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Conflict Management Strategies Used by Male-Headed and Female-Headed Households in Imo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the kinds of conflict found in male-headed and female-headed households in Imo State, Nigeria, the strategies that heads of these households use to manage conflict, and the challenges they face. A structured questionnaire, validated by experts and tested for reliability by the test-retest method (r = .77), was administered in 2023 to 252 household heads (126 men and 126 women) in rural and urban communities across the three senatorial zones of the state. Data were analysed with frequencies and percentages. Most male heads were married (53.97%), while most female heads were widowed (42.86%) or married (34.13%), and 11.90% of female heads were single. The most common monthly income of male heads was ₦30,001 to ₦40,000 (31.75%), close to the national minimum wage of ₦30,000 then in force, while that of female heads was ₦10,001 to ₦20,000 (27.78%). Respondents reported conflicts over land and inheritance, family business, in-law and extended-family relations, religion and the sex of children, among others. Male heads relied mainly on dominating and confrontation, whereas female heads relied more on compromise, collaboration and avoidance; both groups used mediation by kinsmen (umunna and umuada), traditional rulers and religious leaders. Poor communication, pride, low literacy and third-party interference were the main challenges. Conflict theory and the dual-concerns model were used to interpret the findings. The study recommends that government, traditional leaders and other stakeholders review cultural practices that oppress women, and that customary mediation be linked with formal alternative dispute resolution.

Keywords: Conflict Management Strategies; Male-Headed Households; Female-Headed Households; Gender; Imo State

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Introduction

Whether male or female heads of households manage conflict better is still an open question. It is often argued that men and women use different strategies to manage conflict, but it has not been established that either manages conflict better within the household. According to the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey, 36% of ever-married women in Nigeria had experienced emotional, physical or sexual violence from a spouse (National Population Commission & ICF, 2019). A regional analysis of the same survey put the prevalence of any intimate partner violence at 35.9% nationally and 48.3% in the South-East, with emotional violence the most common form (Adebowale et al., 2025). In Imo State, a household survey found a lifetime prevalence of domestic violence of 72.8% and a current prevalence of 42.6% among women (Duru et al., 2018). Men can also experience emotional and economic abuse from their partners.

Conflict is a natural part of human relationships, and effective conflict management is needed to keep harmony and well-being within households. Despite the high level of education, commercial activity and exposure in Imo State, male and female heads of households still face tension within patriarchal settings and societal expectations. Domestic violence has been reported across religious, educational and occupational groups in Southern Nigeria, and economic hardship, poverty, unemployment and weak

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enforcement of legal protections such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act continue to sustain cycles of household conflict in the region (Omotoso et al., 2024).

The agitation of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South-East has also taken on new dynamics. The group's security outfit, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), has clashed with federal and state security agencies such as the police, the military, the Department of State Services, Ebubeagu and community vigilante groups (Chukwudi et al., 2019). Attacks by the so-called unknown gunmen on community and traditional leaders and on state establishments have left households devastated, caused the death of heads of households and weakened economic activity, which has in turn changed how conflict is managed in Imo State. Single parenting is increasing as a result of divorce and separation, and widowhood has left men and women to take on roles that were once seen as specific to one gender.

Statement of the Problem

A central challenge facing families in Imo State is the prevalence of domestic, economic and interpersonal conflict, together with a lack of structured and effective means of resolving it. In traditional Igbo society, conflict management relies on patriarchal frameworks, cultural norms and the intervention of kinship networks such as the umunna (male kindred) and the umuada (daughters of the lineage). However, economic change, urbanisation and poverty have altered household dynamics and contributed to a rise in both male-headed and female-headed households.

Male and female heads of households may approach conflict differently because of differences in socialisation, control of resources and societal expectations. Male-headed households often operate under traditional expectations of authority. This can provide a clear hierarchy for decisions, but it can also lead to power assertion, suppression of grievances, or reliance on external patriarchal structures that may not address the emotional or economic causes of conflict. Female-headed households, which frequently arise from widowhood, divorce, separation or the migration of a male partner, often operate under economic constraints, cultural marginalisation and a lack of institutional backing. Female heads may therefore rely more on collaborative, defensive or religious coping strategies, yet they often meet resistance when they try to enforce decisions outside male oversight.

Much of the literature on conflict management in South-East Nigeria deals with communal, land and political clashes. Empirical research at the household level, comparing the strategies and challenges of male-headed and female-headed households in Imo State, appears to be limited. Ineffective conflict management in households may contribute to marital breakdown, domestic violence and psychological harm to children, and it may drain the emotional and financial resources of families. Without empirical data on these patterns, policymakers, non-governmental organisations and family counsellors cannot design interventions suited to each type of household.

The study therefore addressed the following research questions:

i. What are the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents?
ii. What kinds of conflict exist in male-headed and female-headed households in Imo State?
iii. What conflict management strategies are used by male and female heads of households in Imo State?
iv. What challenges do male and female heads of households face in managing conflict in Imo State?
v. Which group, male or female heads of households, is more experienced and likely to manage conflict better in Imo State?

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study was to examine the conflict management strategies used by male-headed and female-headed households in Imo State. The specific objectives were to:

i. describe the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents;
ii. identify the kinds of conflict in male-headed and female-headed households in Imo State;
iii. examine the conflict management strategies used by male and female heads of households in Imo State;

iv. identify the challenges that male and female heads of households face in managing conflict in Imo State; and
v. ascertain which group, male or female heads of households, is more experienced and likely to manage conflict better in Imo State.

Significance of the Study

This study is relevant to the understanding of family dynamics and to the design of gender-inclusive family policies in South-East Nigeria. In Imo State, culture shapes household interactions, and the study examines conflict around the control of resources. Conflict theory holds that those who control resources within a family hold the main decision-making power, which influences how disputes arise and are resolved. Traditional structures have long legitimised male dominance, and this can itself drive conflict. The study compares how male heads handle conflict with authority and how female heads, often widows or single mothers, manage disputes without traditional patriarchal backing. Edinyang (2012) notes that family conflicts centre on struggles over power, wealth and prestige, so that the family often mirrors the wider inequalities of society.

The study also moves away from Western conflict models that may not fit African settings, where extended family systems and communal obligations often take precedence over individual autonomy. It provides local data that marriage counsellors, non-governmental organisations and social workers in Owerri and its environs can use to tailor their interventions to male-headed or female-headed households. Unresolved household tension lowers the quality of life, reduces productivity and causes psychological distress for parents and children. In Imo State, where family farms and shared resources are common, the management of domestic conflict also affects economic survival. Nwachukwu (2001) found that effective communication and structured family counselling reduce the effects of family crises.

Scope of the Study

The research focused on the conflict management strategies used by male-headed and female-headed households in Imo State, Nigeria. It was carried out in the three senatorial zones of the state: Owerri, Orlu and Okigwe.

Literature Review

Conceptual Clarification

Conflict

Conflict is an inevitable part of human interaction and arises from differences in perceptions, goals and values. It often stems from incompatible goals and social divisions and is made worse by scarcity of resources and differences in identity (Mishra, 2023). Conflicts can produce negative emotions and reduce productivity, but when they are well managed they can also encourage innovation and cooperation. Most complex conflicts involve several related issues, such as basic human needs and the availability of resources. Differences in values and imbalances of power are common causes of disputes, and misunderstanding and misperception contribute to hostile relationships. At its core, conflict is disagreement, contradiction or incompatibility, and it is expressed through animosity, prejudice, hostility, aggression, competition and poor communication.

Kinds of Conflict in Male-Headed and Female-Headed Households in Imo State

In this study, conflicts in households are grouped into three kinds: domestic, economic and group conflict.

Domestic conflict involves the family and the home. It occurs among spouses, children, relatives, sisters-in-law and wider family members over infidelity, behaviour, finance, property, inheritance, plots of land and farmland. Domestic conflict between husband and wife is also called marital conflict. Such conflict disrupts the unity, harmony and cooperation of the household, endangers security and slows the progress of individuals and families. Lack of love, struggles over power and money, and poverty can lead

to domestic conflict, as can childhood background, quality of food, housekeeping, style of dressing, adultery and nagging. Crimes such as rape and incest are acts of violence, not disagreements, and require protection and legal remedies.

Economic conflict, as used in this study, refers to disputes that arise from the scarcity of income, assets and livelihoods, including those that follow when the state fails to provide a secure environment and a basic standard of living. In households in Imo State, competition over resources and disputes over family assets are drivers of conflict. Structural imbalance, unemployment and inequality have produced unequal distribution of wealth and added pressure on households. While more women are becoming financially independent, poverty may push some male heads of households towards substance abuse and gender-based violence.

Group conflict is inflicted on people by pressure groups, agitation groups and other bodies such as IPOB and its security arm, the ESN, as well as the umunna (kindred men), the umuada (kindred daughters), the umunwanyi (kindred wives), town development unions, local governments and ward councillors. These groups sometimes cause hardship for households through their policies and actions (Chukwudi et al., 2019). The sit-at-home orders and attacks associated with IPOB and rival groups have restricted movement, farming and economic activity, and have been linked to hardship, food insecurity, economic decline, sexual abuse, crime and lack of development. The lack of basic needs leads to hunger, malnutrition, disease and death, which in turn generate conflict in households.

Conflict Management

Conflict management is a broad term for the way conflicts are identified and handled to achieve fairness and peace. It can be defined as the process of dealing with perceived incompatibilities or disagreements arising from, for example, diverging opinions, objectives and needs (de Wit, 2016). Effective conflict management limits or prevents the negative effects of conflict and enhances its possible benefits, without necessarily resolving it. It involves identifying the source of the conflict, understanding the perspectives of those involved and finding constructive ways forward, and it applies in personal relationships, workplaces and communities. The way a conflict is managed can create more tension than the conflict itself. In Imo State, conflict management remains a challenge because socially constructed gender roles overlap poorly in decision-making and participation at household and community levels.

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) describe five modes of conflict-handling behaviour, which depend on the degree to which a person tries to satisfy his or her own concerns and those of the other party:

1. Competition is a win-lose approach in which one party pursues its own goals at the expense of the other. It shows high concern for one's own objectives and little concern for the relationship. It may be appropriate when quick, decisive action is needed or when unpopular but important decisions must be taken.
2. Collaboration seeks a solution that satisfies both parties. It rests on a willingness to stand up for one's own interests while accepting the validity of the other party's. Disagreements are expressed openly and alternatives are considered, so there is less confrontation and more cooperation. It is suitable when all parties are willing to work together, and because it aims to meet the needs of both sides, it is often regarded as the most effective way to resolve disagreements.
3. Compromise is common when the parties have relatively equal power and separate aims. It gives weight to both the relationship and personal objectives, and both sides gain and lose something in finding a middle ground.
4. Avoidance rests on the view that conflict is undesirable and should be put off or overlooked. It is neither assertive nor cooperative. It can help when the issue is minor or when the other party is inflexible, and it gives the parties time to calm down.
5. Accommodation combines high cooperation with low assertiveness. It stresses similarities and plays down differences. Giving in can be wise when one side has much to lose and little to gain.

Conflict and Violence

Conflicts are not necessarily violent, nor inherently bad. They are an inevitable part of living in society and result from differences and tensions between people and groups. Conflicts play an important role in

social change, and social change can itself generate conflict. Conflict occurs when two or more parties believe that their interests are incompatible, express hostile attitudes or take action that damages the other party's ability to pursue its interests. It becomes violent when the parties no longer seek their goals peacefully but resort to force (Mitra & Schilling, 2020). Depending on their objectives, the parties may approach a conflict in a cooperative or an aggressive manner. Two factors shape how a person responds: assertiveness, which is the readiness to confront the other party, and cooperation, which is the effort to find a workable solution.

Male-Headed and Female-Headed Households

The concepts of male-headed and female-headed households describe the social, economic and decision-making structure of a household according to the gender of its recognised head. The household head is usually the person who manages household income, makes major financial or welfare decisions, and is recognised as head by other members. Headship may be de jure or de facto. De jure headship is officially or culturally recognised, as when a husband or father is regarded as the main breadwinner. De facto headship occurs in practice when a woman acts as the main decision-maker and provider because an adult man is absent through migration, divorce, separation or death, or because the head is incapacitated.

In patriarchal societies such as Imo State, men are culturally designated as household heads from marriage. Male-headed households have historically benefited from labour market advantages, higher average wages and easier access to land, capital and credit, and they often follow a traditional division of labour, although male heads can still face poverty and unemployment. Female-headed households arise through widowhood, divorce, single motherhood, non-marriage or long-term male labour migration. They are often more vulnerable to poverty because of wage gaps, lower representation in well-paid jobs and restricted ownership of land, houses and other productive assets. Despite lower average earnings, female heads are reported to direct a higher share of their income towards nutrition, healthcare and children's education (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2022).

Gender

Gender is the set of socially constructed roles, behaviours and identities associated with women and men. Unlike biological sex, which refers to physical, genetic and physiological traits such as chromosomes and reproductive organs, gender is learned through social interaction and varies across cultures and over time (World Health Organization, n.d.). The two terms are often used interchangeably although they mean different things. Sex refers to a set of biological attributes, including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels and reproductive anatomy; it is usually categorised as female or male, although there is variation in these attributes. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (2024) describes gender as the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men and gender-diverse people, which influence how people see themselves and others, how they act and interact, and how power and resources are distributed in society. Challenging the received views of social anthropology, Amadiume (1987) argues that in pre-colonial Igbo society sex and gender did not necessarily coincide, and that roles were neither rigidly masculine nor feminine. In this study, the gender of the household head is recorded as male or female, as reported by the respondents.

Socio-Economic Characteristics of Male-Headed and Female-Headed Households in Imo State

Ibeagwa et al. (2020) describe the socio-economic characteristics of male-headed and female-headed farming households in Imo State. Most rural and semi-urban households in their study were male-headed. Male heads were often older and had larger households, which could include extended family members and higher dependency ratios, and most respondents had lived in their communities for more than five years. Female-headed farming households sometimes produced larger quantities of certain food crops or showed high labour efficiency despite structural constraints, but male-headed households had higher food security because of larger farms, more education and higher farm income.

Olumba et al. (2023) report similar differences in resource access in South-East Nigerian cities. Female-headed households had limited access to productive assets, smaller plots of land, less credit and less support from agricultural extension services because of traditional land tenure and patriarchal

structures. Male-headed households generally had greater access to capital, farm implements and equipment, which aids long-term investment. Female-headed households in Imo State are therefore more exposed to financial shocks and shortages of cash because of unequal earning opportunities and limited off-farm income.

Experiences of Conflict Management in Male-Headed and Female-Headed Households

Research does not show that either male-headed or female-headed households are generally more experienced or better at conflict management. Studies show instead that men and women tend to use different styles and face different social, structural and experiential pressures during conflict (Manthi, 2019). In male-headed households, men tend towards competitive, dominating or assertive approaches, and some studies point to a higher tendency towards aggression or to difficulty in being trusted to handle disputes impartially. In female-headed households, women tend to use compromising, accommodating or collaborative approaches that put relationships and cooperation first, but they may also face marginalisation, discrimination and unequal power. The setting matters too: role as against biological sex, and home as against workplace, both influence how people manage conflict. Female-headed households shaped by widowhood, displacement or economic marginalisation often face financial and security pressures that affect household stability differently from male-headed households (Manthi, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Two theories were used to explain this study: conflict theory and the dual-concerns model.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is a sociological theory most commonly associated with Karl Marx (Marx & Engels, 1848/2002). It holds that society is a stage for inequality and power struggles and is structured by differences in power, and it explains social and economic events in terms of a continuing struggle over limited resources. The theory rests on three assumptions: that humans are self-interested; that societies operate under a constant scarcity of resources; and that conflict is pervasive and unavoidable within and between social groups.

In Imo State, traditional Igbo patriarchy gives automatic structural authority to male heads of households, who traditionally hold more power and resources. Female heads, by contrast, often face a deficit of legitimacy in the eyes of extended family networks, which alters their bargaining power and their approach to managing household friction. Because men have historically dominated the economic, political and social spheres, they hold greater power within the household, including income, family inheritance and authority. The division of labour, in which men work outside the home while women manage domestic duties, can make women financially dependent on men. Some households, however, are headed by women as a result of the death of a partner, divorce or migration. Conflict theory therefore suggests that the strategies used by male and female heads of households to manage conflict are tied to their relative positions of power.

The Dual-Concerns Model

The dual-concerns model grew out of Blake and Mouton's (1964) managerial grid and was developed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) into an account of how individuals balance concern for self against concern for others. The balance gives five strategies: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating. Rahim and Katz (2020) show that gender and generation both shape the choice among such strategies.

Empirical Review

Research in Nigeria and elsewhere has examined intra-household conflict and the means used to resolve it. Amadiume's (1987) study of Igbo society shows the central place of kinship institutions, and in South-East Nigeria households commonly turn to third parties such as traditional rulers and kinsmen (umunna) to settle domestic and resource disputes. Economic stress is associated with household conflict in the region, and domestic violence varies with education and occupation in Southern Nigeria

(Omotoso et al., 2024). A meta-analysis by Holt and DeVore (2005) found that culture, gender and organisational role are all associated with preferred styles of conflict resolution, and Rahim and Katz (2020) reported effects of gender and generation on conflict-management strategies over four decades of data. In Kenya, Manthi (2019) found that men and women experience conflict management differently because of their social and structural positions.

Gap in Literature

Nigerian studies have seldom examined how the gender of the household head shifts conflict management between collaborative strategies, avoidance and competition within the patriarchal structure of Imo State. Existing studies tend to treat households as uniform units or to focus on marital conflict in male-headed households. There is therefore an empirical gap regarding how female-headed households, which operate outside traditional patriarchal authority, manage internal conflict compared with male-headed households.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the relationships examined in the study. Conflicts over resources, over the care and discipline of children and over the care of aged parents may be caused by pressure from culture and tradition and by the influence of groups such as the umunna and the umuada. Culture and tradition are treated as intervening variables that shape the strategies used by male and female heads of households, while challenges such as poor communication and low education affect, and are affected by, those strategies.



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Note. Developed by the authors.

Methodology

Study Area

Imo State is one of the five states in South-East Nigeria. It has three senatorial zones (Owerri, Orlu and Okigwe) and 27 local government areas. The 2006 census recorded a population of 3,927,563 (1,976,471 males and 1,951,092 females). Growing at an estimated 2.1% a year, the population was projected at 5,459,300 in 2022 (Brinkhoff, n.d.). Farming is the main occupation, although many people work in teaching, trading, the civil service and other occupations.

Sources of Data

Primary data were obtained with a structured questionnaire administered in 2023 during fieldwork for a master's thesis in Gender and Development Studies at the Federal University of Technology, Owerri. Secondary data were drawn from publications, academic journals and conference proceedings, and the literature was updated for this paper.

Sample and Data Collection

The questionnaire was administered to 252 household heads, 126 from male-headed and 126 from female-headed households, in rural and urban areas of Imo State. The state was chosen because it combines a highly educated population with patriarchal cultural practices. The target population was adult men and women aged 18 years and above who head households, including polygamous, married, widowed and single-parent households. The questionnaire was administered in English and Igbo, the native language commonly used in Imo State. Respondents were asked to indicate the conflict management strategies they used from a list of options, answering "Yes" or "No" to each.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The questionnaire was validated by experts in conflict management, who judged whether its items measured what they were intended to measure; items approved by the experts were retained. Reliability was assessed by the test-retest method. The questionnaire was administered to 20 people outside the study area with characteristics similar to those of the study population and administered again after three weeks. Pearson's product-moment correlation gave a coefficient of r = .77, which was taken to show that the instrument was reliable.

Measurement of Variables and Method of Analysis

Sex was coded as male = 1 and female = 0. Age was recorded in years. Marital status was coded as single = 1, married = 2, divorced = 3, widow = 4 and widower = 5. Monthly income was recorded in Nigerian naira (₦). The data were analysed with descriptive statistics, namely frequencies and percentages.

Results and Discussion

Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1. Sex of Respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	126	50.00
Female	126	50.00
Total	**252**	**100.00**

Source: Field survey, 2023.

Table 2. Age of Respondents by Headship

Age (years)	Male-headed f	Male-headed %	Female-headed f	Female-headed %
20 and below	0	0.00	0	0.00
21–30	0	0.00	5	3.97
31–40	10	7.94	20	15.87
41–50	23	18.25	48	38.10
51–60	45	35.71	20	15.87
61–70	30	23.81	18	14.29
71 and above	18	14.29	15	11.90
Total	**126**	**100.00**	**126**	**100.00**

Source: Field survey, 2023.

Table 3. Marital Status of Respondents by Headship

Marital status	Male-headed f	Male-headed %	Female-headed f	Female-headed %
Single	11	8.73	15	11.90
Married	68	53.97	43	34.13
Separated/divorced	9	7.14	14	11.11
Widowed	38	30.16	54	42.86
Total	**126**	**100.00**	**126**	**100.00**

Source: Field survey, 2023.

Table 4. Monthly Income of Respondents by Headship

Monthly income (₦)	Male-headed f	Male-headed %	Female-headed f	Female-headed %
0–10,000	8	6.35	12	9.52
10,001–20,000	13	10.32	35	27.78
20,001–30,000	30	23.81	27	21.43
30,001–40,000	40	31.75	20	15.87
40,001–50,000	20	15.87	19	15.08
50,001 and above	15	11.90	13	10.32
Total	**126**	**100.00**	**126**	**100.00**

Source: Field survey, 2023.

Table 1 shows that the sample was evenly divided between male and female heads of households. Table 2 shows that female heads were younger than male heads: the largest group of female heads was aged 41 to 50 years (38.10%), while the largest group of male heads was aged 51 to 60 years (35.71%). Table 3 shows that most male heads were married (53.97%) and 30.16% were widowers, while 42.86% of female heads were widowed, which is how many of them came to head their households and face the patriarchal setting of Imo State. Some 11.90% of female heads were single and headed their own households, and 7.14% of male heads were separated or divorced.

Table 4 shows that the most common monthly income of male heads was ₦30,001 to ₦40,000 (31.75%), close to the national minimum wage of ₦30,000 that applied in 2023, which is unlikely to be enough to meet household needs. The most common monthly income of female heads was lower, at ₦10,001 to ₦20,000 (27.78%), and 37.30% of female heads earned ₦20,000 or less, compared with 16.67% of male heads. These income gaps are consistent with the unequal access to assets and earnings reported by Olumba et al. (2023), and low income is a likely source of the economic and domestic conflicts described below.

Kinds of Conflict, Strategies and Challenges

Table 5. Kinds of Conflict, Conflict Management Strategies and Challenges Reported by Male-Headed and Female-Headed Households in Imo State

Kinds of conflict	Conflict management strategies	Challenges
Conflicts over resources, such as land	Compromising and letting go	Low literacy level
Interpersonal conflicts	Dominating and taking charge	Poor communication
Conflicts over family business	Avoidance and keeping off	Lack of willingness to resolve
In-law related conflicts	Separation and walking away	Ego and pride
Conflicts due to changes in family life or situation	Divorce	Non-acceptance of mistakes
Conflicts among brothers and sisters	Confrontation	Lack of mutual understanding
Conflicts from extended family relations	Mediation by third parties such as the umunna, umuada and Eze (traditional	Third-party interference

Kinds of conflict	Conflict management strategies	Challenges
	ruler)	
Conflicts over property inheritance	Negotiation and conversation	Disrespect by members of the household
Conflicts over the birth of children of one sex only	Legal process	Insecurity and lack of truthfulness
Conflicts based on religious belief		Violence
Conflicts arising from cultism		Struggle over natural resources and inheritance
Political conflicts		

Source: Field survey, 2023.

Table 5 lists the kinds of conflict, the strategies and the challenges reported by respondents. The conflicts ranged from disputes over land, inheritance and family business to conflicts with in-laws and extended family, conflicts over religion, conflicts over the birth of children of one sex only, and conflicts linked to cultism and politics.

In Imo State, male heads of households mostly used dominating and confrontation strategies, while female heads used compromising, collaborating and avoiding strategies. The power relations described by conflict theory account for the high authority, backed by Igbo patriarchy, that male heads bring to conflict management, whereas female heads have low structural authority that is often challenged by the umunna. Both male and female heads relied on third parties, such as kinsmen, the umunna and the umuada, to enforce decisions, and religious leaders and maternal relatives were also involved. Some respondents, however, saw the involvement of relatives as interference that made conflict management harder.

Because male heads hold structural power, as conflict theory suggests, they relied heavily on dominating and confrontation. They are backed by cultural norms in Imo State, so their strategies tend to be directive and to assume compliance from other members of the household. Female heads, in contrast, operate within a system that places them at a disadvantage, and they cannot easily dominate or confront without facing backlash. In terms of the dual-concerns model, they tend to adopt collaborating or compromising strategies that preserve household cohesion. Female heads may also use avoidance in disputes with the extended family, such as disputes over the inheritance of family assets or land with in-laws, because they lack the patriarchal backing to confront. This pattern is easily missed in studies that do not separate households by the gender of the head.

The main challenges to conflict management were low literacy, poor communication, unwillingness to resolve disputes, ego and pride, refusal to accept mistakes, lack of mutual understanding, third-party interference, disrespect within the household, insecurity, violence and struggles over resources and inheritance. These challenges affected both kinds of household. On the fifth research question, the findings do not show that either group manages conflict better. Rather, male and female heads draw on different strategies that reflect their positions of power, which agrees with Manthi (2019).

Recommendations

1. The Imo State Bureau for Peace and Conflict Resolution should work with state agencies such as the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare and the Imo State Women, Peace and Security programme to promote women's role in conflict resolution and the protection of their rights.
2. Stakeholders in Imo State, including traditional leaders, men's and women's groups, youth, opinion leaders, town development unions and government, should review cultural practices that oppress women and cause gender inequality.
3. The HeForShe approach and positive masculinity should be promoted. Grassroots initiatives that involve men as peace actors, together with community dialogue sessions, can help men handle financial and social stress without aggression, and can reframe conflict resolution from domination to partnership.

4. Customary mediation should be linked with formal alternative dispute resolution. In disputes over land or extended-family pressure, traditional elders should ensure that the formal family justice system is used where needed, so that outcomes are fair and less confrontational.
5. Intergenerational dialogue and peace education should be strengthened through local family stability programmes that teach structured communication and compromise in the home, so that domestic friction does not spill into the wider community.

Conclusion

The study showed that both male-headed and female-headed households in Imo State experience a wide range of conflicts, from disputes over land and inheritance to conflicts with in-laws and the extended family. Male heads relied mainly on dominating and confrontation, while female heads relied more on compromise, collaboration and avoidance, and both turned to kinsmen, traditional rulers and religious leaders for mediation. Poor communication, pride, low literacy and lack of understanding were challenges in both kinds of household. The findings suggest that the strategies of household heads reflect their positions of power and income more than any inherent ability, and that neither group can be said to manage conflict better. Further research should examine in more detail how the gender of the household head shapes the choice and outcome of conflict management strategies in Imo State.

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