Family Science Review

ISSN: 2331-6780
Journal: https://www.familyscienceassociation.org/journal/

Gender, Culture, and College Attendance for West African Immigrant Women

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ABSTRACT. Using qualitative methodology, 51 West African immigrants were interviewed for this study. This study examined how gender and cultural context intersect to influence the pursuit of higher education for West African women. Thematic analysis illuminated the influence of traditional marital expectations, the power dynamics between husbands and wives, and the cultural understandings that privilege male education over female education at all age levels. The use of African Feminism as a theoretical lens revealed that women collaborated to empower themselves and other females to access higher education and to renegotiate gender roles and expectations.

Keywords: West African women, higher education, African feminism

Cite this article (APA 7):
Stewart, P., Diop, K., & Turner, F. (2026). Gender, culture, and college attendance for West African immigrant women. *Family Science Review, 30*(1). https://doi.org/10.26536/HRTK7734

Published online: April 2026
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Between 1970 and 2007, the number of West African immigrants to the United States increased steadily, with most of that growth occurring since 1990 (Terrazas, 2009). One-third of those immigrants were from West Africa. West Africa is defined by the United Nations as Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo (United Nations, 2014). Among those immigrants, a significant number came to pursue higher education. Others decided to seek a college degree after having settled into life in the United States. Beoku-Betts (2004) and Gatua (2009, 2014) have documented several issues common to immigrant women who pursue higher education. Those issues are embedded in the cultural contexts in which the women were socialized, and those contexts have traveled with them to the United States. For immigrants of West African origin, issues of culture intersect with or influence any number of areas, including but not limited to marriage, gender roles, economic responsibility, and higher education.

Immigrant women must often meet the expectations of higher education while simultaneously navigating cultural contexts that do not support advanced learning for women. Part of that navigation may include the need to "model cultural roles of good wives, mothers, caregivers, and custodians of their culture" (Gatua, 2014, p. 40). Perceived deviation from that model can produce changes in family dynamics and gender roles, and those changes have been described as "among the most stressful post-migration challenges for non-Western immigrant families" (Akinsulure-Smith et al., 2013, p. 110). African immigrant women frequently come from cultural contexts where gender roles and expectations are clearly defined and men's authority is absolute (Ogunsiji et al., 2012). This authority stems from both gender and the ability to provide financially for the family (Kalunta-Crumpton, 2013; Rasmussen et al., 2013). Women are judged by their ability to manage the household and care for the household's children (Babou, 2002, 2008), while men neither expect nor are expected to participate in childcare or domestic labor (Bekou-Betts, 2004).

Immigration to countries where economic opportunities for immigrant men are limited (Stebleton, 2007) often results in the need for women to seek employment outside the home and thereby join the males in the provider role. In such cases, gender roles and authority within the family may be seen by women as open to negotiation, and tension develops within the family (Essandoh, 1995; Rasmussen et al., 2013; Skjortnes & Zachariassen, 2010). Participants in Rasmussen and associates' work on family conflict among West African immigrants spoke specifically of the tension that arose when earning patterns changed after immigration and women demanded input in spending patterns. In writing about the experiences of Senegalese immigrants, Babou said female immigrants "attribute men's discomfort to the fact that in the diaspora men no longer hold the position of authority they enjoyed in Senegal, a position that allowed them to control their wives' lives and economic resources" (2002, p. 163). Though these changes may occur without the pursuit of higher education, qualified immigrant women recognize the benefits of higher education and seize the opportunity to pursue it when such opportunities become available. Access to higher education for women and the subsequent increase in economic power may be a pathway that leads to a shift in the male-female dynamic and increases levels of male discomfort with his place in the family power structure (Babou, 2008).

For African females, as for all immigrants, the journey to higher education begins with access to education in their early years. Cultural, traditional, and economic constraints combine to limit educational access for females in the primary and middle school years, thus limiting access to secondary and/or postsecondary education. The tradition of early marriage is still common in many West African countries despite legislative efforts (Tuwor & Sossou, 2008; Winfred et al., 2019). The belief that

https://doi.org/10.26536/HRTK7734
Family Science Review, Volume 30, Issue 1, 2026

education will not continue after marriage due to childbearing and other mothering duties makes families less willing to invest resources in the education of females (Tuwor & Sossou, 2008; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). This reluctance is further fueled by the feeling that the family's investment will be lost when the girl's marriage allows her husband's family to claim her earnings or that a highly educated female may be unwilling or unable to find a husband (Warrington & Kiragu, 2012).

Ting and Panchanadeswaran (2009) documented the importance of marriage for African women. They spoke of the stigma of being single in cultural contexts where a woman's worth and self-esteem are tied to being a wife and mother. Further, the stigma of being without a husband reflects not only on the woman but on her parents and her entire extended family (Ngazimbi et al., 2013). Women are expected to marry and maintain the marriage even at the cost of discontinuing educational and/or career pursuits, should those pursuits present a barrier to or strain on the marriage (Beoku-Betts, 2004). Hassouneh-Phillips (2001a, 2001b) and Ogunsiji and associates (2012) addressed the importance of maintaining the marital bond even in the presence of severe domestic violence. In addition, motherhood, an essential feature of a West African woman's identity, is closely tied to the cultural imperative to marry. Marriage is considered a prerequisite for childbearing, and those who defy this expectation face the possibility of being shunned by peers, family, and community (Challa et al., 2018) in a cultural context where strong family ties are paramount.

African Feminist thought provides the lens through which this examination will be facilitated. Though there are several versions of African Feminism, there are some tenets that are common to all. One basic tenet of African Feminism is the need to attend to the sociocultural context of African women. This may include issues related to gender and marital expectations, which differ significantly from more Western expectations, ideas about motherhood, and the history of colonialization and its influence on gender relations In keeping with this line of thought, African feminism stresses the need to attend to the power African women possess or do not possess within their unique sociocultural contexts (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010) as the lives, experiences, choices, and decisions of these women cannot be understood without some understanding of that context (Blay, 2008; Jupiter-Jones, 2002). A second tenet of African Feminism acknowledges a complementary rather than adversarial relationship between women and men (Blay, 2008; Jupiter-Jones, 2002). Finally, through an African Feminist lens, motherhood, with all its attendant responsibilities, is cast as a central and venerated aspect of a woman's identity rather than as a hindrance to her success (Arndt, 2000; Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Jupiter-Jones, 2002).

African Feminist thought recognizes the importance of intersectionality. The term intersectionality, coined by Crenshaw (1989) and based on Black Feminist Thought, speaks to the influence of overlapping identities on the lives and experiences of individuals. Collins (2000) describes intersectionality as "systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age [which] form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women's experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women" (p. 299). In examining the experiences of African immigrant women, one must consider not only gender but also how gender intersects with race, social class, nation, and cultural context to construct or constrain life choices and life chances. While an intersectional approach allows for the examination of various levels of oppression to which African women have been subjected, it also allows for the illumination of "intergenerational survival strategies" that are passed from mother to daughter and allow women of African descent "to navigate through multiple spaces" (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015, p. 511).

If one combines the level of growth with the potential for future growth in immigration from West Africa, the necessity of examining the needs, cultures, and issues of the population as they transition into American culture and society becomes clear. This study aims to examine the cultural

https://doi.org/10.26536/HRTK7734
Family Science Review, Volume 30, Issue 1, 2026

contexts that influence the pursuit of higher education for immigrant women and to examine the influence of gender expectations on the pursuit of higher education for West African immigrant women. Thus, the question that guided this study was: *How does cultural context influence West African immigrant women's navigation to and through higher education?*

Methods

Qualitative methodology allows researchers to further understand the lived experiences of participants and the meaning they made of those experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study as it allowed the participants to tell their stories in their own words. In addition, the use of in-depth semistructured interviews allowed for and respected the oral traditions of those who have West African origins (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2011).

The participants who provided data for this study are subsets of two prior studies. The primary difference between the groups was that all participants from the first study were first-generation college students. One study had as its primary focus the influence of college attendance on family relationships. A subset of participants in that study were West African immigrants to the United States, and they consistently raised the issue of cultural expectations around marriage and gender roles as potential barriers to education. The second study focused on the influence of a specific cultural tradition (e.g., polygamy) on the lives of individuals and families. Though the second study did not initially address issues of education, early participants spontaneously linked issues of gender, marriage, and culture to education, often enough that the research team deemed it appropriate to explore educational issues. During the initial round of coding (open coding), in both studies, each coder found that the issue of culture, as it related to gender and gender roles, intersected with ideas about education. Thus, the decision to combine data from the two studies to explore a research question that was not the focus of either original study was driven by participant responses, as well as the interests of the researchers.

As coding for this study proceeded, the researchers found that 34 of the original 51 participants provided data relevant to this study. Though participants were recruited for two different studies, no significant differences were apparent between the groups. The average age of the participants was 35.2 years, with an age range of 19-70. Twenty-four of the participants were female, and 10 were male. The voices of males were included in the study as African Feminism acknowledges that the attitudes and behaviors of African males play a critical role in the lives and opportunities of the females with whom they are connected (Blay, 2008; Jupiter-Jones, 2002). For example, fathers can decide to invest in primary school education for sons rather than daughters (Warrington & Kiragu, 2012), and husbands of immigrant women may decide not to support their pursuit of higher education. Each of these decisions, though consistent with cultural understandings, presents barriers to higher education access for women.

All participants were from countries in the geographic region known as West Africa. Though most came from Senegal (n= 26), participant responses indicated no meaningful cultural differences across countries of origin, as ethnic identities were often shared across borders, given that country borders were often drawn by colonizers who were not mindful of ethnic identities. The remaining participants identified their countries of origin as Benin, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and the Gambia. They were recruited for the studies via snowballing techniques, which began by making contacts with gatekeepers in the West African community. This method of sampling accounts for the disparity between the number of males and females, as women were most likely to refer other women for the study. All participants utilized aliases to protect their identities. After obtaining Human Subjects' approval from the University Institutional Review Board, data were collected via face-to-face,

semi-structured interviews (45-90 minutes each). Participants answered questions related to the importance of cultural context and gender in the pursuit and completion of higher education degrees. All participants were asked to provide examples from their personal experiences as well as their broader perspectives on these topics.

The research team was all female. The data collection team was made up of one faculty member and one graduate assistant. The data collection team was able to establish the required levels of rapport and trust because the graduate assistant was a Senegal-born immigrant to the United States with connections to the West African community, and the faculty member was an African American who lived in a West African village for three years during Peace Corps Service. The third member of the research team entered during the analysis phase of the research and self-identified as Black.

After verbatim transcription of the interviews from digital audio files, data were analyzed using techniques discussed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The authors began by independently coding each interview line by line. This technique, called open coding, was used to identify recurring and distinct concepts within the data. Concepts were compared both within and across interviews. Codes developed while analyzing earlier interviews were used to guide the analysis of later interviews, but the researchers were always open to adding ideas and concepts to the codebook. Axial coding was then used to identify linkages among the open codes and to develop categories that make up larger themes in the data. The authors met on a regular and ongoing basis to compare and contrast their findings. At the heart of those meetings were discussions about the themes, their meanings, and the salience of those themes in the lives of the participants. All team members were cognizant of the influence of reflexivity in creating biases in the collection and analysis of data (Patton, 2002). Factors that influence reflexivity include the background of the researcher, which may influence the assumptions the researcher brings to the research. Careful and frequent discussion of the data was deemed essential to minimize the power of pre-existing biases while drawing on the unique insights provided by knowledge of and experience with the relevant cultural contexts.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationships among culture, gender, and college attendance for West African immigrant women. Thematic analysis of interviews from 51 West African immigrants revealed three primary themes: (1) following and circumventing cultural expectations about education, (2) the influence of marital relationships on the pursuit of higher education, and (3) the conflict between mothering and higher education. Subthemes will be presented for each of these themes, as will exemplar quotes that will serve as supporting data.

Theme 1: Following and Circumventing Cultural Expectations about Education

The unique cultural contexts of these participants influenced access to early educational experiences in their home countries, which provided or failed to provide pathways to higher education. These experiences spoke to cultural expectations with respect to investing in education for females at a young age and to the lack of educational opportunities. Without the benefit of education in the early years, there were limited opportunities to pursue higher education either before or after immigration. In addition, the participants described strategies for accessing education despite cultural restrictions.

Education is Wasted on Girls

In countries where education is not compulsory, the education of boys was typically privileged over the education of girls since the future well-being of females was and continues to be seen as vested in marriage, procreation, and household duties. In many West African countries, even primary school

education requires a monetary investment of some kind, and many fathers are unwilling to provide for the education of daughters with whom they have limited contact and for whom they have other plans. Anna described the attitude as follows:

> They encourage only the young boys to go to school, they say you're a girl, you have to help out around the house. Then you are going to get married, someone will pick you up and then, take care of you.(female, 37 years old)

Anna was echoed by Faith, who spoke of the need to make educational decisions in the face of limited economic resources:

> You barely see the dad and you know dad won't be able to take care of everybody and the greater disadvantage would be for the girls because the dad has limited resources and will, most of the time, invest in the boys and not the girls.(female, 45 years old)

For many females, this attitude was manifested by arrangements for early marriage to ensure the economic security of girls or provide resources for their family of origin. Anna related just such a scenario that was common in her family. She said, "My dad, he used to give away daughters to marriage like when they're thirteen, fourteen. He used to give them to people almost older than him." Bamikore (age 47), one of the male participants whose education had been fully supported by his family, spoke of the experiences of his sisters, "They stopped right there elementary school. That's where they stop their education. It was not a big deal because they knew the next step was to give them away to someone." In such situations, it was virtually assured that higher education would not be an option, even if the girl had such aspirations. Awa offered this description of being given in marriage at the age of 13:

> The only reason why they let me stay in school that long was that I was the number one student in the class. If I was given a chance I would've graduated from high school but they didn't want to let me continue my education. I was told that I reached a marriageable age and I had to be married. I was heartbroken but there was nothing I could do about it. My parents had already given me away in marriage and there was nothing I could do about it. (female, 70 years old)

This is how she described finding out about her marriage:

> One day right after I got back from school I found my family giving out some cola nuts but no one told me that I was going to be given away in marriage. I got home and I asked one of my aunts to give me some of the cola nuts and she said "It's a good thing that you want one. You are just given away to get married." I said to her, "Me"? And she said yes. That's how I found out I got married. I told my parents that I wanted to continue my education but they say that there is no need to continue my education now that I have a husband. They made me stop school in the middle of the school year to get married.

The decision to marry was not within Awa's control, and neither her desire to continue her schooling nor her position as a top student were viewed as important enough to prevent her marriage. The expectation was that she would not only accept her father's decision to see her married but that she would be pleased to have been chosen in marriage. It is somewhat ironic that the marriage for which Awa's education was sacrificed was short-lived. She stated later in her interview that her husband had "misbehaved" and that her family had "broken the marriage" because the husband was unable to care for her properly.

Strategies for Accessing Higher Education

Females in this study recognized the entrenched nature of cultural expectations that did not support higher education for women, but they nonetheless desired higher education for their daughters,

female relatives, and themselves, if possible. Females in the study utilized a variety of strategies to provide access to education for their daughters or younger siblings or to access it for themselves in adulthood. Those strategies included protecting daughters from early marriage and postponing or ending marriages that might interfere with educational aspirations.

Protecting Daughters From Early Marriage. Early marriage was a frequently mentioned issue among these participants. Strategies to prevent the advent of such marriages often involved a network of women working together. The work began early in the girl's life, as there was a need to provide access to primary school education. Mothers might access other relatives or female friends who were able to move the child to another country or area of the country where the child could access education. Anna described her mother's interventions:

> My mom said no, I'm not gonna give away my daughters. One of her friends helped her send one of her daughters away to France. The first daughter sent for the second one, and the second one finished school, sent for the third one, the third one finished, and the fourth one. So, we keep bringing each other, then everybody was in France, that's the way we tried to escape. (female, 37 years old)

Anna's experience was indicative of several other women in the study, and she was not alone in describing it as an escape. Faith also made the journey to live with a female relative in France before the subject of marriage could be broached by her father. Other women reported getting permission to assist female relatives with child care or provide them with "company" in a strange land. Amina, a 47-year-old female, provided an example of this phenomenon: "My mother's cousin moved to the city after she got married. She sent for us to help her so she could have family around her. We helped her but she also sent us to school." This assistance with child care is, in fact, another entrenched aspect of the cultural context from which these participants came.

Ending or Postponing Marriage. Ending or postponing marriages is in itself viewed negatively, as it is in direct opposition to cultural expectations, yet several women in the study utilized these strategies to pursue higher education. This is Faith's description of her decision-making process:

> It's sad to say, but I could not finish college until I got divorced. Because he was always in the way. He was always telling me that if there was anyone to go [to college] it would be him. Because back home the man is supposed to be the head of the household in our mentality and our culture. Female, 45 years old)

Faith's decision to end her marriage resulted in her being unwelcome in the Senegalese community to which she and her husband were attached. So, while she gained the opportunity to complete her undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees, for a time, Faith had only minimal contact with a community that shared her cultural roots. She was eventually able to establish contacts with other communities and had some extended family members who were supportive of her. Other participants related experiences of leaving marriages to allow their daughters to access educational opportunities.

Over the course of data collection, several participants spoke of postponing marriage in favor of pursuing higher education. This choice was time-limited and had several potential and actual consequences. According to these participants, by their late 20s, women who delayed marriage begin to feel substantial familial and social pressure to marry. Khady, a 22-year-old female, spoke of this:

> It's about respect. Most of the time they do not give respect to women that are not married especially when they reach the age of thirty. It's just shameful to them so they look forward to be married, like any way they can. They just want to be married to anyone.

Lamine, a 23-year-old male, supported this line of thinking by saying:

> It puts pressure not only on the woman but on the woman's parents because they don't want to be like "Our daughter is not married. She's 30 and she's in the house." It looks bad on the family you know - it's a cultural context.

Those women who postponed marriage often experienced difficulties in finding a partner who met societal expectations for age and social status. Miriam provided this example:

> I have one example. One of my youngest sisters, she's in her 30's. She has her master's degree, she's working, and when it comes to a husband she is telling me my only option is to get into a polygamous marriage. Because she's like you know with my age, I can't be too picky. She can't marry the younger men, For her, the only option that's in her social status are men who already have wives. (female, 44 years old)

One woman described the experience of a relative who married a polygamous man who lived in a different country. The couple never had intentions of living together or sharing a life, but the marriage fulfilled societal expectations and allowed the woman to live the life she chose. She was also able to have children and thereby fulfill her desire for and the societal expectation of motherhood while her husband maintained his life in the home country.

Theme 2: Marital Relationships

Whether the marital bonds were formed before or after immigration, participants related how cultural attitudes toward marriage and husband–wife dynamics served as barriers to higher education after immigration.

Traditional Attitudes and Power Dynamics in Marriage

The participants spoke of the extent to which men continued to hold and attempted to enforce traditional West African male/female power dynamics within the home and marriage. These attitudes were in evidence regardless of the length of time the couple lived in the United States or whether they married before or after immigration. Faith, a 45-year-old female who had already begun a degree in France before she immigrated to the United States, spoke of her ex-husband's resistance when she expressed interest in continuing her pursuit of higher education after their marriage. She provided the following description of her ex-husband, whom she had to divorce to complete her degree:

> He was that type of conservative, very traditionalist person. So as long as I was his wife he had power over whatever I wanted to decide. So, going to school was out of the question as long as I was in the marriage. He was always telling me that if there was anyone to go [to school] it would be him. He is supposed to have more degrees than me and I had more degrees than him even with two years of college.

She went on to describe his efforts to surpass her in education and, failing that, his attempts to suppress her efforts:

> At some point, he enrolled. But you have to measure your potential. He tried and I know he tried. And the funny thing is I helped him even though he was pushing me down. I helped him in his studies. He would come home with homework and I would be the one who went through his work and made him index cards. Just to make it easy for him to study.

These participants all spoke of the expectation that traditional gender roles be maintained. Sometimes husbands used those expectations to thwart a wife's ability to attend college without actually

expressing their disapproval or the reasons for the disapproval. Faziah described her experience. Her husband was initially unenthusiastic about her efforts but did not express outward disapproval. She later discovered that he did not defend her when his extended family expressed their disapproval of college attendance. She described finding her husband in conversation with a family member who criticized her repeatedly for her failure to complete her duties as a wife and mother:

> She said my husband comes home and there was no food ready and the children were home alone. She said, "She cannot do that, she has children and she has to take care of the children." So anytime she talked to me I went back to my husband and asked him or tell him exactly what she told me and I wait for his reaction because if he didn't give her the opening she would never call and talk about me. (female,42 years old)

Faizah continued to be suspicious of her husband's actual feelings because the conversations with his cousin continued. She suspected that while he spoke privately of the benefits her increased education could bring to their children, he may have denigrated her efforts to other family members to maintain his public image as the dominant member of the family. Ultimately, women such as Anna (female, 37), who were determined to maintain both marriage and her educational pursuits, spoke in terms of competition in all spheres of life: "It's a competition in your own home. You have competition at work, you have competition in school, and then you come home, and you have the same competition."

Support of Education for Wives

Husbands sometimes refuse to support a wife's educational endeavors (financially or pragmatically) in order to maintain their standing among male peers. Anna provided some insight into these feelings, and several of the males interviewed supported those insights:

> It's not, easy for, the African man to let the wife excel because then they [the man] becomes a shadow of you. Most of them, bring and keep in their heads the idea that the wife is still the in the wife's place and he should be the provider. We don't have a lot of support and encouragement from men, in our culture, because for them, your place is not in school, your place is not in an office -- even the educated ones. No, all the friends are saying, oh, you letting your femme (wife) go to school, or she gonna have this degree, you're not gonna have it or then she gonna forget about you. So, they say you need to decide to stop something, either school or work, and just take care of the kids. That's just an excuse, they using the kids because they don't want you to excel. (female, 37)

As Anna stated, even men with high levels of education and significant amounts of time living in countries with less strict adherence to traditional gender roles spoke in terms of women's work, male authority, and the correct (gendered) distribution of tasks in the household. For example, one 23-year-old male (Lamine) spoke of being willing to cook for his mother if she came to visit (though he was quick to say his mother would never permit him to cook if she was present) but of not being willing to cook for a wife (no matter what her other obligations) since that was outside his role as a man in his household. His ideas were in keeping with those of older males who were interviewed. Thierno, a 23-year-old undergraduate, presented himself as an enlightened, modern male. Though he was not married, he did have some thoughts on the topic, "Men are afraid of educated women? I don't think that's true. For me I don't want to control my wife I don't want her to stay home, and have a lower education than I have." Still, as the interview progressed, he made statements that indicated traditional ideas about gender and the dynamics of male/female roles in marriage.

https://doi.org/10.26536/HRTK7734
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Theme Three: Conflict between mothering and higher education

These participants recounted experiences of ridicule and judgment by family, friends, and the community. These feelings manifested with the decision to attend college and grew as they persisted in their college attendance. Participants recognized the benefits of higher education but still felt conflicted with the desire to attend college and their maternal roles and responsibilities. They described challenging efforts to blend the divergent aspects of their lives (school, work, and home) with particular emphasis on motherhood.

Good Mothers Put the Needs of Their Children First

The participants recalled how motherhood affected their educational journey. When participants who were mothers decided to pursue higher education, it came at a cost. To be successful in their roles as mothers and wives, they were expected to put the needs of their children and families before their own. Faith discussed the difficulties of juggling motherhood, work, and school:

> We have to work, to help out the family over there, to help out the family here, we have to take care of kids, we have to take care of our house, our husband, our family. The list is long. We don't even take care of ourselves. (female, 45 years old)

Cultural beliefs that suggest a woman prioritize the care of her family over personal or career endeavors may come at the expense of their emotional well-being. Mothers may become overwhelmed when attempting to fulfill multiple roles. Faizah described her emotional attempt at managing school, work, and motherhood:

> It was very hard. Sometimes I was crying. It was very hard because I have to come home and they expect me to do women's work at home. I had to study, I had to look at my children's homework and the next day go to work, go to school, come home, food ready. It was very hard. (female, 42 years old)

Faizah also talked of the ridicule and judgment she received from her family due to her decision to attend college:

> Sometimes where I come from people tell you that women don't need to go too far in education and you have to help your husband. Especially your in-laws tell you that. They tell you that you have to help your husband, you have to. Sometimes they asked me: why you're going to start school?

Other participants state that taking care of kids takes precedence over everything. Mothers are willing to sacrifice their own professional and academic goals to ensure the needs of their children and families are met. Maimouna's words reflected the thoughts of several participants:

> Oh, yes, sometimes, the conflicts keep going. I have the children to take care of, so that's when I have to stop school. If you want to go to school, in addition to your responsibility to take care of kids, that's you. If you can't handle both, then you need to decide to stop going to school to take care of the kids. (female, 41 years old)

Mame, a 40-year-old female, takes it a step further in suggesting that when you are a mother, your life is not your own. She says, "Your life is not about you being happy. You live your life through your kids… meaning you have to be stable, make sure your kids are stable, no matter what." Though the women in this study acknowledged the strain of balancing the expectations of motherhood and education, none voiced a desire to have foregone motherhood. There was, in fact, some discussion of how they might be better mothers and how their educational achievements would benefit their children.

https://doi.org/10.26536/HRTK7734
Family Science Review, Volume 30, Issue 1, 2026

Discussion

This study examined the influence of certain cultural expectations on the pursuit of higher education for West African immigrant women. Specifically, information from interviews with 51 participants revealed themes that related to the ways that cultural expectations around gender roles, marriage, and marital relationships were expected to supplant the desire of women to seek higher education.

In examining the educational experiences of these participants from an African Feminist perspective, it is impossible to ignore the intersectional effects of gender, class, and culture. The participants' attempts to negotiate or renegotiate gender roles according to their new cultural context (Zentgraf, 2002), which included aspirations to higher education, were met with considerable resistance from their husbands, families, and communities of origin. Though difficult, considering the continued adherence to traditional patriarchal gender roles, Blay (2008) saw such negotiations as both positive and appropriate when viewed through the lens of African Feminism. The women interviewed spoke of the expectation that they not only maintain responsibility for the care of the household and the children while attending college (Babou, 2008; Beoku-Betts, 2004; Gatua, 2009, 2014) but also of needing to attain permission, or at least the tacit approval of their spouse, before enrolling. This approval typically did not include an agreement to provide either financial or pragmatic support. The need to gain permission is indicative of the belief in the absolute authority of the male in the household (Ogunsiji et al., 2012). The renegotiation of that absolute authority came as the women made arrangements to pay the cost of tuition without using funds that were otherwise destined to support the family. Though none of the women interviewed spoke of having been personally subjected to physical violence as a result of their desire to pursue higher education, several spoke of having their efforts belittled in episodes of verbal abuse and of incidents of being sabotaged by spouses and extended family members as the women progressed in their degrees. This was especially evident in situations where the woman's degree would result in her surpassing her husband's educational level. Several researchers have found the pursuit of higher education to be a significant reason for conflict within African families or for women seeking higher education to postpone or avoid marriage (Darvishpour, 2002; Essanoh, 1995; Skjortnes & Zachariassen, 2010). The intrafamilial conflict that weakens family ties is seen as undesirable given the importance of those ties in the context of West African culture (Alber, Häberlein, & Martin, 2010).

The avoidance of marriage or the ending of existing marriages was a point raised frequently among both male and female participants in the study. This is particularly important among this population, given the overall importance of marriage from a cultural standpoint. Marriage is a significant factor in the social and gender identity of females in Africa, irrespective of one's educational level. To be a single female is a source of stigma for both the individual and the family (Ngazimbi et al., 2013) as it may indicate pathology in the individual or the failure of the parents to provide an appropriate upbringing (Skjortnes & Zachariassen, 2010), which has implications for the marital prospects of younger unmarried siblings. Those women who postponed or ended marriages to attain higher education faced ostracism from their community and the disapproval of family members. Women who postponed marriage also ran the risk of being unable to find a suitable partner because of other cultural restrictions. Among those restrictions was the expectation that the man is of equal or higher educational/social status and that the male not be younger than her. Further, according to these participants, highly educated women sometimes enter into polygamous marriages since men of their age and social status are typically already married.

Several of the women in this study had the experience of being among those whose mothers "migrated them" rather than allowing them to be married at a young age. The mothers who participated

in those migration networks were women whose personal educational journeys had been interrupted when their fathers gave them in marriage in their early teens or by the cultural belief that education was wasted on females. Each of those mothers valued education and the opportunities it could provide, and contrary to the accepted image of African women as powerless in society, these women used their networks as a way to "creatively overcome these issues through action" (Cruz, 2015, pg. 24). It was interesting that those participants who had the experience of" being migrated" were typically those who began college degrees before marriage, married and ultimately divorced husbands who were resistant to the completion of their degrees and or careers. These actions can be viewed as a renegotiation of gender roles concerning educational aspirations and the need for a spouse to complete one's social and gender identities. The ability of the females in the kinship group to form coalitions that enabled the migration of younger females beyond the reach of early marriage is a clear indication of what Chilisa and Ntseane described as the "agency and power of mothers as a source of solidarity" (2010, p. 618). It was also indicative of what Nnaemeka (2004) described as the African Feminist strategy of knowing:

> When, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts (p. 378).

These migrations were generally accomplished subtly and in the guise of adherence to cultural traditions such as informal fosterage (Leinaweaver, 2014) or sending a young female to provide labor to a family member in need. The work of Engebretsen and associates (2020) found the practice of utilizing migration as a means to avoid early marriage to be present in contemporary West African society.

Findings from this study suggest a continuing struggle for West African women to balance the obligations of motherhood and college attendance. This can be said to be the experience of women in general since, in contemporary Western society, women are expected to find fulfillment and satisfaction in the role of the "ever-bountiful, ever-giving, self-sacrificing mother" (Kruger, 2003, p. 198). The development of a healthy child depends on parental attention, which is highly focused and intense (Craig et al., 2014). Mothers of all social classes, races, and ethnicities feel pressure to meet societal expectations regarding intensive mothering even as they ignore their personal well-being (Elliott et al., 2015). However, women in this study were further influenced by limited options and cultural expectations. While self-sacrifice may be an expectation of all mothers, for a West African woman to be less than diligent in her care and sacrifice is to deny a fundamental aspect of social, gender, and cultural identity (Tangwa, 2001). It is also noteworthy that while the description of intensive mothering gives the impression of motherhood as a burden, an African Feminist perspective views motherhood with all its obligations as an advantage rather than a hindrance.

Limitations

This study is limited in several ways. The sample size was relatively small and non-representative and may therefore not be generalizable to larger populations. In addition, though snowball sampling has the potential of providing information-rich participants, one also runs the risk of accessing people with similar viewpoints. It might also have been useful to include additional participants in the older age range. The study was also limited in that we were using previously collected data, which left us unable to ask questions specifically related to our study. For example, given the opportunity, further probing about blending American and West African cultural ideals about education and gender would have been an area of interest.

Implications for Future Research

As the West African immigrant population continues to increase and to include women and girls intent on pursuing higher education, it is important that educators at all levels recognize the intersection of culture and gender and that it has a profound impact on decision-making. Rather than press or impress Western values and ways of thinking on African females, the academy, at all levels, might be better served to work at understanding the ways in which the cultural location of these women informs both their efforts at educational access and their ability to succeed once those efforts bear fruit. In this way, educators can learn from and learn to support the networks and strengths that already exist in the lives of African immigrant women.

While our study focused on external expectations and constraints on West African women and their pursuit of higher education, future work should consider examining their personal beliefs, feelings, and expectations about motherhood and the potential conflict between work/school and family commitments. Additionally, research could be extended to consider conflicts with immigrant women in mothering in two separate societies. Immigrant women invariably mother in two, sometimes contradictory, cultural contexts. One of those contexts is their country and culture of origin, for though they have immigrated, these women bring with them internalized concepts of how to raise their children (Baum & Nisan, 2017). The conflict rests between which principles of the new culture they will adopt and those they will disregard to maintain cultural dictates. It would be beneficial to practitioners charged with assisting and developing coping techniques for this population to understand the lived experiences and feelings they may encounter.

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