

SEXISM IN IGBO TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: A CHALLENGE TO IGBO WOMEN

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Abstract

Sexism, a belief that women are weaker, less intelligent and less important than men (Longman 2000), has become entrenched in the Igbo traditional and contemporary societies. Everywhere in the world, the Igbo woman is industrious, enterprising and supportive in nature. Despite these overtures ascribed to her, she is still assigned a pitiable status in the society. The belief about the status of women in the society has left the Igbo woman feeling cheap, timid, intimidated undeveloped and incapable of living her life to the fullest in the contemporary society. This paper showcases the practices of sexism at different domains and levels, discusses its challenges for women and possible solutions as the way forward.

Introduction

Condry and Condry (1976) observe that from infancy male and female children are interpreted differently and interacted with differently. It is not only that male adults seem to enforce gender more than female, experimental evidence suggest that adults' perception of babies are affected by their beliefs about the babies' sex.

Gender discrimination is deeply engrained in our social practices in our understanding of ourselves and of others, that we almost cannot do anything without some consideration for gender implications.

Simone Beauvoir, in a memorable statement, claims that women are not born, they are made; the same is true of men. The making of a man or woman is never ending process that begins before birth; from the moment someone begins to wonder if the expected child will be ka boy or a girl, and the ritual announcement at birth that it in fact one or the other instantly transform an 'it' into a different pronoun: 'he' or 'she', and standardly assigning the lifetime attribute 'male or 'female (Butler 1993). The segregation is of course different from culture to culture, by a cline.

The implication of Simon de' Beauvoir's observation is that apart from the natural differing genital organs, every child is bone the same; that a child becomes man or woman is factor of the environment, otherwise the children are alike.

We survey what obtains in the Igbo traditional society next.

Sexism in Igbo Traditional Society

Sexism in the real sense of the word is practiced in Igbo traditional society. The Igbo see women as lower class citizens, who require just minimal attention by comparison with their male counterparts. Attendant to this belief is the gross neglect, ill-treatment, and discrimination against the women folk manifest in several ways as will be discussed below.

Female Circumcision

In the traditional Igbo society, the child is circumcised on the eight day of birth, ostensibly following some biblical belief of the Jews; a blind practice as the Jewish philosophy for the practice may not be understood, or even

relevant in our setting. I want to believe that no injunction is available in the Jewish religion for female circumcision. Aware of the gap, in their knowledge the argument for female circumcision is that the male also face the pain! What an equal treatment!

A look deeper into the practice of circumcision would reveal that while the male operation is cosmetic, desirable for the health reasons, there can be no such advancement for women; rather what we have is pain, permanent weakening and numbing of the clitoris denying the woman of sexual sensation and enjoyment. Known but mostly unspoken, this mutilation has ruined many marriages, and women to date.

Education of the Girl Child

The most that most girls get of education is domestic and informal. This is true of women about sixty years or older, who did not learn any technical skill that would empower them to earn a decent living independent of their male partners. They worked in the farm while their male counterparts went to school. Worse still this set were given in early marriage; child marriage, for which reason they depended on their husbands (where these are cooperative) and the male siblings who get formal education. Many young females were given out to wealthy old men as settlement for debts. There, they were subjected to slavery in the name of marriage. The reality that no formal dowry was paid on the women earned them perpetual humiliation from both husbands and co-wives as they were taunted with the fact occasionally. This is one of the situations that led to the heart renting satire sang by the young girls in the Igbo traditional society.

Nihi ego nna jiri ree nwa ya
 Nihi ego nna erela nwa ya
 A si na m bu nwoke nna agaghi akpatu m aka
 Ebe m bu nwaanyi, nna e reela m woo!

For the sake of money father sold his child
 For the sake of money father has sold his child
 If I was a male/boy, father would not touch me/do it
 Hence I am a female/girl-child father has sold me oo!
 (Translation mine)

One wondered what the philosophy was that fed the relegation of the female child!

Man's investment

As the saying goes 'he who has the slave has his load'. Women were considered investments to their husbands, and therefore owned everything for the husbands, the latter to dispense of his spouse's achievements as he determined fit! While they do not benefit much (except for that which percolates down from the husband), women are made to continue to struggle under compulsion for the enrichment of the family; or should we say, for the husbands. What with the *isusu* contribution; the woman thrift yields, the man takes.

Cheap Conception of a Girl Child

'What is in a name?'.Tons for the African. Names are significant, and speak volumes in our societies. For instance, male children are given such names as; Nwabugwu 'a child is an honor', Okebugwu 'male/son is an honor',

Nwaesiaba 'a child we boast with'. But when a child, a female child is humiliatingly named Nwanyiabughinwa 'a female child is no child', Amurunwa 'is a child born?', what other evidence of apartheid are we looking for? The humiliation is unending: they are forbidden from eating certain foods—Ovo (a bird specie), egbe (kite), chicken parts like gizzards, butt, Nwaanyi erighi ya 'the woman does not (must not) eat it'. A popular adage says, 'a hubeghi egbe n'anya a si na nwaanyi erighi ya 'you have not even seen/killed a kite, you conclude that a woman must not eat it'. A large mind will translate this as culture-specific, but why must such be taboo to women? In the Institute where I work (NINLAN), Acculturation programme is organized for Igbo second language learners in Colleges of Education in Nigeria. I would scarcely forget the countenance the students wore when they were taken through the **taboos** in Igbo land. They were unpleasantly surprised that apart from a few taboos that affected everybody in Igbo traditional society, the rest (inexhaustive) were against the women. Of course they noticed that after the first few sentences the rest began with the rhythm, 'Nwaanyi anaghi..... n'ala Igbo'. Called by whatever name, this is Sexism, pure and simple.

Humiliation of Widows

In the time of grief, when the source of joy is denied by whatever circumstance, the female is not spared the inhuman Sexism and humiliation. In spite of the good fight Christianity is putting up, women must undergo some traditional rituals even more painful than the death of the husbands like sitting on bare floor, loud cry at the wake of the day and

of course forceful inheritance by the husband's younger sibling. Paradoxically, this is the time the widower enjoys most sympathy, even if he was a violent husband. The widow's quick emotional recovery is frowned on, she is denied carnal relations, and remarriage is begrudged. The man is encouraged to spring back to life soon after the traditional mourning period. He must live his life; of course the woman has none to live other than the husband's, in life or in death. In some Igbo society, the property of the family does not go to the wife, even if they have children to utilize such property.

Family Matters

In family discussions, the Igbo society would prefer that the man discusses issues with male children, however young they are than the wives, much less the daughters! Confidence is reposed on the male child leading to unspoken belief that the female is inferior. Of course the male child is preferred whether blind or crippled.

Social interaction

Whatever the woman inherently is, even if she were a tigress, an outspoken social critic, a knowledgeable figure..... whatever she is at home remains at home; she must be meek outside, and comport herself 'matronly' outside. She has no say in a social gathering or mixed sexes, however desirable her wisdom may be. The celebrated breaking of kola nut is not appropriate for her, she cannot, in some societies, pick kola nut from

the same tray as men, and must be given after all males have taken. Whatever is special about a fruit such as kola nut, it is evidence that myth goes deeper than we see.

Sitting posture is in part prescribed for women; she must not sit cross legged in public, neither must she pick a drink with her left hand. When she takes a drink, she has to do it kneeling! The woman must be subdued anywhere she is! That is the tradition. But what do we have now, has modern life, new religion, new exposure, new realizations gotten her any better deal?

Sexism in the Contemporary Igbo Society

Education

In education, the women in the Igbo society have made a lot of gains. And this is gaining welcome mileage. But we must look critically. It is not enough to say that many do go to school; what is the percentage? How many go beyond the elementary, the secondary and the university? We still note with regret that both in quantity and quality, the skew favours the male. What alternatives do the female have when they cannot go any further in their education? Often, her next career is the husband; marriage, in fact the female sib will be forced into some tough manual labour so that the male can continue his education. Even in this era, all animals are not equal!

A sad thing is that even in school, in the primers, where writers are supposed to know better, the girl is implicitly projected as inferior to the

boy. There are elements of sexism in some English and Igbo primers. In the primers, a situation where Obi dresses smartly and carries his school bag/brief on the hand while Ada carries hers on the head as though heavily laden, the headmaster, in one of the nursery primers was portrayed a gentleman while the headmistress was looking horrible; a situation Ada is always shown sweeping, washing plates, doing one chore or the other while Obi is often shown playing (football), what do these suggest? One wonders whether these treatments do not have impact in achievement in some subject areas like science, mathematics and related disciplines. The obvious fact is that only a few women are there, giving a false credence to the inferiority of women in relation to men. Some women do penetrate the barrier, but how many are Igbo?

Politics

The Igbo women shy away from publicity or public life owing to what the Igbo society prescribes for them. Take the case of politics; how many Igbo women can be cited. Successful women, say in the case of the Aba Women riot of 1929, belong elsewhere. Margaret Ekpo is from Cross Rivers, and the first women liberator, politician, and vehicle driver was Funmilayo Ransome Kuti (mother of professor ransom Kuti, and Fela Anikulapo kuti). Very few Igbo women make career in politics not because they don't find it profitable but because politics attracts the exposure which women in their judgment should not gain. Women who dared to participate in politics are perceived to be wayward and as such derided as 'nwaanyi akanabu' (literally woman with two hands).

Business

In the business world, the Igbo women are intimidated. As noted earlier, an average Igbo woman is industrious and enterprising. However, in the Igbo society, she had better settled with petty economic activities like sales of foodstuff in the mammy market, sewing cloths/ making dresses and the things like that in a shop situated in front of the family house. Where she is employed, she would be cleaner/ messenger so she does not grow wings. It is such mentalities that have left women stunted in their economic development. There are scarcely records of families and husbands empowering women mightily for optimal economic development. To the Igbo folk, international businesses are for the men. Women who thrive in them are derided with the usual slogan, 'nwaanyi akanaabu'. She is treated with contempt. She is often investigated- who knows perhaps she is prostituting. In the same vein, women do not stop attracting envy, antagonism and condemnation from people around them when they are gainfully employed especially when they make career in their different professions. They are not expected to make tall investments or rise to the peak of their career. Rumors must certainly surround the economic success of the Igbo woman. These societal perceptions have limited the economic horizon of women in the Igbo society.

The Challenges

Today, women are liberated and are celebrating it; thanks to educational exposure and cross cultural contacts. In the areas of the

referred to sexual mutilation, the social and health implications on women have been exposed and the society has reciprocated the campaign against the practice. The whole world is aware, the webs are full of addresses to contact for minutiae of the workings of organizations, up to World Health Organization (WHO) for the delivery from this abhorrent sexual practice (see <http://www.mwlnusa.org>, <http://www.lpj.org> and myriads of address and links in WHO, UNICEF). And education of girls is on the increase. Indeed it is such that more girls are in school than boys to the effect that lower educated men marry more highly educated women. What an irony of events. Educated women whether married or not are more highly valued and useful to their families today. Families now confess that their utility children are mostly the females. Maybe this may have turned the table round in the naming of girl child: Ugboaku 'train of wealth', Uloaku 'house of wealth', Akudo 'peaceful wealth', Nwanyibuaku woman is wealth' compared to the erstwhile Nwanyiabughinwa 'female is no child'. A couple that has more girls than a boy is no more derided as Amandom 'compound of women'.

In domestic and social relations, women's investments complement their spouses'. Women are now to some reasonable degree part of decision making, in and out of the immediate family, community, and in-laws. Women are becoming their husband's next of kin'. Even single parenthood, until now a stigma on the women is now acceptable provided products of that system do not constitute social and economic nuisance.

In social appearance and interaction, women are coming up more sociable and outgoing than they were. Today, men would take recreation with their wives and women too among themselves.

In this democratic era, where more women are participating in leadership and administration in our society, the Igbo women are not left behind. The likes of Dr. Okonjo-Iweala, late professor Dora Akunyili, Dr Oby Ezekwesili to mention but a few, have impressed the world. Today, women are so recognized even in the Igbo society that they are not only conferred with chieftaincy titles but seek the electorate and gain it.

In academics, women compete favorably with their men counterparts. Also, many women in this dispensation thrive in science and technology. Such skills as driving are no longer a thing for the men.

Conclusion

It is indeed a pleasant situation that the Igbo society in particular is changing their general perception of a girl child. This did not come without a fight. It is also obvious that majority of the Igbo folk are still holding tenaciously to the old practice of sexism against women thereby subduing women unnecessarily. Antagonism against women is still felt in different contexts. Where will this lead us to? The woman is neither an adversary nor a contender to the man. The voice or face of a woman in the scheme of things will not delete that of the man, it will rather support and complement it. At the national level, it can be seen and felt that the present administration is gender friendly. Nothing can be better than accepting and supporting the Igbo women to live their lives to the fullest

by occupying their rightful positions in the scheme of things both in the traditional and the contemporary society. The other tribes are not relenting in showcasing their women. We therefore enjoin the Igbo to view the women positively and encourage them to queue in now that the opportunities are there for the women both at the national and international levels.

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