

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Nigerian Academic Mothers navigating Invisible Work

Mary Oluwatobiloba Odetoyinbo

Lancaster University

Abstract

The broader African society, including Nigeria, maintains a strict adherence to patriarchal norms and values, as well as gender role ascription and divisions of labour (Adisa et al., 2021; Akanji et al., 2021). Predominantly, Nigeria operates within conventional gender binary classifications and heterosexual family structures, reinforcing traditional gender roles in practice. Women's dedication to and performance of caregiving and housekeeping tasks are culturally normalized and anticipated. Consequently, the physical, cognitive, and emotional labour involved in domestic work, caring for others, and mothering duties, which women predominantly undertake, are rendered invisible, discounted, and rationalised through socio-cultural norms surrounding gendered roles (Dudu et al., 2016). While many women strive to balance these expectations alongside paid work commitments (Omotosho, 2017), the implications on women's career progression and well-being, as well as efforts to mitigate gender inequities, become increasingly apparent. Utilising a qualitative phenomenological approach, the purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences of Nigerian academic mothers, particularly how they navigate invisible mothering activities and domestic labour alongside their academic careers. By uncovering and highlighting the invisible labour performed by Nigerian academic mothers, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of gender inequalities in domestic labour and caregiving responsibilities. It also underscores the need for societal and policy-level changes to recognise, value, and redistribute invisible work more equitably, promoting gender equality in both the household and academia.

Keywords: Motherhood, Nigeria, Invisible Work, Equality, Academia

Invisible work

As originally delineated by Kaplan Daniels (1987), invisible work encompasses the multitude of unpaid tasks related to caregiving and household management that is predominantly performed by women. A broader articulation of the concept encompasses all types of work and labour that are physically unseen, ignored, or overlooked, socially marginalized, economically and/or culturally undervalued, and lacking legal protection and regulation, either individually or in combination (Hatton, 2017), resulting in their lack of acknowledgement and compensation (Kaplan, 2022). The widespread recognition of this concept can be attributed, at least in part, to its effectiveness in highlighting types of labour that have often been disregarded in both popular discourse and academic literature on work and employment (Hatton, 2017).

Besides performing most of the physical housework and childcare, mothers typically undertake the responsibility of managing, planning, anticipating, and organizing both routine and unexpected household tasks and family events, as well as supporting the daily well-being of family members (Reich-Stiebert et al, 2023; Bianchi et al., 2012; Daminger, 2019; Hochschild, 1989; Offer, 2014). That is, beyond the physical aspects of domestic care and mothering, women's invisible work includes emotion and mental labour, which receives comparatively less attention. Termed "cognitive labour", (Damingler, 2019) and the burden of being the "captain of the ship" (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019) the mental and emotional labour associated with caregiving and mothering, is often more draining than the physical tasks involved. Yet, it is often overlooked by the women performing the labour, their spouses, and other people. For instance, the cognitive labour that goes into planning and executing physical tasks may include grocery inventory and listing, what to cook and how, when, and how to organise cleaning, mental notes of children's outfits and things that need replacing, purchasing gifts and planning birthday parties, as well researching best practices of nutrition, child development and care. In addition to this, cognitive labour also includes the emotional labour of managing the emotions of others (Hochschild, 1989; 2003). Comforting emotionally distressed children, anticipating, and managing tantrums, monitoring and motivating children to perform chores or homework, among other activities.

Working women are then expected to navigate all of this together with their paid employment. Consequently, the impact of invisible work as it applies to working women has been established. For example, the burden of the gendered, unequal and invisible work, evident in mothering and domestic care, is attributed to deteriorating mental health and well-being, increased levels of depression, conflict with spouse, feelings of role overload and emptiness, and poorer physical health among women (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Omotosho, 2017; Reich-Stiebert et al, 2023).

For Hatton, (2017) invisible work is economically devalued through three intersecting sociological mechanisms of cultural, legal and spatial mechanisms of invisibility. According to her, "The sociocultural mechanism renders labour invisible through ideologies of gender, race, class, and age; the sociolegal mechanism renders it invisible by removing it from legal definitions of "employment"; and the socio-spatial mechanism renders it invisible by physically segregating it from the socially constructed "workplace." (Hatton, 2017, p.337). In this manner, the mechanisms obscuring women's labour are not only interconnected but are

also subjected to time and space dimensions. In essence, invisibility can be seen as a socio-cultural product of existing social contexts. Utilising a phenomenological approach, the research draws on Hatton's (2017) sociological mechanisms of invisibility as an analytical framework, this research examines how cultural, legal, and spatial mechanisms render women's invisible work unnoticed and underappreciated in Nigeria.

The Nigerian context

In the societal context of Nigeria, deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles continue to shape gender division of labour, with women primarily responsible for caregiving and household management. These responsibilities, often termed invisible work, encompass a multitude of unpaid tasks predominantly performed by women. Despite their significant contributions, these tasks remain invisible, discounted, and undervalued due to socio-cultural norms and practices (Dudu, et al., 2016).

Historically, the colonial educational system reinforced traditional gender roles and discrimination against women (Aina et al., 2015). The belief that women's primary role should be in the domestic sphere while men governed the public sphere was deeply ingrained in colonial ideology. It was not the case that women were more favoured in pre-colonial times in Nigeria, but the colonial version and operations further widened the gaps of inequality resulting in rigid gender binaries and the imposition of gendered perceptions, which included discriminatory practices against women. These practices continued to shape societal norms and expectations long after colonialism ended, contributing to gender inequalities in Nigeria.

While, gender norms have evolved across the globe, and men have been observed to take on more household chores and childcare responsibilities, (Hideg, et al, 2023) women are still unequally yoked with the demands of managing the household even as full-time workers (Omotosho, 2017; Okeke, 2017). Women perform household tasks that are primarily enjoyed within the confines of the home and are rarely marketed or recognized. These unpaid services, often performed by wives and mothers, are hardly measured in national assessments or economic indices (Waring, 1997). These tasks are economically and socially taken for granted and dismissed in their level of exertion and demand on those who carry them out (Hatton, 2017). Because it is their "culturally" expected duty, the demand and strain it places on women is trivialised and made invisible. It is only recognised and acknowledged not for the labour it exerts but for the purpose and expectation. While it is acknowledged, it doesn't get rewarded, since it is an expected role ascribed to women.

Similarly, women's work is also rendered invisible due to the traditional concept of a "job" being associated with paid employment outside the home. This perception influences how activities like housework, caregiving, volunteering, and emotional labour are categorized as "non-work," thereby perpetuating their invisibility (Kaplan, 2022). Consequently, women, particularly those in paid employment, are having to do more with less pay running a "second shift" in the home (Hochschild, 1989). This is more so because ideas about work, wages, skills, and the interplay between work and family life are often framed within a framework that favours and promotes masculine ideals. For instance, in most Nigerian households, productions are traditionally credited solely to the heads of the households,

typically men, while the contributions of women in these instances often go unrecognized and remain invisible, despite their significant engagement in the production process (Dudu et al, 2016). Rendering women's mothering and domestic work activities invisible can be considered a major mechanism perpetuating gender inequality in the labour market and in society in general (Fraser 2016).

Thus, this research aims to explore the lived experiences of Nigerian academic mothers, focusing on how they navigate invisible mothering activities and domestic labour alongside their academic careers. The study aims to reveal how entrenched gender norms and traditional beliefs about gender roles contribute to the undervaluation of women's contributions to household labour and caregiving. By uncovering and highlighting the invisible labour performed by Nigerian academic mothers, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of gender inequalities in domestic labour and caregiving responsibilities. It also underscores the need for societal and policy-level changes to recognise, value, and redistribute invisible work more equitably, promoting gender equality in both the household and academia.

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