

THE BOY CHILD QUAGMIRE: ENTRENCHING PATRIARCHY IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The Nigerian society has historically been influenced by patriarchal structures in which males are frequently perceived as natural beneficiaries, leaders and successors within the family and community. The boy child is often expected to be strong, economically independent, emotionally restrained, physically courageous and prepared to assume responsibility for the family. These expectations may appear advantageous because they confer social privilege on males, but they can also expose boys to neglect, hazardous labour, violence, emotional suppression, educational pressure and premature adult responsibilities. This article argues that the problem is not simply that Nigerian society privileges boys over girls. Rather, patriarchy creates a system in which boys may simultaneously be privileged because they are male and disadvantaged because they are expected to conform to prescribed ideas of masculinity. The result is a paradox. The article utilized the doctrinal research methodology in

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bringing together its ideas and arguments as it relates to this article. Recommendations were made to see ways to curtail the issues raised to have a balanced society.

Keywords: Boy-child quagmire, Patriarchy, Gender socialization and Toxic-masculinity

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The family is the first institution through which a child learns values, identity, authority, responsibility and social relationships. In Nigeria, many children grow up in environments where gender determines expectations, privileges and responsibilities.¹ From an early age, boys may be told that they are future heads of families, providers and protectors, while girls are often socialized towards caregiving, domesticity and submissiveness. The phrase “boy child” therefore carries more than a biological meaning; it represents a social category around which Nigerian society constructs particular expectations of masculinity.

A boy may be told not to cry because “men are strong.” He may be expected to tolerate physical punishment because “boys must be tough.” He may be encouraged to pursue income-generating activities rather than education because he is expected to become a provider. In some communities, a male child is regarded as the continuation of the family name and lineage, while female children may be treated as temporary members of the family because they are expected to marry

¹ Dicke A-L, Safavian N, Eccles J.S (2019). Traditional gender role beliefs and career attainment in STEM: A gendered story? *Frontier Psychology*, 10(1), 1053. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01053>

and leave. These practices demonstrate the complexity of patriarchy visible in the Family unit.²

Patriarchy does not operate exclusively by disadvantaging women and girls. It also imposes a prescribed model of masculinity upon men and boys. The boy is told that his value lies in his ability to provide, protect, dominate, and endure pain without assistance as well as exercise unquestionable authority. Consequently, the boy child may become the vehicle through which patriarchy is reproduce, if it is not checked.³

This is the central argument of this article: unless Nigerian society re-examines how boys are socialized, efforts to dismantle gender inequality will remain incomplete and patriarchy entrenchment will continue to rise in our society.

2.0 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

2.1 Quagmire

The word quagmire metaphorically describes a complex, hazardous, complex and deeply entangled situation from which extrication is exceedingly difficult. In the instant context, it reflects the paradox where a system meant to uphold traditional male dominance ends up harming and neglecting the young boys who are supposed to benefit from it.

² The Boy Child in a Changing Society – Independent Newspaper Nigeria Accessed 15 September, 2026.

³ (PDF) Men's Relationship to Patriarchy Reflections on Masculinity and Role Models Accessed 15 September, 2026.

2.2 Patriarchy

Patriarchy may broadly be described as a social system in which men occupy dominant positions of authority within the family, community, economic institutions and political structures.⁴

In the Nigerian context, patriarchal attitudes may manifest through; preference for male children, male inheritance and succession practices, the perception of men as family heads, expectations that men must provide financially; assigning domestic responsibilities disproportionately to girls, discouraging boys from expressing vulnerability, tolerating aggressive behavior from boys, treating boys as naturally superior to girls. prioritizing male education where family resources are limited, assigning boys leadership roles merely because they are male, and transmitting gender stereotypes from parents to children.⁵

Patriarchy should therefore not be understood merely as a system that says “men are better than women.” It is also a system that tells boys: “This is what a man must be.” The boy who fails to conform may be regarded as weak, irresponsible or inadequate. Thus, patriarchy regulates both female identity and male identity.⁶

3.0 THE BOY CHILD AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY

One of the principal ways patriarchy becomes entrenched is through the social construction of masculinity, a Nigerian boy may grow up hearing expressions such as; “A man must not cry”, “you are a man of

⁴ Lerner G, “The Creation of Patriarchy” Oxford University Press 1986.

⁵ Queendoleen Obinaju & I.E Ekanem, “Patriarchy and Child Development in Nigeria. Association for promoting Quality Education in Nigeria (APQEN) 2021 Vol. 16(1) Pg 1-8.

⁶[\(PDF\) PATRIARCHY AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA: THE WAY FORWARD](#) Accessed 16 September, 2026.

the house”, “you must take care of your sisters”, “you must be strong”, “you cannot allow a woman to control you”, “you are the heir”, “you must continue the family name”, “men must provide for their families”. etc.⁷

Some of these statements may contain positive values concerning responsibility and leadership. However, the difficulty arises when they become rigid rules defining a boy's worth.⁸

The boy consequently learns that: strength is masculine, vulnerability is feminine; authority is masculine, obedience is feminine; financial provision is masculine, domestic care is feminine; leadership is masculine, nurturing is feminine, stoicism is masculine and emotion is feminine. This creates a restricted conception of masculinity and conditions the mind of the boy child to feel superior to the female gender.⁹

A boy who is emotionally distressed may therefore avoid seeking help because he fears ridicule. A boy experiencing abuse may remain silent because he has been taught that men should endure pain. A young man struggling financially may experience shame because society has conditioned him to equate masculinity with economic success. The consequences may extend into adulthood and will become a serious challenge that overwhelms the boy-child.

⁷https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304226945_Boys_Boyhood_and_the_Construction_of_Masculinity Accessed 17 September, 2026.

⁸Amiriota, Kagesten, A. & Adebayo, E., Chandra-Mouli, V. “Addressing Gender Socialization and Masculinity Norms among Adolescent Boys and Programme Implications” (2018) 62(3) *Journal of Adolescent Health*, pg. 3–5.

⁹ *Ibid*

4.0 THE BOY CHILD QUAGMIRE AND PATRIARCHY

This complex, hazardous and harmful relationship displays itself in countless ways, and the multiplicity of its nature will be addressed below. It is conceptualized in this paper as the manifestations of patriarchy on the boy child;

4.1 The Boy Child as Both Beneficiary and Victim of Patriarchy

The boy-child discourse requires nuance, and it would be inaccurate to suggest that boys are generally more disadvantaged than girls in Nigerian society. Patriarchal structures have historically conferred significant advantages on males, particularly in matters of inheritance, authority, family decision-making and social status.¹⁰

However, privilege does not eliminate vulnerability. A boy may benefit from being male while simultaneously suffering because of the expectations attached to being male¹¹. For example, a male child may be preferred because he is regarded as a future heir. Yet the same expectation may place enormous pressure upon him to succeed economically.

A boy may be given authority over his sisters because he is male, yet he may also be denied the freedom to express fear, sadness or emotional vulnerability. A boy may be sent to work because his family believes he must learn to become a provider¹². The same practice can deprive him of education and childhood.

¹⁰ (PDF) [Toxic Masculinity and Patriarchy: Barriers to Connecting Biopsychosocial Risk for Male Violence to Policy and Practice](#). Accessed 17 September, 2026.

¹¹Balogun, O. M., "Social Construction of Masculinity in Nigerian Children's Prose Fiction (2024)."

¹² Re-examining Gender Inequality in Accessing Resources and Educational Stance in Reducing Masculine Gender Hegemony in Nigeria (2024).

This demonstrates the paradox of the boy child; in the Nigerian Society as Patriarchy can give boys power while denying them freedom. This is quite a dilemma, which is indeed one of the challenges the boy child is facing in Nigeria.

4.2 Child Labor and the Economic Burden Placed on Boys

Economic hardship is one of the most significant factors affecting Nigerian children. The Universal Basic Education Act 2004 provides for free, compulsory and universal basic education for children of primary and junior-secondary-school age and imposes responsibilities upon parents to ensure that their children attend and complete basic education.¹³

It is said that economic circumstances have pushed children, particularly boys, into work. Many Boys have been seen working as; mechanics, motor-park assistants, street traders, apprentices, construction workers; agricultural laborers, domestic workers; commercial transport assistants; and other informal-sector occupations. Although vocational training and apprenticeship can be beneficial when properly structured but exploitation occurs when children are deprived of education, exposed to dangerous working conditions or forced to assume responsibilities beyond their age.

The Child Rights Act 2003 recognizes the child's right to development, parental care, protection and maintenance and specifically contains provisions dealing with exploitative labor. The law therefore recognizes an important principle: which is that childhood should not be sacrificed simply because a child happens to be male.¹⁴

¹³ [NGA87623-UBE-ACT-2004.pdf](#) Accessed 18 September, 2026.

¹⁴ Child's Rights Act 2003 (Act No. 26 of 2003) codified as C 50 Laws of the Federation 2004.

4.3 Emotional Suppression and the “Men Don’t Cry” Culture

Perhaps one of the least discussed consequences of patriarchy for boys is emotional suppression. The statement “men don’t cry” appears harmless but can have profound consequences. A child develops emotionally through the ability to identify, express and regulate emotions. When boys are taught that sadness, fear and vulnerability are feminine characteristics, they may suppress rather than process their emotions and look down on those who display emotions. It also produces a rather ironic position where certain emotions like sadness and sorrow are deemed weak and anger and aggressive behavior are deemed strong.¹⁵

The consequence may include: inability to communicate emotional difficulties; reluctance to seek psychological assistance; aggressive responses to frustration; difficulty forming healthy relationships; emotional isolation; and transmission of the same behavior to the next generation.

A healthier model of masculinity should teach boys that courage does not mean the absence of emotion and that a boy can cry and still be courageous, a boy can ask for help and still be responsible, a boy can be gentle without being weak, a boy can care for children without losing his masculinity. These principles are important for dismantling patriarchal gender stereotypes in our society.

4.4 The Male Child and Domestic Responsibilities

Another manifestation of patriarchy is the gendering of household responsibilities in the family unit.¹⁶ In many Nigerian homes, girls are

¹⁵ Ohaeto, E. Fighting Patriarchy in Nigerian Cultures through Children’s Literature. *Studies in Literature and Language* 2015 Vol. 10 (6): 59–66.

¹⁶ Awed A.D, ‘‘ Sex-Role’s inequality in the African Family: Contemporary Implication. *Ife Social Science Review* (1984) Vol. 7(1), Pg. 188-197

expected to cook, clean, wash clothes, care for younger children and perform other domestic duties, while boys are given fewer responsibilities in the home. This creates two problems; first, girls may grow up believing that domestic work is inherently female, and boys may become adults who lack basic domestic skills and expect women to perform unpaid household labor¹⁷.

The boy-child question is therefore not simply about giving boys more privileges, it is about raising boys who can participate equally in the family life. A boy should learn how to cook, clean, care for children, wash clothes and maintain a household, not because domestic work is masculine, but because these are essential human skills that is required for our existence and wellbeing.¹⁸

4.5 Patriarchy and the Production of Future Patriarchs

The most important argument in this discussion is intergenerational. A boy does not automatically become patriarchal because he is male, he becomes patriarchal when society teaches him that authority belongs to men, care belongs to women; leadership belongs to men, obedience belongs to women; emotional vulnerability is weakness, women exist to serve men; and male children are inherently more valuable than female children.¹⁹

The boy who absorbs these ideas may eventually become a husband who believes his wife must obey him. He may become a father who educates his sons but de-prioritizes his daughters, he may become a community leader who excludes women from decision-making. He may become an employer who considers women less capable. He may

¹⁷Balogun, O. M., "Social Construction of Masculinity in Nigerian Children's Prose Fiction (2024)."

¹⁸*Ibid*

¹⁹ Makama G.A., 'Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: The way Forward. European Scientific Journal (2013) Vol.9(17)

become a politician who views gender equality as a threat to the male authority.²⁰

In this way, patriarchy reproduces itself through socialization. The child becomes the adult; the adult becomes the parent and the parent and when reproduces the same ideas in the next generation.

5.0 PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF PATRIARCHY ON THE BOY CHILD.

In Nigeria, men are dispassionately defined by their capacity to provide financially especially in tough economic climate. This unrealistic pressure placed men transcends to the boy child who tries to secure financial power early in life drives many toward quick-money schemes.

The expectation that male children must serve as primary financial anchors for their families is one of the most pervasive schemes that continues to push the boy child to look for money. While patriarchy grants men structural power and systematic dominance scheme that continues to push the boy child to look for money. it pushes them to become an economic provider from early age. Accordingly, when financial responsibility is fused with the boy child's core identity, patriarchy functions not just as a system of male privilege, but as a rigid contract of mandatory performance.²¹

In traditional patriarchal frameworks, the boy child's worth is tied to his potential for economic utility. The boy child is frequently socialized to measure their personal value by what they can provide

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ M.Gupta, J. S madabushi, N.Gupta,' Critical Overview of Patriarchy, its interferences with psychological Development and risks for mental Health—Cureus National Library of Medicine 2023 Vol. 15(6).

rather than who they are.²² The boy-child in a resource-constrained household are often expected to assume adult financial responsibilities very early in life, for instance funding younger siblings' education, contributing to daily household survival, supporting elderly relatives etc. However, economic capacity becomes the primary metric of manhood leaving little room for self-discovery and self-development outside of financial capability.²³

Additionally, Patriarchy norms afford men head-of household status, this is often tied to economic provision as authority is tied to wealth. A male child who cannot provide loses social standing and authority within the family network²⁴. The boy child's income is absorbed by family obligations which often limits his ability to build personal equity, invest or secure his future.

This financial burden placed on the boy child often manifest as a lifelong intergenerational transfer of wealth as adult male children are made to carry the family financially which they eventually expect their own son (s) to fulfill the same role thereby replicating the patriarchal dependency cycle across generations. To remain economically reliable, the boy child is taught to suppress emotional distress, anxiety and fatigue by viewing self-care or failure as signs of weakness.²⁵

In other to redefine patriarchy and the boy-child beyond financial provision, it is imperative to decouple self-worth from wealth, encouraging personal growth, financial investment, emotional literacy, individual autonomy alongside economic responsibility among the boy

²²Connell, R. W., *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ Connell, R. W. and Messerschmidt, J. W., "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept" (2005) 19(6) *Gender & Society* 829.

²⁵ *Ibid*

child. Again, shared family responsibility and moving away from single-breadwinner expectation towards equitable economic distribution among all family members regardless of gender and normalizing conversation about financial stress, anxiety and burnout amongst the male child.

6.0 PATRIARCHY AND THE LAW

There are several legal frameworks that makes provision for the protection of the boy child in Nigeria, and they include;

6.1 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 provides the fundamental legal foundation for equality and human dignity. ²⁶Section 17 establishes a social order founded upon ideals of freedom, equality and justice, while ²⁷ Section 42 prohibits discrimination on grounds including sex. Section 42(2) further provides that no citizen shall suffer disability or deprivation merely because of the circumstances of his birth.

These provisions are significant to the boy-child debate because they demonstrate that Nigerian constitutionalism does not support arbitrary discrimination based upon sex or circumstances of birth. Section 33 protects the right to life, while Section 34 protects the dignity of the human person and prohibits torture and inhuman or degrading treatment²⁸. Accordingly, cultural practices involving excessive physical punishment or degrading treatment cannot automatically be justified by saying that boys must be “tough.”

²⁶ S. 17(3) of the Nigerian Constitution 1999(as amended)

²⁷S. 42 of the Nigerian Constitution 1999(as amended)

²⁸ Constitution 1999 (as amended), s 34

6.2 The Child Rights Act 2003

The Child Rights Act 2003 is perhaps the most important and comprehensive federal legislation concerning children. It establishes the principle that the best interests of the child should be a paramount consideration in actions concerning children.

It also recognizes rights relating to survival and development, freedom from discrimination, dignity, health, parental care and education. Section 10, for example, recognizes the child's right to freedom from discrimination²⁹. The Act provides for the child's right to free, compulsory and universal primary education and other educational protections³⁰.

This Act is therefore relevant to the boy-child debate in two ways; first, boys are entitled to protection as children. Secondly the Act prevents the society from treating boys merely as future adults whose present welfare may be sacrificed for cultural expectations. It should also be noted that the Child Rights Act requires state-level implementation. The National Human Rights Commission has reported that not all Nigerian states have enacted the Act as state law. This remains an important challenge to uniform child-rights protection throughout the country.

6.3 Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act 2004

Education is one of the most powerful mechanisms for breaking the cycle of patriarchy. The Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act 2004 requires government to provide free, compulsory and universal basic education for children of primary and junior-secondary-school age. It also places an obligation on parents to ensure

²⁹ Child Rights Act 2003, s 10

³⁰ Child Rights Act 2003, s 15

that children attend and complete primary and junior secondary education.

The legislation is particularly relevant where boys are removed from school to engage in economic activities. A child does not cease to be a child because society believes he must become a provider.

6.4 Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015

The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 (VAPP Act)³¹ provides a broader legal framework against violence in private and public life and establishes remedies and punishments for prohibited conduct. Although gender-based violence discussions often focus on women and girls, the legal protection against violence should not be understood as excluding boys. Boys can be victims of; physical violence, sexual abuse, psychological violence, exploitation, domestic violence, and other forms of abuse. A serious boy-child policy must therefore recognize boys as potential victims of violence rather than assuming that males are always perpetrators.

6.5 Customary Law and the Entrenchment of Patriarchy.

Customary law occupies an important place in Nigerian legal development. However, customary practices must conform to the Constitution and applicable principles of justice. The Nigerian courts have increasingly confronted discriminatory customs affecting women.

The Supreme Court rejected the Igbo customary rule that excluded female children from inheriting their father's property, holding that the discriminatory rule was inconsistent with Section 42 of the Constitution.³² Similarly, the court in another case³³ addressed discriminatory customary inheritance practices affecting women and

³¹Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015

³² Ukeje v Ukeje (2014) 11 NWLR (Pt 1418) 384

³³ Anekwe v Nweke (2014) LPELR-22697(SC)

reinforced the principle that customs inconsistent with constitutional rights cannot prevail.

These decisions are important to the boy-child debate because they demonstrate that the law must distinguish between legitimate cultural identity and discriminatory cultural practices. The fact that a practice is traditional does not automatically make it legally valid.

6.6 International Legal Framework

Nigeria's obligations extend beyond domestic legislation. Nigeria ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985 and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991. Nigeria subsequently domesticated the CRC through the Child Rights Act 2003. Nigeria has also ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol).

The CRC is particularly relevant because it recognizes children as rights-bearing individuals and establishes principles including: non-discrimination; the best interests of the child; survival and development; and respect for the child's views. These principles apply equally to boys. The African Charter on the Rights³⁴ and Welfare of the Child similarly establishes protections for children within the African social and cultural context.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The boy-child quagmire in Nigeria is fundamentally a question of how society constructs masculinity. The Nigerian boy is frequently placed

³⁴African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990)

on a pedestal as heir, protector, provider and future head of the family. At first glance, these expectations appear to confer privilege. However, beneath that privilege lies a significant burden: boys are frequently denied emotional vulnerability, subjected to premature responsibility, exposed to violence and economic pressures, and trained to understand authority through a patriarchal lens.

The consequence is a paradoxical social structure in which the boy child is both a beneficiary of patriarchy and one of its casualties. More importantly, when boys are raised to believe that masculinity requires dominance, emotional silence and superiority over women, society creates the next generation of patriarchs. The legal framework already provides important foundations for change.

The Constitution guarantees equality and freedom from discrimination; the Child Rights Act protects children against discrimination, exploitation and abuse; the Universal Basic Education Act protects access to basic education; the VAPP Act provides protection against violence; and Nigeria's international commitments reinforce the principles of child protection, equality and human dignity.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply the absence of law. It is the gap between law and social reality. Nigeria must move from raising boys to become “men in charge” to raising boys to become responsible human beings. A boy should be taught leadership without domination, strength without violence, responsibility without exploitation, confidence without arrogance, and masculinity without misogyny. Ultimately, the goal should not be to replace female subordination with male victimhood.

It should be to create a society in which the worth of a child is not determined by whether that child is a boy or a girl. The liberation of the girl child and the healthy development of the boy child are therefore not competing objectives. They are complementary components of the same struggle for equality, dignity, justice and a healthier Nigerian society.

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The solution is not to weaken the boy child in order to empower the girl child. Rather, Nigerian society should raise both sexes within a framework of equality, dignity and mutual responsibility.

First, the redefinition masculinity; boys should be taught that strength includes emotional intelligence, compassion, self-control, responsibility and respect for others.

Second, the promotion of equal domestic responsibilities, boys should participate in household duties alongside girls.

Thirdly, child-protection mechanisms should be strengthened; this means, child-protection institutions should recognize that boys can be victims of violence, exploitation, and abuse.

Fourth, protection of boys from exploitative labor; economic hardship should not become a justification for sacrificing a child's education and development.

Fifth, an intentional reform of harmful cultural practices; traditional institutions should work with government and civil society to eliminate discriminatory practices while preserving positive aspects of Nigerian culture.

Sixth, promotion of gender-sensitive education; schools should teach children about equality, consent, dignity, emotional intelligence and peaceful conflict resolution.

Seventh, responsible fatherhood should be encouraged, fathers have an especially important role in demonstrating to boys that masculinity is compatible with affection, care-giving and respect for women.

Eighth, ensuring equal educational opportunities; parents should not view education as more important for one sex than the other.

Ninth, the creation of safe spaces where boys can speak; schools, religious organizations and community organizations should create safe spaces where boys can discuss bullying, abuse, emotional difficulties, academic pressure and family problems without ridicule.