

## GENDER PROFILING IN NIGERIA: THE CASE OF THE IGBOs OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *Over and over again, the gender issue has remained topical among researchers and policy makers alike. In Nigeria, the clamour for more equitable distributions of positions to favour the women folk, has led to the thirty five percent affirmative programme which seeks to allot thirty five percent of elective positions for women in the National Assembly. The logic had been that women are by nature the weaker sex and therefore need special privileges. Further, it is argued that it is indeed a man's world and that is why women cannot find a survival space. While these logics may have their merits, the theses of this paper is that the problems go beyond these presentations. In particular for Nigeria and for the Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria, the source of the problem is to be located in the culture, folklore and language of the Igbos which from cradle has rendered the woman subservient to the man. Therefore, any changes that may take place must start with dismantling these basic stereotypes such that relative space can be created for the triumph of the woman in modern Nigeria.*

**KEYWORDS:** Gender, Profiling, Culture

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### INTRODUCTION

Gender profiling in Nigeria points at gender imbalance, gender inequality, gender bias and gender discrimination. These put together mean the practice of favouring and giving preferential treatment to males at the expense of their counter parts. (Okebukola 2008:89). In a country like Nigeria, governance is dominated by men, who use their status to accumulate power and wealth to the detriment of the deprived women. Women are not well represented in decision making positions. Women are more often than not discouraged from contesting for political offices. In Igboland for instance, the positions of Head of the clan “*onye isiala*” have remained under the custody of the masculine gender. Nowhere in Igbo history is there evidence of a reigning queen or titular head.

At the level of government of women representation in leadership positions in the three tiers of government has remained low. Election, appointment and nomination of women into political offices have been characterized and motivated by tokenism, and woman in government appointments work in groups that are predominated by male. (Okonkwo, 2008:133)

To a greater extent, some women who gain positions in government are mainly used by the menfolk to secure the sympathy of women in order to attract their votes and support. That is what Okebukola, (2008:92) refers to as “*Rhetoric of women empowerment*” because, political offices created will not be for the poor and unskilled women. Economically, women have not received a fair share in Nigeria, in general and Igbo land in particular. Some inhibitory factors have created a hitch to the economic liberty of the feminine gender. Okonkwo (2008:139) identifies one of these inhibitory factors as “*denial of women access to good education*” which he claims has resulted in overconcentration of women on low income jobs like, nursing, secretarial job, typing and duty attendance. Okagbue (1996:336) shares similar view with Okonkwo (2008:139) when he states that, “more women will experience poverty than the men as poverty level increase and that there are specific impacts of poverty on women.”

In terms of security and the right to live, gender inequality in Nigeria, with particular reference to Igboland has kept the feminine gender at the receiving end of violence against women. They are subjected to both physical and psychological abuse, and they are unable to seek redress. Ahituhu & Ajakor (2011: 796) in recap of the agitations of early feminist theorists, assert that:

*“... women are excluded from some central activities crucial to humanity such as the defining activities of modern political identity, which men appeared to be granted by natural fiat. These included the right to take an active role in politics, government and leadership. The right to political representation, the right to education, the right to self definition, the right to legal ownership and the right to bequeath an inheritance.”*

All these social maltreatments have prevented women from developing into whatever innate potentials their creator embedded in them. A point supported by Chukwukere (2000: 121) who asserts that: In the universities, females avoid the first executive position in campus politics, but rather settle for the post of deputies. In a large-scale congregation made up of both the males and the females, the males always dominate the conversation.

However, there are evidence of strong sentiments in support of gender equity. Presently, several international conferences have been held to inspire government in developing anti-gender inequality policies. One of those conferences is the international conference on women in Beijing China in 1995 (Okebukola, 2008:90). The government has made several attempts to address the issue of gender inequality by appointment women into political offices. They now assume the offices of Councillor, Chairperson of Local Government Areas, Commissioners and Special/Executive Assistants to the Governor or President, Deputy Governors, Ministers, Representatives in States and National Assemblies.

In addition to these, series of legislations have been made in order to raise the status of women. For instance, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), Better Life Programme for Rural Women, National Commission for Women Affairs and Social Development, and recently, the endorsement of thirty five percent

affirmative programme which gives women thirty five percent chance of elective positions in the National Assembly.

Despite these giant strides by both National and International bodies in ensuring equity among the masculine and feminine gender, there are still agitations concerning gender imbalance in African society, especially as it affects the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria. There are still cases of discriminatory and humiliating attitude of most men in the society. Women are still seen as the weaker sex that should not be taken seriously. Men still see woman as the women in their household, who should be bossed and subdued. (Okebukola, 2008: 96).

In a Hot FM, 99.5 phone-in-radio programme, "People's Assembly" of 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2014, most callers spoke against the intention of Senator Chris Anyanwu's (a female) of vying for the Governorship post of Imo State in 2015. These callers advised her to remain in Senate where she was doing very well. To those callers' opinion, the governorship position of the State is not for a woman rather an exclusive reserve of men, whether they will do well or not. These situations therefore give credence to the contention of this paper, that the problem of gender inequality and discrimination is deep rooted in the culture of the people and as such it cannot be effectively handled at the surface or government level alone.

This paper will go further to x-ray those aspects of Igbo culture which from the cradle, have rendered women subservient to the men. At the end, it will make recommendations towards change of the current state of neglect and discrimination.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Social learning theory of gender involves how both males and females learn behaviour and inherent cultural roles regarding their gender. Essential components influencing this social learning include, observational learning, labelling theory, cultural influences, social control theory and mass media influences and the socialization process. This paper will dwell more on cultural inferences and labelling theories.

### **Cultural Influences**

Social learning theory pertaining to gender, involves cultural influences, shared values, customs and belief systems a community upholds, specific to expectations in how males or females are supposed to act. For example, sexual intimacy or how sexuality is supposed to be expressed of usually viciously upheld and preoccupies vast amount of the rule-makers' time. The implications on expected gender-related behaviours are very exact and specific to the roles both males and females are supposed to engage in throughout Igbo land. From the beginning, a person is assimilated into a culture void of his own choice and proceeds to learn by observing what is culturally acceptable by others.

### **Labelling Theory**

Labelling theory is a component of social learning influencing a person's behaviour and identity. Labelling theory is essentially learning how to act and internalize an identity by observing how people treat you and the titles subscribed to you. Labelling theory is a

powerful behaviour modifier and has been increasingly part of the anatomy of determining political correctness. For example, the classical and outdated label of “men are better in maths and women are better in English” is acknowledged as potentially dangerous as there are, in fact many young talented male writers or women scientists who may have their efforts eroded by internalizing a disempowering label specific to their gender. (Wallace, J. [www.ehow.com](http://www.ehow.com) 23/10/2014)

### **Relevance of Social Learning Theory of Gender to Gender Profiling in Igboland**

Having briefly expiated on the theoretical bases of this paper, it is necessary to make a synthesis of cultural influences and labelling theories and relate their relevance to gender profiling. The cultural influences, under social learning theory buttresses the contention of this paper which sees the problem of gender profiling as one that can be located in the culture of the people. This theory talks about how culture, customs, shared values and belief system of a people affect the behaviour and social status of the people.

On the side of labelling theory, one’s behaviour and identity is affected by observing how one is being treated and titles ascribed to one. This is to say that the position of the feminine gender in Nigeria today, is as a result of the label placed on them by the culture and norm of their people. This label goes a long way in influencing their rights and privileges, hence the reason for agitations about gender inequality.

### **Cultural basis, women profiling among the Igbo**

Culture is the way of life. The shared, learned behaviour of a people. It includes everything we think, do and have as members of society. Culture includes the idea, values beliefs, literature, religion and philosophy of the people. It also includes the rules by which those people guide their behaviour and material objects that are found among them. Culture also refers to man’s entire social heritage, all the knowledge, beliefs, customs and skills he acquired as member of society. (Abalere, 2009: 3) and in fact world view.

Inherently, culture is a social heritage of any society: it is a specific and distinctive way of life of a group of people. Igbo culture is full of elements which not only incite the feelings that the Igbo women are maltreated, but also brings to limelight the fact that there is an inequality existing between the Igbo man and Igbo woman, in concrete and clearer terms. Those elements range from Igbo literature, folklore-proverbs, idioms, wise sayings, Igbo philosophy and belief system, taboo system, marriage and divorce, right of inheritance and socialization. These elements will be examined below:

## **LITERATURE**

Talking about Igbo literature, there are folktales that create negative impression in the minds of growing generations against women. For instance, there is an Igbo folktale which gives reason why women no longer grow beards. In that story (abridged), a certain king lost his valuable ring inside a river. The king made all efforts to find the ring, but to no avail. One day, a certain ghost appeared to an indigent boy, as a form of a thirsty little boy. The indigent boy took him to the stream, bath him and gave him water to drink. In appreciation, the ghost

instructed the boy to cast his hook inside the river. He obeyed and behold, he caught a fish. The ghost asked him to take the fish home, open the stomach, get the king's ring and send to him, so that the king will reward him. The ghost disappeared and when the boy was about taking the ring to the king, a certain woman, Nkemdiiche, snatched the ring and ran away. The boy reported to the king and when they went for search in the woman's house, the woman hid the ring in her long bears. When the king and his people searched and could not find the ring, the king promised Nkemdiiche marriage, if she can bring out the ring. It was then that Nkemdiiche brought out the ring from her long bears.

The king got angry and wanted to kill Nkemdiiche but the benevolent boy prevailed on her behalf, but asked the king to shave off Nkemdiiche's bears and that of all women and rub them with tortoise's excreta, so that they will not grow bears again and their skin will remain as slippery as okra (Ogbalu, 1988: 5) From the above folktale, it is glaring that the reason why women do not grow bears is as a result of punishment for their misdeed. Everybody knows that men also steal or snatch people's things, but they rarely receive punishments that will demean their status, as we found in the above folktale.

This story is handed over from generations to generations of Igbo sons and daughters, and its impressionistic effect against women remains indelible.

### **Igbo Proverbs/Idioms and Wise Sayings**

Igbo proverbs reveal a lot about the Igbo themselves. While some nations quote the Bible, or the works and maxims of acknowledged authorities or wise men; or from a carefully worked out code of law, the Igbo quote proverbs (the time-honoured wisdom of their folk) to support and give authority and authenticity to an idea or disputed fact. (Okonkwo, 1974: 99)

The value of proverb to the Igbo is enormous. It is a mark of a mature and experienced speaker. It is often used when a speaker wants to make a powerful speech as well as impress his audience; usually of respectable and experienced elderly Igbo. The proverb is so important to the Igbo that one who cannot understand proverbs is regarded as inexperienced fool or naive.

Nwoga (1975: 186) defines proverb as "*the wisdom of many and the wit of one; the experience and wisdom of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression.*" What this implies is that every Igbo proverb is important especially when it suits the context of usage. Again, Igbo proverb is not a respecter of any person.

A critical look at these proverbs, at their surface structure, buttresses the fact that Igbo proverbs are among the factors that encourage gender inequality, by creating negative impression about women.

1. "Nwanyi ike otele ga-amata ihe o mere onwe ya ma ahia su."

(A woman with fat buttocks will regret it when there is stampede in the market). This proverb talks about an action that is regrettable at the short or long run. The question is, is it only women that have fat buttocks? What about the fat bellied men, has it been used against them?

2. **“Nwata nwanyi zuru tooro onwe ya”?**

There is a general assumption among the Igbo that any child brought up under the tutelage of a woman lacks a deep sense of discipline. This assumption is based on the premise that women are no good disciplinarians and there is a little difference between them and children. (Kewulezi, 2004:82)

3. **“Nwoke luchaa ogu nwanyi enwere akuko”** (Women only tell stories about a war, after men have finished fighting the war).

4. **“Mma nwanyi wu di”** (The beauty of any woman is the husband). This implies that without men, women are worthless.

5. **“Nwanyi makaa di ya n’uzo, ihe chere di ya ewere ya”** (If a woman sets out on a journey earlier than her husband, she will be caught by the trap that was set for her husband). The idea of this proverb is that a woman should never move faster than a matter.

6. **“Nwoke o na-aso nwanyi ike ukwu anya, o bu ya ga-akpo onwe ya”** (Man should not fear a fat buttock woman, because she must always pair with a man).

7. **“Nwanyi anaghi anyuli mmamire elu”** (Woman cannot urinate upwards).

### **Igbo Marriage System**

Mbiti (1979) as cited in Iwuchukwu (2006:202) defines marriage as *“the agreement between male and female partners specifying their right and obligations, with respect to sexual behaviour, child rearing and the provision of such necessities as food, shelter and clothing.”*

The marriage system in Igboland is more positive for man than for woman. A woman, in the first place, has to leave her parents’ home and join that of her husband’s. She changes her surname, the payment of dowry gives the man purchasing power, right and proof of ownership over the woman. Their children draw their right and legitimacy from husband and not the wife. A man is entitled to as many wives as he can afford, but no woman can marry more than a husband at a time.

Divorce, in Igbo culture is more often than not at the man’s command. All the cases that could lead to divorce, ranging from childlessness, inability to cook well, fighting, excessive quarrelling, stealing, infidelity, sickness, poverty, etc are all made to be women’s offences, the men, even when they are culprits, receive no punishment, whereas a divorced woman is sent out empty-handed.

Green (1977) as cited in Iwuchukwu (2006:2013) says,

The woman so treated is deprived of all property, including her children. Her only possessions are her cooking pot, market basket, and a few other small articles. She may go where she likes, and live as she pleases, the husband ceases to take any interest of her or in her affairs from that day forth, with one other exception. Viz: that should another man express a willingness to marry her, the original husband claims back fully the “Ngor” (bride price).

In the case of death, the woman is made to suffer a lot of trauma. Widowhood practice is prevalent in most Igbo communities whereas nobody talks about widower-hood practices.

### **Young Girls and Virginit**

The Igbo regard a virgin girl as one who is pure, both in body and character. As rightly stated by Igbokwe (2013: 94) that:

A virgin bride is a pride to her parents and her husband. In traditional Igbo life, a virgin bride attracts, a lot of gift and goodwill; while on the contrary, any girl that loses her virginity before marriage is a disgrace to her parents and a disappointment to the husband.

The above cited ideology makes premarital sex a taboo for women; it became a punishable act with shameful consequences. This aspect of Igbo culture makes the feminine gender vulnerable, while the masculine gender are made sacred cow. Those men who engage in pre-marital sex are the same people to look for a virgin bride. Meanwhile, as nature will have it, there is no mechanism to detect a man who had engaged in sex before marriage.

### **Igbo Taboo System**

Taboo, according to Mairi (1998:1488) is “anything which is forbidden or disapproved of for religious reasons or by social custom. The Igbo forebears introduced taboo to promote stability, cohesion and progress based on moral rectitude, diligence, hardwork, truthfulness and the fear God. It has been observed that the weight, sex and lost of virginity, one discovers that in Igbo culture, sexual freedom outside marriage is not permitted and remains a shame, especially to mothers who are traditionally expected to help their daughters bequeath to their husbands their greatest treasure – virginity (Uche, 2009:244). From the above comments, the fact remains clear that the problem of pre-marital sex or lost of virginity is the problem and crime blamed on women alone.

There are many other rules and regulations guiding the everyday activities of women in Igboland. There are injunctions on women partaking in certain foods, for instance, women are not allowed to eat the gizzard of a fowl, if a woman must drink palm wine before the men, she must be kneeling or squatting. A pregnant woman should not eat egg and grass cutter meat. A woman must not be the first to taste the first fruit of any plant, where there are men. Other prohibitions include; that women should not climb any tree. They do not touch the kolanut tree. Women do not break the kolanut when a man is around. They are not shown kolaut during its presentation. Women are not allowed to enter the obi (elders section of the compound) during her menstruation. (Anozie, 2003:157 and Iwuchukwu, 2006:205).

In Igbo ideology, a woman is regarded as “amaonye ozo” (belonging to another family). That is why any Igbo family that has not gotten a male child will not relax until he gets one, even if it entails bearing more children than expected or getting more wives. This is because a family that has not male child is regarded as closed. Property ownership in a family is the reserved right of the men. Whatever the women procure in the family, automatically belong to the man because it is said that men own the women, including their property. That is why whenever a woman is divorced, she can only be allowed to go with her clothing and cooking items.

All these and more are those cultural elements that are fundamental in placing women perpetually under men. Therefore, no remarkable progress can be made in the quest and agitations for gender equity, without first of all dismantling these basic stereotypes.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Gender inequality has been a long time phenomena, ranging from the creation of man. Any approach to solving the problem will be gradual and systematic. Since gender inequality is rooted in people's culture and traditional practices, any successful approach towards rewriting the wrongs, must have a socio-cultural approach, as follows:

- There is need for cultural re-orientation as a way of correcting some offensive aspects of the norms that place women under one form of depravity or the other.
- Igbo culture and literature should be streamlined in such a way that their contents and thematic import will not demean the integrity of women.
- Women should embrace virtuous way of life in order to erase some of the negative impressions against them.
- Women should learn to be pro-active in whatever they do and try as much as possible to eschew inferiority complex so that men do not take such advantage over them.
- Parents should grant their female children equal opportunities with the males in terms of formal education and other useful human development trainings.
- Men should correct their attitude of treating women as second class citizens bearing in mind that both men and women are equal before God.
- Women should be prudent while handling issues that concern the public, in such a way that men do not feel slighted and stated recounting some traditional encumbrances against women.
- Women should denounce the title, "*Oriaku*" and embrace "*Odoziaku*" or "*Osodieme*" in such a way that they will not be regarded as unproductive consumers in the family.
- Government should uphold legislations that will give women a place of pride in the society. They should also be encouraged to contest for elective positions in politics.
- Our proverbs, idioms and other sayings should be revisited in such a way that they do not place women under perpetual disadvantage.

## CONCLUSION

Nigeria, as one of the African countries is culturally more male chauvinistic. Some foreign countries have successfully battled with inequality, through human rights laws and women regained their freedom and dignity. These foreigners achieved success because they tackled the source of their problem by developing highly skilled workers among males and females, thereby basing their employment on qualified and competent people, oblivious of gender disparity. (Okebukola: 2008:91).

Nigeria and the Igbo in particular have made efforts in order to liberate women from stereotype and gender inequality by involving women in political appointments as well as allotting thirty five percent affirmative action to them. All these actions have not yielded the expected result because the root of gender profiling in Nigeria and Igbo land in particular, is culture bound.

Culture, norms and values of a people is not, and cannot be cement-cast on a rock. Culture is dynamic, as such it could be constantly amended and repositioned as the need arises. Therefore, there should be a u-turn towards cultural re-orientation in order to correct wrong impressions about the feminine gender, as well as redefine their place and role in the society.

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