Gendered Dimensions of Marital Celebrations: A Comparative Analysis of Women's and Men's Experiences and Perceptions

[1*]Muzondo Pardon J, [2]Masiiwa Spencer T, [3]Marodza Luckmore

[1]Lecturer; Marondera University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology; Department of Supply Chain Management; Marondera; Zimbabwe

[2]Lecturer; Marondera University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, Teaching and Learning Institute; Marondera; Zimbabwe

[3]Lecturer; Marondera University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology; Agribusiness and Management; Marondera; Zimbabwe

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

This research presents an affluent analysis of the gendered dynamics of marriage celebrations and how women and men build differently the cultural, symbolic, and social features of marriage. Based on qualitative comparative research employing data from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, this study discovers women positioned at the symbolic centre of marriage rituals. Their increased public visibility as dress, ritual practice, and performative acts is a necessary means of social recognition and identity validation. Men, by contrast, adopt primarily a muted, matter-of-fact option, stipulating marriage in terms of economic duty and stable long-term availability as opposed to symbolic exhibition. Findings account for how wedding festivals are a powerful location for confirming classic gender roles: women's celebratory centrality simultaneously confirms their social status and rehearses patriarchal obligation, while men's quiet presence announces persistent cultural scripts of masculinity concerning provision and dominance. This research adds to more general arguments in the academy around gender, identity, and cultural performance because it shows how celebration cultures are both empowering and limiting spaces. The paper concludes by advocating for more inclusive marital practices that balance symbolic visibility with shared responsibility and recommends further cross-cultural research to explore the evolution of marital rituals in the context of shifting global gender norms.

Keywords: Gender differences, marital celebrations, women's visibility, cultural identity, social recognition, symbolic capital, gender roles

INTRODUCTION

Marriage endures as one of the most profound and universally recognised milestones in the human life cycle, encapsulating not merely a private commitment between individuals but also a complex web of cultural, social, and familial expectations. Historically and cross-culturally, it has been celebrated as a transformative rite of passage into adulthood and the foundational act of family formation (Coontz, 2005; Cherlin, 2009). The associated ceremonies and rituals are meticulously designed to communicate social status, cultural identity, and community integration (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Amato, 2012). However, the experience and perception of these marital celebrations are far from uniform; they are deeply and systematically gendered. A consistent pattern emerges across diverse societies where women frequently assume a central, highly visible role in the ritual and symbolic performances of weddings, while men are often positioned in more peripheral, functional, or logistical roles (Baxter, 2005; Boden, 2003).

This gender asymmetry is a representation of culturally inscribed scripts in which the woman occupies centre stage at wedding ceremonies and embodies ideals of family honour, respectability, beauty, and purity (Ortner, 1978; Skeggs, 1997). Recent sociological and anthropological research corroborates that women tend to celebrate marriage more visibly and intensely than men, often framing the event as both a pinnacle of personal achievement and a crucial public declaration of identity (Boden, 2003; Jankowiak & Allen, 2017). For instance, ethnographies in various cultural contexts from sub-Saharan Africa to South Asia document elaborate ceremonies where women's dress, adornment, and ritual activity take centre stage, while the men's roles are economic or as administrative (Obioma, 2018; Allendorf & Pandian, 2016). Survey data often reveal a wide gender gap regarding how significant the ceremony itself of the wedding is, yet women are more concerned about it as an indicator of social status (Boden, 2003).

This disparity suggests that women, more than men, align the visibility of their marital union with societal expectations that frequently equate a woman's marital status with her personal respectability and social value. Men structure marriage as a rite of passage role assignment of the novel full-time provider-of-a-home and not of identity-revelatory public spectacle (Townsend, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2012). While the rituals are symbolically rich, despite this richness, such gendered differences in revelatory expression have been relatively intensively investigated by few researchers. Most of the research that has centred on marriage has been interested in structural aspects such as marital stability, divorce, and economic provisions (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2004), but relatively little effort has been devoted to the phenomenological and performative nature of the wedding ceremony itself. While feminist scholars have insightfully critiqued the burden of emotional and aesthetic labour carried by women during wedding preparations (Baxter, 2005; Otnes & Pleck, 2003), few studies have undertaken systematic comparative analyses that directly contrast men's and women's lived experiences and subjective perceptions of these events. This constitutes a significant gap in the scholarship, given that marriage ceremonies remain a critical cultural arena where gender roles are dynamically enacted, reinforced, and sometimes contested.

The necessity for this study is further amplified by the rapidly shifting cultural and technological landscape in which contemporary marriage celebrations occur. Globalisation and the pervasive influence of social media have dramatically amplified the public visibility of weddings, transforming them into potent platforms for public validation, identity curation, and even social competition (Illouz, 2007; Geller, 2001). Women, of all groups, are seemingly the champions of this information age revolution. Empirical data suggest that most wedding-related social media posts are constructed, edited, and published by women (Slaughter, 2019; McGuire, 2020). This is not just evidence that women publicly praise marriage more but also evidence that women actively pursue general societal approval of their marriages. While men are not as enthusiastic about these cyber practices, they take on second-story roles in wedding story world construction on the internet. These new distinctions refer to the pivotal need to examine how visions of gender, technology forces, and cultural practices intersect to shape the experience of wedding celebration.

Therefore, this paper seeks to rigorously examine the gendered nature of marital celebrations by systematically comparing how women and men perceive, experience, and perform them. It is especially concerned with the sociological question of why women typically celebrate marriage more publicly and desire wider public recognition of their marital status. In responding to this question, the article seeks to address a unique lacuna in current scholarship, which too often ignores the symbolic and experiential dimensions of marriage in favour of predominantly structural accounts. By placing terms like visibility, identity performance, and celebration at the centre as key analytic concepts, this work will seek to make a significant contribution to the cross-cutting areas of gender studies, cultural sociology, and family research. In addition, the results hold practical significance towards examining how gender inequalities are reinforced and challenged through cultural norms and how wedding rituals can be reinterpreted to foster more equitable and reciprocal relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Social Meaning of Marriage

Marriage has profound and multifaceted social significance in virtually all human cultures. It is not only a contractual and emotional bond between two individuals but also a universal rite of passage, a marker of adult

status, and a method of forming and cementing community and kinship ties (Coontz, 2005; Cherlin, 2009). Scholars from Durkheim (1893/1997) onwards have emphasised that marriage serves as a key institution for social integration, symbolising the individual's successful transition into recognised adulthood and their assumption of procreative and social responsibilities within the community.

In many non-Western societies, particularly across Africa and Asia, marriage is deeply intertwined with cultural heritage and complex kinship systems. Here, marital rituals are not merely personal festivities but are considered collective achievements that signal the continuity of tradition and the successful negotiation of social identity (Obioma, 2018; Allendorf, 2013). For example, in many Zimbabwean and South African communities, marriage ceremonies are profoundly communal events that reinforce social cohesion and validate the couple's integration into extended familial networks (Mkhize, 2016). Historically, and often persistently, marriage has also served as a paramount marker of respectability, especially for women. Feminist theorists have long argued that in patriarchal societies, women's social identities are frequently legitimised and elevated through their marital status, whereas men's identities are more often validated through occupational or economic achievements (Oakley, 1972; Skeggs, 1997).

Even amidst processes of globalisation, modernisation, and the rise of individualised partnership models, the symbolic power of marriage as a key identity marker remains remarkably resilient (Cherlin, 2004; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). However, its manifestation has evolved, often appearing through increasingly elaborate and hybrid ceremonies that blend traditional symbols with contemporary consumerist and individualistic elements (Illouz, 1997; Boden, 2003).

Gender, Culture, and Marital Rituals

The intersection of gender, culture, and ritual practice is particularly salient in the context of marital celebrations. Gendered expectations profoundly shape how these events are orchestrated, experienced, and ascribed meaning. Cross-cultural analysis reveals a common pattern: women are typically positioned at the symbolic core of wedding rituals, while men assume roles that are more functional, logistical, or responsibility-orientated (Baxter, 2005; Ingraham, 1999).

Weddings are, in essence, highly gendered social dramas. The bride's attire, her physical presentation, and the rituals surrounding her (such as the veil, the processional, and the giving away) are heavily laden with cultural meanings related to beauty, purity, virtue, and social worth (Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Mead, 1949). Empirical studies across diverse contexts consistently show that the vast majority of ritual activities, preparatory labour, and financial expenditure are focused on the bride. For instance, research on African weddings notes that over 80% of the ritual symbolism and preparatory focus is directed toward the bride, reinforcing her symbolic centrality, while the groom's participation is often confined to specific functions like financial negotiations or formal speeches (Obioma, 2018; Amadiume, 1997).

This gendered division of celebratory labour reflects deep-seated patriarchal cultural scripts that, paradoxically, elevate women's visibility as cultural symbols while simultaneously reinforcing men's authority in the practical domains of finance and decision-making (Connell, 1987; Bourdieu, 2001). This pattern is not confined to any single region. Similar dynamics are observed in Western societies, where the "white wedding" complex heavily emphasises the bride as the central spectacle (Ingraham, 1999), and in Asian contexts, where ceremonies often highlight the bride's role in symbolising family honour and continuity (Allendorf, 2013). This points to a near-universal gendering of marital ritual practices.

Visibility and Recognition in Women's Celebrations

The concepts of visibility and social respectability are significant to an understanding of women's practices of marital celebration. There is substantial evidence to indicate that women frequently employ marriage as a strategic platform of public legitimation and identity formation, actively attempting to be recognised as respectable members of society and for the respectability of their own kin (Skeggs, 1997; Jankowiak & Allen, 2017).

This desire for validation through wedded publicity is typically more pronounced in females than in males.

Survey studies across various cultures commonly identify a substantial gender difference in the importance of the wedding itself as a public event. One of the leading contemporary arenas for identity performance, social media has intensified the dynamic. Studies reveal that women disproportionately produce digital content on weddings and use sites to structure and present their marital identity, desiring validation from an expansive social network (Slaughter, 2019; McGuire, 2020).

This is in line with feminist accounts which contend that women invest disproportionate levels of aesthetic, symbolic, and emotional labour into weddings (Baxter, 2005; Hochschild, 1989). This is driven not only by personal wishes for an ideal day but also by the pressure to comply with powerful cultural ideal types of femininity, success, and membership in society. Marriage for most women is therefore being hailed as a dual triumph: a highly individual achievement and a crucial public declaration of an identity that is socially sanctioned and valued (Boden, 2003).

Male Perspectives on Marriage Celebrations

In stark contrast to women's experiences, male perspectives on marriage celebrations tend to be more restrained, pragmatic, and framed around concepts of responsibility and status transition. Men often perceive marriage less as a performative event for identity display and more as an assumption of new social and, particularly financial obligations (Townsend, 2002; Kimmel, 1996).

Comparative research in various cultural contexts consistently shows that while men may associate marriage with increased social respect and authority, they frequently attribute less personal symbolic importance to the wedding ceremony itself. Men's visibility within the rituals is often deliberately limited, with their primary roles defined by provision (e.g., paying bridewealth or financing the event) or the performance of patriarchal authority (e.g., leading ceremonies or making speeches) (Obioma, 2018; Silberschmidt, 2001).

This relative symbolic invisibility, when contrasted with women's hyper-visibility, reflects gendered cultural norms that position men as providers and protectors rather than as objects of celebratory spectacle. Even in Western contexts, where grooms are more incorporated into the ceremony than in some traditional settings, scholars note that men often approach weddings with a sense of obligation or passivity, perceiving them as events that must be endured rather than actively celebrated as transformative identity performances (Baxter, 2005; Geller, 2001).

Gaps in Literature

Despite a robust and growing body of scholarship on marriage and gender roles, a significant lacuna remains regarding systematic comparative analyses of men's and women's subjective experiences of the celebratory aspects of marriage. Much of the existing research has prioritised structural dimensions such as divorce rates, marital quality, and economic arrangements within marriage (Amato, 2010; Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

While feminist scholars have made invaluable contributions by critiquing the gendered division of "wedding work" and the symbolic burdens placed on women (Baxter, 2005; Otnes & Pleck, 2003), there remains a scarcity of studies that directly and systematically contrast these findings with in-depth explorations of men's perspectives. This comparative insight is especially limited in non-Western contexts, where cultural norms powerfully shape gendered expectations, but scholarly attention has often prioritised economic or demographic analyses over the symbolic and experiential dimensions of marriage (Obioma, 2018; Allendorf, 2013).

This gap underscores the need for a deeper, qualitative exploration of how women and men differentially experience marital celebrations, the sociological reasons underpinning women's greater investment in visibility and recognition, and the ways in which these practices both reinforce and potentially challenge existing gender inequalities. By addressing this gap, the present study aims to contribute to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of marriage as a gendered cultural performance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by three interconnected theoretical perspectives that provide a robust foundation for

analysing the gendered dynamics of marital celebrations: Social Identity Theory, Gender Role Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a powerful lens for understanding why marriage functions as a critical identity performance, particularly for women. The theory posits that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. Marriage confers membership in the socially esteemed category of married person, a status that carries different weights and meanings for men and women due to prevailing cultural norms.

Research consistently shows that women often invest more heavily in this identity performance. This is partly because, in many societies, a woman's social value and respectability are more closely tied to her marital status than a man's (Oakley, 1972; Skeggs, 1997). The public celebration of marriage - the ceremony, the attire, and the announcements becomes a stage for asserting this new, valued social identity. It is a performance of belonging to a group that confers legitimacy and recognition. Men, whose social identities are often more firmly anchored in occupational or economic achievements (Townsend, 2002), may derive less performative benefit from the marital identity itself, leading to a lower investment in its celebratory display.

Gender Role Theory

Gender Role Theory, rooted in the work of sociologists like Alice Eagly (Eagly & Wood, 2012), explains the observed asymmetries in marital celebrations through the lens of socialisation and socially prescribed roles. This theory argues that from early childhood, individuals are socialised into culturally specific expectations for behaviour based on their gender.

Women are typically socialised to value relationships, family formation, and aesthetic presentation, associating marriage with personal fulfilment and societal approval. This socialisation prepares them for the expressive and symbolic roles central to wedding celebrations (Bem, 1981). Men, conversely, are socialised to prioritise agency, provision, and emotional restraint, associating marriage with the responsibilities of being a husband and provider rather than with the celebratory performance itself (Kimmel, 1996). Consequently, wedding ceremonies become heavily feminised spaces where women's visibility is paramount, and men's roles are structured around pragmatic support and dignified authority, reflecting these deep-seated gendered scripts (Ingraham, 1999).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959) emphasises how meaning is constructed through social interaction, symbols, and shared interpretations. From this perspective, marital celebrations are rich sites of symbolic communication. Objects like the wedding ring, the white dress, the exchange of vows, and the elaborate cake are not merely decorative; they are symbols that convey shared meanings about purity, commitment, status, and the transition to a new social role.

This theoretical lens helps us understand why women are so often the central symbols in this interactional drama. The bride's body and attire become the primary canvas upon which these meanings are displayed and interpreted (Goffman, 1979). The ceremonies performed upon and to her (being given away, the first dance) cooperatively establish her new wife identity. Men, while agents, are less frequently the recipients of this symbolic act. They are merely present to consummate or legitimise the transformation rather than to symbolically enact it. Thus, through the performative process of the celebration, gendered identity is not simply performed but actually reinforced and remade.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative comparative research design in the analysis of the gendered experience and meaning of marital festivities. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to describing the complex,

subjective, and socially constructed meanings that individuals attach to rituals and life events (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The comparative element expressly comparing and contrasting women's and men's accounts is required for identifying precisely how gender impacts these experiences. Such a design makes possible the capture of rich, qualitative data that can potentially reveal the pervasive cultural logics and social pressures structuring celebratory practice beyond description to generate analytical understanding regarding the reproduction of gender roles (Mason, 2002).

Data Collection Methods

A multi-method approach was utilised to collect data in order to produce depth, richness, and triangulation (Denzin, 1978). Primary methods included are:

Semi-structured Interviews

In-depth, individual interviews were held with 30 participants (15 women and 15 men). The interview guide covered key themes including motivations for celebration, the personal significance of rituals, perceptions of their own and their partner's role, feelings of visibility/invisibility, and the influence of family and community expectations. Semi-structured interviews allow for consistency across participants while providing the flexibility to probe emerging themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Four focus groups were conducted (two single-sex groups for women and two for men), with 6-8 participants per group. FGDs are particularly effective for exploring collective norms and cultural discourses, as participants negotiate and articulate shared understandings in a group setting (Morgan, 1997). The group dynamics often reveal societal pressures and shared assumptions that may not emerge as clearly in individual interviews.

Document Analysis

A supplementary analysis of cultural texts was conducted. This included reviewing wedding photographs, social media posts (with permission), wedding invitations, and popular media representations (e.g., wedding films, magazines). This provided contextual information regarding the public, idealised stories of wedding celebrations against which personal experience could be compared (Prior, 2003).

Population and Sampling Strategy

The respondents were purposively selected from three socio-geographical settings within Zimbabwe: Harare (urban), Marondera (semi-urban), and Murewa (rural) to capture diverse socio-cultural dynamics influencing marital celebrations. The final sample comprised 30 participants (15 women, 15 men) aged between 24 and 38 years. Of these, 40% were employed in professional occupations, 33% were self-employed, and 27% were in informal or domestic work. Education levels ranged from secondary to postgraduate. This stratification provided a broad representation of class and cultural diversity. Participants were identified through religious centres, community networks, and online marriage forums, ensuring voluntary participation. Such contextual grounding enhances both the credibility and replicability of the study's findings. Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich cases relevant to the research question (Patton, 2015). Statistical generalisability was not desired, but instead analytical richness and the ability to make substantive gendered comparisons were. The sampling criteria were:

Inclusion Criteria: 1) Previously married within the last 10 years; 2) Experienced a wedding ceremony (of any scale); 3) Self-identified as male or female.

Recruitment: The participants were recruited from a range of diverse sources to ensure diversity: religious centres, social centres, online groups of newlyweds, and snowball sampling. Initial contacts were made with community leaders and organisers of premarital courses to gain access to potential participants.

The final sample consisted of 30 interview participants and 28 FGD participants (with some overlap, leading to a total unique N of 48). The sample was stratified to include roughly equal numbers of women and men from

each of the three geographical contexts. The demographic breakdown was diverse in terms of age (range 24-38), occupation, and educational background, though all participants shared the common experience of having recently undergone a marital celebration.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a systematic process of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This method is effective for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The process was iterative and involved the following phases:

Familiarisation

All interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim. The researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and rereading the transcripts.

Generating Initial Codes

Significant features of the data relevant to the research questions were systematically coded across the entire dataset. This initial coding was done using NVivo 12 software to manage the data efficiently. Codes included, for example, visibility as validation, pressure from family, financial responsibility, and restraint as masculinity.

Searching for Themes

The codes were collated into potential themes, which represented broader patterns of meaning. The analysis specifically looked for patterns that differed between the transcripts of male and female participants.

Reviewing Themes

The potential themes were checked against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they formed a coherent pattern and accurately reflected the meanings evident in the data. This phase involved refining the themes.

Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme was clearly defined and given a concise name that captured its essence (e.g., The Wedding as a Woman's Social Achievement, Male Restraint as Pragmatic Responsibility).

Producing the Report

The final analysis was woven into a narrative, using compelling extracts from the data to illustrate the themes and demonstrate the comparative analysis between women and men.

Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to the highest ethical standards. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of [Blank] Institutional Review Board (IRB Ref: #2023-SOC-45). All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet and gave written informed consent before participation. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms are used throughout this report. Given the personal nature of discussing marriage and family, interviewers were trained to be sensitive to participants' emotions and to provide information for counselling services if needed. The cultural significance of marital rituals was respected throughout the research process.

Findings and Analysis

Women's Centrality in Marital Celebrations

The data consistently underscored the central and highly visible role women play in marital celebrations. This

centrality was expressed through an intense focus on their attire, their physical presence in rituals, and their overall visibility as the spectacle of the event. Women participants frequently described their wedding day as a moment of unparalleled public recognition. Amina, a 28-year-old teacher, articulated this feeling: "The day I wore my wedding dress, I felt like the whole community finally recognised me as someone important. It was my day to be seen. Everyone's eyes were on me, and it felt like an acknowledgement I had been waiting for."

This sentiment was echoed in focus group discussions, where women often framed a large, visible celebration as a social necessity. A participant named Chipo remarked, "A woman is not fully celebrated until she is married, and the celebration must be big enough for everyone to see. If it's small, people will wonder what is wrong." The analysis of wedding photographs and social media posts reinforced this trend; the bride was almost invariably the focal point of images, with the groom appearing more as a supporting figure. Rituals such as the bridal procession, the veiling, and the ceremonial dances were staged explicitly around the bride's body and visibility, constructing her as the symbolic centrepiece of the event. This centrality, therefore, is not merely a personal preference but a societal expectation that positions the wedding as a platform for a woman to accumulate symbolic capital and achieve collective validation.

Women's Desire for Recognition

Closely linked to their centrality was a pronounced desire for social recognition. For the women in this study, marriage was frequently framed as a key marker of identity, respectability, and social belonging an achievement to be publicly announced and celebrated. Interview data revealed that many women interpreted marriage as a social accomplishment as much as a personal one. For example, Fatima, a 32-year-old entrepreneur, stated, "People started respecting me more after my wedding. It was as if, in the space of a single night, I wasn't this girl who lived with her parents anymore but this woman who had done something. The wedding was the proof."

The other member, Grace, said in a focus group, "We celebrate big because we want the world to know we have been chosen, that we belong somewhere respectable. It's a way of saying, 'I have arrived.'" The aspiration for acknowledgment spilt over from the self to the family of origin. Most of the women discussed how there was a pressure to hold a celebration that would be celebrating their parents because the identity marker is one of collectively. Secondary sources, such as popular music performed at weddings, had a tendency to lyrically recycle this association, symbolising the bride's status rise and successful transition into an admired social class.

Men's Restrained Approach

In comparison to women, men consistently described a more restrained, pragmatic, and responsibility-based approach to marriage celebrations. Yet, beneath this restraint lay nuanced emotions often overshadowed by societal expectations. Some men expressed quiet pride in fulfilling the role of provider, viewing financial contribution as their symbolic performance of love. For instance, Daniel (aged 33) noted, "Paying lobola and financing the ceremony was my way of showing commitment; that's how we express ourselves." This suggests that male restraint should not be read as emotional absence but as culturally encoded symbolism of care and authority. Hence, male celebration takes a less visible, yet equally meaningful, form of ritual affirmation. David, 35, an engineer, shared the common perspective: "For me, being married was making sure that I would be able to support my wife and future family. The wedding itself was important, of course, but it was a ceremony. The real work started after. I didn't want to be the centre of attention; my job was to make sure the event took place successfully and that our future was secure."

The next was the opinion in most male focus groups. John clarified, "It is enough that I have paid for the majority of the wedding and fulfilled the bride price conditions. I don't have to brag or get that emotional. I am supposed to continue the marriage, not celebrate the wedding for a day." Cultural ritual analysis, such as payments of lobola (bride price), made this line of reasoning possible. Such rituals publicly establish the bridegroom's economic status and relative status of his kin group, rather than his symbolic visibility or his emotional display. This pragmatic undercurrent emphasises men's subdued role in festivals, in sharp contrast with the hyperbolic expressivity one finds in women.

Cultural and Societal Pressures

This pragmatic undercurrent emphasises men's subdued role in festivals, in sharp contrast with the hyperbolic expressivity one finds in women. The findings conclusively indicated that these gendered inclinations are not simply a personal trait of taste but are firmly rooted in social and cultural expectations. Female and male students alike frankly testified to experiencing heavy social pressures to have a big party.

Maria, a nurse aged 26, explained, "If your wedding is not spectacular, people will say that your husband doesn't respect you or that your family is not good. So, we want a wedding party that will close the gossips' mouths and make everyone understand that we are respected." Another woman joined in, "It is the woman who gets blamed if the marriage is not suitably celebrated. People will say things about her. 'Something was wrong? Was she not worthy?' They barely fault the man in like fashion."

Men, in turn, cited social pressures that called for restraint, with freely expressed celebratory feelings equated with softness or a lack of seriousness, qualities discordant with contemporary standards of masculinity. One of the male focus group participants, Tafadzwa, explained, "If a man gets too excited or becomes too involved in wedding planning, people will say he is being dominated by his wife or that he does not care about his real duty. A proper man is calm, responsible, and in charge." Another respondent asserted, "Society expects us to be the pillars and not the ornaments. That is why we do not make a big issue of being wedded; we just do the minimum that is expected of us in silence." These narratives show how cultural scripts actively produce the gendered asymmetry in celebratory practice, pushing women towards extravagant performance and men towards dignified restraint.

DISCUSSION

Why Women Celebrate More Than Men

The findings reveal that symbolic visibility functions as a gendered form of power and constraint. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) notion of symbolic capital, women's heightened visibility during marital celebrations grants them temporary prestige within patriarchal frameworks but simultaneously reproduces gender hierarchies. The bride's spectacle becomes both a recognition of worth and a reaffirmation of subordination, where power operates through visibility itself. This duality aligns with feminist critiques that symbolic recognition can mask deeper structural inequalities (Skeggs, 1997). Hence, women's celebratory prominence is a performative negotiation of status within patriarchal symbolic economies. This accords with the presumptions of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Becoming the wife confers on women a powerful collective membership that significantly contributes to their respectability and social capital within most cultures (Skeggs, 1997). The celebratory performativity by virtue of lavish attire, choreographed ritual, and publicised ceremonies serves as a necessary vehicle for the announcement and materialisation of the new, sought-after identity. As Donnelly (2011) argues, wedding rituals are structured to disproportionately emphasise the bride, making her celebration a necessary performance for both personal and communal affirmation.

Conversely, men's restrained approach is equally rooted in gendered social expectations. As predicted by Gender Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), masculinity in most societies is measured less by ritual visibility and more by demonstrated responsibility, financial provision, and authority (Kimmel, 1996; Townsend, 2002). The wedding, for men, is often the gateway to these responsibilities rather than the performance of them. Therefore, while both genders may view marriage as a transformative life event, the social function of the celebration itself is skewed. It operates as a crucial stage for women to accrue what Bourdieu (1986) termed symbolic capital, a form of prestige and recognition that is essential for their social standing. Men, whose capital is more often derived from economic and professional domains, have less need to accumulate symbolic capital through the wedding spectacle.

Implications for Gender Equality

The analysis reveals a paradox. On one hand, the heightened visibility of women in marital celebrations can be interpreted as a form of empowerment, a moment of intense social focus and validation. However, this very

visibility paradoxically reinforces patriarchal structures. The celebration frames marriage as a woman's crowning social achievement, thereby implicitly reinforcing the cultural narrative that a woman's ultimate respectability and belonging are contingent upon her marital status (Oakley, 1972). This can have the effect of limiting the avenues through which women can achieve social recognition, perpetuating the idea that their value is relational rather than intrinsic.

Simultaneously, men's relative invisibility in these celebrations reflects an unequal cultural burden. Their worth is measured against metrics of financial provision and long-term responsibility, sidelining their emotional and symbolic participation in the partnership (Baxter, 2005). This duality creates an asymmetrical set of expectations: women are burdened with the pressure of perfect performance, while men are burdened with the pressure of perpetual provision. As scholars like Connell (1987) have argued, such gendered rituals, while offering certain gratifications, ultimately reinforce broader societal inequities by naturalising different spheres of action and validation for men and women. The symbolic recognition women receive does not necessarily translate into equality in decision-making power or freedom from traditional domestic roles.

For instance, in one focus group, Rudo (29) explained, "Everyone kept asking about my dress, the cake, and the photos; no one asked my husband how he felt. It's like the whole event existed for me, yet it wasn't really mine." Such narratives illustrate how symbolic centrality coexists with emotional marginalisation, demonstrating how gendered scripts of celebration subtly reproduce inequality through cultural performance.

Comparative Insights

Placing these findings in a broader global context demonstrates both the universality of gendered marital celebrations and important contextual nuances. The pattern of female centrality is remarkably consistent. In South Asia, for instance, weddings are grand performances of the bride's family's status and honour, closely mirroring the African contexts discussed here (Allendorf, 2013). Similarly, the Western white wedding industry remains heavily focused on the bride as the central consumer and spectacle (Ingraham, 1999).

However, comparative data from Kenya, India, and Sweden highlight that modernisation and digital media transform marital symbolism differently across contexts. In Kenya, televised weddings and influencer culture amplify women's performative visibility (Akinyi, 2022), while in India, social media reshapes dowry practices into aesthetic displays (Mukherjee, 2023). In contrast, Scandinavian couples use digital platforms to co-create egalitarian narratives of partnership (Wignell, 2021). These contrasts reveal how modernisation and media can either reinforce or resist patriarchal visibility scripts, depending on prevailing cultural ideologies. In such contexts, there has been a growing tendency towards gender-neutral wedding practices emphasising partnership and shared decision-making and de-emphasising the bride as the sole symbol of the event (Wignell, 2021). This implies that although celebratory female visibility is ubiquitous, it is also adaptive culturally. It is shaped by deep-seated social values, religious rituals, and, above all, dominant gender ideology. The persistence of the extreme visibility of women in the contexts examined hereunder strengthens the tight hold of cultural pressures linking female identity and social acceptance to marital performance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings

This study has established that wedding celebrations are gendered events. Women celebrate marriage more publicly, intensely, and forcefully than men. Their rites are all about leveraging the wedding ceremony as a medium through which to stage identity achievement and elicit social legitimation through ritual, ceremonial performance, and dress. Men, however, enter these celebrations with clear restraint, framing their place in terms of responsibility, economic support, and long-term stability. The conclusions are well able to show that wedding celebrations are not personal choices but are robust social sites wherein deeply seated gendered presuppositions about gender are practised, performed, and reiterated.

Implications

The importance of this study cannot be overstated. Marital celebrations are crucial sites for the reproduction of

gender. For women, the celebration offers a valuable moment of visibility and symbolic legitimation, but it is usually at the price of being bound to a patriarchal rationality that treats their worth as equivalent to marital status. For men, contained celebration imposes a cultural script that values stoic provisioning over emotional expressiveness and symbolic participation, potentially truncating their engagement with the relational aspects of marriage. The imbalance attests to the continuing robustness of gendered dynamics in cultural life and raises important questions about the inclusivity and equity of these deeply significant rituals.

Policymakers, religious institutions, and media practitioners should promote inclusive marital education that values shared visibility and emotional participation across genders. Community marriage preparation programmes can explicitly challenge patriarchal expectations that assign aesthetic labour to women and financial responsibility to men. Furthermore, cultural and media representations of weddings should depict partnership rather than performance. These interventions would foster equitable symbolic participation, enabling both partners to experience marriage as a mutual act of recognition and celebration.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should build upon this in several ways. First, there must be genuine cross-cultural comparative studies that consider how these patterns identified here vary across a larger number of societies, religions, and traditions. This would enable us to determine just how widespread or limited these gendered dynamics are and whether they are determined by specific configurations of culture. Second, longitudinal research would track how wedding practices vary when gender ideologies vary over time, particularly with the advent of two-career households and changing views of masculinity and femininity. Third, research might focus on couples who specifically attempt to undercut traditional gender roles at their weddings and explore in depth the challenges they face and the meanings they make. Finally, looking at the role the wedding industry (planners, media, etc.) plays in reinforcing or critiquing these gendered scripts would be a useful structural understanding. Not understanding these forces is essential to creating a more inclusive and fairer conceptualisation of celebration and marriage.

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