughter-in-law clean the corpse and cover its mouth... those who fail must bring a goat as penalty.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024).

“It is the women who insist that any woman accused of adultery must go round the market to confess her sin, otherwise the gods will punish the whole family.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“When a man or his children fall sick or experience misfortune, it is usually the women in the compound who start saying that the wife’s unfaithfulness is the cause.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

- **Pillar 5: Generational Transmission**

Harmful cultural practices are sustained across time through generational transmission, with mothers and grandmothers serving as primary agents in this cycle. They introduce girls to traditional expectations early—sometimes through stories, songs, or casual warnings—and often oversee their participation in

practices like FGM, early marriage, and restrictive widowhood rituals. These actions are framed as acts of love or preparation for womanhood, not as violence.

This intergenerational repetition solidifies harmful norms as unquestioned truths. A grandmother who underwent a painful ritual may insist her granddaughter does the same to preserve family honor or avoid spiritual consequences. Over time, this transmission builds what feminist theorists describe as “cultural memory,” where resistance to harmful norms is viewed as betrayal. Breaking this chain requires not only confronting the practices but also the authority of those who pass them on

“My cousin is a drunk, but his sisters went and married two women for him and his children. They’re not living with him, but tradition says all the children are his.”

(Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“When I told my mother that I didn’t want my daughter to be circumcised, she became angry and said I wanted to bring shame to the family.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“My grandmother said we must continue our tradition because if we stop, the gods will turn against us.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

- **Pillar 6: Women's Role in Socialization**

In patriarchal communities, mothers and senior women are often tasked with preparing girls to fit into socially acceptable gender roles. This socialization process reinforces expectations around sexual purity, modesty, silence, obedience, and readiness for marriage. These lessons are delivered not only through words but through discipline, correction, and strategic use of fear, shame, or even ridicule. Girls are taught that failure to comply could bring disgrace to the family or lead to spiritual consequences.

This early conditioning shapes how girls internalize their roles and perceive other women. A mother who constantly warns her daughter about being “too forward” or pressures her to marry early believes she is protecting the child, but in reality, she is transferring patriarchal expectations. In doing so, women become both products and enforcers of the very systems that limit their autonomy – thereby reinforcing harmful cultural practices through daily acts of social grooming.

“Women force their pregnant daughters to the house of the person who impregnated them or to anybody that has declared interest because they want to maintain their positions in the church.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“My mother used to say that a woman who talks too much or stays out late will never find a husband. I grew up fearing to do anything that people might say is shameful.”

(Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“When my daughter refused to marry the man we chose for her, my sisters said I didn’t train her well. They said I allowed her to become too bold.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

- **Pillar 7: Peer and Group Pressure Among Women**

Beyond family structures, women experience intense social pressure from their female peers, age-grade groups, religious women's associations, and community-based networks. These collectives often reinforce conformity through ridicule, exclusion, or gossip, especially when a woman challenges or rejects a harmful practice. Within these groups, there's often a shared understanding that "good" women are those who abide by tradition, while dissenters are labeled as rebellious or unworthy.

This peer surveillance functions as a powerful mechanism for enforcing compliance. In Ebonyi State, for instance, women who refused to subject their daughters to circumcision or marry them off early were mocked or isolated by other women. This pressure fosters a collective complicity, where no woman wants to stand out for fear of being stigmatized. As a result, harmful practices become not only normalized but also socially policed by women themselves, reinforcing horizontal oppression.

"The man's sisters and mother will continue to say she has killed our brother... they may take her children away." (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

"When I said my daughter will not be circumcised, other women laughed and said I want her to become a prostitute." (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

"When a woman refuses to circumcise her daughter in town, once she comes home during Christmas or any festival, the grandmothers from both families will join hands and arrange it without her consent." (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

- **Pillar 8: Reluctance to Challenge Cultural Norms**

Many women conform to harmful cultural practices not because they believe in them, but because they fear the social consequences of resistance. In patriarchal communities, challenging tradition can lead to severe backlash, including isolation, shame, or being labeled as dishonorable. As a result, even those who privately oppose these practices often support or remain silent about them in public.

For instance, in Ebonyi State, older women were found arranging ghost marriages for girls who had children outside of wedlock—pairing them with deceased male relatives. Though aware of the psychological harm and coercion involved, these women acted to avoid community disgrace and preserve family lineage. This pillar highlights the emotional and reputational risks women navigate in deciding whether or not to challenge cultural norms.

"Some women brought a girl who already had children in her father's house and married her for their late brother. They say the children now belong to the dead man's lineage not minding the psychological and health implications."

(Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

"Some women don't believe in these customs again, but they can't speak out because people will say they have joined bad groups." (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

"When a girl gets pregnant without marriage, her mother will quickly agree to a ghost marriage so that people won't say she raised her daughter badly." (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“We know it’s not good to push a pregnant girl into marriage, especially to an old man, but if we don’t, people will laugh at our family and call us names.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

“Even though many women privately feel that FGM is painful and unnecessary, they still support it because they believe others expect it. No one wants to be seen as the only one opposing tradition.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

- **Pillar 9: Complex Victim-Perpetrator Identity**

A core premise of the Women Against Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) is that many women simultaneously occupy the roles of both victim and enforcer. A woman who was subjected to FGM, denied education, or forced into marriage may later become the one who insists that her daughter, niece, or daughter-in-law undergo the same experiences. This dynamic is not necessarily rooted in cruelty but in the normalization of suffering as a pathway to respect, inclusion, or perceived virtue.

This pillar disrupts binary thinking by showing that complicity often stems from survival and internalized beliefs rather than malice. The cycle of harm continues because the line between those who suffer and those who inflict is blurred by tradition, social reward, and the desire for legitimacy. Recognizing this complex identity is essential for designing interventions that do not shame women but instead empower them to break generational cycles of harm.

“Most of us were forced into marriage by our mothers because they believed it was right, despite all that we suffered, we still force our children into such marriages as we can’t help them while they suffer.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024).

“Most of these women in this community know what FGM has cost them—the pain, childbirth complications, loss of sexual pleasure and even VVF—yet they still allow their daughters to go through it and watch them suffer the same way they did.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024)

- **Pillar 10: Role of Peer Pressure and Social Solidarity**

Among women and girls, peer groups—such as age-grade associations, women’s fellowships, and social circles—play a significant role in reinforcing conformity to harmful cultural norms. These groups often use tools like ridicule, gossip, labeling, or social exclusion to enforce expected behaviors. For instance, a woman who refuses to circumcise her daughter may be mocked or accused of abandoning tradition, while an unmarried mother may be shunned until she accepts a "corrective" marriage arrangement.

This pressure is intensified by the human desire for belonging and solidarity. For many women, maintaining group membership and avoiding isolation is more urgent than questioning harmful norms. As a result, these female networks, originally created for support and community, can become informal systems of control that reproduce gendered harm. Addressing peer-driven enforcement is therefore critical to building solidarity that liberates rather than limits.

“There is peer group FGM... girls who haven’t been circumcised are mocked, insulted, pressured, and shamed by their peers in schools and at home.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024).

“In most religious groups, women are the ones who mock and sanction their fellow women who allowed their pregnant daughters to stay back in their homes and deliver, sometimes insist that their religious leadership positions are taken away from them.” (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024).

“There are some cultural practices in our community that are tied to FGM, women are the ones who ensure that those who did not go through FGM do not take part in it and are called incomplete women during gathering”. (Ajah-Okohu, Fieldwork, 2024).

Together, these ten conceptual pillars constitute the foundation of the Women Against Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP), offering a multidimensional lens for understanding why harmful traditions persist within female-dominated spaces. Rather than viewing women solely as victims of patriarchal systems, this theory highlights their complex roles as both enforcers and transmitters of cultural harm. It calls for a shift in intervention strategies—toward approaches that confront intra-gender complicity, nurture transformative female solidarity, and foster critical consciousness among women about their participation in sustaining or challenging harmful norms. By centering the lived realities and agency of women, the WAW-HCP theory invites a deeper, more honest reckoning with the structures that shape gendered harm and healing

## Women Against Women (WAW) Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices – Ajah-Okohu D.I. (2025)

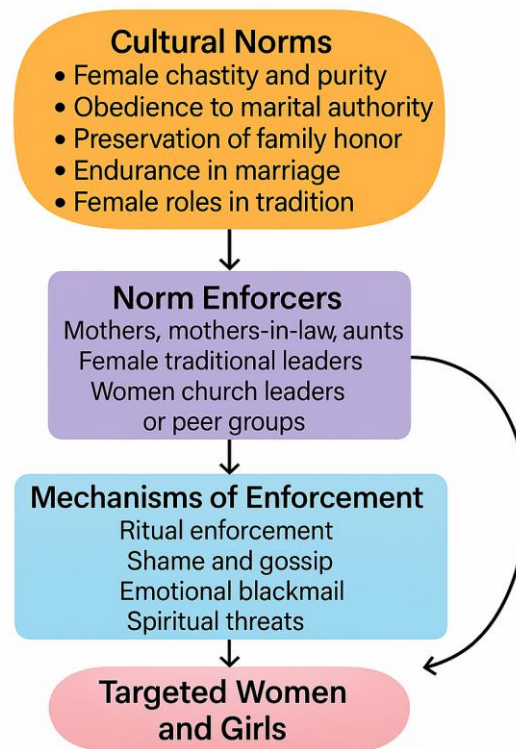


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Women Against Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP)

This framework illustrates how cultural and religious norms are internalized and enforced by female actors – especially older women, peers, and religious groups – thereby sustaining harmful practices across generations.

### RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Women Against Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) challenges dominant frameworks that present women exclusively as victims of patriarchal violence. While patriarchy certainly structures gender inequality in Nigeria and beyond, this theory highlights that women themselves – especially those in positions of relative cultural power – can act as enforcers and perpetuators of harmful norms. This does not suggest moral equivalency between men and women in terms of power, but rather introduces a critical middle ground: that women can simultaneously be oppressed and complicit in oppression.

Traditional feminist theory has been instrumental in uncovering male-dominated systems of exploitation. However, it has been less successful in accounting for the nuanced ways that women themselves may uphold these systems – particularly in localized, rural, and community-based contexts where tradition and honor shape behavior. The WAW-HCP theory makes this

intervention by foregrounding intra-gender enforcement, intergenerational reproduction of norms, and the role of internalized oppression in sustaining practices like FGM, ghost marriage, child marriage, widowhood rites, and arranged marriages for deceased family members.

The theory also reveals that complicity is not always a matter of choice or intent. Often, it is a survival strategy. Women in patriarchal societies face intense social pressure to conform to expectations surrounding family honor, marital duty, and sexual morality. In such contexts, enforcing harmful practices can be a means of avoiding disgrace, maintaining status, or simply preserving belonging within a tightly knit community. These are not just individual choices; they are structured responses to social expectations, as Social Norms Theory and Internalized Oppression Theory help to explain.

Moreover, WAW-HCP contributes a distinctly African feminist perspective, rooted in empirical realities rather than imported frameworks. It affirms the need to re-center African women's voices in theorizing gender harm—not just as recipients of policy and aid, but as complex actors navigating layered power systems.

For policy and programming, the implications are profound. Interventions aimed at eliminating harmful practices must go beyond educating men or legislating change. They must engage the networks of women influencers—mothers, mothers-in-law, religious women leaders, peers, and elderly gatekeepers—who shape and enforce normative behavior. Community dialogues, peer-led reflection groups, and critical consciousness-raising must become core strategies to disrupt these gendered chains of harm.

Ultimately, WAW-HCP calls for a paradigmatic shift in both academic and interventionist thinking. It demands that we see women not only as recipients of harm but as potential nodes of transformation. By acknowledging women's complex roles in sustaining harmful practices, we create new pathways for empowerment, solidarity, and collective liberation from within.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION**

The Women Against Women Theory of Harmful Cultural Practices (WAW-HCP) presents a transformative shift in how we understand the persistence of gender-based harm within patriarchal societies. By centering the roles women play—not only as victims but also as norm enforcers, cultural custodians, and survival actors—this theory expands the analytical scope of feminist and sociological inquiry. It underscores that harmful practices such as FGM, forced marriage, widowhood rites, and ghost marriages do not survive merely because of male dominance, but also through the active participation of women who have internalized and now defend these norms.

Grounded in empirical evidence from Ebonyi State, Nigeria, the WAW-HCP theory reveals that intra-gender dynamics—especially among women from different generational, social, and religious positions—are central to the enforcement and continuity of these practices. It invites scholars and practitioners to rethink binary approaches to gender oppression and to adopt

intersectional, culturally aware strategies that address female complicity alongside male dominance.

Ultimately, this theory calls for interventions that go beyond legal reform and public health campaigns to include critical consciousness-raising among women, peer-group transformation, and culturally sensitive engagement with female community leaders. Only by acknowledging and addressing the complex ways women participate in harmful cultural practices can we hope to dismantle them sustainably and collectively.

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