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# Education and Reproductive Autonomy: The Case of Married Nigerian Women

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**Abstract.** In this article, we examine the influence of education on the exercise of married women's reproductive autonomy. We carried out 34 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with purposively sampled married Ikwerre women in Rivers State, Nigeria. The participants were between the ages of 22 and 60, had different educational backgrounds, and were in monogamous and polygynous marriages. Data were analyzed using MAXQDA 11 software. We found that although formal education enhanced women's ability to exercise reproductive autonomy, the culture of demanding absolute respect for men remains a major barrier. Formal education provides women with the knowledge that they need in order to access adequate health services for themselves and their children. Participants also believed that educating men was critical for the exercise of women's reproductive autonomy. The cultural aspects that promote female subordination and patriarchy should be addressed more openly in Nigeria.

**Keywords.** Education, Marriage, Nigeria, Reproductive Autonomy, Women

## Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), lack of education is one of the contributing factors to increased maternal/child mortality and morbidity in developing countries (2010). Other reasons include poverty, lack of female empowerment, and gender violence (Alabi, Bahah, & Alabi, 2014; Okemini & Adekola, 2012). The global annual number of maternal deaths is estimated to be approximately 358,000, and sub-Saharan Africa

accounts for 57% of these deaths (Gyimah, Takyi, & Addai, 2006; WHO, 2010). One way of tackling the issue of maternal/child mortality and morbidity is to foster a society that promotes female education and women's reproductive autonomy (Cleland et al., 2006; Kinanee & Ezekiel-Hart, 2009; Lee, 2000; Purdy, 2006; Wado, 2013). According to the program of action of the International Conference on Population and Development of 1994, "reproductive rights" are defined as "the recognition of the basic

rights of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes their right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in human rights documents" (UFPA, 1994). According to Purdy (2006), reproductive autonomy is defined as a woman's ability or freedom to exercise her reproductive rights. Throughout this article, the terms "reproductive autonomy" and "reproductive rights" will be used interchangeably.

In many developing countries, disregard for reproductive autonomy is part of a systematic discrimination against women (Cook, 1993; Ifemeje, Obidimma, & Umejiaku, 2013; Ladan, 2006). Sexual decision-making still lies in the hands of men. Women are expected to comply with their husbands' requests for sexual intimacy, and they may often experience sexual intercourse against their will (Fahmida & Doneys, 2013; Okemini & Adekola, 2012).

Formal education<sup>1</sup> is key to promoting women's reproductive autonomy. Studies have shown, for example, that educated women are more likely to seek adequate health care for themselves and their children than uneducated women (Abdulrazaq, Mohammad, & Suleiman, 2014; Harsha & Shashirekha, 2014). Educated mothers are more likely to teach their male and female children respect for each other and to promote women's well-being and reproductive rights (Alabi et al., 2014; Okin, 1989). Educated women are also more likely to seek appropriate health care, while uneducated mothers instead often seek support from herbalists who attribute illness to evil spirits and administer harmful concoctions that compromise

the health of both the mother and her child (Cadwell & Cadwell, 1993; Harrison, 1997; Kishor, 2000; Mistry, Osman, & Lu, 2009). Women who receive formal education are also more aware of the importance of ante- and postnatal care as well as the benefits of a balanced diet (Admaczyk & Greif, 2011; Luz & Agadjanian, 2015).

In Nigeria, the Federal Ministry of Education oversees the educational affairs of all 36 states and the federal capital, and is responsible for harmonizing educational policies and procedures. The Nigerian educational system uses the 6-3-3-4 system, wherein students spend a maximum of 6 years in primary school, 3 years in junior secondary school, and 3 years in senior secondary school, and a minimum of 4 years in a university undergraduate program. The Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act was introduced in 2004 but was never implemented. The act aimed to make education compulsory for children between the ages of 6 and 14, with the first 9 years of schooling provided free of charge (Kazeem, Jensen, & Stokes, 2010). If parents failed to send their children to school, they would be subject to a fine or imprisonment. In addition, any institution that was supposed to be free but took money from students would incur a similar penalty. Unfortunately, this legislation was never implemented due to the government's inadequate preparation and limited funding (Nwachukwu, 2014).

Because the Universal Basic Education Act was not implemented and because of economic hardship in Nigeria, female children make sacrifices so that male children may acquire education (Enaibe, 2012). Some families are forced to send their daughters out to work as servants to support them. Others marry their girls off because they feel that educating a female child will not benefit the family in the long run. There is also a persistent cultural belief that educated women pose a threat to the existing male supremacy because they are perceived to become uncontrollable (Enaibe, 2012). Although there is no specified age at which girls in Ikwerre get married, it is also sometimes believed that education will delay or even prevent their marrying. Therefore, women are often denied education in order to safeguard their ability to fulfil the role of submissive wife.

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this discussion, the type of education referred to will be the formal education acquired from schools, colleges, and universities (Feinstein, Sabates, Anderson, Sorhaindo, & Hammond, 2006).

Scholars who focus on the importance of education in enhancing women's autonomy in general have done so in other contexts and have underlined the positive impact on the woman and her children (Allotey et al., 2011; Emina, Chirwa, & Kandala, 2014; Harrison, 1997; Oye-Adeniran, Adewole, Iwere, & Mahmoud, 2004; Saleem & Bobak, 2005). Other researchers have focused on only a specific aspect of reproductive autonomy such as pregnancy, use of contraception, marriage, household decision-making, or sexual coercion. These studies conclude that education is an important tool for giving women a clear understanding of the need for ante- and postnatal care; of the types, methods, and usefulness of contraceptives; and of what marriage entails. Researchers have concluded that women who are financially empowered—that is, those who work, earn money, and contribute to the family finances—are able to achieve some level of decision-making in the home. They are also able to decide when and when not to have sex because they contribute financially to the family purse (Chigbu, Oyebuchi, Onwudiwe, & Iwuji, 2013; Dudgeon & Inhorn, 2004; Orisaremi & Alubo, 2012; Rahman, Mostofa, & Hoque, 2014).

The aim of this article is to explore the impact of education on married Ikwerre women's reproductive autonomy, using a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews (IDIs). A thorough review of published literature did not yield any such similar study. The Ikwerres are an ethnic group that lives in Rivers State, the seat of Nigeria's oil industry and thus a relatively wealthy region of the country. Compared with other major ethnic groups in Rivers State, the Ikwerres are fairly well educated, with 91% of the population receiving some formal education (National Population Commission, 2010a, 2010b). Moreover, laws have been put into place, both at the national and the state levels, for the protection of women's reproductive autonomy (Ladan, 2006). According to the National Gender Policy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FMOWASD, 2006), these laws stipulate equal education for the girl-child, gender equality, legislative reforms to guarantee gender justice and respect for both genders, as well as equal relationships between

men and women in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the physical integrity of the human body. The enactment of these laws shows that, under the impetus of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Violence Against Women (CEDAW), Nigeria is trying to address the widespread problem of domestic and sexual violence against women (Arisi & Oromareghake, 2011).

According to Nsirim-Worlu (2011) and Okemini & Adekola (2012), the problem of domestic and sexual violence largely stems from the highly patriarchal character of the Ikwerre culture. Regardless of age or education, men are respected and valued more than women. Because a married man is free to do what he pleases with his wife's body, rape is not recognized within marriage. The wife has no right to tell the husband when, how, and where to have sex, nor is she allowed to determine the timing and number of her children.

## Methodology

### Setting

Study participants were recruited from the four local government areas of the Ikwerre ethnic group: Port Harcourt Local Government Area (PHALGA), Obio/Akpor Local Government Area (OBALGA), Emuoha Local Government Area (EMOLGA), and Ikwerre Local Government Area (KELGA). The Ikwerres occupy 20% of the arable land of Rivers State and make up one fourth of its total population (Imaa, 2004). Although traditionally farmers, fishermen, and traders, currently most Ikwerres hold office jobs or work as traders or artisans. The spoken languages are Ikwerre, English, and Pidgin, an adapted version of the English language spoken by almost everyone in Rivers State regardless of education level.

### Eligibility criteria

In order to be eligible to participate, women had to be married (in either a monogamous or polygynous marriage); be 22 to 60 years old; and speak Ikwerre, Pidgin, or English. Women were further categorized

as educated, semi-educated, or uneducated. For the purposes of this study, educated women are those who have attended the 6–3–3–4 educational system, completing primary, junior, and senior secondary school then continuing on to university and obtaining a bachelor's degree. Semi-educated women have completed some formal schooling; that is, primary, junior, or senior secondary school. Uneducated women have had no formal education.

### Participant recruitment

Participant recruitment was purposive based on desired study participant characteristics. We contacted four Ikwerre community leaders and explained the purpose of the study. The mediation of the four community leaders was required due to the sensitivity of the research topic. These leaders are respected by the women and their support was necessary to enroll women from the community in the study. The community leaders identified 90 potential participants and contacted them to explain briefly the purpose of the study. The researcher then met with potential participants in groups in their different local government areas to tell them more about the objectives of the study. If two or more women were married to the same man, only one of them was invited in order to avoid conflicts and overrepresentation of any one family.

The researcher visited those women who expressed interest in participating in the study in their homes or offices to review the informed consent document. All potential participants were allowed a week to decide whether they wished to take part in the study, then were contacted to establish the time and place for the interview. After 39 interviews, when we were no longer getting any new information from participants, we felt that we had reached saturation and therefore terminated the interviewing stage of the study.

### Semi-structured interview guide

A qualitative semi-structured interview method was chosen because it enables participants to discuss freely their perspectives about the research topic. It also provides participants with the

opportunity to discuss in-depth their experiences of the research topic as it applied to them as individuals. The research team developed interview guide questions, which were then piloted in the first two interviews to ascertain the sensitivity and acceptability of the questions to participants. After the two pilot interviews, the interview guide questions were finalized for the rest of the in-depth interviews. The semi-structured research guide included questions on the following topics: (1) whose decision it was for the participant to be educated, (2) the level of education she had completed (if applicable), (3) the reason she was not educated (if applicable), (4) the role of education in the exercise of women's reproductive autonomy, and (5) the importance of education in general. Throughout the interviews, prompts were used to elucidate responses to the questions.

### Data collection

A total of 39 interviews were completed. The first two interviews were conducted to refine the research questions, as discussed above, and therefore were excluded during data analysis. The research team also decided to exclude three other interviews because participants were not willing to respond to the research questions. Therefore, the final analysis includes 34 semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs).

CWP (the first author) and ASJ (the fourth author) conducted the first 10 interviews. Thereafter, CWP conducted and completed the remaining interviews. The IDIs were conducted at a venue and time suggested by the participant and in the absence of other family members. Interviews were audiotaped with consent and transcribed verbatim. The IDIs conducted in Pidgin were first transcribed in that language before being translated into English. Extensive notes were taken to capture body language as well as facial expressions. The IDIs lasted for about 40 to 60 minutes.

### Data analysis

To analyze the data, CWP and TW (the fifth author) carefully read the transcribed interviews while

**Table 1**  
Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Factors influencing access/barriers to education	a) Parents/personal motivation b) Husband's education c) Financial barriers to education d) Traditional barriers to education
Influence of education on women's reproductive autonomy	a) Reproductive autonomy and family well-being b) Culture of absolute respect for men c) Financial independence d) Change in social status

listening to the audiotapes in order to ensure that the transcriptions were accurate. The transcribed interviews were then uploaded using qualitative analysis software MAXQDA 11 (VERBI GmbH, Berlin, Germany). Next, CWP and TW coded 10 interviews together and developed a list of codes from the data. They used open, axial, as well as selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thereafter, CWP and TW read and coded the remaining 24 interviews separately and then met to review and compare individual codes. Next, they grouped similar codes together into relevant themes. For this manuscript, codes relating to education, autonomy, and women's reproductive rights were carefully selected and reanalyzed by CWP, TW, ASJ, and EDC (the second author). This reanalysis was discussed among all authors, resulting in two broad themes: 1) Factors influencing access/barriers to education and 2) Influence of education on women's reproductive autonomy (Table 1). Thereafter, all authors agreed on the interpretation of the study results.

### Ethics Consideration and Approval

This study was certified by the Ethikkommission Nordwest- und Zentralschweiz (EKNZ) of Basel and approved by the UI/UCH Ethics Committee of Nigeria.

### Results

Of the 34 women who participated in this study, 23 were educated, 7 semi-educated, and 4 uneducated (see Table 2). We aimed to have this heterogeneous sample in order to explore the role of different levels of education on the exercise of women's reproductive autonomy. Participants' accounts of the factors that influenced their decision for or against education and the effect of education on the exercise of their reproductive autonomy centered on two main overarching themes, as explained below.

#### Factors influencing access/barriers to education

In this section, we will discuss the following subthemes: Parents/personal motivation, husband's education, financial barriers to education, and traditional barriers to education.

##### *Parents/personal motivation*

Some participants reported that their education was influenced by their own parents' educational background. Paula,<sup>2</sup> a 50-year-old woman in polygynous marriage, recalled,

<sup>2</sup> The names of study participants have been replaced by pseudonyms.



**Table 2****Demographics of Study Population (n = 34)**

Age (mean)	42.3
Age categories	
22–30	n = 4
31–40	n = 11
41–50	n = 12
51–60	n = 7
Local Government Area	
EMOLGA	n = 7
PHALGA	n = 9
OBALGA	n = 9
KELGA	n = 9
Marital Status:	
Monogamy	n = 23
Polygamy	n = 11
Educational Status:	
Educated	n = 23
Semi-educated	n = 7
Uneducated	n = 4

My father is an educationalist who loves education. He ensured that his children went to school to acquire education. I also love education, but my father made my education possible.

For a few participants, their primary school teachers, together with television newscasters who were university graduates, functioned as role models who made them aware of the effect of education as a vehicle for social change. They reported doing petty trades and household chores to fund their education. Said Antonia, a 45-year-old educated woman in monogamous marriage,

After my secondary school my parents could not afford to send me to the university because of lack of finance. My father told me to go and learn tailoring. But because of my zeal to be educated and the way I admired my teachers and the television newscasters, I told myself I must acquire [*sic*] education. I sold periwinkles and did house chores for people. I used the money I got from these sales of periwinkles and

house chores I did for people to sponsor myself through school.

#### *Husbands' education*

Similarly, other participants agreed that educated Ikwerre men are more likely than those who are not educated to accept the fact that their wives are educated or to encourage their wives to receive a higher education (depending on the educational background of the wives at the time of marriage). Mirabel, a 38-year-old uneducated woman in polygynous marriage, said that

A man who is educated will encourage his wife to acquire education because he would want a wife that can represent him at functions and not embarrass him. Also, an educated man will want a woman who can reason intelligently like him. He will understand the importance of giving his wife the freedom to exercise her reproductive autonomy and will not regard doing so as a sign of weakness.



Participants agreed that marrying an uneducated man could be a barrier to a woman's education and so female education alone was not sufficient to guarantee reproductive autonomy. They stated that their husbands' education was vital to the exercise of their reproductive autonomy because men act as gatekeepers of the Ikwerre cultural norms and practices. Men are also at the center of women's reproductive autonomy in the Ikwerre culture, in which such autonomy is subsumed under their perceived marital obligations.

In the Ikwerre culture, absolute respect for the man is very important. So, an educated husband is more likely to allow his wife to acquire education and the freedom to exercise her reproductive autonomy in the home. For me, my husband does not take any decision concerning the home without speaking with me. He considers me an important aspect of his life and I believe this is because he is educated. (Evilla, a 38-year-old educated woman in monogamous marriage)

Another participant reported that

Marrying an educated man will help a woman to exercise her reproductive autonomy because if the man is educated he will understand that his wife is also a human being. My husband and I are uneducated and this has not helped us. My husband demands for sex even when I am not feeling well. If I refuse, he beats me thoroughly. An educated man will understand that his sick wife needs medical care at times like this. (Patricia, a 45-year-old uneducated woman in monogamous marriage)

#### *Financial barriers to education*

Several participants reported that although some parents want to give their children proper education, they lack the financial means to do so since no level of education is completely free in Nigeria. Other participants stated that their parents married them off, hoping that their husbands would have the resources to sponsor them through school. Interestingly, a few of the participants said that they themselves decided to get married because their future husbands promised to sponsor them through school. This promise, however, did not materialize in some cases because their husbands feared that

an educated wife would be difficult to control and would not be submissive. A few participants said that men sometimes make promises to potential parents-in-law just to be allowed to marry their daughter, and that men are certain the women will not dissolve the marriage because of an unfulfilled promise.

I went into polygynous marriage because my husband was financially buoyant and he promised to sponsor my education. This he did and even sent me to Manchester in the UK to continue my education. (Matilda, a 59-year-old educated woman in polygynous marriage)

I married my husband because my parents did not have the financial backing to let me continue my education beyond the secondary school level. So, my husband promised my parents that he will help sponsor my education. But after marriage, my husband did not fulfil his promise to me because he feared that I will oppress him, understand and exercise my rights in the family after education. Instead, he went ahead to marry a second and third wife. (Eva, a 41-year-old semi-educated woman in polygynous marriage)

#### *Traditional barriers to education*

In a different vein, participants with limited or no formal education said that their parents refused to send them to school because they considered female education unnecessary. Traditionally, it is believed that educating a girl will not benefit the family in any way because she will belong to her husband's household. In their view, female education is a waste of resources, while male children should be educated. As Rachael, a 36-year-old semi-educated woman in monogamous marriage, says,

In the traditional Ikwerre culture those days, it was believed that a woman's education ends in a man's kitchen and therefore investing in female education was a waste of money. So, my father did not send his female children to school, he sent only his male children to school.

Oprah, a 28-year-old semi-educated woman in polygynous marriage, explains:

I got married to my husband because my father said there was no need to send girls to school because women are supposed to get married.

But I intend to acquire education after I am through having my children.

When Oprah was asked at what age she thought she would be through with child bearing so as to continue her education, her response was that she didn't know as that would be determined by her husband.

### Influence of education on women's reproductive autonomy

In this section, we will touch upon the following subthemes: reproductive autonomy and family well-being, culture of absolute respect for men, financial independence, and change in social status.

#### *Reproductive autonomy and family well-being*

Responses from educated participants revealed that education is important because it enables women to adequately take care of themselves and their children. They particularly mentioned the role of education in enabling them to choose qualified doctors/quality health care over herbalists/harmful concoctions.

Education has helped me to know that my children and I need to go to the hospital when we are sick and not attribute our ill health to some spiritual problems, to go to qualified doctors and not the uneducated herbalists. Being educated has helped me to know that I need to take medications when sick and not concoctions. (Natalia, a 54-year-old educated woman in polygynous marriage).

When I was pregnant, my mother-in-law brought concoctions in bottles for me to drink and she advised me to go to the uneducated herbalist for check-ups and massaging, but because I am educated, I knew the risks involved. I accepted the herbs and concoctions she gave to me for peace sake but I did not drink them. If I were not educated, maybe I would have taken the concoctions and caused complications for myself and my unborn child. (Anita, a 47-year-old educated woman in monogamous marriage)

Education was also perceived as a useful tool in making important decisions regarding the number

and spacing of children. Participants responded that education helps in reducing maternal and child mortality. By giving birth more frequently, uneducated women were considered incapable of raising healthy children and properly educating them. As Lucy, a 24-year-old educated woman in monogamous marriage, pointed out:

Education is very important in that it will help the woman make reasonable decisions concerning the number of children to have and when to have them. Even in terms of giving birth to children and raising them. There is a difference in terms of behaviors and health of the children of an educated woman and the children of an uneducated woman. Uneducated women give birth almost every year to too many children they are unable to cater for.

#### *Culture of absolute respect for men*

Participants frequently referred to the culture of absolute respect for men as a major hindrance to their reproductive autonomy. In the Ikwerre community, a woman is not allowed to make and act on her decisions without the consent of her husband. Doing so would jeopardize her status as a respectful wife and could lead to divorce. Annabel, a 30-year-old uneducated woman in monogamous marriage, said:

The Ikwerre culture of absolute respect for men makes it almost impossible for the wife to exercise her reproductive autonomy because the Ikwerre wife is expected to respect and obey her husband in all things. Going against your husband means that the wife is stubborn and disrespectful. This is why exercising one's reproductive autonomy could lead to dire consequences such as divorce or beating.

In order to avoid negative events such as divorce and physical violence, one participant noted that women need to exercise their reproductive rights in a "subtle" way. Thus educated participants reported how education can be used as a helpful tool in knowing how and when to achieve reproductive autonomy without annoying their husbands.

You know, as an educated woman, I know when and how to approach my husband and get him to agree with my decisions. I speak to him in a

subtle manner and when he is in a good mood. Sometimes, I call him sweet names and gradually inform him of the decisions and actions I have taken. (Sandra, a 43-year-old educated woman in monogamous marriage)

### *Financial independence*

All participants stated that education is an important tool for achieving financial independence. Educated women are more likely to find a job and become less dependent on their husbands because they have their own earnings. As a result, it is easier for them to have access to proper health care and to exercise a little of their reproductive autonomy. Rebecca, a 45-year-old educated woman in polygamous marriage, reported:

I was not educated and I had no money when I gave birth to my first daughter. I gave birth to her in the house on a plantain leaf with native midwives because that was what my husband wanted. . . . When I was through with my education, I realized the importance of going to the hospital. I gave birth to my other children in the hospital without the type of trauma I went through with my first pregnancy because by this time I was educated, working, and earning my own money.

In the Ikwerre culture, the number and spacing of children depend on the husband. A few participants reported that their husbands made them give birth every year. To safeguard their health and be able to take care of the children they already had, they decided to secretly go for family planning assistance. Abigail, a 46-year-old educated woman in monogamous marriage, narrated thus:

When I got married I was giving birth every year because my husband, being an Ikwerre man, wanted many children even at the expense of my health. Since in the Ikwerre culture the man determines the number of children to have and when to have them, he did not listen to my plea to stop having children. I secretly went and did family planning on my own because I was working and did not have to ask him for money. This was how I could space my children.

Likewise, the uneducated participants reported that their lack of education placed them in a financially

vulnerable position which impeded them from getting proper health care and education for their children. They said that the lessons taught during antenatal and postnatal care were very useful to them, but that they lacked the financial means to follow through.

It is true that we learn a lot during antenatal in the hospitals. But I gave birth to all my 13 children in the house because hospital birth is very expensive and I do not have money for it. For my husband, once I get pregnant, he doesn't care about me and my children. From the point of pregnancy henceforth, I take full responsibility for myself and my children. (Nirvana, a 35-year-old uneducated woman in monogamous marriage)

A few participants said that financial independence was necessary not only to exercise their reproductive autonomy but also to gain respect from their husbands. They responded that men sometimes are frustrated by having to bear the family financial burden alone. They thus felt that husbands are more likely to give their wives some degree of liberty in reproductive decisions if the women contribute to the family finances.

I sell fish in the market. This helps me to contribute to the family finance. I don't always rely on my husband for all my needs. I also do not rely on him to adequately take care of my children because I earn my own money through my fish business. This has helped me gain respect before my husband and so we both take family decisions together. I can exercise my reproductive right with his consent. (Beatrice, a 37-year-old semi-educated woman in monogamous marriage).

Very different from these participants were a few educated participants who reported that they were not allowed to work because their husbands were afraid that their financial independence would make them behave disrespectfully. The reason for such denial of permission to work is derived from a common assumption that educated women, when empowered, have greater economic and reproductive autonomy. The majority of the participants' responses indicate that husbands are of the opinion that if wives were allowed to work and earn their

own salaries, not only would it confer a high degree of independence on the wives but they would also stand up to their husbands, essentially claiming equality. A few others said that their husbands wanted them to stop working and be full-time housewives in order to take care of the children. They pointed out that this essentially compromised their reproductive autonomy.

My husband told me not to work so that I can adequately take care of our children since he is hardly in the house. That is why I am a full-time housewife despite my education. This has made me completely dependent on him for my well-being and that of our children. So, it is difficult for me to exercise my reproductive autonomy in the home because I practically depend on him financially. (Anna, a 37-year-old educated woman in monogamous marriage)

#### *Change in social status*

Almost all participants agreed that educated women receive more respect in their society than do uneducated ones. They can make meaningful contributions by informing society about the importance of women's education and their right to exercise reproductive autonomy. This, in turn, has led to an overall reform in the Ikwerre community. Most families no longer marry off their female children but let them study and choose whom to marry, which is a part of women's reproductive rights.

Education is important in that it marks you out in the society. An educated woman has prestige and carries herself with dignity. She is respected by all and also understands how to go about the exercise of her reproductive autonomy in the home. (Peggy, a 36-year-old educated woman in monogamous marriage)

A lot of things have changed, thanks to education. Women are now being sent to school to the level of education they wish to attain. Parents no longer choose husbands for their female children or force them to marry someone they do not wish to marry. These are great aspects of women's reproductive autonomy. (Samantha, a 55-year-old uneducated woman in monogamous marriage)

A few uneducated women agreed that marriage, like education, leads to a new social status

in society but lamented being in a marriage that they did not choose. They said that if they were to be in the same situation again, they would prefer to acquire education up to the university level before choosing to marry because they now realized the enormous benefits of education. One woman noted how she was dragged to her husband's house after she tried to escape:

I was forced to marry my husband. When my husband came with his family to take me, I ran away from the house. For several months, nobody knew where I was. But unfortunately for me, I was found and carried to my husband's house. That first day in my husband's house I cried so much for what has befallen me. But I had no choice because in those days you dare not disobey your parents. I still regret this marriage every day. But my happiness is that education has changed a lot of things in our society. Ikwerre girls now choose their husbands. (Mirabel, a 38-year-old uneducated woman in polygynous marriage)

## **Discussion**

This study provides data about the perceptions of married women in the Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria, concerning the influence of education on their reproductive autonomy. The findings of this study provide insights into factors that promote or hinder Ikwerre women's education, as well as how education has influenced the exercise of their reproductive autonomy within a marital setting.

Participants identified factors that influence access and barriers to their education, such as family beliefs, economic factors, and cultural factors. Some participants affirmed that the level of education, as well as the economic standing of their parents and husbands, were instrumental in determining the extent of their own education. Participants noted that the education of their husbands is vital to their education and the exercise of their reproductive autonomy. Their reasoning is that an educated husband will be more positive regarding the exercise of his wife's reproductive autonomy. This is in agreement with other studies (Ghimire, Axinn, & Smith-Greenaway, 2015; Harrison, 1997,

Jejeebhoy, 1996; Rahman et al., 2014), which have observed that women's education will have a greater impact on their reproductive autonomy if men are educated as well because women's decisions are not made independently of the social and family context in which they live. As a result, men can positively influence the exercise of women's reproductive autonomy because men are seen as gatekeepers of the cultural norms and practices (Chigbu et al., 2013; Dodoo, Horne, & Biney, 2014; Harsha & Shashirekha, 2014; Okemini & Adekola, 2012; Riyami, Afifi, & Mabry, 2004).

Other factors at the cultural level that inspired participants to gain education included having female role models, such as their teachers and television newscasters, who were university graduates. At the same time, for the uneducated participants, a barrier to their educational attainment was family financial constraints and the tradition that makes parents consider the education of the girl-child to be a waste of resources. Interestingly, some participants could take charge by engaging in petty trades to finance their education. Unfortunately, for a few, the promise of education after marriage did not materialize.

According to the participants, there were three ways in which they felt that education had improved their reproductive autonomy. First, they said that education had helped them understand how to adequately care for their own health as well as the health of their children. These findings are consistent with a previous study by Kinanee & Ezekiel-Hart (2009), which found that women's education is essential for their own adequate health care and that of their children. Participants perceived education to be a useful tool for family planning, child spacing, and the upbringing of their children. This study supports the idea that the exercise of women's reproductive autonomy will not only benefit women but will also help the overall well-being of their children (Dodoo et al., 2014; Harrison, 1997).

Second, participants discussed how education had given them the wisdom to decide when and how to exercise their reproductive autonomy in a society that expects absolute respect for the male from the female. Because the culture expects

absolute respect and submission of the wife to the husband, participants in the study have devised means for safeguarding their lives. For instance, a few participants responded that because they were financially independent, they could secretly go for family planning aid in order to avoid any negative consequences from their husbands (Orisaremi & Alubo, 2012). Some researchers have found that education does not help in the exercise of women's reproductive autonomy (Chigbu et al., 2013; Dodoo et al., 2014; Jejeebhoy, 1996; Riyami et al., 2004); this study, however, reveals that education has proved to be an important guide for women in knowing when and how to exercise their reproductive autonomy in their homes. Education has also helped them to access health benefits that are essential to them and their children even if their husbands do not consent, as long as they have the financial empowerment to do so. The majority of participants responded that with more women being educated and financially independent, the influence of some aspects of the Ikwerre culture that subordinate women may be reduced. Both educated and uneducated participants who earn money noted that contributing to the family finances gives them respect before their husbands and also enables them to exercise their reproductive autonomy in the home. A few educated participants who are housewives without any earnings said that their husbands restricted them from doing any job that would earn them money for fear that their financial freedom would make them uncontrollable; others said that their husbands wanted them to stay at home and take care of the children.

Third, participants stated that education was important for safeguarding their status in their family and society. With education, Ikwerre women are allowed to attain the highest educational level they desire and they are no longer forced into marriage. Although some stated that marriage gave them a respected status in society, a few others said that it brought memories of pain and regret because they did not choose to be in the marriage they were in. However, participants were particularly happy that with an overall greater level of education, women are now able to attain the level of education they



want and girls are no longer forced into marriage or made to marry someone they do not like. Rather, parents now strive to send their female children to school because they no longer view female education as a waste of family resources. For the participants, this is a good outcome of education.

## Study Limitations

As with most qualitative studies, one of the limitations of this one is the small sample size, which limits its generalizability. Also, the Ikwerre may not be generalizable to other ethnic groups in Nigeria living in other states. Among those women who agreed to be interviewed, there was an overrepresentation of educated women. This is not surprising, as 91% of Ikwerre have some formal education. In our purposive sampling we aimed to identify as many uneducated women as possible, knowing that the majority have had some education. Another limitation is that participants may not have understood some technical terms used by the researcher. But the researcher speaks Ikwerre, Pidgin, and English, and strove to simplify technical terms as much as possible for study participants. Also, participants were free to express themselves in any of these three languages.

## Conclusion

This study reveals the importance of education as a tool for women in exercising their reproductive autonomy. For married Ikwerre women wishing to do so, the cultural practice of absolute respect for men is an obstacle that needs to be addressed. Men's education is necessary since they are the custodians of cultural norms and practices in this context. Thus the education of women as well as that of men will reduce women's subordination and discrimination. The Nigerian government's strict implementation of the existing policy on Universal Basic Education could also help in advancing the education of both women and men. To help give a balanced view of the influence of education on married Ikwerre women's reproductive autonomy,

we recommend further research on Nigerian men's views of women's education.

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