

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CULTURAL CRUELTY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHILDLESS WOMEN IN EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA.

¹Ogbonnia Eze, ¹Ekene Ezedigwe, ¹Francis Ugota, ¹Andrew Odom, ¹Amarachi O Ude

¹Department of Psychology, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria.
(Corresponding email: eze.ogbonnia@ebsu.edu.ng, Mobile: +234 803 455 4687)

ABSTRACT

Childlessness remains a deeply stigmatized condition in many African societies where fertility is culturally central to womanhood. In southeastern Nigeria and Ebonyi State, childless women often face systematic cultural cruelty, including derogatory labeling, exclusion from community rituals, and marital insecurity. This study explored the lived experiences of childless women in Ebonyi State and examined how cultural practices shape their psychological well-being. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological design, 21 women aged 25–52 were purposively recruited from rural and urban communities. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews conducted in English and Igbo and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. Findings four emergent and co-constructed themes: (a) stigma and social exclusion, highlighting derogatory cultural constructions of childlessness; (b) emotional and psychological suffering, including anxiety, depression, and diminished self-worth; (c) coping through faith and resilience, where women relied on spirituality and family support; and (d) aspirations for cultural change, reflecting calls for community sensitization and policy interventions. The study illustrates that cultural cruelty operates as a structural determinant of women's psychological health, with significant implications for gender equity and mental health services. It advocates for culturally sensitive counseling, community education, and supportive health policies that protect the dignity and rights of childless women.

Keywords: Childlessness, Cultural cruelty, Psychological well-being, Stigma, Women, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Editor-in-Chief

Prof. Henry Odhianosen Imhonde

Assistant Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Oyeleke Johnson

Associate Editors: Ajibola Abdulrahmon Ishola, Dr. Leonard Orji, Dr. Daniel Kumuyi, Dr. Chinyere Okonkwo, Dr. Juliana Pwajok, Dr.

Samson Olowo Kolawole, Dr. Victor Onyecho

Consulting Editors:

Prof. Peter. O. Ebigbo, Prof. Ebenezer. O. Akinowo, Prof. Helen O. Osinowo, Prof. Onaolopo K. Taiwo, Prof. Erhabor Idemudia, Prof. Harry Obi Nwosu, Prof. Obiageli Omeje, Prof. Benjamin O. Olley, Prof. Gboyega Emmanuel Abikoye, Prof. Bolade O. Mokuolu

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

The gender role of motherhood remains a central marker of adult femininity across many African societies, where procreation sustains lineage, property transmission and social standing (Roomaney et al., 2024). In Ebonyi State Igbo communities and specifically in rural parts of Ebonyi State, the social meaning attached to fertility is profound: childbearing is often framed as a primary social role for women, and failure to bear children can incur ongoing social sanctions and exclusion. Community-based research in Ebonyi has documented the multiple social and economic consequences associated with infertility, including widespread reliance on non-allopathic remedies and elevated intimate partner violence experienced by women who do not conceive (Ibekwe et al., 2021).

Motherhood is deeply embedded in African cultural identity, and in many societies, a woman's social worth is strongly tied to her ability to bear children. In Igbo culture, Nigeria, procreation is further considered not only a biological function but also a cultural obligation that sustains lineage, inheritance, and community continuity. Within this sociocultural context, childlessness is viewed as a serious misfortune, often interpreted through cultural, spiritual, or

moral lenses (Dyer, 2007). As a result, women who are unable to conceive are subjected to various forms of cultural cruelty ranging from ridicule and ostracism to exclusion from significant rituals, making childlessness both a personal and collective tragedy.

The psychological consequences of such cultural cruelty are profound. Research has consistently shown that stigmatization associated with infertility and childlessness can result in low self-esteem, depression, marital strain, and social withdrawal (Donkor & Sandall, 2007; Xie et al, 2023; Donkor and Sandall, 2007; Essan et al, 2022). While infertility has been widely studied in medical and demographic terms, its psychological dimensions within specific cultural contexts remain underexplored. This gap is most pronounced in culturally conservative areas like Ebonyi State, where traditional norms remain highly influential. The few existing studies in Nigeria tend to focus on the medical aspects of infertility (e.g., causes and treatments) or broader sociological implications (Ogunjuyigbe et al., 2015), leaving a gap in understanding the lived experiences and psychological well-being

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

of women who face childlessness in culturally conservative communities.

Globally, scholars have drawn attention to the stigma of infertility and its gendered consequences. In South Asia, for instance, women without children are often labeled incomplete or cursed, leading to psychological distress and social marginalization (Donkor & Sandall, 2019). Similar patterns have been observed in sub-Saharan Africa, where motherhood is strongly linked to feminine identity and social status (Hollos et al., 2014). Yet, cultural expressions of cruelty such as derogatory naming, ritual exclusion, and inheritance denial vary across regions and require context-specific analysis. For childless women in Ebonyi State, the experience of cruelty is intensified by the deeply communal structure of Igbo society, where individuals are constantly evaluated against collective expectations.

From a psychological perspective, these experiences can be understood through **stigma theory** (Goffman, 1963), which highlights how labeling and stereotyping lead to status loss and discrimination. In Ebonyi communities, childless women are often given pejorative labels, such as *nwanyiamuginwa* (“barren woman”), which mark them as socially and culturally

deficient. The internalization of such stigma can erode a woman’s sense of identity, producing feelings of shame, worthlessness, and alienation (Hollos, and Larsen, 2008). Furthermore, feminist psychology provides a useful lens to examine how patriarchal structures amplify this cruelty by defining womanhood almost exclusively in terms of reproduction, thereby reinforcing gendered oppression (Mapedzahama, 2019).

The importance of situating this study within the discipline of psychology lies in its ability to move beyond descriptive accounts of cultural practices and to critically examine their impact on mental health and well-being. Qualitative inquiry, particularly narrative and phenomenological approaches, offers an avenue to capture the subjective realities of childless women and how they construct meaning in the face of stigma and cruelty (Smith & Eatough, 2017). By foregrounding women’s voices, this study aims to illuminate the intersection of culture, gender, and psychology in ways that can inform both culturally sensitive counseling practices and broader policy interventions.

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

Problem statement

In Ebonyi State, childlessness is not merely a private medical issue; it is embedded in local cultural practices and everyday social interactions that can take the form of what is defined as cultural cruelty in this context; repeated verbal denigration, ritual or symbolic exclusion from community ceremonies, and informal penalties that limit women's social participation and economic security. Empirical work from Nigerian contexts shows that infertile or childless women may be labeled with pejoratives, marginalized by in-laws, or left vulnerable to marital dissolution and other harms (Whitehouse, 2014). These culturally rooted pressures create a context in which childless women face persistent, interpersonal cruelty that shapes their opportunities, status, and daily life. Despite the growing body of research on infertility and stigma in Africa, Ebonyi State remains understudied. The state is unique in that it retains a strong rural-traditional identity compared to some other parts of Igbo land, which may amplify cultural pressures on women. In some communities, women without children may be excluded from decision-making bodies, denied full participation in cultural ceremonies, and sometimes may be

prevented from being buried in their marital homes. This practice underscores the depth of cultural cruelty. The cumulative psychological toll of such practices can be severe, but few empirical studies have systematically examined the lived narratives of affected women in Ebonyi.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, with specific attention to how cultural cruelty influences their psychological well-being. In many Igbo communities, motherhood is constructed as the defining marker of womanhood, and women who are unable to bear children are frequently subjected to stigmatization, derogatory labeling, social exclusion, and marital insecurity. Despite the prevalence of such experiences, limited psychological research has systematically examined how these forms of cultural cruelty affect the self-concept, emotional health, and coping strategies of women in this context.

Using a phenomenological qualitative design, the study seeks to capture women's narratives in their own voices, highlighting how they interpret, internalize, and respond to the stigma of childlessness. By

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

focusing on the psychological dimensions of cultural cruelty such as identity threat, emotional distress, resilience, and meaning-making the research aims to fill a gap in cross-cultural psychology literature by centering on the psychological impact of structural gender inequality, thereby contributing to feminist psychology perspectives. The ultimate purpose is not only to generate culturally grounded psychological knowledge but also to inform counseling practice, community sensitization, and policy interventions that can support the dignity and mental health of childless women in Ebonyi State and comparable sociocultural contexts. Accordingly, this paper seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. How do childless women in Ebonyi State perceive and experience cultural cruelty?
2. What emotional and psychological impacts result from these

experiences, particularly regarding self-concept and identity?

3. What coping mechanisms do they adopt in response to stigma and exclusion?

In addressing these questions, the study contributes to cross-cultural psychology by highlighting how cultural scripts of fertility and womanhood shape psychological well-being. It also contributes to feminist psychology by exposing the structural inequalities that underpin cultural cruelty, while offering practical implications for mental health practitioners working in Nigerian and similar contexts. Ultimately, this research underscores the need for culturally grounded psychological interventions that respect local traditions while challenging harmful practices that compromise women's dignity and mental health.

Literature Review

Concept of Childlessness

Childlessness can be understood as the absence of biological or socially recognized children in a woman's life, either voluntary or involuntary (Van Balen & Bos, 2009). In sub-Saharan Africa, childlessness is rarely voluntary; it is

largely associated with infertility or reproductive health challenges (Esan et al., 2022). Within the Igbo cultural context, procreation is regarded as the primary purpose of marriage and the ultimate validation of womanhood. Thus, childless women face cultural suspicion, blame, and

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

ridicule. Unlike Western contexts where voluntary childlessness is increasingly accepted (Park, 2022), Nigerian society continues to equate womanhood with motherhood, rendering childlessness socially deviant.

Cultural Cruelty

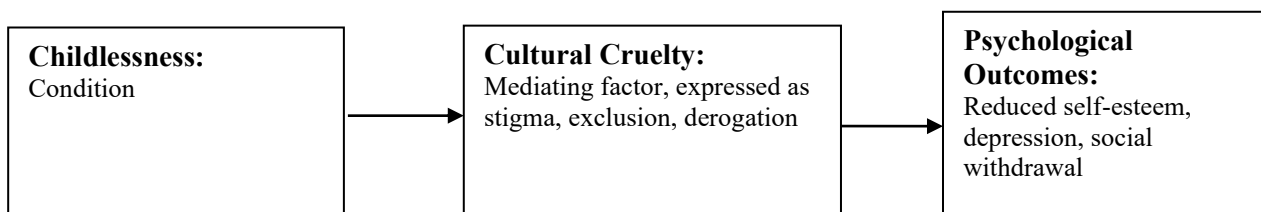
“Cultural cruelty” refers to the systematic practices, norms, and values within a culture that perpetuate psychological suffering, social exclusion, or discrimination against particular groups (Kanu, 2019). For childless women in Ebonyi State, cultural cruelty manifests in forms such as derogatory labeling (e.g., “nwanyiamuginwa” – barren woman), exclusion from rituals, women’s associations, inheritance rights, and economic and marital insecurity.

Cultural cruelty differs from individual acts of violence because it is normalized and sanctioned by cultural traditions and social expectations. As Goffman (1963) theorized, such labeling processes create spoiled identities, reinforcing marginalization. Psychological Well-being

Psychological well-being is a multidimensional construct involving positive functioning, life satisfaction, emotional stability, and resilience (Ryff, 2014). In the context of infertility, psychological well-being is compromised by social stigma, identity threats, and chronic stress. Studies show that infertile women often experience depression, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem (Xie et al., 2023; Anari et al., 2024). Within patriarchal cultures, these psychological effects are magnified because motherhood is treated as the pinnacle of feminine worth (Roomaney et al., 2024).

Intersections between Childlessness, Cultural Cruelty, and Psychological Well-being

Conceptually, childlessness serves as the trigger condition that exposes women to cultural cruelty, which in turn undermines psychological well-being. This can be seen as a **chain relationship** represented in the diagram below:



Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

This illustration aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which explains how exclusion from valued social categories damages self-concept. It also reflects feminist psychology's critique that women's psychological suffering is rooted in structural gender inequalities (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017).

Narratives and Meaning-Making

Despite these challenges, conceptualizing childless women only as passive victims overlooks their agency. Narrative psychology highlights that individuals construct meaning through stories about their lives (McAdams & McLean, 2013). For childless women in Ebonyi State, sharing narratives of resilience, faith, and resistance is itself a psychological resource. These narratives may also expose the cracks in cultural systems that sustain cruelty, potentially opening avenues for social change.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three interrelated psychological frameworks: Goffman's Stigma Theory (to explain labeling and identity threat), Social Identity Theory (to explain social exclusion and loss of belonging), and Feminist Psychology (to

interpret these experiences within structural gender inequality). According to Goffman (1963), stigma occurs when individuals possess an attribute that society devalues, leading to labeling, stereotyping, and exclusion. In Igbo society, motherhood is central to feminine identity, and women who are childless are perceived as "spoiled identities." This stigma not only diminishes their social standing but also undermines psychological well-being.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) emphasizes that self-concept is shaped by group membership. When childless women are excluded from key cultural groups such as women's associations or ceremonies they experience identity threat, loss of belonging, and reduced self-esteem.

Finally, feminist psychology argues that women's psychological experiences must be understood within patriarchal and socio-cultural structures (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). From this perspective, childlessness is not merely a biological condition but a socially constructed disadvantage amplified by cultural norms, gender inequality, and power relations.

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

These frameworks together provide a lens for interpreting how cultural cruelty is internalized and resisted by women in Ebonyi State.

Empirical Review

Global Perspectives on Childlessness and Stigma

Globally, infertility affects an estimated 1 in 6 people of reproductive age (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). Studies consistently show that women bear a disproportionate burden of blame, stigma, and psychological distress compared to men (Xie et al., 2023). For instance, Taebi et al. (2021) found that infertile women in Iran experienced deep feelings of shame, worthlessness, and social isolation. Similarly, Anari et al. (2024) linked infertility stigma with lower quality of life and reduced emotional well-being. These findings confirm that infertility-related stigma is both a health and psychological issue.

African Context

In African societies, childbearing is often considered the essence of womanhood, making infertility a highly stigmatized condition (Roomaney et al., 2024). Tabong and Adongo (2013) reported that infertile couples in Ghana experienced ridicule,

exclusion from social gatherings, and marital tensions. Donkor and Sandall (2009) further observed that women developed coping strategies such as concealment or seeking alternative therapies, though these rarely resolved the emotional distress. A review by Roomaney et al. (2024) confirmed that infertility stigma in Africa is associated with depression, marital insecurity, and diminished social identity.

Nigerian Evidence

In Nigeria, several studies highlight the severe socio-cultural consequences of childlessness. Hollos et al. (2014) described childless women in southern Nigeria as “women in limbo,” caught between community rejection and personal grief. More recent research by Esan et al. (2022) revealed that infertility significantly lowers quality of life for women and their partners, with stigma being a major predictor of emotional distress. Ibekwe et al. (2022), in a study specific to Ebonyi State, found that childless women faced not only social exclusion but also economic disadvantages, such as denial of inheritance rights and exclusion from women’s councils. These findings demonstrate that the psychological impact

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

of cultural cruelty is embedded within broader structures of patriarchy and tradition.

Psychological Consequences

Across contexts, the psychological effects of childlessness include anxiety, depression, and identity crisis. Xie et al. (2023) noted that stigma directly impairs self-esteem and mental health, while Donkor and Sandall (2007) found a strong correlation between perceived stigma and infertility-related stress. For women in Igbo culture, the constant reminder of their inability to bear children contributes to internalized stigma, marital insecurity, and low self-worth.

Coping and Resilience

Despite these challenges, women adopt various coping strategies. Religious faith and spiritual practices are common, providing hope and a sense of meaning (Esan et al., 2022). Social support from

natal families also helps mitigate distress, though this is not universal (Roomaney et al., 2024). Feminist psychologists caution, however, that reliance on individual coping (e.g., silence, prayer) without structural change perpetuates systemic gender inequalities (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017).

Synthesis and Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates that childlessness is globally stigmatized but is particularly severe in African settings where motherhood defines feminine identity. While studies in Nigeria and other African countries document the social and cultural dimensions of infertility stigma, few have explored its psychological consequences using qualitative, phenomenological approaches in Ebonyi State. This study addresses that gap by centering women's narratives and linking cultural cruelty with psychological well-being.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were childless women residing in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Inclusion criteria was: women aged 25-52 years, who are legally married, have lived in the state for at least five

years, and are experiencing involuntary childlessness (i.e., have not had a biological child of their own). Exclusion criteria were women who are voluntarily childless, unmarried, or experiencing temporary childlessness of less than two

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

years. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants from both rural and urban areas of the state, ensuring representation across different socio-economic backgrounds. Recruitment was facilitated through community leaders, women's associations, and local health centers. To mitigate potential selection bias, researchers prioritized direct contact with potential participants in private settings and clearly communicated confidentiality, given that community leaders are sometimes agents of the cruelty. The sample size is **21 women**, consistent with phenomenological research which prioritizes depth of experience over large numbers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, seven (7) participants were sampled from each of the three senatorial zones of the state.

Instrument

The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers. The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit narratives around participants' experiences of childlessness, cultural treatment, and psychological well-being. Questions explored perceptions of cultural expectations surrounding motherhood, experiences of stigma, exclusion, or derogatory labeling,

emotional and psychological effects of childlessness, Coping strategies and sources of resilience and suggestions for community support and cultural change. The interview guide was reviewed by two experts of Cross-cultural psychology and one anthropologist for content validity. To enhance cultural sensitivity, the guide was translated into Igbo (the local language) and back-translated into English to ensure accuracy.

Procedure

Data collection involved in-depth, face-to-face interviews conducted in private and safe community spaces, such as women's meeting halls or health center consultation rooms. Each interview lasted between 45–60 minutes and was conducted in English and Igbo depending on participant preference. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Before each interview, participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent (in both English and Igbo) was obtained. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifying information. Community leaders were consulted to ensure cultural appropriateness and local acceptance of the research process.

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

Design

The study adopts a **qualitative phenomenological design**.

Phenomenology is particularly suitable because it seeks to explore and interpret the **lived experiences** of individuals, emphasizing meaning-making and subjective realities (Moustakas, 1994). This design allowed the researchers to capture how cultural cruelty is experienced, perceived, and negotiated by childless women in Ebonyi State, providing rich insights into their psychological well-being.

Method Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach: familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. To ensure rigor, the study incorporated credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member-checking was conducted by sharing theme summaries with a subset of 5 participants to confirm accuracy of interpretations.

RESULTS

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, resulting in **four major themes** and several subthemes that captured the lived experiences of childless women in Ebonyi State. Illustrative participant quotes are provided using pseudonyms

Theme 1: Perceived and Internalized Cultural Cruelty

a. Verbal Abuse and Labeling

Many participants reported being addressed with derogatory names such as "nwanyiamuginwa" (barren woman) or "okukona-anaghiamunwa" (hen that does not lay eggs). These labels were often used

in public, reinforcing feelings of humiliation.

"Sometimes, when quarrels happen, they remind me that I am 'nwanyiamuginwa.' It cuts deeper than any slap." (Ngozi, 42 years)

b. Social Exclusion from Rituals and Ceremonies

Childless women described exclusion from vital cultural activities such as naming ceremonies, traditional women's councils, and burial rites.

"In my village, only women with children can join the 'August Meeting.' They told me, 'What are you coming to discuss? You don't know what it means to raise a child.'" (Chika, 36 years)

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

c. In-law Pressure and Marital Strain

Several participants highlighted that in-laws often instigated cruelty, suggesting divorce or polygamy.

“My husband’s people openly advised him to marry another wife. They said, ‘A man without a son has no name.’ Every day I live in fear of being replaced.”
(Amaka, 39 years)

Theme 2: Emotional Distress, Identity Erosion, and Psychological Suffering

a. Emotional Distress and Low Self-worth

Participants consistently reported sadness, worthlessness, and internalized shame.

“There are days I wake up and cry without reason. I feel like less than a woman.” (Ebele, 44 years)

b. Depression and Social Withdrawal
(Defined as participants reporting pervasive sadness, crying, and active avoidance of communal spaces).

Some women described avoiding social gatherings to escape ridicule.

“I stopped going for village meetings because people stare. It is like they are counting how many years I have been married with no child.”
(Nnenna, 33 years)

c. Marital Insecurity and Fear of Abandonment

Participants linked childlessness to strained spousal relationships.

“I try to please my husband in everything, because I know one day he may decide to bring in another wife.”
(Adaaze, 41 years)

Theme 3: Coping Strategies and Sources of Resilience
a. Religious Faith and Spiritual Practices

Most women turned to Christianity, prayer houses, or pilgrimages for hope and strength.

“My strength comes from God. Even when people mock me, I kneel and pray. That is my only comfort.” (Ogechi, 47 years)

b. Silence and Concealment (Ambivalent Coping Mechanism)

Some participants coped by withdrawing emotionally and refusing to discuss the issue.

“I learned to keep quiet. If you talk too much, people will use it against you.”
(Chioma, 38 years)

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

c. Social Support from Natal Families and Friends

A minority described strong support from parents or siblings, which buffered the cruelty of in-laws.

“My mother encourages me, she says I am still her child, with or without children. That keeps me going.”
(Oluchi, 35 years)

Theme 4: Expressions of Agency and Aspirations for Cultural Reorientation.

a. Desire for Cultural Reorientation

Participants expressed the need for communities to redefine womanhood beyond procreation.

“We are more than wombs. We are wives, sisters, workers. Why can’t they see that?” (Ngozi, 42 years)

b. Call for Counseling and Support Systems

Some recommended that churches, health facilities, and community leaders provide counseling and support groups.

“If there were a group where women like me could talk freely, it would ease the pain.” (Amaka, 39 years)

c. Advocacy for Equal Rights

Women also highlighted structural changes such as inheritance rights and acceptance in community decision-making.

“They should stop denying us land or burial rights. Child or no child, we are part of the family.” (Ebele, 44 years)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this phenomenological study align with and are substantiated by established bodies of sociological, anthropological, and psychological research. The four emergent themes—cultural cruelty, psychological consequences, coping strategies, and hopes for change—reflect interconnected dimensions of stigma and gender inequality documented in other patriarchal, pronatalist contexts.

1. Experiences of Cultural Cruelty: A Systemic Stigma

The reported verbal abuse, social exclusion, and pressure from in-laws are consistent with the concept of social stigma as defined by Goffman (2009), wherein an individual possesses an attribute that deeply discredits them within a particular social context. In pronatalist societies, fertility is a core expected social and biological role, particularly for women

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

(Upton, 2001). The stigmatizing labels and diminished social standing described by participants are manifestations of what Gerrits (1997) identifies as a profound reproductive disenfranchisement, a form of social control that enforces gender norms by excluding those who do not conform. Research across sub-Saharan Africa confirms that childlessness, often assumed to be the woman's "fault," leads to severe social sanctions, including ostracism and threats to marriage (Dyer et al., 2005). The pressure from in-laws is a documented mechanism for enforcing these norms and preserving patrilineal lineage (Hollos & Larsen, 2008).

2. Psychological Consequences: The Internalization of Stigma
The emotional distress, depression, and marital insecurity reported are well-correlated with the psychological impact of chronic social stigma. Link and Phelan's (2001) model of stigma illustrates how discrimination and status loss lead to negative emotional and mental health outcomes. Studies specifically on infertility have shown a significant correlation between infertility-related stigma and increased rates of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Donkor & Sandall, 2007; Corrigan & Watson, 2002). The "marital insecurity" described is a

direct consequence of the cultural framing of marriage as inherently procreative, where a childless wife may be seen as failing in her primary contract, leaving her economically and socially vulnerable (Hollos & Larsen, 2008).

3. Coping Strategies and Resilience: Navigating Structural Constraints
The reliance on faith and silence as primary coping mechanisms is a common finding in research on marginalized groups facing insoluble social strain. Koenig (2009) notes that religious coping can provide meaning, foster hope, and offer a supportive community, serving as a vital buffer against distress. However, as this study notes, such strategies are often fragile. "Silence" can be interpreted as a form of internalized stigma (Corrigan & Watson, 2002), where the individual accepts the negative societal views, or as a strategic withdrawal to avoid further mistreatment. The limited family support echoes findings that while kin networks can be crucial, they can also be the primary source of pressure, creating a double bind for childless women (van Balen & Bos, 2009). These individualized strategies underscore the lack of structural support systems.

4. Hopes for Change: A Call for Structural and Cultural Intervention

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

The participants' recommendations for redefining womanhood and instituting counseling and advocacy align with scholarly calls for multi-level interventions. Amadiume's (2015) analysis of gender in Igbo society highlights the historical fluidity of gender roles, suggesting that cultural re-examination is possible. From a public health and human rights perspective, scholars advocate for:

- Community-level education to challenge pronatalist assumptions and reduce stigma (van Balen & Bos, 2009);
- Integration of psychosocial counseling into reproductive healthcare services to address the mental health burden (World Health Organization, 2023); and
- Legal and policy frameworks that protect women's rights irrespective of fertility status, reinforcing their personhood beyond reproductive capacity (Banda, 2005).

Recommendations

1. Community Reorientation: Traditional and religious leaders should promote cultural narratives that value women beyond motherhood, emphasizing contributions in education, leadership, and economic productivity.

2. Psychological Support: Culturally sensitive counseling services focused on identity reconstruction and trauma-informed care should be established within communities, churches, and health facilities to provide safe spaces for childless women.
3. Policy Intervention: Government and NGOs should advocate for the rights of childless women, addressing inheritance discrimination, marital insecurity, and community exclusion.
4. Educational Campaigns: Awareness programs should challenge stigmatizing language and practices, encouraging empathy and inclusivity.
5. Future Research: Further qualitative and mixed-methods studies should examine coping strategies and interventions that foster resilience while addressing structural inequalities.

Implications of Findings

For Psychological Theory: The study expands the understanding of stigma and identity in African cultural contexts, supporting Goffman's theory of stigma while highlighting the need to integrate

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

feminist and cross-cultural psychology frameworks in studying gendered experiences of childlessness.

For Psychological Practice: Counseling psychologists, Cross-cultural psychologists and community health workers must recognize cultural cruelty as a determinant of mental health. Interventions should be context-specific,

culturally sensitive, and aimed at restoring self-esteem and psychological well-being.

For Policy and Advocacy: Findings emphasize the urgent need for advocacy in redefining cultural norms around womanhood, with policies that protect the rights of childless women in marital, familial, and communal structures.

For Community Development: By addressing cultural cruelty, communities can foster inclusion, reduce psychological suffering, and promote resilience, ultimately strengthening family and social cohesion. Potential factors that could

influence mental well-being, such as substance use, social support, or lifestyle factors, further studies are encouraged to delve into these other factors to explore their influences on gambling behaviour.

Disclosure statement

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest related to this study.

Funding

The authors confirmed that no external funding was received for the research or publication of this article.

REFERENCES

- Amadiume, I. (2015). *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society*. Zed Books. (Original work blished 1987).
- Anari, M., Taebi, M., Tarrahi, M. J., & Pirhadi, M. (2024). Relationship between emotional intelligence, quality of life, and infertility stigma in infertile women: A descriptive-correlational study. *International Journal of Reproductive BioMedicine*, 22(9), 739–748. <https://doi.org/10.18502/ijrm.v22i9.17479>

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

- Banda, F. (2005). *Women, law and human rights: An African perspective*. Hart Publishing.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Corrigan, P. W., & Watson, A. C. (2002). The paradox of self-stigma and mental illness. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 9(1), 35–53.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Donkor, E. S., & Sandall, J. (2007). The impact of infertility on women's lives in rural Ghana: A grounded theory study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 65(12), 2423–2433. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2007.06.019>
- Donkor, E. S., & Sandall, J. (2009). Coping strategies of women seeking infertility treatment in southern Ghana. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 13(4), 81–94.
- Dyer, S. J. (2007). The value of children in African countries—Insights from studies on infertility. *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 28(2), 69–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01674820701409959>
- Dyer, S. J., Abrahams, N., Mokoena, N. E., & Lombard, C. J. (2005). Psychological distress among women suffering from couple infertility in South Africa: A quantitative assessment. *Human Reproduction*, 20(7), 1938–1943.
- Esan, D. T., Nnamani, K. Q., Ogunkorode, A., Muhammad, F., Oluwagbemi, O. O., & Ramos, C. G. (2022). Infertility affects the quality of life of Southwestern Nigerian women and their partners. *International Journal of Africa Nursing Sciences*, 17, 100506. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijans.2022.100506>
- Gerrits, T. (1997). Social and cultural aspects of infertility in Mozambique. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 31(3), 39–48.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice Hall.
- Goffman, E. (2009). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Simon and Schuster. (Original work published 1963).
- Hollos, M., & Larsen, U. (2008). Motherhood in sub-Saharan Africa: The social consequences of infertility in an urban population in northern Tanzania. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 10(2), 159–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050701656789>
- Hollos, M., Larsen, U., Obono, O., & Whitehouse, B. (2014). Women in

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

- limbo: Life-course consequences of infertility in a Nigerian community. *Human Fertility*, 17(4), 221–225. <https://doi.org/10.3109/14647273.2014.936052>
- Ibekwe, P. C., Ajah, L. O., Obuna, J. A., Azuogu, B., Ojide, N., Egede, J. O., & Okeke, A. (2022). The socio-cultural and economic impact of infertility in Ebonyi State, Nigeria: A community-based study. *EBSU Journal of Nature*, 2(2), 119–128.
- Kanu, I. A. (2019). African cultural concept of womanhood and its implications for gender equality. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*, 2(2), 56–67.
- Koenig, H. G. (2009). Research on religion, spirituality, and mental health: A review. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 54(5), 283–291.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. C. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 363–385.
- Mapedzahama, V. (2019). Race matters: (Re) thinking the significance of race and racial inequalities in community development practice in Australia. *Social Work and Policy Studies: Social Justice, Practice and Theory*, 2(1), URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243216649929>
- McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(3), 233–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622>
- Moradi, B., & Grzanka, P. R. (2017). Using intersectionality responsibly: Toward critical epistemology, structural analysis, and social justice activism. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64(5), 500–513. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000203>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. sage.
- Ogunjuyigbe, P. O., Akinlo, A., & Ebigbola, J. A. (2015). Infertility in Nigeria: Prevalence and risk factors among women of childbearing age. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 19(2), 21–34.
- Park, K. (2022). Voluntary childlessness: The emergence of a new social identity. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 48, 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-030420-090827>
- Roomaney, R., Salie, M., Jenkins, D., Eder, C., Mutumba-Nakalembe, M. J., Volks, C., Holland, N., & Silingile, K. (2024). Psychosocial aspects of infertility in African countries: A scoping review. *Reproductive Health*, 21(1), 123. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-024-01858-2>

Eze, O., Ezedigwe, E., Ugota, F., Odom, A., & Ude, A. O. (2025). Lived experiences of cultural cruelty and psychological well-being: A qualitative study of childless women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

- Ryff, C. D. (2014). Psychological well-being revisited: Advances in the science and practice of eudaimonia. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 83(1), 10–28. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000353263>
- Smith, J. A & Eatough, V. (2017). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 193–211). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n12>
- Tabong, P. T., & Adongo, P. B. (2013). Infertility and childlessness: A qualitative study of the experiences of infertile couples in northern Ghana. *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*, 13, (72) <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2393-13-72>
- Taebe, M., Kariman, N., Montazeri, A., & Alavi Majd, H. (2021). Infertility stigma: A qualitative study on feelings and experiences of infertile women. *International Journal of Fertility & Sterility*, 15, 189–196. <https://doi.org/10.22074/IJFS.2021.139093.1039>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall.
- Upton, R. L. (2001). 'Infertility makes you invisible': Gender, health, and the negotiation of fertility in northern Botswana. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27(2), 349–362.
- Van Balen, F., & Bos, H. M. (2009). The social and cultural consequences of being childless in poor-resource areas. *Facts, Views & Vision in ObGyn*, 1(2), 106–121.
- Whitehouse, B., & Hollos, M. (2014). Definitions and the experience of fertility problems: infertile and sub-fertile women, childless mothers, and honorary mothers in two Southern Nigerian communities. *Medical anthropology quarterly*, 28(1), 122–139.
- World Health Organization. (2023, April 3). *Infertility*. World Health Organization. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/infertility>
- World Health Organization. (2024, May 22). *Infertility* (fact sheet). <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/infertility>
- Xie, Y., Ren, H., Niu, L., Zheng, X., Yu, Z., & Li, L. (2023). The impact of stigma on mental health and quality of life of infertile women: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 1093459. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1093459>