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MASCULINITY AND CARE IN TRANSITION: EMPTY NEST SYNDROME AND OMUGWO AMONG LEFT-BEHIND HUSBANDS IN ESAN, EDO STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the implications of omugwo (postpartum care) for husbands left behind, focusing on the challenges they face and the coping strategies they adopt during their wives' absence. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the study found that omugwo-related spousal absenteeism exposes men, particularly older ones, to loneliness, emotional distress, and care deficits. These vulnerabilities are compounded by the decline of extended family support, the influence of Westernization and Christianity in promoting monogamous households, and the migration of young adults who would traditionally assist with care. As a result, many men experience negative outcomes, including loneliness, depression, malnutrition, irregular access to food, and limited opportunities for social interaction and leisure. To manage these challenges, left-behind husbands rely on a combination of strategies, including support from extended family, friends, and religious networks; financial and practical assistance from church or mosque members; employing domestic workers and healthcare professionals; and maintaining frequent communication with spouses and children. The findings underscore that men's well-being and survival are significantly compromised in the absence of women's care, making coping both demanding and uneven. The study advocates for revitalizing the extended family as a social security mechanism, complemented by a multi-track social policy framework engaging government, civil society, and the private sector.

Keywords: Omugwo, empty nest syndrome, social adjustment, left-behind husbands, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

In Genesis 3:16, God pronounced a curse upon woman, declaring, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children" (New International Version). Across societies, this biblical imagery resonates with broader cultural constructions of childbirth as a physically and emotionally taxing process, often framed as an existential passage involving suffering, risk, and the possibility of death (Choudhry, et al, 2016). Anthropologically, childbirth is widely understood as a liminal event, a transition between life stages in which women occupy a socially vulnerable position requiring ritualized care, protection, and social support (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969; Davis-Floyd, 1992; Jordan, 1993). While some women survive childbirth, others do not, making successful delivery a culturally significant milestone that is widely celebrated. Among the Esan people of Edo State, South-South Nigeria, for instance, childbirth is symbolically interpreted as a journey between life and death; a woman who gives birth is believed to have metaphorically gone to hell and returned to life. Within this cosmology, the postpartum woman is understood as fragile and in need of sustained care, moral protection, and social

From an anthropological and sociological perspective, postpartum care systems reflect deeply embedded cultural logics of kinship, gender, and intergenerational obligation. Globally, postpartum care, known in parts of Nigeria as *omugwo*, has also gained recognition as a strategic public health intervention capable of reducing maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality, particularly in developing countries (Gülmezoglu, 2016). Beyond biomedical concerns, however, *Omugwo* represents a culturally sanctioned institution through which families mobilize gendered labour, redistribute domestic responsibilities, and reaffirm kinship ties following childbirth (Iwuagwu, 2023; Ogburn, 2018). In many societies, this takes the form of female-centred caregiving, where a woman's mother or mother-in-law temporarily assumes responsibility for domestic work, childcare, and emotional support. These practices are culturally understood to promote healing, prevent postpartum ill-health, and protect women from long-term reproductive and social consequences (Adegoke & Van den Broek, 2009).

In traditional Esan society, the organization of postpartum care (i.e., *Igbelogho omo non labie*) was facilitated by patterns of residence and marriage that emphasized spatial proximity and kinship continuity (Eboiyehi and Onwuzuruigbo, 2013). Young women commonly married within their villages or neighbouring communities, ensuring that mothers and mothers-in-law were readily available to provide care after childbirth. These caregivers could visit regularly, often in the mornings and evenings, while maintaining their own marital and domestic responsibilities, including looking after their husbands. Such arrangements were sustained by strong cultural norms that associate women with nurturing roles and position caregiving as a moral obligation embedded in womanhood, motherhood, and grand-motherhood (Eboiyehi, 2008b).

Comparative ethnographic studies across Nigeria further illustrate how postpartum care is embedded within broader systems of intergenerational reciprocity (Udegbe, 1990; Eboiyehi & Onwuzuruigbo, 2013; Iwuagwu, 2023; Nwokedi et al., 2025). For example, Udegbe's (1990) study, "*An Examination of Predictors of Adjustment in Old Age amongst Some Elderly Nigerian Women*," highlights how, among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, caregiving is reciprocal across the life course. While adult children provide care for ageing parents, older women, particularly grandmothers, continue to contribute as midwives, pediatric caregivers, babysitters, and informal educators of grandchildren. Grandfathers, by contrast, occupy complementary roles involving financial support, decision-making, and ritual mediation (Eboiyehi, 2008b). Among the Esan, grandfathers consult oracles and perform sacrifices to ensure the spiritual well-being of both mother and child, reinforcing the moral and cosmological dimensions of childbirth and caregiving (Eboiyehi & Onwuzuruigbo, 2013).

Among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, this culturally institutionalized postpartum period is known as *omugwo*. Typically commencing shortly after childbirth and lasting six to eight weeks, *omugwo* is characterized by special diets, enforced rest, seclusion, and intensive caregiving (Iwuagwu, 2023). Anthropologically, the practice functions as a rite of recuperation and reintegration, marking the woman's gradual return to full social and marital roles (Iwuagwu, 2023). From a gender studies perspective, *Omugwo* also highlights the centrality of women's unpaid reproductive labour and the expectation that older women will temporarily suspend their own marital obligations to support younger kin, particularly daughters or daughters-in-law (ibid, 2023). In addition to physical recovery, *Omugwo* facilitates nutritional regulation, early illness detection, psychosocial support, and access to sexual and reproductive health services, including postpartum family planning (Adebola, 2022). It may also provide a protective buffer for women experiencing intimate partner violence.

Despite its cultural value, Omugwo constitutes a period of intense transition for nursing mothers. The demands of newborn care, sleep disruption, and physical and emotional recovery often generate heightened stress and vulnerability (Hilli, 2011; Raynor, 2019; Odinka et al., 2019). Within this context, the presence of an experienced caregiver, usually the mother or mother-in-law, becomes critical. By bathing, soothing, and carrying the baby, and by interpreting infant cues, these caregivers alleviate maternal exhaustion and emotional strain. Raynor (2019) observes that such developmental transitions are “*frequently more stressful in bringing about more marked changes to roles, relationships, lifestyles, and family routines than any other single life event.*” When combined with existing stressors, these demands may increase the risk of psychological distress for the new mother (Jevitt et al., 2012). Consequently, cultural norms strongly prescribe the presence of a trusted female elder during the period of Omugwo. According to Iwuagwu (2023), although Omugwo is unpaid care work, grandmothers gain **social recognition, authority, and enhanced status** within the family and community. They also derive **emotional fulfilment, a sense of purpose, and strengthened intergenerational and affinal ties**, while transmitting cultural knowledge and caregiving skills. In addition, Omugwo generates **moral and reciprocal capital**, often leading to long-term support, respect, and inclusion for grandmothers within the kinship system (Iwuagwu, 2023).

While scholarship has emphasized the benefits of Omugwo for mothers and infants, family sociology draws attention to its implications for marital relationships and household organization. In Genesis 2:18, God declared, “*It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him,*” framing marriage as a relationship of companionship and mutual support. In contemporary Esan society, however, the practice of Omugwo or as in the case of Esan people, *Igbelogho omon non labie* (postpartum care), often requires married women, particularly mothers and mothers-in-law, to leave their marital homes temporarily, and sometimes for extended periods, to provide postpartum care for daughters or daughters-in-law. Although this practice reflects intergenerational solidarity and culturally valued caregiving norms, it simultaneously disrupts spousal co-residence and marital routines. As a result, husbands are frequently left to manage domestic labour, emotional needs, and daily sustenance independently during the omugwo period (Onyeze, n.d.).

Within Nigerian society, grand-motherhood is deeply rooted in familism, intergenerational obligation, and gendered expectations of care (Busari & Adebayo, 2022). Feminist scholars also argue that such familist arrangements disproportionately assign unpaid caregiving labour to older women, reinforcing patriarchal gender ideologies (Lee & Bauer, 2013; Busari & Adebayo, 2022). However, this critique has been challenged for privileging women’s experiences while overlooking men’s roles, particularly those of grandfathers and husbands affected by caregiving-induced absences (Mann, 2007; Lie, 2010). Despite urbanization and the rise of nuclear family structures, indigenous postpartum practices such as *omugwo*, *ojojo omo*, *igbelogho-omon non labie* and *jago* continue to anchor grandmothers as custodians of care and transmitters of cultural knowledge (Obikeze, 1997). Migration and diaspora grandmothering further complicate these dynamics, at times destabilizing patriarchal household arrangements and reshaping marital companionship and gender relations (Akanle & Oluwakemi, 2012; Busari & Adebayo, 2022).

Despite the pervasiveness of omugwo in Nigerian society, existing scholarship has overwhelmingly centred on mothers and infants, paying limited attention to the experiences of men whose wives temporarily relocate or “permanently” for postpartum caregiving. This study addresses this gap by examining Omugwo as a culturally embedded institution that restructures gender relations, kinship obligations, and marital life. Specifically, it asks: What cultural meanings and practices underpin omugwo (*igbelogho-omo non labie*) in Esan culture? How are women’s traditional roles as wives and mothers constructed and sustained within this context? How do men perceive omugwo in relation to marital companionship and spousal absence? What challenges do men encounter when their wives travel to urban centres or abroad to participate in *Igbelogho*

omon (omugwo)? Finally, what coping strategies do men adopt to manage the social, emotional, and practical consequences of spousal absence during the this period? By foregrounding men's perspectives, this study contributes to anthropological, gender, and family sociological debates on caregiving, ageing, and the reconfiguration of marital and intergenerational relations in contemporary Nigerian culture, using Esan of Edo State as a case study.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are to

1. examine the concept, cultural significance, and contemporary practice of *omugwo* in Esan;
2. analyze the traditional roles of women as wives and mothers within Nigerian cultural systems and how these roles shape expectations around care;
3. explore men's perceptions and interpretations of *omugwo* in the context of marriage and family life;
4. identify and analyze the challenges faced by men whose wives travel for *omugwo*, including emotional, social, domestic, and health-related challenges;
5. examine the coping strategies employed by men during periods of spousal absence, including reliance on family networks, religious institutions, friends, and paid care arrangements; and
6. explore the implications of *omugwo*-related spousal absence for marital relations, gender roles, and care arrangements in contemporary Nigerian society.

The Concept of *Omugwo* (*Igbelogho omon non labie*)

In this section, the terms *Omugwo*, *Igbelogho omon non labie*, and postpartum care are used interchangeably to refer to traditional post-birth caregiving practices. *Omugwo* is an Igbo word for care-giving to a woman who has just given birth to a baby. It is a cultural response to the burden on the mother that arises with the arrival of a newborn baby after delivery (Adejuyigbe, 2015). In other words, it implies that care of the new mother is generally taken over by her mother, mother-in-law, or another female relative, depending on who is available during the period (Lawal *et al.*, 2022). It is a period when the household tasks, which typically include cooking, cleaning, and bathing the baby, are taken over by the mother or the mother-in-law (Okeke, Ugwu & Ezenyeaku, 2013). In the Nigerian cultures, particularly among the Igbos of the southeast and the Esan of the south-south, this time is regarded as a special period in a new mother's life. It helps create a sense of intimacy for nursing mothers, making them aware that they are not on the journey of motherhood alone, as they can always lean on others for care and support whenever needed (Nwokedi, Kanu, & Green, 2025). Among the Igbos as in other parts in Nigeria, motherhood was not considered as a private affair but essentially a support system for new mothers in providing care for their babies in the early post-delivery period (Lawal *et al.*, 2022).

Although *Omugwo* is an Igbo concept that is not globally widespread, its practice is found to have been entrenched in many cultures in Nigeria including the Esan. Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, after birth care also referred to as *Olojojo Omo*. Among the Akwa Iboms of south-south Nigeria, it is known as *umuaan* and *Igbeloghomon non labie* among the Esan respectively. In these cultures, it demands that both the mother and the mother-in-law are present to take care of the daughter, daughter-in-law, and the baby. It is also culturally believed that nursing mothers with low social support have a higher probability of developing anxiety and depression than those with optimal social support" (Taylor, 1989; Sanjana & Jayashankar, 2013). It is therefore, not surprising, that during *omugwo*, the nursing woman is prevented from doing anything except sleep, eat, breastfeed, bath and receive visitors. The mother, or mother-in-law as the case may be, does all the chores and child care to allow the mother regain her strength after a long and months of excruciating pain during childbirth, justifying why she must leave her marital home to provide care and support for her newly born daughter or daughter-in-law (Nzeribe, 2025). In some cases, the mother-in-law or the woman's mother leaves after 40 days or less to enable the new

mother recuperate well (The Guardian Nigeria, 2018, November 7). In other cultures, she remains till after the naming ceremony or even spends up to 3 months depending on their lifestyle (Lolo, 2018). Among the Esan of Edo State in south-south Nigeria, the mother of the woman or mother-in-law leaves after 60 days (three months) after the *ihó-eto* (naming ceremony), depending on how quickly the new mother recovers. While the mother or mother-in-law of the nursing mother is away in the city or abroad to participate in *omugwo* or *igbeloghomon*, the husband is left to manage on his own, including taking responsibility for the household.

Traditionally, and before western civilization began to make its inroads into the lives and cultures of the Esan people, the man (husband) did not experience neglect or isolation because Esan culture permitted him to marry as many wives as he could afford (Eboiyehi, 2015). When one of his wives travelled to participate in *igbeloghomon*, other wives remained to take care of their husbands in a polygynous family system. Because women married within the same or nearby village, the mother of the nursing mother or her mother-in-law did not need to travel far. It was easier for them to perform after birth care from her house, usually in the mornings and evenings. The issue of who took care of the husband was also not a problem as it was culturally imperative for other wives, members of the extended family, which included the children, sisters, and children's wives, to provide care and support for him. Thus, while one wife is absent, the husband enjoys the comfort of other wives, his children, and other extended family members for his well-being. This social relationship and structure of the extended family in the traditional Esan society were such that they promoted closeness among members, thus reducing the problems of isolation, loneliness, abandonment, or hunger when any of the wives is unavailable (Eboiyehi, 2008a). Their well-being is often defined in terms of space (e.g., co-residence) or time (household assistance or care) (National Research Council, 2001). Thus, in the traditional Esan culture, co-residence remained an important source of care and support for every member of the family, including the husband, the elderly, as well as the children. By this, their physical, economic, social, and emotional needs were met through this informal network (Fadipe, 1970; Eboiyehi & Onwuzuruigbo, 2014). The general situation that prevailed in the traditional Nigerian society and the high esteem men enjoyed made people aspire to have many wives and children.

Unfortunately, the intergenerational relationships outlined above have been shaped by external forces, which have not only altered cultural orientations but, in some cases, disrupted the family-based care and support systems traditionally characteristic of African societies (Otaki, 1998; Eboiyehi, 2013). Moreover, as part of the process of rapid demographic and socio-economic change due mainly to westernization or modernization, the structure and functions of the family are continuing to undergo considerable change. For instance, the introduction of Christianity, which emphasizes and encourages monogamous marriages of one man and one wife, has contributed in no small measure to the weakening of the extended family system, which used to provide care and support to its members, including communal ties that used to unite the family system together. This is combined with the strong trend towards nucleation of family structure, which implies that the well-being of men and other family members could be weak during spousal absenteeism. Moreover, the ongoing trend of women migrating abroad to participate in *Igbelogho omon* in countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, and others has often left men to manage on their own, with little regard for how these left-behind husbands cope (Lewis et al., 2025). In Esan culture, male involvement in postpartum care (*igbeloghomon*) is traditionally prohibited and regarded as taboo. Also, the saying *uwa akhuan, akhuan yuo* (a man is expected to stay and die in his house) reinforces the notion that *Igbelogho omon* is exclusively a female responsibility, limiting men's involvement in postpartum care. The introduction of Western lifestyles through Christianity, which promotes monogamous marriage, has coincided with the gradual erosion of extended family systems that traditionally supported men when their wives were away, leaving many men to manage household responsibilities on their own (Eboiyehi, 2008b).

Consequently, it has become increasingly common for these men to adapt by eating fast food and sleeping alone. In some instances, affluent children employ young women to assist with household tasks. There have been reported cases in which the 'oga' (husband) develops a

romantic relationship with the *omo-odo* (housemaid), sometimes resulting in marital tensions or breakdowns (Tribune Online, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies of left-behind men whose wives travelled to participate in *igbeloghomon* (postpartum care or *omugwo*). The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of culturally embedded practices and the subjective meanings men attach to spousal absence within the Esan socio-cultural context.

The study was conducted among the Esan of Edo State, South–South Nigeria, specifically in two Local Government Areas: Esan Central and Esan North-East. These Local Government Areas were purposively selected due to their strong cultural adherence to the practice of *igbeloghomon* (*omugwo* or postpartum care), in which women used to travel to their natal homes after childbirth for postpartum care.

The study population comprised left-behind men/husbands whose wives travelled to participate in *igbelogho omon non labie* (*omugwo*) following childbirth. These men were drawn from rural communities within the two selected LGAs and represented individuals directly affected by spousal absence during the postpartum period.

A non-probability sampling approach was employed in this study. Twelve rural communities were selected from each of the two LGAs. For this study, six villages were purposively chosen from Esan Central Local Government Area, namely, Ujabhole Udomi, Ibhiolulu, Unogbo, Idumuoghodo, and Afuda, along with six villages of Onewa, Unuwazi, Awo, Utako, Amedokhian, and Uzea in Esan North East.

There was no rigid sampling framework; participants were identified through convenience sampling as eligible men were encountered and consented to participate. In addition, snowball sampling was used, whereby initial participants referred other left-behind men/husbands who met the study criteria. In total, thirty-two left-behind men participated in the study.

The study relied on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were generated through in-depth interviews with the selected participants. Secondary data were obtained from newspapers, magazines, and relevant internet-based sources to provide contextual and empirical support for the analysis.

Data were collected using in-depth interviews guided by a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews explored key issues such as the cultural meaning and practice of *omugwo* among the Esan; women's traditional roles as wives within Esan cultural settings and men's perceptions of *omugwo* in relation to marital life and spousal absence. The challenges experienced by men during their wives' absence, and the coping strategies adopted to manage the social, emotional, and practical consequences of spousal absence during the period of *igbelogho omon* (postpartum care) were also interrogated.

Interviews were conducted in the Esan dialect and Nigerian Pidgin English, depending on participants' preferences. Nigerian Pidgin English, a widely spoken lingua franca, is commonly used in both formal and informal contexts across Nigeria, which facilitated effective communication and enhanced participants' comfort during the interview process.

FINDINGS

The Traditional Roles of Women as Wives and Mothers within Nigerian Cultural Systems

Traditionally, Esan women's sphere of activities clusters around the homes and attendant occupations. Before Western education was introduced, the main duty of woman aside from reproduction, was to cater for the entire household (Oyekanmi, 2000; Eboiyehi, 2008). More importantly, care for husband and children was seen as a woman's main responsibility, which

should always be at the back of their hearts. When asked about the traditional roles of Esan women, a male interviewee (65,) from Ujabhole village explained:

An Esan woman is a mother, a wife, and a housekeeper. She plans with her husband, manages households, helps in farm work, and partakes in cultural rituals and local trade.

According to Mr. A (71, pseudonym) from Uzea village:

An Esan woman is very industrious. She is a manager, and nurturer of her children and carer of her husband and the elderly within the household. She is a market woman and actively participates in household and communal decision-making. She helps her husband in the farm and in making major decisions.

Correspondingly, Mr. X (67, pseudonym) of Amendokhian village further noted:

A good woman is the backbone of her husband. Without woman, the man cannot survive or make progress. She cooks and wash his clothes, guides her daughters in cultural norms, skills, and social behaviour. She also supports husband, manages extended family relations, and ensures family cohesion. A woman in Esan culture also takes care of older members of her family procreation and of her own family of orientation.

In addition, Mr. V (70, pseudonym) of Udomi village stated thus:

In Esan, women are traditionally responsible for giving birth to children, raising them, and managing their early education and care. They also oversee domestic chores like cooking, cleaning, fetching water, and maintaining the home. They take care of the daughters and daughters-in-law when they give birth to babies.

These stereotypes built around women in different Nigerian cultures, including Esan, have resulted in seeing women as invisible producers as a result of the traditional belief in the myth of familism (Michel, 1981:155-158). The myth of familism, according to Michel (1981), sees the family as “a unit of production and home as a place of women”. These findings align with Aluko’s (2006) study, *“Women in Higher Education in Nigeria: Progress and Constraints,”* which revealed that tasks such as housekeeping, preparing meals for the husband and children, and laundering clothes were traditionally considered the exclusive responsibility of women. Therefore, if she must provide after-birth care (*omugwo*) for her daughter or daughter-in-law, she could go in the morning and in the evening and return to cook for the husband and children. Thus, a traditional Esan woman was often congruent with the traditional stereotype of a complete housewife, as the worth of a good housewife is often measured in terms of her success in family matters. An ideal African woman was therefore summarized in the words of the British colonial administrative officers who gave a clear picture of her thus:

One whose place was in the home, and whose main goal in life was to be a good wife and mother, subordinate to her husband and economically dependent on her husband (Denzer, 1945).

Consistent with the above, Obi (1998) also noted that “a good housewife puts glamour in housekeeping, childcare, and wellbeing of the husband”. “She sacrifices her personal ambitions and pleasure, offers companionship, friendship, and acts as her husband’s helpmate”. “She is a home manager and serves as caregiver to the husband and children (Obi, 1998). Her husband is just as much in need of her as she is of him (Ndongko, 1976). She sets certain standards that help to relieve the strain, stress, and tension of the husband. “A proper woman puts the family interest first before even her own personal interest” (Maathai, 2011). She supports her husband and helps him maintain a good home. In his novel, “Things Fall Apart”, Chinua and Achebe describes the roles of an Igbo woman thus:

Her traditional role is to care for the husband and children. She supports her husband and contributes immensely to the economic well-being of their families. She is a bridge builder and connects one family, kinship, and community to another through marital relationships. Every other responsibility that the woman assumes stems from this role.

Among the Esan of South-South Nigeria, marital relationships are often deeply shaped by culturally embedded notions of hierarchy and gender roles. Within this context, a wife traditionally perceives her husband as *ebi-anlemen*, a term that can be understood as “my lord who owes me”, reflecting both respect and recognition of his authority within the household. Conversely, the husband often regards his wife as *okhan non semen*, implying that she is “my child”, and ultimately subordinate to his authority.

This hierarchical relationship establishes the husband’s word as both rule and law, which the wife is expected to follow unconditionally. Consequently, the wife assumes extensive domestic responsibilities, including washing her husband’s clothes, running errands, cooking, making his bed, and providing emotional and practical care and support. These duties are not merely tasks; they symbolize obedience, loyalty, and the maintenance of household order, reflecting the broader social expectation that women uphold the stability and moral fabric of the family.

Such dynamics highlight the intersection of culture, gender, and power within Esan marital life, illustrating how traditional norms continue to shape domestic roles, obligations, and authority in contemporary society.

Like the Igbo, Esan girl is raised to care for her husband and children. Her duty is also to assist her husband in running the house. She does this by assisting the man to make wise decisions through good counsel. She is expected to grow into a woman capable of taking care of her husband’s home in the future. She must be able to prepare delicious meals like her own mother for her husband, as the skills to become a better woman are easily transmitted by her mother (Iwuagwu, 2023). The social relationship promoted closeness between husband and wife, thus reducing the problems of isolation and loneliness of her husband. She knows her participation in *Igbeloghon omon (Omugwo)* beyond the expected period may dent her role as a good wife to her husband, which people may regard as neglect or abandonment (Iwuagwu, 2023).

Men’s Perceptions of Omugwo

The participants were asked about their perceptions of *omugwo*, and their responses revealed both positive and negative standpoints. The majority of the interviewees (23) perceived *omugwo* as a culturally significant practice that supports postpartum women and newborns. However, many simultaneously experienced it as disruptive to marital companionship and everyday household functioning. Twenty-one out of the 32 interviewees acknowledged *omugwo* as a morally and culturally appropriate response to childbirth, particularly for first-time mothers. During the in-depth interview, Mr. L (67, pseudonym) of Unogbo village stated:

Culturally, Omugwo is good. It is a way of guaranteeing proper childcare, particularly for first-time mothers. It also shows our children that we are always there for them and they have our shoulders to lean on. It will not be proper therefore, for a family to abandon its own in times of need. New mothers lack experience, so they need support during this critical period.

Similarly, Mr S (68, pseudonym) from Idumoghodo village affirmed the caregiving rationale of *omugwo* as follows:

It is good to take care of women when they give birth. At childbirth, they need care and support, and it is the mother who should provide this because of her experience. Omugwo ensures that the new mother is not alone and it thereby promotes family solidarity. When women go for omugwo, men should try to manage. Omugwo is not forever.

These accounts show a shared view of *omugwo* as a practice that promotes family support across generations, moral responsibility, and social unity. However, despite this recognition, some interviewees emphasized that *omugwo* reinforces traditional gender divisions of labour, leaving men unprepared to cope with domestic and caregiving responsibilities during their wives' absence. These concerns were particularly pronounced among older men interviewees. Mr. C (68, pseudonym) from Onewa village lamented thus:

I struggled daily with cooking, laundry, cleaning, and overall household management. I was neither accustomed to these tasks nor prepared for them, and at my age, the burden has become overwhelming.

Similarly, Mr. D (78, pseudonym) from Awo village, Esan North East, also described the emotional toll of spousal absence thus:

Since my wife travelled to London to take care of our daughter who put to birth three months ago, I have been experiencing deep loneliness. Even in the company of friends, I still feel alone, and at my age, this has been particularly difficult.

These narratives illustrate how *omugwo*, while culturally authorized, also exposes men, especially the older ones, to emotional vulnerability, anxiety, and isolation, particularly when wives' absences are elongated or encompass transnational travel.

To deepen understanding of men's lived experiences, the study further drew on narrative and opinion-based reflections from Nigerian men expressed in public discourse, specifically from OnePageAfrica (2012). Thus, these purposively selected excerpts were obtained from OnePageAfrica (2012) to reflect shared sentiments and complement the interview data generated for this study. These excerpts highlight some distresses caused by extended *omugwo* periods:

Excerpt I

My dad did not find my mother's Omugwo easy at all... The two weeks she was away were like two years. My dad complained of not being given food at the right time and many other excuses.

Excerpt II

My father wanted his wife back... During this period, my father kept complaining of being lonely and depressed in her absence. You can imagine the fate of those with no nearby relatives.

Excerpt III

I wouldn't mind my wife going for Omugwo if it's the first time. What I don't like is repeated or prolonged stays. Women often don't consider how their husbands are faring during these periods.

Excerpt IV

Those who go abroad are the most difficult. They should be given a time frame. How do they expect men to cope alone for such a long period?

Excerpt V

Omugwo is creating stress and loneliness for men due to the prolonged absence of my wife. I am left alone with children and domestic duties, which affect my social life.

Excerpt VI

My role as a man is to provide and make decisions, not to be a caregiver. Omugwo sidelines men and supports traditional femininity. Since my wife travelled, I have experienced frustration and loneliness.

These narratives highlight how cultural exclusion from caregiving roles reinforces men's passivity, isolation, and emotional neglect during the Omugwo (postpartum) period. Little wonder that Mr. CO (68, pseudonym) from Ibiolulu village described *Omugwo* as "a cultural practice that puts asunder what God has joined together." According to him, men increasingly bear the burden of *omugwo* during their wives' absences. According to him:

Men are at the receiving end, especially now that the extended family system, which once supported its members, is gradually eroding due to Western influence.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that men's perceptions of *omugwo* reflect a clear duality. On one hand, *omugwo* is valued as a culturally meaningful practice that promotes maternal and infant wellbeing, intergenerational care, and social solidarity, while on the other hand, prolonged spousal absence generates emotional strain, loneliness, domestic overload, financial pressure, and weakened marital companionship, particularly among older men. This dual experience underscores the complex and gendered impact of omugwo on marriage, ageing, and household dynamics, especially within a context of declining extended family support, increasing migration, and entrenched patriarchal expectations.

The Challenges Faced by Men Whose Wives Travel for Omugwo

The interviewees were further asked to reflect on the challenges they experienced when their wives travelled to participate in *omugwo*. Their responses revealed that the prolonged absence of wives has far-reaching implications for them, particularly at the intersection of marriage, ageing, migration, and gendered expectations of care. Although *omugwo* is culturally approved and widely understood as a practice intended to support postpartum women and newborns, it simultaneously generates unintended vulnerabilities for men, especially older men, whose well-being is closely tied to spousal companionship, care, and everyday interaction.

A central theme that emerged from the interviews is the disruption of marital companionship. Marriage was consistently described as a key source of emotional intimacy, mutual support, and daily interaction. When wives were absent for extended periods, men reported a loss of these relational resources, resulting in emotional strain and weakened marital bonds. For instance, Mr. PO (71, pseudonym) from Unuwazi village explained:

My wife and I share a close and intimate bond; she is my confidant and my primary source of care, emotional support, and companionship. Her absence has left me feeling lonely even in the presence of others, and I deeply miss her companionship.

Closely related to the loss of companionship was the experience of loneliness and psychological distress. Left-behind husbands described feelings of isolation, sadness, emotional insecurity, and anxiety, often intensified by advancing age, declining health, and reduced social networks. Loneliness became more pronounced when spousal absence extended beyond the culturally expected duration of *omugwo* or occurred repeatedly. In relation to the above, Mr. BC (69, pseudonym) from Ibhiolulu village remarked:

My wife's absence generated a profound sense of loneliness, emotional unease, and a feeling of dislocation within the household. Sometimes, I feel lonely in the midst of friends.

Consistent with this finding, Goody (1973) and Smith (2010) similarly observe that spousal absence undermines traditional social and caregiving structures, thereby increasing the likelihood of isolation in the absence of wives. In addition to emotional strain, 16 interviewees reported having to take on domestic and caregiving tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping, and farm work, which, for men raised within patriarchal norms, led to significant psychological stress and feelings of insecurity. A 72 year old man popularly known as Old soldier (pseudonym) by the villagers in Unogbo village described the cumulative burden of combining paid work with domestic responsibilities as follows:

My major challenge has been balancing my official work with domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and shopping. These tasks have been extremely demanding since my wife travelled. I cannot recall the last time I went to the market, returned from work, and immediately began cooking. At times, the cumulative strain has led to physical exhaustion and illness.

This finding is largely attributable to spousal absence associated with *omugwo*, as women often temporarily leave their husbands to travel to urban centres or abroad, particularly to Europe and North America, to provide postpartum support. This finding also aligns with Isiugo-Abanihe's (2003) study, which shows that the practice of *omugwo* embodies strong intergenerational responsibility but frequently leaves husbands managing daily life alone, thereby challenging cultural ideals of co-residence and marital companionship.

In addition, Mr. CO highlighted the social stigma associated with men's engagement in domestic work:

My neighbours and friends used to laugh at me when they see me in the market or find me in the kitchen cooking. They threatened sewing skirt and blouse for me. I find this very embarrassing and emotionally uncomfortable.

The above experience illustrates how domestic role reversals not only create physical exhaustion but also expose men to ridicule and emotional discomfort within their communities. For some of the interviewees, the inability to cope with household demands led to reliance on paid domestic help, which introduced additional financial pressures. A middle aged man, popularly known as Charly boy (56, pseudonym) from Unuwazi village explained:

I found it extremely difficult to cope with the demands created by my wife's absence. As a result, I now pay people to assist with laundry, meal preparation, and household cleaning. These additional expenses have placed considerable strain on my household finances, particularly given my limited income.

He further described how the weakening of traditional support systems was responsible for his action. He affirmed thus:

In the past, my brothers' wives and children provided support whenever my wife travelled. However, this support system has been weakened over the years, as some of them have married while others have migrated to urban centres in search of better economic opportunities, making things difficult.

The erosion of extended family support reflects broader social transformations associated with urbanization, migration, and declining collectivist norms.

Coping Strategies Men Employ during Spousal Absence

Regarding how left-behind men cope with their spouses' absence, they reported relying on alternative support networks, such as extended family, friends, religious communities, and paid domestic help, as well as remittances from children and phone communication, although these measures rarely fully replaced the care and companionship of their wives. For instance, during IDIs in Udomi village, an interviewee BO (76, pseudonym) remarked:

My children are a tremendous support to me. They regularly send money and medications, and they even hire a nurse to care for me whenever I am ill. Additionally, I have a house help who assists with domestic chores.

In the study also reveal an increasing reliance on religious institutions and voluntary associations, particularly churches. Particularly, Faith-based institutions emerged as most critical coping resources. They provide emotional reassurance, material assistance, and social inclusion for left-behind husbands. For instance, Mr. AK (76, pseudonym) from Afuda village, whose wife has been away for omugwo for over two years, recounted his struggles with basic domestic tasks during his wife's absence, symbolized by an incident in which he carried a jerry can of water on his head. His narrative illustrates the extent of domestic dislocation experienced by older men

and highlights the role of religious communities in cushioning these challenges through practical help and emotional support. He recounted thus:

I would have struggled to cope without the support of my church members. When my wife traveled to the UK for Omugwo, I was left alone. All my children had graduated and moved away, leaving me to handle all household chores by myself. One day, I went to fetch water from a nearby stream with a jerry can on my head. A church member saw me and informed the pastor. Since then, some members of the church have been helping me with cooking, fetching water, cleaning, laundry, and sometimes even contributing money. Occasionally, they send their children to assist me; without their support, I would have had to manage everything alone.

Furthermore, an interviewee, by name Kolo (68, pseudonym) from Utako, affirmed:

Suffering often brings frustration. When none of my relatives are around to help, I initially feel restless. Like anyone, I want to survive. With no wife or family to rely on, I have no choice but to take matters into my own hands—going to the market, preparing my own meals, and handling everything myself. I do what I must to stay alive.

More often than not, left-behind husbands cope through phone contact with family, remittances from adult children, and support from neighbours or religious communities, showing how they actively mobilize diverse resources to manage domestic, emotional, and health challenges. Mr. Igerase of Ujabhole village (63) whose wife have been away in for two months in Germany had this to say:

I keep in regular touch with my wife and children, and these conversations give me a lot of emotional support. Most of the time, we connect through video calls, which really helps to ease the loneliness I sometimes feel.

The above finding aligns with Haan's (1982) view that such strategies serve as ways for husbands left behind to cope with stress and adapt to the changes in their daily household routines.

The study also reveals that friends and extended family members also assist without formal solicitation despite its decline underscoring the residual strength of kin-based obligations. Mr. X had this to say:

My friends often come by to keep me company, and their wives are always very helpful. They bring me food, assist with fetching water, help clean the house, and even take care of the laundry. Their support makes daily life much easier.

Female kin such as sisters, daughters-in-law, and nieces also stepped in to handle domestic and caregiving tasks. In his response, Mr. BBC (65, pseudonym), from Udomi village described his experiences thus:

My brothers' wives, children, and my sisters' families have been of immense assistance. They ensured that I did not feel too keenly the absence of my wife. While they help with domestic tasks, my brothers and sisters also visit regularly to keep me company. Additionally, my second wife has been of tremendous support.

This finding reflects Hochschild's (2000) concept of the global care chain, where care gaps are addressed through social networks. This also shows that traditional gender roles in Esan communities continue, with women taking on household tasks instead of men. The above finding also supports other existing research (Renzaho et al., 2011; Mokomane, 2013; Tanle, 2023), showing that the extended family among the Esan still acts as an informal safety net during times of crisis or vulnerability. However, while extended family remains important, their assistance increasingly served to supplement rather than replace other coping strategies, such as support from religious groups and paid care services.

Supports from children, particularly involved adult children, living in cities or abroad were found to be key coping strategies. Many of these children arranged professional support for their fathers, such as medical check-ups and domestic help. Mr. JB (67, pseudonym) from Onewa village, whose wife has been in Lagos for 3 years, stated:

My children abroad regularly send money for my upkeep and even provide clothing. They bought the car outside for me and sent money to pay my driver. But I must say, money and food mean little when there is no one to share your thoughts with. My greatest challenge is loneliness. It feels as if I am alone in the midst of a crowd. At my age, I need someone to talk to, run errands, cook for me, and discuss matters with. Yet, my wife's stay is being prolonged. What I never had to do when I was young was cooking, washing clothes, going to the market. I am now doing it myself if there is no one to help. It is as hard as that, and very sad. Unfortunately, here in Esan, no one wants to work as a house help; pride keeps them away. I must admit, I deeply miss my wife and wish she were here.

This account illustrates a shift from kin-based caregiving to market-mediated support, in which transnational children fulfil familial obligations primarily through remittances and material provisions. While such support addresses practical needs, it fails to replace the emotional, relational, and moral dimensions of care traditionally provided within the household. Despite being materially comfortable, the respondent experiences profound loneliness, revealing the limits of commodified care. The prolonged absence of his wife disrupts everyday companionship and gendered domestic arrangements, compelling him to assume unfamiliar household tasks. At the same time, the scarcity and social stigma of domestic help further weaken informal care networks. Overall, the findings show that monetized care alleviates material hardship but deepens emotional vulnerability, underscoring the irreplaceability of intimate, family-based caregiving in later life.

Conclusion

This study shows that when wives travel for omugwo, men face significant social, emotional, and practical challenges due to deeply gendered household roles. Coping strategies are layered, combining kin, religious, community, and paid resources, but support systems are increasingly fragile amid urbanization, migration, and the decline of extended families. The findings highlight the need to strengthen both informal and formal care networks through integrated social policies to address men's vulnerabilities and adapt to changing family structures in contemporary Nigeria.

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