



Deconstructing the Lived Experiences of Breadwinning Women in 21st Century

Abstract

The experience in many West African families shows a decline in male bread winners and the rise in female bread winners. This has led to tension in homes that is not sustainable for families. However, the problem with this switch of positions is a result of a fundamental error in gender training connected to colonial incursion and imbibing of Western ideas as against previous indigenous approach to breadwinning. The consequences are the rise of emergence of resentment, and conflicts in homes, which if left unresolved disrupts social life, with the capacity to threatens 21st century homes, and the stability of family members. This paper employed the phenomenological framework of lived experiences to interrogate themes like gendering and breadwinners. The objectives include examining how the adoption of western values of gender influenced the gender training. It compared western and indigenous views of breadwinning. It interrogates the resulting concern of personality switch and how women lived experiences propelled them out of their comfort zones to bring the sheaves home. The paper employed literary review, critical elucidations, and applies phenomenological concepts, to interrogate faulty gender stereotype and factors responsible for the state of affairs. It concludes that the reality of breadwinning, left unresolved will continue to lead to internal conflicts and crises in 21st century homes, families and relationships. It proffers and advocates for open approach to gender role plays for sustainable families in the 21st-century.

Isoken. E Onoyona-Ekeocha, (PhD)
No: 08029511799

Corresponding Author's Email:
ekeochasoky@gmail.com

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Introduction

Providing for the family used to be the exclusive domain of men, while indigenous families cooperated with their wives to ensure the sustenance of the families, this approach is common amongst Isoko people who have a system of division of labour of the gender. Here men and women had roles

assigned to them. But with infusion of Western ideals a new culture emerged where men were portrayed as sole bread winners, compelling them to act up. But many men failed badly to live up to this position.

The problem of imported family dynamics was not the fault of the genders but masculine approach

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contributed to the crisis. Masculinity enjoyed the pedestal but couldn't meet the demands, and this impacted their egos, those who could not deal with empowered women, demanded need submission. Male leadership is not just about egos and positions, but about direction and providing family visions. Lived experience showed that many men were unable to dream beyond their financial capacity and this must have impeded their ability to support their families.

The preachers of submission also contributed negatively to the situation, as submission was approached from one angle, that is female submitting to male. Thus, self-driven women were perceived as crossing gender lines, yet, the history of African women revealed that many African women who were celebrated their bravery. However, susceptibility to Western family dynamics saw men leaving their homes to the care of women. It became apparent to many women, that should they keep waiting for their men, they would be settling for a 'let down', hence taking up the challenge, many women choose survival over ego and social perception. The challenge is that where famine and lack exist, women were the more likely to live the experience, in reality the threat of starvation compelled women to add to their assigned roles, mandating them to contribute their quota to the family wellbeing, Janssens, (1997) point to the act of. "Breadwinning" as literally providing food.

This paper's research contributes to knowledge, and is significant for exploring a silent problem in many families, it evaluates the 'take-for-

granted' gender role play, a critical concern for sustainable 21st century families. The paper contributes to knowledge for proposing other model of parental training for 21st century children. It proposes government policy options and how social agency can help create a new narrative. Thus, ideas and lived experiences explored in this paper is important for family stability, and, the suggested ideas, when applied, helps to create enabling environment at homes, that produces mentally balanced children. Again, literature shows a gap in studying how families approach the trend of breadwinning women, as little exploration has been done about female breadwinners, the act of bread winning and its approach in Africa, particularly West Africa.

Defining Breadwinning

The term seems self-explanatory as Warren, (2007) observes that little works of research has taken place about breadwinning, insisting that "so little attention has been paid to theorizing and operationalizing breadwinning. Breadwinning seems to lie uncontested, with an unproblematic taken-for-granted", clearly those assumptions mean that breadwinning roles were already ascribed and uncontested. Furthermore, Potuchek, (1997) in his study demonstrates that, "breadwinning is still widely used as a boundary that creates gender by distinguishing the meaning of men's employment from that of women's" insisting that this is the case despite the fact there are couples who share the experience and responsibility of breadwinning, his term is 'dual-earner marriages' .He insists that "breadwinning is used as a gender

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boundary is strongly influenced by adult experiences and circumstances and by the material conditions of couples' lives" Potuchek, (1997). Claiming that men and women's employments were approached and perceived differently, constructed through negotiation, contention and cooperation. While the issue of approach is partly true for many Africans, but not in the lived experience of negotiation and cooperation. Rather African experiences reveal starvation as the driving force of women becoming bread winners. Clearly when it relates to breadwinning Africans also need to adopt the dynamic process of renegotiated and reconstructed gender boundaries, as Jean Potuchek, shows to be the standard in Western hemisphere, in changing circumstances, and in other, related gender boundaries. In many traditional African cultures, girls were groomed to be home keepers, baby makers and sacrificial lambs. And, men portrayed as home visionaries and leaders. The gap in the style of gender training, that molds women to wait at home for men, believing that men would bring the bread home becomes obsolete.

The usual practice where boys and girls grooming has different scripts is being rescripted as parents are now conscious of the need to change the narrative. While government and many organizations are training and empowering girls and women to help improve family life, another challenge evolves. Boys and men are in a limbo, they do not understand the new dynamics and how to deal with the situation, and this explains why many

empowered women could not fully enjoy their new status.

The inability of both genders to meet in the middle way in resolving the problem of poverty and threat of starvation, amongst other things meant that "women" had to do something to resolve the conflict or decrease its impact. One approach is secret, hiding their new personality and character traits which results from developing fighting skills, thus, dual personality. Owing to lived experiences women hide the fact that they win 'the bread' by taking on a facade. Impeding their families from navigating their new reality of working women.

Phenomenology and West African Women Experiences with Bread Winning

Mapp, (2008: 308-311). Indicates that "Phenomenology "is that aspect of philosophy that describes experience exactly as it occurs, without any prior presumptions, and to achieve the aim, one is expected to perform eidetic deductions of previous experiences, in this way, its objective is to discover the essence of things. In Edmond Husserl's view, eidetic deduction should be performed on the object of experience, to reveal its essence. Phenomenological has been approached from different views, however the most common approach is from the concept of lived experiences.

In exploring West African women experience, this concept becomes relevant in the gender discourse of bread winning. A historic review of the breadwinning reveals fundamental issues particularly the concerns of social mold. Here, the idea

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of mold is another way of reviewing gender boxes and categories responsible for creating the mold, a common feature for many West African girls who experience their girlhood as a time of grooming. The standard approach to girls training in many Southern cultures, is being prepared for home keeping and this training comes naturally, as younger girls are taught about how to care for their homes and younger ones, knowing that they will one day birth their own children and continue the circle of populating the earth nurturing children.

Once the girl becomes of age, which is usually recognized through puberty the usual expectation is home and family. Colonialism introduced concerns about education. But not many people bother about educating girls, boys are always preferred in cases of low funds. The point is pointing girls to home babies and husbands is a lacuna, as breadwinning was not part of the script. The usual assumption is that their spouses would fill in the gap, but when men return home empty handed, reality dawns. Most devastating is when social agency still expects women to make do, they were expected to silently deal with the threat of children starving and imminent poverty without complaining. However, this lived experience explains why many women choose to take the reins of bread-leading.

The new trend shows women on the move, confronting their challenges and developing the necessary character traits along the way. Yet, instead of being cheered, a new challenge arises, insecure men, who may perceive the move either as a threat to their masculinity or a question of their ability.

Lived experiences amongst city women show that while fighting to make a living, some men live like the ostrich, trying to deny reality others become discouraged when they focus on the daunting task of supporting their families, and more become defensive, vindictive and confrontational.

This situation though requiring conflict resolution, see many women suffer in silence as social and family responsibility compels them to deal with it, however, phenomenologically, women concerns and their lived experiences have a way of rubbing off on everyone, it has a boomerang effect which many ignore until too late. Again, lived experiences connect these situations to mental break downs and other health problems. Inevitably, patriarchy and other fundamental notions that enabled masculinity, or ideas that encourage men to continue to dominate home affairs came under attack as feminist theorist engaged in the debate, demanding policies that helped change the narrative. This is the case in many developed countries, it is only a matter of time before it boomerangs to more women activism, and advocacy for better spaces, leading to empowerment of many women.

In recent times, many African countries have taken the same approach girl's up bringing by trying to support women empowerment and reduce the dart of women in public space, this can be experienced through the international interventions Camacho-Miñano, LaVoi, and Barr-Anderson, (2011). These studies and interventions focus on the girl children and their challenges. These endeavors, and many like it produced educated girls and

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women who are not scared of standing alone, or stand with their partners, with equal or better economic power. Hence with better education more West African women contribute to bread winning at homes, this way they have more capacity to help. Owing from lived experiences, the gender battle of breadwinning necessitate a switch in gender roles play, reducing men's exclusive position as bread winners, where some employ the carrot and stick privilege. For women it means developing new traits. As women lived experiences show them under threat of abandonment, fear of living in poverty or dealing with betrayal. This happens when their husbands decide to start another family. The new reality of conflicts and tension becomes a challenge for both genders; men do not know how to approach women whose economic power means they may be equal. In this conflicting family situations, many West African agencies are caught between living in the past and facing present reality, many are not used to regarding and respecting women. Others, wielding the weapon of guilt, accusing women of abandoning their homes, family and children. Such thoughts and sentiments effectively subdued many women, as family was their natural concerns.

Gendering, and Family Conflict: The Lived Experience of Breadwinning Women

Women who became breadwinners experience victimization from intimate partner, and sometimes violence from family members. In one study Loke, Alice Yuen, Mei Lan Emma Wan, and Hayter, (2012) explains that

women are often ashamed to disclose their situation, in many West African cultures this owes to their cultural inclinations and beliefs that they will be open to ridicule. But, reluctance in seeking help means that the abuse continues until it becomes too late. They insist that women experience "low self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideas. They are ambivalent about staying in an abusive relationship and endure violent incidents in silence until they cannot tolerate any more and seek help at an emergency department" Loke, Mei Lan, and Hayter. (2012: 2336-2346).

This negative attitude in help-seeking is cultural as the general notion is that we should be able to cope and build their homes, no matter the situation at home. other family members and health professionals colored by cultural restraints generally ignore women's complaints and need for help. This reiterates previous cultural concerns about women being groomed to accept that they are expected to sacrifice themselves and their careers on the altar of family.

Agency wields the guilt weapon to steal their satisfaction and mental wellbeing. Again, the experience of bread winning seem complicated, from the point of patriarchy, which is anchored on traditional social structure in many African families. The reason for this position is that the government of many African countries, though making the efforts to create more room for women to project their reality, has failed to bridge the gaps left behind by the women folk, and their families are at loss of perception. The traditional role ascribed to women as home makers, and men as breadwinners is far from the

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reality, women's hope have been dashed, and they watch helplessly as their children 'make do' and live below poverty lines.

Here, conflict resolution means the intervention of agency in girl's training, resolving women's guilt that comes from living their cubs behind. Conflicts resolutions also portend active listening to women complain about abuse, and families should explore the idea of clear communication. Though uncommon in many home where men have been portrayed as sovereign, undisputed leaders. Many men are not conversant notions of negotiating at home. Again, managing conflict means emotional intelligence, acknowledging the issues, and understanding the views of others. In this discourse, it is important to understand the training of girls and boys impacts their expectations, mentioning the old view of gender roles can lead to crises in 21st century homes. Both genders should maintain an open approach to possible roles in sustainable homes. Particularly for 21st century family living, clearly women as bread winners equals to them competing for the few available resources, in these developing nations, it does not reflect that more jobs, rather it shows that women also join the 'the rat' race, as the competition is commonly referred.

The lived experiences of women reveal them as partakers of the survival of the fittest, as employers are not planning to pay two people for the same job, they choose the best and pay the best. Hence, with empowered women entrepreneurs and more educated girls, there is always the possibility of them snatching the few paying jobs, by

outdoing their male counterpart. Again, another study Edicleia, Basini, and Cooney, (2024) reveals how women entrepreneur their successes also perpetuated male-biases, they indicate that "intentionality and temporality in analysing women entrepreneurs' agency within gendered institutional contexts... perpetuated a male-biased"

More West African women now have the ability to attain better economic power, thereby reducing their reliance on parents and husbands, thus, as the ratio of capable women increase, the ratio of bread winning men reduces. This turned table observe explains the emergence of independent women, empowered and self-confident, young ladies who no longer look up to men to save them and their families. however, the act of empowering women raise more question, like who is keeping the home and the idea of submission. Again, lived experience portray submission as a game played by women. However, this new status of women affects the family structure and impacts family dynamics. Those who have not come to terms with the significance of a working wife, mother, daughter or sister perceive this as a threat to masculinity. Some cultural views believe that a working woman indicts that family, that women works because the parents or spouses could not support them. But could this be all there is to working women? Couldn't women work just for self-actualization, must they sacrifice their personal needs for family? Clearly, Male ego, pride and arrogance make it difficult for many families to enjoy the privilege of empowered women. As this calls for adjustment of views, about what is mean to be a woman, and associated

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gender roles. Therefore, agencies need to be more open to, and embrace working women. Just as women themselves also need to change their belief about money, and leadership in the family. Ideas about bread winning also need reviewing.

Breadwinning and its Implication for Being a Woman.

Many West African women experience awareness of their being, that transcend self to deal with the need of others. Exploring the self inevitably reveal the essence of a woman or rather what makes a woman. Though the general belief is to point at the woman as the weaker vessel, yet lived experience reveal a sturdy and solid substance, showing that the being and nature of women is stronger than anatomy. The strength of women particularly indigenous ones, could be deduced from their lived experience and their capacity to rise to the challenges of poverty, and starvation to defend their children, while they experience their own personal struggle with body and hormones. Thus, it should not be surprising when they take up the additional task or burden of bread winning, traditional roles ascribed to men.

More commendable is when the develop the required skills and character traits to compete and win their bread. They only confirm the local saying about necessity being the mother of invention. In this debate, the contention is with social agency, that sets different standards for the genders. Also, other international organization drawing attention to women's condition, including other women agitating for

self-actualization. Notwithstanding, those who belief that training a girl impacts the nation could not be wrong, yet, training and empowering one gender to the detriment of the other has several consequences like the concern with sustainable homes, all belief that disregard one gender in favour of the other should be abolished to strike the balance. The breadwinning experience has not been a merry go ride for those concerned; men and women have scars and should be regarded equally. Moreso, for women who stumbled into breadwinning, they too have scars to show for their sacrifices, they feel betrayed.

The Lived Experience and Consciousness of Betrayal

Many female bread winners are familiar with the lived experiences of betrayal and being let down, which owes to double standards of social agency concerning the genders. Burch, (1990) explains this by insisting on "philosophical vantage point from which to begin to mediate the conflicting expectations" Husserl views it from consciousness, insisting that consciousness is always consciousness of something, in unconscious consciousness. Bernet, (2002) explains that "Phenomenology of consciousness can show how it is possible that consciousness can bring to present appearance something unconscious, that is, something foreign or absent to consciousness, without incorporating it into or subordinating it to the conscious present". This style of unconscious consciousness is similar to women's perception of betrayal, when

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they remember their efforts, and how they endeavored to save their families.

Again, the consciousness of betrayal impact women to the extent of impacting their essential nature, though social agency refuses to recognize this reality, such lived experience enables women to develop other character traits, which includes the ability to switch personality. This is clearly the case as docility does not win bread, it is impossible for women to remain docile, and when women acquire new traits, they are then labelled as rude. Such self-ownership could possibly portray their husbands in other light, like being tagged a “women wrapper”. According to Onoyona-Ekeocha, (2025) labelling a man as women wrappers aims to ridicule him, indicating a domesticated man. Being a women wrapper has diverse interpretations, which usually portray men negatively, when used in a local sense, as it implies that such a husband has become docile, and is manipulated by his wife, and, this does not bode well for the home, a man who wants to reverse this perception would become a terror, even as dread leads to conflicts and crises.

In many West African homes, lived experiences portrays submission from only one gender, that is female. This explains why submission from women is the only approach to peace at home, and, the reason that breadwinning women or entrepreneurs, have to navigate this social expectation. Should this one-sided approach to family life continue, it implies that, the rise of bread winning women portends danger for sustainable families. Otherwise, submission faces possible extinction, easily be eroded as women’s

traits. In this view self-confidence is opposite to this kind of submission. Particularly, if women breadwinners must succeed. In reality many West African men are not prepared to deal with women as their equal, not their spouses.

Notwithstanding, breadwinning women should be used to navigating conflicts, as part ‘rat race’ all rats run, and ‘dog eat dog situation’. The lived experiences of women show that achieving success in this condition would definitely change a women’s attitude and views to life. Many women in this situation develop new self-image. Self-image being how she sees herself, as she develops personality.

Undauntedly, many women’s the essential nature encounter changes as they transcend in this environment. While many can maintain a balance between the home and office, not many women can cope with this reconstruction, as expecting women to remain the same after their lived experiences is very painful, tantamount to betrayal. Shockingly, those culpable to betraying women are those closet to them, their spouses, families and agencies.

Critical Analysis

Phenomenology as a theory that explores the notion of essences, compels everyone capable of betraying breadwinning women to answer the question, about how they expect her experience to remain the same? Particularly, in the light of gender performative training that created boxes for her. It is commendable that she courageously stepped-off the script, to ensure the survival of her family. And, lived experiences show that families

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survived, many were sustained by breadwinning women, despite clear restrictions. Particularly when men returned home carrying their professional traits, but women switch postures between “putting on and putting off” as indicated by Butler, (2003) and Salih, S. (2007) who examines Butler and performativity notion that involves communication in everyday life, pointing to gender traits that can be put off and on, owing to the lived experiences of bread winning women. Showing that as bread winners new skills must be developed by women, yet, the general belief is that one can still be a woman and succeed in the rat race.

Phenomenologically, one should expect everyone who contributed to propelling women out of their boxes, to cooperate with them and celebrate them, but the opposite seems to be the case, as different standard applies to the genders, and we confront the problem of meaning. But the question is, should agency be interpreting the meaning of women’s experience differently from those of men, shouldn’t women be allowed to label their experiences, surprisingly, many West African women cannot be quoted, because they prefer to suffer in silence.

However, women lived experiences of breadwinning shows that moving out of one’s assigned space has implications, and consequences. This is significance for women and progressive families in 21st century. Clearly, agencies must actively create atmosphere that breed progression and sustainable living for both genders.

Though, many breadwinning women deal with personal struggles, and fight silent battles, including the

regular hormonal and emotional issues. Thus, supportive homes should be encouraged, for producing girls who a determined and self-driven, as they progress into womanhood. Girls who are committed to their self-goals and dreams, this is critical to the quality of life and boomerangs to others.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper attempted to deconstruct the lived experiences of breadwinning women in West Africa; it examined the resulting challenges of women leaving their comfort zone to help as bread winners or co-breadwinners. It critically analyses the consequences of breadwinning, for the genders, the place of agency and what could be done to create enabling environments for sustainable 21st century families. it insists that, to remedy the situation and demystify bread winning, more actions should be taken to deconstruct the idea of breadwinning, that attributes family support to one gender. Or insist on role playing for genders. This is critical for 21st century policy making, and agencies should do more advocacy for the idea that ‘home keeping’ be considered a job. The reason is that paying a salary to the partner who remains behind, would resolve dependency, remove tension and reliance on only one source of income. In this view, home keeping should be the responsibility of the person who has more time, not a strict script directed at women. Also, this calls for a total removal or renegotiation of certain archaic ideas, notions that cause tension like blind submission.

Also, the strict scripts about women as home keepers, men as

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breadwinners should be discarded. As concerted efforts to support families encourages both genders to improve and progress. Special care and policies that support and encourage pregnant women and those nursing children should be enacted, for sustainability. Including "Bedroom Tax" as indicated by Greenstein, Burman, Kalambouka, & Sapin, (2016).

Finally, deconstructing gender roles implies that roles are open in different situations, and no longer ascribed unreasonably. Clearly, many women are smart and they have strong leadership skills, thus, recognizing and accepting such possibility will limit the personality crises, that compels them to take on dual identity. This calls for accountability, training and retraining of the genders, including re-script the genders with open approach.

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