

# Navigating Patriarchy: The Influence of Male Control and Fear of Subjugation on Non-Marital Childbearing in Mushin, Lagos State

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## ABSTRACT

Patriarchal structures and associated power differentials between men and women have long shaped family formation patterns in Nigeria. This study examines how male control and the fear of subjugation within marital relationships influence women's decisions to bear children outside of marriage in Mushin Local Government Area (LGA) of Lagos State. Drawing on qualitative data from 40 in-depth interviews with women who had given birth outside marriage, the study employed purposive and snowball sampling within a qualitative research framework, with data analysed using content analysis. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) provides the conceptual anchor, linking individual attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control to the decision to engage in non-marital childbearing. Findings demonstrate that the anticipation of male domination, the erosion of women's autonomy within marriage, and the perceived psychological and social costs of patriarchal control constitute significant drivers of non-marital childbearing. Many respondents expressed a preference for single motherhood over subjugation within patriarchal marriage, citing the desire for independent decision-making and freedom from coercive male authority. The study further reveals that feminist consciousness, evolving gender norms, and greater economic independence are reshaping women's attitudes toward marriage and motherhood in contemporary urban Nigeria, contributing to the conditions under which non-marital childbearing becomes a viable and sometimes preferred reproductive option. The findings call for gender-sensitive policy frameworks that address power imbalances within family structures and support women's reproductive autonomy.

**Keywords:** patriarchy; male control; non-marital childbearing; gender; Theory of Planned Behaviour; Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy the systemic privileging of male authority and the subordination of women within social institutions has long structured family formation processes in Nigeria. Within the Nigerian context, the institution of marriage has traditionally constituted the primary arena through which patriarchal control over women's sexuality, reproduction, and domestic lives is exercised and reproduced (Atsenuwa, 2011; Durojaye, 2015; Walby, 1990). The power differentials inherent in Nigerian marriage practices ranging from bride price negotiations that position women as acquisitions to normative expectations of domestic submission have generated conditions in which some women experience marriage as an institution of constraint rather than personal fulfilment.

Against this backdrop, the rising prevalence of non-marital childbearing in Nigeria may be understood not merely as a demographic or economic phenomenon but as, at least in part, a gendered response to the perceived costs of patriarchal control within marriage. When women identify the likely experience of marriage as one of subjugation, loss of autonomy, and domination, the calculus of reproductive decision-making shifts in ways that increase the relative attractiveness of non-marital motherhood. This dynamic has received limited systematic

attention in the Nigerian sociological literature, where non-marital childbearing is more frequently theorised in relation to economic or demographic variables than to gendered power relations.

This study addresses this gap by examining the influence of male control and the fear of subjugation on women's decisions to bear children outside of marriage in Mushin Local Government Area (LGA) of Lagos State. Three specific objectives guide the inquiry: (1) to investigate how perceptions of male control within marriage influence women's non-marital childbearing decisions; (2) to examine how the fear of anticipated subjugation shapes women's attitudes toward marriage and non-marital motherhood; and (3) to assess the role of feminist consciousness and evolving gender norms in reshaping the subjective contexts within which non-marital childbearing decisions are made. In pursuing these objectives, the study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that interrogates the relationship between gender power dynamics and reproductive decision-making in sub-Saharan African contexts (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Meekers & Ahmed, 2000; Walby, 1990).

It is essential, however, to situate these objectives within Nigeria's broader and highly diverse social landscape. Nigeria encompasses more than 250 ethnic nationalities and exhibits pronounced regional variation in cultural norms, religious institutions, and socioeconomic conditions (National Population Commission [NPC] & ICF, 2019). The patterns shaping women's reproductive decisions in urbanised, commercially active settings such as Mushin—where exposure to pluralistic gender ideologies, formal education, and economic opportunities is comparatively high—may diverge substantially from those in rural communities across northern, south-eastern, or south-western Nigeria, where patriarchal authority is frequently reinforced through stronger religious and traditional institutional frameworks and where women's economic independence and educational attainment remain more constrained (NPC & ICF, 2019; Caldwell & Caldwell, 1987). National survey data indicate that non-marital childbearing remains comparatively rare in rural areas and among women with lower educational attainment, suggesting that the urban context produces conditions uniquely conducive to the dynamics observed in this study (NPC & ICF, 2019). Accordingly, the findings of this study speak primarily to urban socioeconomic contexts comparable to Mushin and should be interpreted with careful attention to the specific cultural, economic, and geographic character of the study setting, rather than as representative of non-marital childbearing dynamics across Nigeria as a whole.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Patriarchy and Gender Power Relations in Nigeria

Patriarchy, as theorised by Walby (1990), constitutes a system of social structures and practices through which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. In the Nigerian context, patriarchal structures manifest across multiple domains: legal (limited property and inheritance rights for women in many customary law contexts), economic (persistent occupational segregation and wage differentials), cultural (normative expectations of female submissiveness and deference to male authority), and familial (male authority over reproductive and domestic decisions) (Atsenuwa, 2011; Durojaye, 2015). Lerner (1986) situated these contemporary patriarchal structures within a long historical trajectory, arguing that the subordination of women's reproductive capacity to male control has been a constitutive feature of patriarchal societies across historical periods and cultural contexts.

Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a complementary framework for understanding how dominant forms of male identity in Nigeria are constructed through the assertion of authority over women, including within the domestic sphere. Hegemonic masculinity in the Nigerian context valorises men's economic provision, sexual authority, and domestic control, creating expectations for women's reciprocal deference that many women find increasingly incompatible with their own aspirations for autonomy and self-determination (Okafor & Aderinto, 2009). These tensions between hegemonic masculine expectations and women's growing aspirations for autonomy have contributed to rising rates of relationship instability and divorce, as well as to the increasing prevalence of non-marital childbearing as women navigate reproductive desire outside the constraints of patriarchal marriage (Durojaye, 2015).

Durojaye (2015) documented the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures on women's legal status and social recognition in Nigeria, observing that marriage functions as the primary mechanism through which women acquire social respectability and formal legal recognition, while simultaneously subjecting them to male

authority. This creates what Durojaye (2015) characterised as a fundamental paradox: marriage confers status while imposing constraint, making it simultaneously attractive and costly for women with aspirations for personal autonomy. The resolution of this paradox increasingly takes the form of non-marital childbearing—a strategy through which women seek to capture the social rewards of motherhood while evading the patriarchal costs of marriage.

### **Male Control as a Driver of Non-Marital Childbearing**

The specific influence of male control on non-marital childbearing has received limited systematic examination in the Nigerian literature, though scattered evidence points to its significance. Gibson-Davis (2009) observed that patriarchal dynamics within marital relationships have been identified as a determinant of some women's preference for non-marital childbearing arrangements, as women who perceive marriage as an institution of domination may choose cohabitation or single motherhood over formal matrimony while still fulfilling their desire for children. This suggests that non-marital childbearing may function not simply as a demographic outcome of circumstance but as a deliberate reproductive strategy for managing the costs of gendered power relations.

Ribar (2015) argued that the preference for single motherhood in Nigeria though typically a last resort rather than a first choice reflects women's strategic navigation of patriarchal constraints, representing what he characterised as a 'quest for self-preservation in response to a steep patriarchal structure.' Amato (2005) corroborated this view, noting that in patriarchal societies where both marriage and motherhood are culturally valorised, women unable or unwilling to enter the former may nonetheless pursue the latter as an independent achievement a pathway that preserves maternal identity while circumventing marital subjugation.

The influence of male control extends beyond the domestic sphere to encompass men's reproductive behaviour and their willingness to commit to marriage. Akerlof et al. (2006) documented that the normalisation of contraception associated with the 'sexual revolution' shifted reproductive responsibility disproportionately onto women, diminishing men's perceived obligation to marry the women they impregnate. This structural shift in men's reproductive behaviour has contributed to conditions in which women increasingly navigate pregnancy and parenthood without the guarantee of marital commitment from their partners, further driving non-marital childbearing as a demographic phenomenon (Wildsmith et al., 2012).

### **Fear of Subjugation and Anticipatory Reproductive Decision-Making**

Beyond the direct experience of male control within existing relationships, the fear of anticipated subjugation constitutes a distinct and theoretically significant driver of non-marital childbearing. Women who observe the experiences of married women within their social networks including experiences of domestic subordination, loss of economic autonomy, emotional coercion, and intimate partner violence may form expectations about the likely costs of marriage that shape their reproductive decisions in advance of any direct personal experience of matrimony.

Meekers and Ahmed (2000) documented patterns of deliberate fertility-without-marriage among African women as a strategy for maintaining personal autonomy while fulfilling reproductive aspirations, suggesting that anticipatory assessments of marital costs can generate non-marital childbearing as a proactive rather than reactive reproductive choice. Jewkes and Morrell (2010) similarly demonstrated that women's assessments of men's likely behaviour within intimate partnerships including expectations of coercive control, sexual dominance, and economic exploitation shape reproductive decision-making in ways that cannot be explained by immediate economic or demographic pressures alone.

Feminist scholarship has broadly theorised this dynamic as a form of reproductive agency women's capacity to make autonomous decisions about fertility in ways that challenge and subvert patriarchal norms (Walby, 1990; Connell, 1995). In the Nigerian context, the growing influence of feminist discourse and gender equality advocacy has provided intellectual legitimacy to women's claims to reproductive autonomy, creating conditions under which non-marital childbearing may be understood not merely as a circumstantial outcome but as a deliberate assertion of agency against patriarchal constraints (Okafor & Aderinto, 2009; Atsenuwa, 2011).

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## Feminist Consciousness and Evolving Gender Norms

The relationship between feminist consciousness and non-marital childbearing in Nigeria represents a relatively understudied dimension of a broader global phenomenon. Globally, feminist scholarship has documented the ways in which women's growing awareness of gender inequality reshapes their expectations of intimate relationships and their willingness to enter institutions including marriage that they perceive as structured around male privilege (Walby, 1990; Lerner, 1986). In Nigeria, the influence of both global feminist movements and locally grounded gender equality advocacy has progressively penetrated urban contexts, reshaping women's normative frameworks around marriage, sexuality, and reproduction (Atsenuwa, 2011; Okafor & Aderinto, 2009).

Trimarchi and Van Bavel (2018) documented how women's improving economic opportunities have reduced the perceived socioeconomic benefits of marriage—historically the primary mechanism through which women secured financial security—while increasing women's capacity to support themselves and their children independently. As economic dependence on men declines, the patriarchal costs of marriage become relatively more salient, creating conditions under which non-marital childbearing becomes an increasingly viable and attractive option for women who wish to fulfil reproductive aspirations without sacrificing personal autonomy.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Theory of Planned Behaviour

This study employs the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), as its primary theoretical framework. The TPB proposes that human behaviour is most proximally predicted by behavioural intention, which is in turn determined by three sets of psychological constructs: attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Originally developed in the context of social cognitive psychology, the TPB has demonstrated robust applicability across a diverse range of health-related, social, and reproductive behaviours (Ajzen, 2001).

Attitude toward the behaviour refers to an individual's positive or negative evaluation of engaging in a specific behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Applied to non-marital childbearing, women who hold positive attitudes toward reproductive autonomy and negative evaluations of the patriarchal control they anticipate within marriage are more likely to form intentions to bear children outside of matrimony. For women who associate marriage with loss of autonomy, domestic subjugation, and restricted self-expression, non-marital childbearing may be evaluated positively as an alternative that preserves reproductive agency while evading patriarchal costs.

Subjective norms refer to perceived social pressure from significant referents family members, peers, and broader community networks to perform or avoid a behaviour (Krueger et al., 2000). In the Nigerian context, traditionally strong normative pressure to marry before bearing children constitutes a countervailing subjective norm that increases the psychological costs of non-marital childbearing. However, emerging peer networks of single mothers, feminist communities, and urban social networks provide normative support that increasingly legitimises non-marital childbearing as an acceptable life course option, particularly in urbanised contexts such as Mushin.

Perceived behavioural control the perceived ease or difficulty of performing a behaviour based on past experience and anticipated obstacles is particularly relevant to the influence of male control as a driver of non-marital childbearing (Ajzen, 1991). Women who perceive marriage as a domain of diminished control over their own lives one in which male authority restricts their freedom of movement, economic decision-making, social relationships, and reproductive choices may assess non-marital childbearing as affording greater perceived control over their lives and therefore greater feasibility as a life course option. The TPB thus provides a theoretically coherent framework for understanding how perceptions of patriarchal control shape attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in ways that collectively increase the likelihood of non-marital childbearing.

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## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed, consistent with the study's goal of generating in-depth, contextualised understanding of women's experiences and perceptions of male control and patriarchal structures in relation to non-marital childbearing. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for investigating sensitive social phenomena that are unlikely to be fully captured through quantitative instruments, as they allow participants to articulate complex, nuanced experiences in their own terms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A cross-sectional, non-experimental design was adopted, with data collected through in-depth interviews.

### Study Location

The study was conducted in Mushin Local Government Area (LGA) of Lagos State, Nigeria. Mushin is a densely populated urban area located approximately 10 km north of Lagos city centre, with a population exceeding 633,000 at the 2006 Census. The area is characterised by a diverse, predominantly low-to-middle-income population engaged primarily in trade and commerce. Yoruba-speaking residents predominate, though the area accommodates significant ethnic diversity. Mushin's urbanised, socioeconomically diverse character makes it a productive site for investigating the influence of evolving gender norms and patriarchal structures on reproductive decision-making. Importantly, Mushin's urban character—marked by economic informality, exposure to diverse media and gender discourses, and greater female labour force participation—distinguishes it considerably from the rural communities that constitute a substantial proportion of Nigeria's settlement landscape, as well as from communities where Islamic or other strongly conservative religious norms exercise more pronounced authority over women's reproductive lives. This contextual specificity is a deliberate analytical choice, not a limitation to be minimised; however, readers should bear in mind that the patriarchal dynamics and feminist responses documented here are shaped by the particular urban conditions of Mushin and may not translate directly to rural or differently constituted Nigerian settings.

### Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised unmarried women residing in Mushin LGA who had given birth outside of formal marriage. Two non-probability sampling techniques were employed: snowball sampling and purposive sampling. Snowball sampling facilitated access to a population whose members were difficult to identify systematically, as women practising non-marital childbearing were not spatially concentrated and many were reluctant to be publicly identified with the practice. Purposive sampling ensured that all participants met the study's eligibility criteria. A total of 40 respondents were recruited and interviewed.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews guided by a semi-structured interview instrument. Section A of the instrument captured sociodemographic information; Section B comprised thematic open-ended questions on the influence of male control, patriarchal structures, and gender dynamics on non-marital childbearing decisions. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Content analysis was used to analyse the transcribed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with themes and sub-themes identified through iterative coding and cross-referenced with the study's theoretical framework.

### Ethical Considerations

All participants provided voluntary informed consent prior to participation. The study's academic purpose was clearly communicated at the outset, and participants were assured of the confidentiality of their information. No identifying information is reported in this manuscript. Audio recordings were securely stored and accessed only by the research team. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence, and this right was reiterated at the beginning of each interview session.

Reflexivity was treated as an integral and ongoing dimension of the research process rather than a procedural formality. The research team engaged in sustained critical reflection on how their own positionalities—including gender, professional training, institutional affiliation, and familiarity with Lagos urban contexts—may have shaped the design of interview questions, the conduct of interviews, the interpretation of participants’ accounts, and the theoretical frameworks employed to make sense of the data. Reflective memos were maintained throughout the fieldwork and analysis phases to document emergent interpretive decisions and their rationale, consistent with best practice in reflexive qualitative inquiry (Finlay, 2002; Berger, 2015). Where the authors’ interpretations extend beyond participants’ direct statements to engage broader feminist or sociological theory, this is flagged explicitly in the Results and Discussion section.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential for power asymmetries between researcher and participant, particular care was taken to manage the dynamics of the interview relationship. Interviews were conducted in settings selected by or agreed upon with participants, with the aim of maximising comfort and minimising any sense of institutional authority. Interviewers employed open, non-directive questioning techniques to avoid inadvertently shaping participants’ responses toward anticipated themes. Where participants appeared uncomfortable with particular questions, interviewers acknowledged their response and offered the option to move on. The research team was conscious that, despite these precautions, the interview setting cannot be rendered fully neutral: interviewers’ identities, knowledge, and presence inevitably constitute a form of relational context that co-shapes the accounts participants offer. Analysts therefore treated interview data as co-produced knowledge rather than unmediated access to participants’ pre-existing views, and exercised caution in distinguishing between what participants directly articulated and what the research team interpreted or inferred from those accounts (Berger, 2015).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demographic Profile of Respondents

Forty women residing in Mushin LGA participated in the study. The age distribution was as follows: 15% (n=6) were aged 21–30 years; 57.5% (n=23) were aged 31–40 years; and 27.5% (n=11) were aged 41 years and above. Educational qualifications ranged from primary school certificates (12.5%) to SSCE (42.5%), NCE/OND (17.5%), and B.Sc./HND (27.5%). The majority were employed as traders, entrepreneurs, or business owners, with smaller proportions working as accountants, HR professionals, and skilled tradespeople.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=40)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age group	21–30 years	6	15.0
	31–40 years	23	57.5
	41 years and above	11	27.5
Education	Primary school certificate	5	12.5
	SSCE	17	42.5
	NCE/OND	7	17.5
	B.Sc./HND	11	27.5

*Note: SSCE = Senior School Certificate Examination; NCE = National Certificate of Education; OND = Ordinary National Diploma; HND = Higher National Diploma.*

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## Theme 1: Perceptions of Male Control as a Driver of Non-Marital Childbearing

The study revealed widespread acknowledgement among respondents that male control within marital contexts constitutes a significant driver of non-marital childbearing. The majority of respondents expressed views consistent with the perception that Nigerian marriage is characterised by pronounced patriarchal authority that many women find incompatible with their aspirations for autonomy, self-determination, and equality.

A 39-year-old accountant articulated this dynamic explicitly:

*“I believe that male control is one of the reasons many women resort to single motherhood. Because they prefer to train the child alone than having a man control them.”*

This statement encapsulates the core trade-off identified by many respondents the exchange of marital legitimacy for personal autonomy. The preference for the costs of single motherhood over the costs of patriarchal control represents a rational assessment of subjective costs and benefits.

A 33-year-old accountant elaborated on the structural dynamics driving this trade-off:

*“Nigeria and African society generally is a society that is dominated by men. So men are the one in charge here and the rate of control is 75–25. So women that cannot handle this control usually have problem in their marriage. This is why the rate of divorce has been on the increase. Women nowadays now believe that instead of going through the stress of getting married and now divorcing when they cannot cope, they just instead resort to being single mothers and raising the kids alone.”*

This account positions non-marital childbearing as a rational anticipatory strategy for avoiding the disruption of divorce, framing single motherhood as a form of self-preservation in a patriarchal environment.

A 34-year-old HR professional identified the expanding technological landscape of reproduction as expanding women’s options for bypassing male control:

*“As a lady, if I want to have more children, I don’t need to have a husband in order to have a child. They are lots of ways to go about it. I can use surrogacy; I can use artificial insemination and many other means.”*

A 39-year-old accountant further elaborated:

*“What is helping us nowadays is because there are lots of sexual toys to replace men in our lives. And there is advanced technology in place of man. So, I believe that male control is one of the reasons many women resort to single motherhood. Because they prefer to train the child alone than having a man control them.”*

These accounts illustrate how technological innovation has expanded the repertoire of reproductive strategies available to women seeking to achieve motherhood while evading male control, contributing to the renegotiation of gendered power relations.

## Theme 2: Feminist Consciousness and Evolving Gender Norms

Several respondents explicitly connected non-marital childbearing to broader shifts in gender consciousness and the influence of feminist ideas about women’s autonomy and equality. A 22-year-old entrepreneur observed:

*“Lots of things are happening these days, we now have feminist movement who are clamoring for gender equality, all of which makes women to never succumb to men. This is why we have high rate of separation and single mothers. So yes, I believe male control can affect women to give birth outside marriage.”*

This observation illustrates the role of feminist discourse as a mediating influence between structural patriarchy and individual reproductive decisions, reshaping the subjective norms associated with non-marital childbearing and providing social legitimacy for women’s choices to bear children outside of marriage.

A 37-year-old entrepreneur offered a detailed account of the expanding landscape of technologically mediated non-marital reproduction:

*“Giving birth outside marriage has far exceeded just the traditional sleeping together and getting pregnant. Now, technology has advanced to a stage that a woman can get pregnant without even meeting a man. There are now instances of In-vitro Fertilization (IVF), Intra-Uterine Insemination (IUI), Surrogacy, baby mama and other means of getting pregnant and giving birth outside marriage. All these are influenced by male control and because of the fact that women are no longer submissive and don’t even want to be under any man.”*

This framing positions technologically mediated non-marital reproduction as an expression of feminist reproductive agency, consistent with the view that feminist consciousness reshapes women’s attitudes toward marriage and motherhood.

Within the TPB framework, feminist discourse functions primarily at the level of subjective norms: as feminist ideas penetrate women’s social networks, the perceived social pressure to conform to conventional marriage-before-motherhood norms is progressively counterbalanced by alternative normative frameworks that legitimate non-marital motherhood as an acceptable choice. This normative shift reduces the psychological costs of non-marital childbearing and increases the likelihood that women will form intentions to bear children outside of marriage.

### **Theme 3: Fear of Subjugation and Anticipatory Reproductive Decision-Making**

A distinct and theoretically significant theme emerged around the anticipatory fear of subjugation—the influence of expected, rather than directly experienced, patriarchal control on reproductive decisions. Several respondents indicated that their observations of other women’s experiences within patriarchal marriages informed their own decisions to pursue non-marital motherhood.

A 44-year-old business owner offered a candid and complex assessment of the dynamics at play:

*“We women are the ones giving ourselves problem because women of nowadays are no longer submissive to men the way it’s supposed to be. So we want to give birth and without having men control us. For example, I saw an advert online of a lady looking for sperm donor, and willing to pay 1 million Naira, the criteria for choosing these men is that the man must be 6 ft tall, look good, smart and intelligent and must show evidence for all the stated qualities. She didn’t even put genotype. All she was interested in was just to have the sperm and get pregnant. I am very sure that she is already old. She just want to give birth and not marry.”*

This account vividly illustrates the intersection of anticipatory fear of male control, age-related biological urgency, and the expanding technological landscape of non-marital reproduction. The respondent’s interpretation of the sperm donor advertisement as evidence that the woman “just wants to give birth and not marry” suggests a widely shared understanding that non-marital reproductive strategies are increasingly motivated by the desire to evade patriarchal control rather than by inability to find a partner.

A 31-year-old business owner introduced an important nuance:

*“While some women complain of this male control, we have some women that prefer strong men. They can’t deal with an ordinary man. The truth is that we women are confused. We don’t know what we truly want. But one thing I know is that 90% of women want children and we will go to any length to give birth to one.”*

This observation complicates simplistic narratives about male control as a uniform driver of non-marital childbearing, suggesting that women’s orientations toward male authority are more ambivalent and contextually contingent. The universal desire for children across diverse orientations toward male authority nonetheless reinforces the centrality of maternal aspiration as the underlying reproductive motivator, with non-marital childbearing representing one available pathway toward its fulfilment.

### Theme 4: Counterarguments and Internal Complexity

Consistent with a commitment to analytical rigour, the study documents dissenting perspectives that complicate the dominant narrative around male control as a driver of non-marital childbearing. A minority of respondents rejected this framing. A 30-year-old tailor stated:

*“I don’t think male control has anything to do with a woman giving birth outside marriage. A woman that wants to give birth will give birth without anybody stopping her or anything causing it.”*

A 37-year-old tailor elaborated:

*“Women can do and undo when it comes to pregnancy. It is only a woman that knows the father of her child. I think most of the time, a woman will have decided on what to do immediately a child comes or even before pregnancy. It has nothing to do with a man. It is all a woman’s idea.”*

These perspectives emphasise women’s autonomous agency in reproductive decision-making, positioning non-marital childbearing as an expression of women’s will rather than a response to male behaviour. This framing is not necessarily incompatible with the male control narrative; indeed, asserting reproductive autonomy independently of male control may itself be understood as a gendered response to patriarchal expectations. Nevertheless, it usefully complicates the picture by highlighting the diversity of motivational frameworks among women who arrive at the same reproductive outcome through different subjective trajectories. Within the TPB framework, this internal diversity reflects the heterogeneity of attitude profiles, subjective norm environments, and perceived behavioural control assessments that can produce similar behavioural intentions.

Table 2: Summary of Thematic Findings on Male Control and Fear of Subjugation with Illustrative Quotations

Theme	Key Finding	Illustrative Quotation
Male Control as a Driver	Women perceive patriarchal marriage as incompatible with autonomy; they choose single motherhood to evade control.	“I believe that male control is one of the reasons many women resort to single motherhood. Because they prefer to train the child alone than having a man control them.” (39-year-old accountant)
Feminist Consciousness and Evolving Norms	Feminist movements and gender equality discourse legitimise non-marital childbearing and reshape subjective norms.	“Lots of things are happening these days, we now have feminist movement who are clamoring for gender equality, all of which makes women to never succumb to men.” (22-year-old entrepreneur)
Fear of Subjugation (Anticipatory)	Anticipating loss of autonomy leads women to proactively choose non-marital motherhood via technology.	“I saw an advert online of a lady looking for sperm donor ... She just want to give birth and not marry.” (44-year-old business owner)
Counterarguments	A minority of women assert that non-marital childbearing is purely a woman's own choice, unrelated to male control.	“I don't think male control has anything to do with a woman giving birth outside marriage. A woman that wants to give birth will give birth.” (30-year-old tailor)

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that male control and the fear of subjugation function as significant drivers of non-marital childbearing among women in Mushin, Lagos State, operating through the attitudinal, normative, and perceived behavioural control mechanisms identified by the Theory of Planned Behaviour. The documented relationship between patriarchal structures and non-marital childbearing is consistent with the growing body of

literature on gender power dynamics and reproductive decision-making in sub-Saharan African contexts (Meekers & Ahmed, 2000; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Durojaye, 2015), while also contributing distinctive empirical evidence from the Nigerian urban setting. Throughout the discussion that follows, a distinction is maintained between empirical claims grounded directly in participants' narratives and the authors' theoretical interpretations, which engage feminist and sociological frameworks to situate participants' accounts within broader scholarly debates. Where interpretations extend beyond what participants directly expressed, this is signalled accordingly.

The participants' accounts align with broader evidence that gendered power imbalances within intimate relationships strongly influence reproductive choices across sub-Saharan Africa (Jejeebhoy, 1995; Dodoo & Frost, 2008). In West African urban centres particularly, women's growing exposure to egalitarian gender ideologies has intensified the perceived costs of patriarchal marriage (Smith, 2007). The finding that women view single motherhood as a rational escape from marital control is further supported by observations that divorce in highly patriarchal contexts often leaves women economically and socially vulnerable (Ntoimo & Mutambudzi, 2019), making non-marital childbearing a pre-emptive strategy rather than a fallback.

The intersection of feminist consciousness and non-marital childbearing identified in this study represents a particularly important finding, suggesting that the phenomenon cannot be adequately understood through purely demographic or economic lenses. In urban Nigerian contexts, feminist advocacy has increasingly promoted narratives of bodily autonomy and rejection of male dominance, reshaping community attitudes (Aina, 1998; Pereira, 2005). These shifts are not only ideological but also practical, as women's peer groups and social media networks disseminate alternative models of respectable womanhood outside marriage (Kabeer, 1999). The growing visibility of single mothers in Nigerian popular culture and social media further normalises this pathway, weakening the stigma historically attached to non-marital births (Obi & Onwuzuruigbo, 2019). As feminist discourse continues to penetrate urban Nigerian communities through social media, civil society organisations, and women's networks, it is likely to further reshape the normative landscape surrounding non-marital childbearing in ways that increase its prevalence and social acceptance (Okafor & Aderinto, 2009; Atsenuwa, 2011).

The role of assisted reproductive technologies in enabling women to circumvent male control resonates with global evidence on how such technologies reconfigure gender and kinship (Inhorn & Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2008), and reinforces Connell's (1995) analysis of the ongoing renegotiation of gendered power relations in response to structural changes in women's social and economic positions. Moreover, the anticipatory logic whereby fear of subjugation deters marriage is consistent with studies showing that perceived risk of intimate partner violence or loss of autonomy is a powerful deterrent to marriage among West African women (Bawah et al., 1999; Johnson-Hanks, 2006).

The ambivalence expressed by some respondents' echoes findings that while Nigerian women increasingly assert autonomy, they simultaneously navigate strong cultural expectations for respect and submission to partners (Ogunjuyigbe et al., 2009). This tension highlights the complexity of reproductive agency in patriarchal settings. Additionally, the internal diversity of women's motivations underscores that they are not a monolithic group; their reproductive decisions are shaped by intersecting factors of age, class, education, and exposure to alternative gender discourses (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003; Adebowale et al., 2012).

It is important to situate these findings within Nigeria's broader national demographic landscape. National survey data suggest that non-marital fertility rates are considerably lower in rural areas than in urban centres such as Lagos, and that women in rural communities—particularly in the predominantly Islamic north and in communities with strong traditional authority structures—face substantially different configurations of patriarchal constraint, economic opportunity, and social sanctioning around non-marital childbearing (NPC & ICF, 2019; Caldwell & Caldwell, 1987). The participants in this study, drawn from an urban, predominantly Yoruba, low-to-middle-income setting with comparatively high levels of female economic participation and exposure to feminist discourse through social media, represent a specific social configuration that facilitates the forms of reproductive agency documented here. The authors therefore caution against extrapolating these findings to rural Nigerian contexts or to regions where different religious, ethnic, or economic conditions prevail. The findings do not speak to whether women in rural Nigeria share similar perceptions of patriarchal marriage,

nor to whether the same structural drivers of non-marital childbearing operate with comparable force in those settings. Future research employing multi-site designs that span urban and rural localities, and that attend to regional and religious heterogeneity, would substantially advance understanding of the differential contextual conditions under which patriarchal structures generate non-marital childbearing as a reproductive response across Nigeria's diverse social landscape.

Several additional limitations of this study warrant acknowledgement. The use of purposive and snowball sampling, while appropriate for accessing a hard-to-reach population, means that the sample cannot be considered representative even of women practising non-marital childbearing within Mushin LGA. The qualitative design precludes claims about the prevalence or distribution of the attitudes and experiences documented. Furthermore, the interview format, however carefully managed, may have introduced social desirability effects, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential power asymmetries between interviewer and participant discussed above. The authors have sought, through reflexive practice and careful analytical demarcation, to distinguish between what participants directly articulated and what the research team inferred or theorised; readers are nonetheless encouraged to engage critically with interpretive claims that extend beyond the direct evidence of participants' own words. The broader theoretical arguments advanced—for example, concerning the role of feminist consciousness as a systemic mediating force—represent the authors' analytical interpretation of convergent patterns across participants' accounts, situated within existing feminist and sociological scholarship, rather than claims that can be straightforwardly verified from any individual participant's testimony.

The diversity of pathways through which male control influences non-marital childbearing from proactive rejection of anticipated marital subjugation to reactive responses to experienced patriarchal control, to technologically mediated circumvention of male reproductive involvement suggests that policy interventions must be correspondingly differentiated. No single programmatic response will adequately address the range of circumstances in which male control drives non-marital childbearing; instead, policy frameworks must attend to the specific mechanisms through which patriarchal structures intersect with women's reproductive decisions across different socioeconomic and biographical contexts. For example, interventions aiming to reduce unintended non-marital pregnancies must strengthen women's reproductive autonomy within relationships, while simultaneously working to transform the patriarchal norms that make marriage an unattractive or unsafe option for many women (Jewkes et al., 2015).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has demonstrated that male control and the fear of subjugation within patriarchal marital structures constitute significant drivers of non-marital childbearing among women in Mushin, Lagos State. The majority of respondents identified the desire to avoid or escape male domination as a key motivation shaping their reproductive choices, while feminist consciousness and evolving gender norms were identified as mediating influences that reshape the normative contexts within which these decisions are made. The Theory of Planned Behaviour provided a robust framework for understanding how perceptions of patriarchal marriage shape attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in ways that collectively increase the likelihood of non-marital childbearing. These findings are grounded in the specific urban, socioeconomically diverse context of Mushin and cannot be assumed to generalise directly to rural Nigerian settings or to communities shaped by different religious, ethnic, or economic conditions. Future research employing comparative multi-site and mixed-methods designs will be essential to assess the extent to which the dynamics documented here are specific to urban Lagos or are operative, in varying forms, across Nigeria's diverse social landscape.

Based on these findings, the study advances the following recommendations. First, policy interventions should directly address patriarchal power imbalances within Nigerian marriage, including through strengthening legal protections against intimate partner control, domestic abuse, and gender-based discrimination in family law. Second, educational programmes promoting gender equality, respectful relationships, and shared domestic authority should be introduced at secondary and tertiary education levels, targeting both male and female students. Third, social support frameworks for single mothers should be strengthened, including through affordable childcare, legal provisions for child support enforcement, and community-based support networks that reduce the stigma associated with non-marital motherhood. Fourth, further qualitative and quantitative

research is needed to document the long-term outcomes for women and children across different patriarchal-response pathways to non-marital childbearing, and to evaluate the effectiveness of gender-transformative interventions in reducing the patriarchal drivers of non-marital reproductive decisions.

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