

ASPECTS OF TRADITIONAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS WOMEN IN IGBOLAND: AN EVALUATION

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Abstract

This work is a systematic survey of the traditional rights of women in Igboland and the subjugations they suffer unduly just for being women. Women were made with rights, privileges and responsibilities and they possess all the fundamental human rights as they are humans. This work therefore aims at the empowerment of women in Igboland to take her rightful place in society and in all spheres of human endeavours. The work is a qualitative research which adopted a systematic approach in harnessing available secondary data. It was found that women have fought both at national and international levels for their rights and substantial progress has been made. In today's world, Igbo women have made significant strides, enjoying equal right with men in various aspects of society. They are entitled to full participation in the democratic process, including voting in all elections, running for public office, and holding positions of authority. This shift towards equality is a notable departure from the traditional Igbo society, where women's roles were often limited. Now, Igbo women can exercise public functions and hold public offices on an equal footing with men, marking a significant



milestone in their fight for equality. Government should take appropriate measures including legislation to modify or abolish laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women especially, widows.

Key words: *traditional, rights, women, attitudes, Igboland*

Introduction

Igboland is the home of the Igbo people and it covers most of southeastern Nigeria. This area is divided by the Niger River into two unequal sections- the eastern region (which is the largest) and the Midwestern region¹. The river, however, has not acted as a barrier to cultural unity; rather it has provided an easy means of communication in an area where many settlements claim different origins. The Igbo are also surrounded on all sides by other tribes; the Bini, Warri, Ijaw, Ogoni, Yiv, Igala, Yako and Ibibio². There appears to be a stark polarity of spheres in ethnological findings concerning Igbo men and women³. Whereas, men are given to the public spheres, women are given to the private and natural⁴. This distinction determines the way in which the two sexes are permitted to, enabled by, obligated to or restricted from the public or the private⁵. The belief in man's innate superiority and women's innate inferiority resulted in the exclusion and marginalization of women in all walks of life.

In the pagan world, woman was degraded by her own habits⁶, but Christianity held out to her a lifting hand. Nwachukwuike,⁷ citing Saint Paul asserts that, when Christ freed us, He meant us to remain free, thus Paul insists that there is no more distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all

are one in Christ Jesus⁸. The equality of human personality has been recognized and enriched by Christianity without any discriminations based on race, ethnic origin, sex or social status. For the many rights of man, liberty is fundamental.

Then the question; what are the issues that are involved in the women's rights in traditional Igboland? What value did Christianity attach to woman's life, her right to life; how did it seek to protect it, coupled with other modern liberation agencies? The issues that are involved are political, economic, religious, social and cultural activities. The right here means proper authority or claim; the state of being justly entitled to something; something one may do or have by law. The Women's rights means equality with men in terms of political, economic, cultural, religious and social among other affairs. It is similar to Feminism, which denotes women's liberation movement. It is nothing short of a "human revolution"⁹. Women's liberation is a feminist movement that advocates for the equality of the sexes. This includes the elimination of formal and informal social and business restraints on women. The movement was effective especially since 1970. These movements includes; Women in Nigeria (WIN), National Women's Union, Federation of Ogoni Women Association, Non-governmental Women's Human Rights Organization, Federation of Nigeria Women's Society, Aba Market Women Organization, Abeokuta Women's Union, Widows Association of Nigeria etc. The Economic and Social Commission, an organ of United Nation, has organized conferences on women's rights ranging from Mexico 1985 to Beijing China, 1995. It was in the latter that declaration on women's rights was made. This work aims at the liberation and empowerment of women to take thier rightful place in the society

and in all spheres of human endeavor. It aims to reclaim women's rights, affirming their inherent worth as individuals created in God's image, redeemed in Christ, and integrated as living stones within the living temple and body of Christ, which is the church.

In dealing with the statement of problem; Osita opined that;

Igbo women, like the majority of the African population are subject to inequalities in the political, social, economic and cultural fields. Women's attitudes to their traditional role have varied from acceptance that has tended to condition the non-utilization of formal guarantees of quality where they exist¹⁰.

According to Osita¹¹, the factors that militate against women's rights in traditional Igbo land and Africa as a whole are categorized into two classes; the capitalist socio-economic organization prevalent in most African states which caused structural inequalities in these societies. Also, the manner in which African societies have evolved have tended in general to encourage discrimination based on sex, a factor that was to some extent facilitated by colonial and Islamic influences.

Apart from the overwhelming impact of the prevalent political economy¹², social, traditional values among others, the status of African women has tended to be conditioned by tradition and the philosophy of the dominant religions. Given the above conditions, discrimination against women is further exacerbated by the underdevelopment of African economies, in which the already dominant male has an advantage when it comes to competing for jobs or material wealth¹³. The issues involved in these problems



have been under examination by various communities and women organizations in Igbo land and beyond.

This work tries to assess the traditional attitudes towards aspects of women's right in Igbo land and to know the level at which women are disadvantaged in the field of human rights promotion and protection. It was noted that obstacles are posed by the slow pace at which men's traditional conception of women changes and also the confusion of women as to what they understand by the equality of the sexes. Hence Osita, asserts that the image of women is rapidly gaining ground in countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America which opted for capitalism¹⁴. For discrimination against women to end, exploitation of human beings by another must be halted. Whatever perception men have of women and women of themselves, women appear not have a share in the economic, political and social processes commensurate with their capabilities.

Anyaoku stated that the traditional African family has a man at the helm of affairs and so the care and upbringing of children is seen as women's responsibilities¹⁵. Despite holding high social status, legal rights, religious and political responsibilities, women still face limitations due to the persistent division of labour, which disproportionately handicaps them¹⁶. Time shall come when Igbo women will play public roles that are equal to those of men in solving the world's economic, cultural, social and political problems.

Some Traditional Attitudes of the Igbo Towards Women

In African society and Igbo in particular, gender peculiarities and patriarchal construct remain the bane across virtually all spheres of life in the society. There is a greater level of gender-sensitivity to the extent that boys are brought up to see themselves as superior sex to girls and as such, boys feel stronger, more important and indispensable, while the females are trained to see themselves as weaker sex or even as appendages to the men folk¹⁷. Male chauvinism is the expression of male superiority and suspension of women. There are always reasons why a woman should not do certain things. She should not have a say in the home, because it is the man's prerogative to decide everything. She should not go into gainful employment, because she should stay at home and depend on her husband and be the "Oriaku"- "food consumer", or "Odoziaku"- "wealth care-taker". Ezeaku citing an Igbo wise saying thus; 'if a child behaves well, he is the father's replica, but if he behaves badly, he is the mother's replica'.¹⁸

This portrays a clear picture of the knowledge of the traditional Igbo society's regard for women. Women must not cause the unhappiness of their husbands either by giving out or receiving anything from their husbands with left hand; they must not use harsh and abusive words on their husbands. Such behaviour by the woman could lead to the husband divorcing their wives at will simply by throwing away their earthenware, cooking utensils, removing their *mkpuke* (kitchen) roofs, kissing their hands and handing them over to their parents, among other things. They have no right to challenge their husband's actions

Moreover, in a situation where a man brings a complaint against his wife, the woman is often presumed guilty, rooted in a biased assumption that men are infallible and incapable of error. The fine usually imposed on the woman is often a cock and kola nuts which are used to appease the “man and the ancestor”¹⁹. During the period the accusation is made, the man would not eat any food prepared by the woman. It is true that the man might have been guilty, but the pronouncement is never made before the woman. The elders would reprimand him later, because to do so in her presence meant humiliating the man before his “bond servant”, such is the attitudes of Igbo society by men.

Also, in the traditional Igbo homestead, two apartments were distinguished, one for the husband and the other for the wife. The husband’s apartment is called *obi* while the wife’s is called *mkpuke*. Entry into the *mkpuke* was restricted to the female visitors who must, of course, pass through the *obi*. The movements within this axis, *obi-mkpuke*, were regulated. A woman in *mkpuke* come to the *obi* either to bring food to the husband, or by an invitation by the husband for procreation or to face “family court” if she had offended her husband. Some other natural phenomena were taken by the society to be cases against women. Such phenomena include the birth of twins, women’s sterility, including certain calamities and epidemics which were easily attributed to women. Men were never guilty of adultery and children born outside matrimonial home were never blamed on men, but women because men were never infallible.

This concept agrees with “the three musketeers” who once declared, “a woman is born for subjugation and obedience to her

parents to begin with, to her husband next, then to her child later and to duty always”²⁰. Duties and rights go together, as a duty cannot be effectively performed without the concomitant right that accompanies it.

Another serious cultural factor that shows attitudes towards women is the boy-child preference. Cases abound where mothers are neglected or thrown out of their matrimonial homes for failure to give birth to male children. Early marriage connotes that the glory and salvation of a woman lies in the marriage, and in the production of children, especially male children. This keeps parents from giving full school education to their girls. The traditional policy is that a woman can only have a share and inheritance through her children –the male children of course, and through their married daughters as they have children in their husband’s homes. This situation leads to some of the motherhood choruses such as:

*“O bughì ma nwa onyegaenyem” and “Chukwu nyem nwa, nyem ego” and so on. That is to say, “if not my child, who will take care or give me something” and God, please give me child and money*²¹.

Furthermore, the traditional Igbo policy is that women are not supposed to inherit property or head any political office. Women cannot have access to land in terms of owning a land. They cannot even negotiate to purchase land unless a man accompanies them. The most agonizing is for a widow who cannot even claim a land belonging to her husband. No matter how desperate she is to raise money to train and feed her children, she cannot pledge that land to the funds. In a decision-making situation, gender

discrimination is very obvious where women are often excluded. Even when women are the implementers or bear the brunt of such decisions, women are usually not invited nor their opinions sought. Further observation can be made in the family and society about the position of women in contrast with that of men. For the man, the family picture is on his desk, a solid responsible family man. For the woman, her family will come before her career. The man is obviously a hard worker and a busy person, which has made his desk to be filled up with papers, whereas the woman in the office is disorganized in nature with less responsibility. When the man is not in the office, he must be at a meeting or meeting with his customers. But the woman, when she is not on the desk, she must be out shopping or must be gossiping among others. That is the attitude of the Igbo under this circumstance.

During the busy season, a typical Igbo woman begins her duty before dawn, embarking on a journey to the farm to tackle her daily responsibilities. She spends some nine to ten hours hoeing, planting or harvesting. She brings food and firewood home from the farm. She walks long distance for water, carrying a pot, which may weigh 20 kilogram or more, grinds, pounds grains and cleans the house. She cooks while nursing her infant, washes the dishes and cloths, minds the children and generally cares for the household. A United Nations document stated that African woman processes and stores food and markets excess produce, often walking long distances with heavy loads in distant terrain. She must also attend to the family's social obligations such as wedding and funerals. She may have to provide for herself and her children.²²

Education is the basic tool in life. Many women were deprived access to education. Some reasons for that are due to the boy-child preference in which only male children are considered fit to be educated. Cases abound where mothers are neglected or thrown out of their matrimonial homes for failure to give birth to male children. This practice has done untold damage to womanhood. Female children develop inferiority complex, lack of confidence in themselves and feeling of continual dependence on men. Girls and women shy away from some disciplines and jobs which they consider as men's domain. Women, who consider themselves good for nothing, completely withdraw into shells waiting for men to take all the decision, do the implementation and leave them (the women) to play minimal and insignificant roles.

Examination on Women's Rights in Igboland

The definition of human rights or what they are depend upon circumstances. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. As a result, human rights are those rights that all people are or should be entitled to, such as fair trial in a court of law, access to medical care and education coupled with that of religion. Generally speaking, "right" can be defined as proper authority or claim: the state of being justly entitled to something, something to which one has a just claim; something, one may do or have by law. Hence, women's right could be stressed especially of equality with men in terms of political, economic, cultural, religious and social among other affairs.

The supreme court of Nigeria, in a unanimous decision upholds the decision of two lower courts, which had found unconstitutional an Igbo customary law of succession excluding female offspring

from eligibility to inherit the property of their fathers²³. Although Igbo women are by and large excluded from inheritance, some localities permit female children to inherit their father's compound in joint tenancy with their brothers. However, in such instances, the eldest remains in control of the property²⁴. There are also localities in which a daughter with respect to whom *Nhanye* ceremony is performed (a practice in which a female child of a man who does not have male issue is prevented from marrying so that she can bear male children in her father's name) may inherit her father's compound, land and houses ²⁵. Hence the Igbo inheritance rules excluding women from inheritance violate the country's 1999 Constitution. Thus gender-based discrimination by customary rights is banned.

Every human being has a right to life and no one shall be deprived intentionally of his or her life. The Igbo hold the right to life as natural and sacred because, it is a God given right, hence any interference with it in any form has grave consequences. It is a doctrine of peaceful co-existence. Also in Igboland, a woman is entitled to live in her matrimonial home without strings attached to it whether her husband likes it or not. The fact that she has no child does not affect her right to live in her matrimonial home²⁶. This covers the period from her husband's lifetime to after his death, whether her husband's family likes it or not. On the other hand, if the woman or wife is of persistent bad behaviour, she may be driven out of the matrimonial home by her husband or family. As the case may be, this would be done through a special process which varies from place to place. She has also a right to be consulted on matters pertaining the education and advancement of her children. She has a right to have her husband's duties

towards her performed. Such duties include to provide such items as cows, rams, goats, fowls, clothes and money.

On the contrary, the wife has to cook his food, help him with his farm work, provide water for his use, and help to keep his premises clean. She has to look after his children, to give him money on demand where he has reasonable need and she has the means. She has to satisfy his reasonable sexual need on demand, to entertain his friends and guests with food. She has to run errands for him where necessary, and to do the necessary mourning for him when he dies among others ²⁷.

The husband has a right to compel his wife to perform her duties towards him. He may exact a fine from her failure without good reason to perform any of such duties. However, a wife can compel performance by her husband of his duties towards her, only by the indirect method of leaving him and refusing to return to the matrimonial home, until he undertakes to perform his matrimonial duties towards her in future. The husband has to convince the wife that he has adequately appeased her for past acts of omission; or by reporting her to her parents who will compel performance of such duties by withdrawing her from the matrimonial home until the husband gives an undertaking to perform his duties in future and appease his wife for past omissions²⁸.

Furthermore, marriage does not terminate a daughter's membership of her maiden family. She retains such rights as the right to inherit her mother's or sister's property at death. She has the right to visit her maiden family at any time she so desire; the right

to attend meetings of daughters of the family and take part in their discussions; the right to settle disputes between members of the family both male and female; the right to share any money or food items due to daughters of the family; and the right to return permanently to the family on being separated or divorced from her husband²⁹.

Also women's right to education is to enable the woman develop her faculties and contribute positively to the common welfare of the community. The consequence of her sharing in the benefit of culture are all geared towards her personal and social needs. The contents of the education include, the liberal education and professional technical training. The former is broad based education, which efficaciously equips one with the key to a decent share in the cultural heritage of man and woman. Such education also involves sex education meant to prepare them for life within the community, hence, is based on some principles. These principles include recognizing the weakness of human nature, the role of parents and the spirit of piety in sex education and discipline. The age of the women is also taken into consideration. The agents of the cultural formation in terms of education include the family and the society³⁰.

Impact of Modern Factors on Women's Right in Igboland

The penetration of the Igbo society by the Christian missionaries in 1857 brought about the beginning of the end of the traditions that placed women in their passive position. The entry of Christianity and its civilizing agencies created a new world view of the Christian theology of equality of persons before God or to reject



the traditional system which they were made to accept as divinely ordered. It is because the Igbo society has been exposed to the new world-order, women passivity has become reassessed and re-ordered, at least by the women themselves. Western education and Urbanization have become increasingly accessible to them, offering new opportunities for growth and development. Such education helped to create the awareness that men and women are different only on the biological level³¹.

In the contemporary society, women rights awareness in the church started with the World Council of Churches, which declared 1988 to 1998 as the decade of churches in solidarity with women. Prior to this, there had been the United Nations Decade for Women 1975-1985. The main objective of the United Nations Women's Decade and the World Council of Churches in solidarity with women was and still is to bring the attention of Governments, Non-Government Organizations, society, churches and people into the heavy gender bias against women and all the inequality they experience in all spheres of life, with a view to uplifting the level of operation of women in particular and the dignity of human persons in general. Their area of focus was and been Equality, Development and peace for all ³².

From 1985 to 1996, a lot has happened under the umbrella of the United Nations Organization through its agencies and member Nations. For example, in 1985 at the end of the women Decade, the United Nations Organization adopted the Nairobi strategies for the advancement of women, till the year 2000. Since then, there has been a lot of actions based on the National, Regional and International levels to ensure greater equity and opportunity for



women. In Nigeria, a lot of awareness has been created through workshops or Seminars organized by Governments, Non-Governmental organizations and the establishment of special organs to advice on women concerns. These organisations take action with the aim of improving the socio-economic status and overall well-being of women. Government on their part, has done much to improve women education, and employment opportunity.

The Christian Council of Nigeria, like the Christian Association of Nigeria, has through its member churches, brought consciousness to everybody on the issue of women participation in the life of the church and society through consultation, seminar or worships and conferences organized by the institute of church and society, and the women's work board of Christian Council of Nigeria. Church women in this aspect would appear to be better informed in knowing that they have equal rights, obligations and opportunities before the law enshrined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria of 1999. The same Constitution defines all the fundamental rights of every Nigerian citizen, his right to life, right to dignity of human person and right to private and family life among others. These equalities of rights include, equal opportunities to education, employment, equal participation in politics and government at all levels. It also includes participation in commerce and industry, but serious constraints of age long prejudices in strongly patriarchal culture have imposed very strong barrier on Igbo women in all walks of life³³.

Among the traditions, which denigrate Igbo women includes custom concerning widowhood and levirate marriage which are still very alive in both towns and villages. A widow has no right of

succession to her husband's estate, her contributions to the acquisition of the estate notwithstanding. This includes the right to be provided with food, clothing and other necessities; the right to be shown land for cultivation and economic trees for harvesting. These rights are enforceable against the successor of her husband, but this is subject to good conduct and good behaviour on the part of the widow. The successor of her husband is entitled to reciprocal duty of respect and loyalty from the widow.

Furthermore, in response to the needs and realization of the potential importance of women in poverty alleviation and Nation development, Nigeria while including women in its national agenda, further established the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, hence, coordinating women and other social development programmes. Programmes adopted for intervention and coordinated within the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development include the Family Support Programme, which focusses on nine action areas some of which are health, education, women in development, agriculture, destitution, shelter, administration and management structure.

Additional women socio-economic activities include the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP). This is meant to enhance access to the much desired capital for the women's economic growth. Through FEAP, families are encouraged to establish cottage industries. In addition, women non-governmental organizations have to lobby cultural systems to abolish discriminatory inheritance cultures. They have to intensified the mobilization of Igbo women at grassroots to avail

themselves of all available credit facilities and overcome fright. There should be equal work for equal pay accordingly.

The past few decades have witnessed advances in information technology which have facilitated a global communications network that transcends national boundaries and has an impact of public, policy, private attitudes and behaviour, especially of children and adults. According to Karibi-whyte, there exists enough potentials for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women. Hence Igbo women were not left out in the benefit of mass media³⁴. Awareness as regards women's rights is made in both electronic and print media. At times, the information is disseminated in vernacular to reach the grassroots. The international Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) have translated the fundamental human rights into the Igbo vernacular in their publications, including magazines and booklets.

Conclusion

It is quite evident that significant strides have been made both at national and international levels for women's political rights and substantial progress has been made. Igbo women are now entitled to vote in all elections, participate in politics, hold public offices and exercise public functions established by law on equal terms with men without much discrimination.

This work therefore recommend that the government should remove the obstacles to the effective participation of all women including widows in development as intellectuals, policy-makers and decision makers. Government should take appropriate measures including legislation to abolish laws, regulations,

customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women especially widows. Christian monitoring groups should be set up to monitor the abuse of rights of widows and women in general. All widows and married women should be encouraged to own, administer, sell and buy property independent of any body.

Other measures should include poverty alleviation for women through access to income generation activities; reducing low level of female education through deliberate policy of equal access to functional literacy; deliberate intervention in the health conditions of women and elimination of harmful traditional practices that dehumanize women, availing women access to equal economic opportunities, eliminating gender stereotype in media coverage, and demand of increased commercialization, industrialization and democracy in the present millennium would place more women in leadership position where they would be involved in decisions, management and control of operations of major matters.

Sufficient resources should be allocated to national machineries for the advancement of women as well as to all institutions, as appropriate, that can contribute to the implementation and ministering of the platform for action. According to the United Nation³⁵, non-governmental and grassroots organization have a specific role to play in creating a social, economic, political and intellectual climate based on equality between women and men. National Orientation Agency (NOA), should intensify women's right consciousness in Igboland. The government should also enact and enforce legislation to guarantee the rights of women and men to equal pay for equal work or work of equal value. It should promote and support women's self-employment and the

development of small enterprises, strengthen women access to credit and capital on appropriate terms equal to those of men. This should be done through the scaling-up of institutions dedicated to promoting women's entrepreneurship, including, as appropriate, nontraditional and mutual credit schemes, as well as innovative linkages with financial institutions.

Furthermore, the government should enhance the rural women's income-generating potentials both at local and national levels by facilitating their equal access to and control of programmes, as well as projects. This is to ensure that a higher proportion of resources reach women in rural and remote areas. The government should also provide business services, training, access to markets, information and technology, particularly to low-income women. They should facilitate research and implement a strategic information, education and communication plan that promotes a balanced and nuanced portrayal of women and girls, highlighting their diverse roles and contributions. It should encourage the media and advertising agencies to develop specific programmes to raise awareness of the platform for Action. It has to promote the concept that the sexiest stereotypes displayed in the media are gender discriminatory, degrading in nature and offensive. Among other things, the governments at national, state and local councils have to guarantee the freedom of the media and its subsequent protection within the framework of popular law, consistent with freedom of expression. In other words self-regulatory mechanisms for media need to be created, strengthened and approaches developed to eliminate gender-based programming. Women therefore need to be involved in decision-

making regarding the development of the new technologies in order to participate fully in their growth and impact.

Women have potentials to be good leaders and the ability to execute laws and decrees with balanced equanimity. Women as producers and utilizers of indigenous technologies would be required to transform same to fit into the existing trend of development. Some imported technologies would also be adopted. Women would be involved in research development and information utilization. They need to be involved in the production and utilization of labour saving devices in view of their increased roles and responsibilities.

Be that as it may, the rural environment is the citadel of people's culture and traditional life, hence one would visualize a different frame of reference among literate women in an environment of such nature. They could join the various elitist movements and have a kind of pulling of the illiterate ones to appreciate their new positions in the society. They have become the women leaders in the town unions and associations. In this new set of values, the group becomes proud that it does not just remain as "oriakus" – the consumers of wealth but as "Okpataaku" –breadwinners, whose contributions promote the image and social status of the family.

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