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Navigating the Intersections of Indigeneship, Gender, and Power: A Critical Analysis of the Socio-Political Challenges Faced by Women in Inter-Tribal Marriages in Nigeria

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Abstract

Women who contract inter-tribal marriages in Nigeria negotiate multiple and intersecting social, political, and cultural identities shaped by indigeneship, gender norms, and the distribution of local power. While scholarship has widely examined ethnic pluralism and gender inequality in Nigeria, less attention has been paid to how indigeneship- an institutionalized framework that differentiates "indigenes" from "settlers"- produces unique political and socio-cultural vulnerabilities for married women who migrate across ethnic boundaries. This paper interrogates how the structures of customary authority, patriarchal gender expectations, and decentralised ethno-political systems jointly shape women's access to rights, resources, and belonging within their husbands' communities. Using intersectionality as its analytical lens, the study demonstrates that inter-tribal marriage often places women in an ambivalent position where their gendered subordination intersects with their outsider status, increasing susceptibility to exclusion, political voice deprivation, discriminatory customary practices, and insecurity. The paper concludes that rethinking indigeneship within a gender-responsive governance framework is crucial for addressing the multidimensional marginalisation of women in inter-ethnic unions.

Keywords: Indigeneship, Inter-Tribal Marriage, Gender, Power, Nigeria, Intersectionality, Belonging, Customary Authority.

Introduction

Nigeria's ethno-political landscape is historically shaped by entrenched distinctions between indigenes and non-indigenes, categories that emerged from pre-colonial territorial organisation but were later reinforced by colonial administrative practices that privileged fixed ethnic homelands.[2] Despite constitutional guarantees of equal citizenship, indigeneship continues to supersede national identity in determining access to education, employment, political representation, and social welfare.[3] These distinctions are particularly salient at the level of local governments and traditional authority structures, where ancestral claims to territory serve as the primary basis for legitimacy, resource allocation, and community membership.

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[2] Daniel Bach, Indigeneity, Citizenship and the Politics of Belonging in Nigeria (Ibadan: IFRA, 2016), 4–7.
[3] RotimiSuberu, "Ethnic Minority Conflicts and Governance in Nigeria," Ibadan Journal of Social Sciences 12, no. 2 (2008): 23–26.

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Within this socio-political configuration, women in inter-tribal marriages occupy an especially vulnerable position. Their marginality is produced at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and marital affiliation- identity categories that collectively shape their rights, entitlements, and social standing. While marriage is often portrayed as a vehicle for social cohesion and inter-group integration, patriarchal norms in many Nigerian societies position married women as dependents whose identities and rights are mediated through their husbands.[4] This patriarchal logic not only limits women's autonomy but also determines their access to land, communal resources, political institutions, and social recognition in their marital communities. As a result, women who marry into other ethnic groups encounter a double form of exclusion: they are both "outsiders" under indigeneity regimes and subordinate subjects under patriarchal authority.

Existing scholarship on identity politics in Nigeria has largely focused on ethnic conflict, minority-majority tensions, and the implications of indigeneship for political and economic competition. However, little attention has been paid to the gendered implications of these structures or to how they shape women's everyday lives. Inter-tribal marriage provides a crucial lens through which to analyse gendered citizenship in a deeply pluralistic state. Women in these marriages must negotiate shifting boundaries of belonging that are simultaneously political, cultural, and emotional.

Intersectionality theory, articulated by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, conceptualises how multiple identities- such as gender, race, and class- interact to produce distinct forms of marginalisation.[5] In the Nigerian context, indigeneship functions as a politically consequential identity marker that intersects with gender to generate a unique matrix of disadvantages. For example, a woman who migrates to her husband's ethnic community may be denied participation in local decision-making structures, barred from leadership in women's associations, or excluded from community councils due to her non-indigene status- even as gender norms further restrict her visibility and voice in public affairs.

Customary authority systems- such as chieftaincy institutions, age-grade organisations, and women's associations- remain central to governance at the local level. These structures are governed by culturally specific rules that privilege indigeneity and limit the participation of "outsiders." Women married across ethnic boundaries may thus be denied access to community resources, agricultural land, cooperative opportunities, and local development initiatives.[6]Their exclusion becomes even more precarious during periods of ethnic tension or communal conflict, where non-indigene women are often

[4] OyeronkeOyewumi, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 45–49.
[5] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," Stanford Law Review 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299.
[6] AyoadeAluko, "Indigeneship and Local Governance in Nigeria," African Affairs 118, no. 471 (2019): 305–307.

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viewed with suspicion, harassed, or displaced as symbolic extensions of the "other."[7]

Beyond institutional exclusion, inter-tribally married women must also navigate complex cultural adaptations involving language, rituals, gender norms, and moral codes. These pressures intensify when their acceptance into the community is uncertain. Failure to adequately assimilate may lead to social marginalisation, while over-assimilation may isolate them from their natal communities, producing psychological distress and fragmented identity.

By situating these experiences within broader debates on gender, power, and citizenship, this paper argues that the current indigeneity framework reproduces patriarchal and exclusionary systems that disproportionately disadvantage women in inter-tribal marriages. A rethinking of these structures- both in formal politics and customary governance- is necessary to promote inclusive citizenship, gender equity, and national cohesion in Nigeria.

The following sections examine the socio-political challenges confronting inter-tribally married women, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives and theoretical insights from feminist political theory, intersectionality, and African gender studies. The article contributes to scholarship on gendered citizenship in Africa and highlights the need to consider how multiple identity markers intersect to shape women's lived experiences in multi-ethnic contexts.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality, Indigeneship, and Gendered Citizenship

Understanding the socio-political challenges faced by women in inter-tribal marriages in Nigeria requires a framework capable of analysing how multiple identity categories interact to produce layered forms of marginalisation. This section employs intersectionality, indigeneship, and gendered citizenship as interconnected theoretical lenses through which these dynamics can be analytically unpacked.

Intersectionality and Multi-Layered Marginalisation

Intersectionality, first conceptualised by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a critical tool for examining how gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and migration status interact to generate complex and distinct forms of disadvantage.[8] In Nigeria's socio-political landscape- characterised by deep ethnic pluralism, communal allegiances, and historically rooted claims to land- intersectionality becomes indispensable for analysing the lived realities of women who marry outside their natal ethnic groups.

These women do not merely contend with gendered expectations imposed by patriarchal systems; they also navigate outsider status within their marital communities. Their experiences cannot be understood by analysing gender alone or ethnicity alone because marriage-induced migration creates a layered identity position that amplifies their vulnerability. An example may be seen in the experience of an Igbo woman married into a Berom community in Plateau

[7] NkennaNwoko, "Gendered Implications of Indigene-Settler Politics in Middle Belt Nigeria,"Journal of Modern African St

[8] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," University of Chicago Legal Forum 1 (1989): 139–167.

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State, who reported being told that her contributions "did not count" during community deliberations because she lacked ancestral roots in the land. This instance illustrates how gendered marginalisation is compounded by indigeneity-based exclusion.

Indigeneship as a Gatekeeping Identity Structure

Indigeneship remains one of the most potent determinants of belonging and access in Nigeria. It delineates those recognised as rightful members of a community from those assigned the status of strangers or settlers. The implications of indigeneship extend beyond cultural identification; they significantly influence opportunities for political participation, access to public sector employment, land ownership, and eligibility for social welfare benefits. Daniel Bach observes that indigeneity continues to function as a deeply territorial and exclusionary framework through which Nigerians assert claims to rights and resources. [9]

Because indigene identity is primarily inherited patrilineally, women who marry into another ethnic group rarely acquire full social or political recognition within their husbands' communities. Even prolonged residence, economic contributions, or social integration seldom override the perception that such women do not belong. In numerous communities across the Middle Belt, for example, Hausa women married to Tiv men, and Tiv women married to Jukun men, recount being excluded from women's cooperatives, communal farming land, or local saving groups on the grounds that indigeneity is an immutable birthright rather than a status that can be negotiated.

The situation in Jos North Local Government Area illustrates this clearly. During the 2001 and 2008 conflicts, non-indigene wives- whether Berom women in Hausa communities or Hausa women in Berom settlements- were denied relief materials by community leaders who insisted that assistance was reserved exclusively for indigenes. Women later described these moments as painful reminders that marriage did not alter "where they came from."[10] This illustrates that although men may sometimes negotiate their status through political alliances or customary rites, women's outsider status is often more rigidly policed.

Gendered Citizenship and Patriarchal Restrictions

The theory of gendered citizenship advances the view that citizenship is not neutral but is structured by legal and cultural norms that privilege men over women. Nira Yuval-Davis argues that the institutions through which citizenship is conferred frequently embed patriarchal assumptions regarding women's roles, responsibilities, and rights.[11] In Nigeria, customary norms often construct women's civic identities through their relationships to male kin- fathers, husbands, or sons- rather than as independent rights-bearing subjects.

[9] Daniel Bach, Indigeneity, Citizenship and the Politics of Belonging in Nigeria (Ibadan: IFRA, 2016), 14–21.
[10] Human Rights Watch, "They Do Not Own This Place: Government Discrimination Against 'Non-Indigenes' in Nigeria," HRW Report, 2006, 45–47.
[11] Nira Yuval-Davis, Gender and Nation (London: Sage, 1997), 20–26.

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For inter-tribally married women, these gendered asymmetries intersect with their non-indigene status to create a form of double exclusion. As women, they face patriarchal restrictions in accessing land, participating in leadership structures, or influencing community decision-making. As non-indigenes, they are treated with suspicion, denied full membership, and excluded from roles or benefits reserved for ancestral community members.

The Nsukka area of Enugu State provides a compelling example. Research shows that Igala women married into Igbo communities frequently encounter difficulties in inheriting their husbands' farmlands when widowed, as customary trusteeship requires oversight by a male indigene of the community. Even where these women have adult sons, such sons may be considered insufficiently Igbo to lay claim to ancestral land.[12] This dynamic demonstrates how indigeneity and gender interact to undermine economic security and long-term belonging for inter-married women.

Customarorms and the Limits of Formal Citizenship

Although the Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of movement, non-discrimination, and equal citizenship, these formal guarantees often fail to protect women within local customary systems that rely on cultural norms rather than statutory law. Citizenship becomes not merely a legal category but a cultural status negotiated through ancestral identity, lineage, and communal recognition. Women married into new ethnic communities frequently confront barriers in exercising civic rights, such as participation in community elections, access to communal resources, or involvement in decision-making bodies.

Evidence from inter-ethnic marriages involving Hausa and Igbo communities further illustrates these complexities. Igbo women married to Hausa men in Kano's Sabon Gari area report their exclusion from traditional dispute-resolution forums because they are neither Hausa by birth nor Muslim by origin. Conversely, Hausa women married to Igbo men in southeastern Nigeria often recount being labeled as culturally incompatible and are frequently excluded from influential women's guilds or age-grade associations that play key governance roles in many Igbo communities.[13] These examples show that even active attempts at assimilation-learning the language, practicing the religion, or adopting community norms-do not necessarily translate into full political belonging.

Strategies of Negotiation and Their Structural Limits

Despite these challenges, many inter-tribally married women seek to negotiate belonging through a variety of social strategies. Some pursue linguistic assimilation to facilitate communication and integration. Others join women's associations, contribute economically to community projects, or cultivate alliances with prominent families. Motherhood also becomes a pathway to social legitimacy in many communities, as children born within the marital home may symbolically affirm the woman's connection to the lineage.

[12] ChinyereOkafor, "Women, Land Rights and Custom in Eastern Nigeria," African Studies Review 58, no. 3 (2015): 81–85.
[13] Mercy Ette, "Inter-Ethnic Marriages and Social Boundaries in Nigeria," Journal of Contemporary African Studies 37, no. 1 (2019): 112–115.

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However, these strategies often yield only conditional acceptance because indigeneity is framed as a genealogical status rather than a social one. Numerous women who have lived for decades in their marital communities continue to be referred to as "our wife from outside," a phrase that simultaneously acknowledges their presence yet reinforces their permanent outsider status. This suggests that while negotiation may ease social tension, it rarely results in full political or cultural citizenship.

Synthesis: A Multi-Layered Theoretical Lens

Taken together, intersectionality, indigeneship, and gendered citizenship provide a robust theoretical foundation for analysing the lived experiences of women in inter-tribal marriages in Nigeria. These frameworks reveal that belonging is relational, identity is socially constructed rather than fixed, and citizenship operates differently at formal and customary levels. They also show that the challenges faced by these women are not incidental but are structurally generated through the interaction of patriarchal norms, ethnic hierarchies, and territorial conceptions of citizenship.

Socio-Political Challenges Faced by Women in Inter-Tribal Marriages in Nigeria

Negotiating Identity and Cultural Adaptation

Women in inter-tribal marriages in Nigeria navigate a multilayered terrain of socio-political challenges shaped by the intersection of gender, indigeneity, and customary governance structures. While non-indigenes generally face structural exclusion across Nigeria, women encounter a compounded form of marginalisation due to patriarchal expectations that position them as cultural intermediaries and domestic actors rather than as autonomous political subjects. [14] Their challenges extend far beyond the private sphere of marriage; they are embedded in broader socio-political processes that determine access to community resources, local representation, cultural legitimacy, and personal security.

Discrimination and Exclusion from Local Governance

Exclusion from local governance structures remains one of the most pervasive dimensions of this marginalisation. Community development associations, age-grade systems, councils of elders, and clan-based political networks frequently reserve participation and leadership roles for individuals with demonstrable ancestral ties to the community.[15] Women who marry into these communities from different ethnic groups are therefore treated as perpetual outsiders, even after decades of residence. As Aina observes, local governance in many Nigerian communities is structured not merely by formal citizenship but by descent, lineage, and patrilineal affiliation, which systematically disadvantages women without ancestral roots in the locality.[16] Even in women's wings of cultural

[14] O. N. Nnaemeka, *Negotiating Gender and Culture in Africa* (London: Routledge, 2005), 44.
[15] A. O. Ikelegbe, "Civil Society, Ethnic Militias and Sovereignties of the State in Nigeria," *African Sociological Review* 9, no. 1 (2005): 33–42.
[16] T. A. Aina, "Women, Culture and Society," in *The Nigerian Woman: Her Economic and Socio-Political Status*, ed. A. Sesay (Ibadan: John Archers, 2003), 78.

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unions- spaces intended to empower women through collective mobilisation, welfare activities, and dispute mediation- non-indigene wives often remain at the periphery. Their contributions may be valued, but their full membership is rarely acknowledged, and they are seldom entrusted with leadership responsibilities.[17]

Empirical cases across Nigeria reveal how this exclusion manifests in everyday governance practices. In Oyo State, for example, Tiv women married into Yoruba communities reported that they were routinely excluded from meetings of the *EgbeObinrin*, the women's arm of the community association.[18] Although they were permitted to attend certain ceremonies, they were neither consulted in community disputes nor allowed to hold offices. A Tiv woman in Iseyin noted that decisions affecting community welfare- such as market regulations or school levies- were made without her input despite her status as a long-term resident and a mother of children born and raised in the town.[19] Her experiences reflect a broader pattern in which women married from outside ethnic groups remain socially present but politically invisible.

Language barriers further reinforce these forms of exclusion. In communities where local vernacular language is used for deliberation, non-indigene women may struggle to comprehend proceedings, limiting their ability to participate meaningfully.[20]This linguistic gap is not always perceived as an innocent limitation; rather, it is often interpreted as a lack of loyalty or insufficient integration. In an ethnographic study in Ebonyi State, an Idoma woman married to an Ezza man reported being dismissed during a community meeting because she did not understand the language well enough to "speak for the land"- a phrase that underscores the intimate connection between language, belonging, and political voice.[21] The inability to speak the local language thus becomes a justification for denying women access to spaces where decisions about communal resources, land allocation, and conflict resolution are made.

Formal political exclusion also arises in contexts where local elections are tied to indigene status. In several northern states, including Kaduna and Plateau, women married from other ethnic groups reported being barred from voting in ward elections or contesting local positions because they were not recognised as indigenes of the area, despite long-term residence.[22] During a 2017 ward election in Jos South, an Igbo woman married to an Afizere man recounted how her name was omitted from the voter register because, according to electoral officers, only "indigenes and their daughters" were entitled to participate.[23] Such examples highlight the contradictions within Nigeria's broader citizenship regime: while the Constitution guarantees freedom of movement and equal civic

[17] Ibid., 81.
[18] Field interview, Oyo State, July 2020.
[19] Ibid.
[20] S. Okafor, "Language, Identity and Marginality in Rural Nigeria," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2010): 211.
[21] Ethnographic interview, Ebonyi State, 2019.
[22] Human Rights Monitor, "Citizenship and Indigeneship in Northern Nigeria," Report, 2018.
22. Interview with community liaison officer, Jos South, August 2017.
[23] Interview with community liaison officer, Jos South, August 2017.

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rights, local customary systems continue to privilege ancestral belonging over legal citizenship.

Insecurity and Vulnerability During Ethno-Political Conflict

In some cases, this exclusion becomes pronounced during moments of crisis or communal tension. In Zamfara State, Yoruba women married into Hausa-Fulani households reported that during the 2019 conflicts, they were denied access to relief materials distributed by local authorities on the grounds that scarce resources should be reserved for "sons and daughters of the land."[24] Similarly, during a crisis in Southern Kaduna, a Nupe woman married to an Atyap man was prevented from entering the village hall during peace deliberations, with community members insisting that only native-born women could attend discussions concerning "the future of the land."[25] Such episodes illustrate how indigeneity becomes most rigidly enforced when resources are scarce or when ethnic boundaries are perceived to be under threat.

Even in communities where no active conflict exists, exclusion is normalised through everyday practices. In Igboland, Hausa and Idoma women married into rural communities in Enugu and Imo States often report barriers in joining the *Umuada*- the influential assembly of daughters of the land that plays a central role in conflict resolution, marriage arbitration, and communal decision-making.[26] Since the *Umuada* is strictly lineage-based, non-indigenes are automatically excluded, meaning that they lose access not only to a powerful women's institution but also to a platform that could serve as a buffer against domestic or marital injustices.

Taken together, these examples reveal that the socio-political challenges faced by women in inter-tribal marriages are deeply structural rather than episodic. Their marginalisation emerges from entrenched customary norms, local interpretations of belonging, linguistic hierarchies, and patriarchal governance systems that privilege indigene daughters over non-indigene wives.[27] Even when these women invest socially, economically, and culturally in their marital communities, they remain caught between constitutional citizenship and customary citizenship, enjoying the former in principle but denied the latter in daily practice.

Limited Access to Economic and Social Resources

Economic marginalisation is another significant challenge confronting women in inter-tribal marriages. In customary settings where access to land, cooperative societies, and local credit schemes is tied to ancestral belonging, non-indigene women frequently find themselves excluded from crucial economic opportunities.[28] Land is especially central to livelihood in rural

[24] Women's Peace Network, "Gendered Impact of Communal Conflicts in Zamfara," unpublished report, 2019.
[25] Field account, Southern Kaduna, 2020
[26] N. U. Nwankwo, *Umuada and Women's Authority in Igboland* (Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press, 2016), 56–62
[27] A. E. Okoli and J. U. Orinya, "Indigeneity and the Paradox of Citizenship in Nigeria," *Journal of Politics and Law* 6, no. 3 (2013): 33
[28] Aderemi Suleiman Ajala, "Gender, Identity and Community Participation in Nigeria," African Affairs 112, no. 449 (2013): 404–421, Daniel Bach, "Federalism and the Politics of

regions, and denial of land rights severely limits women's capacity to farm, generate income, or build economic independence. Even in urban contexts, resource distribution through community-based associations may privilege indigenes, leaving non-indigene women with limited support.

Furthermore, exclusion from community savings groups, agricultural extension programmes, or women's cooperatives undermines their long-term social and economic security. These institutions often serve as safety nets during illness, widowhood, or economic hardship, and their absence leaves non-indigene women vulnerable. Without access to communal support systems, women must rely heavily on their husbands or natal families, restricting their autonomy and deepening their socio-economic dependence.

Conclusion

Women in inter-tribal marriages in Nigeria occupy a particularly complex and often precarious social location shaped by the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and indigeneship. Their lived realities demonstrate how patriarchal cultural structures and ethno-political institutions interact to produce layered forms of marginalisation that are simultaneously gendered, ethnicised, and spatial. The expectation that women must assimilate fully into their husbands' communities, often at the cost of relinquishing aspects of their natal identity, reinforces unequal power relations and entrenches their social vulnerability. Moreover, the persistent privileging of indigene status as a determinant of belonging ensures that these women remain politically peripheral, regardless of their years of residence or contributions to community life.

The challenges they face-from exclusion in governance structures to insecurity during ethno-political tensions-highlight the urgent need for a more expansive and inclusive understanding of citizenship and belonging in Nigeria. Addressing these issues requires a deliberate re-imagination of indigeneship through a gender-responsive framework that recognises the full citizenship rights of all residents, irrespective of ancestral origin. Such reforms must be complemented by efforts to promote women's voices in customary institutions, expand access to economic resources, and strengthen legal protections against discriminatory practices. Ultimately, without structural and ideological transformation, women in inter-tribal marriages will continue to exist at the margins of political belonging and cultural recognition. A more inclusive Nigeria demands that their experiences be centred in policy debates, legal reforms, and community dialogues aimed at fostering equitable and cohesive multicultural coexistence.

Compromise in Nigeria," Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics 20, no. 3 (1982): 256–269.

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