

## **Female Empowerment among the Igbo Extraction of Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

In the recent past, the agitation for women empowerment in Nigeria has gained the attention of diverse groups of the Nigerian population. The need to educate the girl child and redirect her from certain primordial and culture-assigned roles to modern day realities is more expedient now than ever. The paper examines the extent of empowerment, the historical background, and perspectives to gender inequities in Igbo land, pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial socio-political roles of the female gender in Igbo land. The study showed a remarkable empowerment of the women folk among the Igbo people of Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Female Empowerment, Gender, Igbo, Nigeria, Post-Colonialism.

### **Introduction**

It is popularly held and advocated by scholars within and beyond the shores of Nigeria that women are disadvantaged specie in Igbo land. Chimamanda Adichie, in various theses,

postulates that Igbo women suffer needlessly due to the patriarchal status of Igbo laws, customs and value systems.

These laws, customs and belief systems have been interpreted to be the cause of the unequal opportunities and the treatment of the different gender. The major example that is always cited and brought up is that notwithstanding the changes and development brought in by colonialism, a lot of women still do not inherit properties and things from their parents. The women are not accorded the right to inherit things when their parents die, and thus, they suffer limitations of resources, which come easily to men.

This paper's preoccupation is not to write about gender inequality in full gear, it is to write about female empowerment in Igbo land while linking it to the issue and traces of gender inequality among the Igbo. The preoccupation of this paper negates that of the regular postulation that there is gross gender inequality in Igbo land. There will be a study of the tools, methods, and processes of female empowerment among the Igbo as these methods and tools are geared towards promoting and uplifting the female gender.

To understand the level of this paper and the argument of some female scholars about the Igbo culture, there should be an understanding of who the Igbo are, and what makes up their culture that tends to make their women call out the Igbo nation on the issue of their patriarchy and female subjugation. Igbo is a republican nation with an individualist drive for success and with a family and leadership unit centred on the "male" as the head.

Forde and Jones wrote that Igbo is a word known for representing a language and people in the West African

country of Nigeria. They wrote that “this was not the case a century ago when the Igbo (wrongly called Ibo by some writers) addressed themselves by the names of their towns. The Igbo is one of the three major sub-nationalities in Nigeria, a West African country with about 250 ethnicities,” (10).

On the geographical location and structure of the Igbo, Nwosu and Kalu opined that the Igbo nation is on the two sides of the River Niger. There is the heartland, which is the bigger part of Igbo land, is in southeastern Nigeria and is at the present time made up of five states and several towns in other states like Benue, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River states. The other side is the smaller section of Igbo land, called Anioma or the western Igbo area. This smaller side is located in southwest Nigeria, and in conjunction with other ethnic groups makes up a state. For easier identification and study, some anthropologists divided Igbo land into five cultural groups, and they include the northern, eastern, northeastern, western (Anioma), and southern Igbo. The Igbo language is classified as part of Niger-Congo family. (15)

The attempt of these anthropologists to divide Igbo land into cultural groups though, it is for easier study and identification, is also done due to some variations in their cultures. Even though, there are variations in their cultures, this does not mean that they are in a large way different as they are similar. Thus, on the issue of some Igbo female scholars attacking the Igbo culture, no cultural group is excluded from the perceived patriarchy. Then, on the matter of female empowerment among the Igbo, most and if not all these cultural zones are part of the changes in the affairs of the women.

G. T. Basden in *Niger Ibos* (1938) described the Igbo as “astute in business”, “good colonists”, “very generous in their gifts”, and “with a remarkable ability to adapt to challenging conditions.” This drive for business success is driven by the individualist stance of the Igbo culture. Before colonialism, it is perceived women were part of this trade, but they became sidelined at the beginning of colonialism.

Furthermore, on the aspect of the patriarchal nature of Igbo culture, Nwosu and Kalu write that

... with the exception of the northeastern cultural group who are matrilineal, the Igbo generally are a patrilineal people. They attach much importance to the masculine role. In addition to their largely patrilineal leaning, they emphasize kinship ties, which find their most intimate expression in the joint or extended family system (23).

Even among the northeastern cultural group of the Igbo ethnic group that is matrilineal, most decisions and opinions are made by the men. It is merely matrilineal with much of the decision-making put on the male gender. However, in a nutshell, the Igbo are independent and goal driven as illustrated by a British writer quoted by Henderson as “talkative, intelligent and very keen, the go-getters of Nigeria. They are also highly individualistic” (17).

One must note that the attributes of these people can also be encountered among Igbo women. One can also note that it is the individualist stance of the people that makes them consider the patriarchal stance they take. They consider the scarcity of resources and resort to dominating the women to preserve the scarce resources.

## **Female Representation and Situation in the Pre-Colonial Era**

Scholars have divergent opinions about female representation and the situation during the pre-colonial era in Igbo land. While some are of the view that women were heavily maltreated and did not have equal rights at all with their male counterparts, others are of the view that women had better opportunities and rights in the pre-colonial era than they had on the coming of the Europeans. In this part of this paper, there would be an unbiased assessment of the female situation in the pre-colonial era.

There is this prevalent idea or mentality among the Igbo even at the present and worse during the pre-colonial time that women are unsuited for leadership positions and roles in the community. Most men consider women to lack the mental capacity and emotional intelligence to lead people or make good decisions. Even in popular English literature by Igbo writers such as Chinua Achebe and Elechi Amadi, for instance, women in pre-colonial times are presented as submissive, unquestioning, and under the hard rule of the men.

Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* writes about the way Okonkwo pounces on his wives and shuts them up as well. In a scene where Nwoye's mother asks about what would happen to Ikemefuna, Okonkwo shouts at her and tells her to shut up that she is not one of the men making decisions for Umuofia. Thus, she can't make decisions and she cannot even ask questions about the decisions that are to be taken.

Elechi Amadi in *The Slave* writes about the women as that "the thoughts of women are nearly always crooked, and the older they get the worse. That is why they are not allowed to run the affairs of any community" (49). Thus, women are not

considered good for decision-making and are in most cases not considered the same as men. This is what Igbo female scholars hold on to when criticizing the patriarchal nature of the Igbo culture.

Nevertheless, this view about the highly patriarchal nature of the Igbo is not supported by all scholars. Some are in support of the notion, others are against the notion, while some others have no stance at all. Anyalebechi makes a case where she presents the pre-colonial Igbo culture as not being totally discriminatory to the women as some scholars would have us believe. The women, to her, were part of the communities' decision-making and made some administrative duties. She writes,

In pre-colonial Igbo society, women performed certain administrative duties that were female-focused. They still do so in the present but with limited scope and impact. Outside their areas of jurisdiction, they were able to influence societal decisions at the grassroots level. They accomplished this by subtly manipulating their closest male relatives. Thus, their influence, which was concealed, unacknowledged, and indirect, was wielded from behind the scenes. The most prominent female actors at the grassroots level were the Omu. Although Omu did not exist in all parts of Igbo land in the pre-colonial era--they were found only in Onitsha, Ossomari, and a few communities in Delta--, they played a great role in these few places as female chiefs and leaders of trading and the markets. (28)

It is evident above that those women like the ones who were omuoversaw trading and the markets at the pre-colonial time. While the men took an active part in cultivating the land and

planting the king of crops: yam, the women planted other crops like cocoyam, beans, vegetables, cassava, and more. Ikpeze illustrates this view when he writes that,

In agriculture in the pre-colonial period, for instance, Igbo women fill a substantial role in decision making and execution in the production process and the associated food processing activities. While it is said that men in traditional Igbo society perform the role of clearing and preparing the land for cultivation, planting of crops like yam, and harvesting oil palm produce, whereas women plant other crops like maize, cassava, cocoyam, beans, tomatoes, vegetables, pumpkins, and okra. (90)

The women were also in charge of going to the market to sell what the family had and bringing back the money that belonged to them or their husbands. Thus, Igbo markets in the past and the present is populated more by women. It is, therefore, pertinent that a woman is made the market leader.

Obetta conducting his study of the important roles women played in the pre-colonial time writes about *umuada* group in several Igbo republican villages. According to Obetta, during the pre-colonial period, the women in the different communities that made up modern Nigeria posed tremendous influence on the communities' political, economic, and cultural wellbeing. Women's voices were defiant, loud, and could not be ignored. In Igbo land, the most prominent of women groups is that of the daughters of the land (*umuada*). *Umuada* in Igbo land heard cases, made vital decisions, and meted out punishment to whoever erred. Nigerian women in different cultures in the country, especially Igbo women, before the arrival of Europeans had an important position in

our social scheme of things even though the colonial authorities made it look as if it was false. (30)

Thus, the women played pivotal roles in their communities. To these scholars, they were more empowered than the economic, cultural, and legal system we have now, or perhaps, women were not maltreated or subjugated like what is often written by some European scholars. Obeta concludes that “during this period, men and women enjoyed same relevance. Male and females were farmers and compete equally in farming cultivation. In some parts of Igbo land, women were reputed to own barns and in some parts of Igbo land, women were engaged with most men in social competitions” (33).

Onyishi buttressing the idea of the female gender not being sidelined as alleged, writes that even though there are some areas in which men outlaw women from engaging in, like masquerades; at that time, women partook or were part of the vital decision-making process and leaders in their communities like Queen Amina of Zaria that ruled Zaria for thirty-four years, also in some Yoruba Kingdom like the Dahomey female warriors. There were also other important roles women held like the kingdom’s treasurer, market leader, chief priest, and head of the army. To indicate the intensity with which womanhood was revered, most gods ascribed to be female were usually more powerful and excellent in dispensing justice. (21)

Most of these advantages enjoyed by women vanished as the British colonialists came in. This day, no woman is the leader of a major religion in the country. More so, apart from Lagos and some other few states, women are hardly made market leaders even though, they have the larger population in these markets. No woman occupies a major position in all Nigeria’s military and paramilitary bodies.



### **Colonial Era and Gender Inequality**

With the onset of colonialism, the Europeans introduced their system of government and made laws limiting the pivotal roles played by women in Nigeria, Igbo land inclusive. These laws set to guide and direct the country limited women a lot. It is also unfortunate that independent Nigeria carried on these laws as most women are still being limited in some way. In the present Nigerian political system, women have little say and there is no major female decision-maker unlike what we had in most pre-colonial cultures like Igbo and Yoruba.

The beginning of colonialism also came at a time that the two major foreign religions in Nigeria were expanding in the country. These religions in conjunction with colonialism opposed the female independence prevalent in Nigeria. Anya writes that the perception about women being in leadership positions began to take shape as,

The introduction of colonialism and foreign religions made people begin to consider women who aspired to be in leadership positions as rebels and prostitutes, this attitude and mentality hinder women from participating in politics. Thus, the Nigerian population patriarchal before even got more points to see a woman as the property of her husband who has moral rights to decide the actions which the woman will take, whether she will come out to join the active politics is a matter which the man will decide since the tradition has ascribed the headship of the family to the man.  
(18)

The beauty of pre-colonial time is that most women in taking decisions that had to do with their groups and benefits like *umụada* do not consult their husbands. After the introduction

of colonialism and these religions, man attained a very supreme role in the family, and every decision had to be made by him including those concerning the women. This was not how it used to be. This means, of course, that majority of the women were forbidden by their husbands in participating in any political meeting or any decision-making group.

Peter Eze argues that women became more restricted with colonialism instead of the freedom that colonial authorities allege. In Igbo land, women were dethroned from heading the markets, and men who saw trading as a female job got into it displacing the women and impoverishing them. Colonial laws stated that women could not own land and most women had to register their lands in the names of their male children and husbands. The powers of great women groups were limited especially by warrant chiefs who felt these groups threatened them, mostly done after the Aba Women Riot of 1929. (50)

The laws of colonialism were carried into independent Nigeria. However, some changes have been made and women can buy and own land. There are still great limitations of the female gender as they are not part of the decision-making process of the country till this moment.

### **Female Empowerment among the Igbo: Post-Colonial and Present Era**

It is a fact that Nigeria inherited a poor system limiting the women from the era of colonialism, but this does not mean that the country has remained like this. Successive governments since after Nigeria's independence have continued to modify Nigerian laws and include more women in the running of the affairs of the country. United Nations

and other world bodies have continuously brought up the need for female empowerment and inclusion in governance and Nigeria has been keying into the proposition.

For instance, the 1995 Beijing Declaration asked for 30 percent women representation in governments across the world, and in 2000, the United Nations also stated the eight points Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and one of these points is the increased inclusion of women in governance, women empowerment, and gender equality. Unfortunately, this has nowhere been achieved in Nigeria.

However, among the Igbo, female empowerment has continued to improve. Successive Igbo state governments have invested a lot in female education, stopping discrimination against the female child and early marriage, and other vices under-developing the female gender. Across the whole country, Igbo women are one of the best-educated, one of the best in top corporate positions in and outside the country, and are highly independent financially and otherwise.

Duruji et al. Writes about the policies embarked upon by successive Nigerian and Igbo states governments that have in great ways improved the lives of women in the country, especially in Igbo land. They also come to the empowerment of Igbo women as further increased by external forces like the economic crash of the country and the Nigerian civil war. They write,

Immediately after the war, educated Igbo, who were mostly male, found it hard to secure jobs due to the after-war discrimination. They began to lose interest in acquiring education and the female gender picked up good interest in it. However, Babaginda's SAP eschewed the nepotism that characterizes employment

in Nigeria, the emphasis in post-adjustment Nigeria has created a level playing ground for skillful persons to be employed irrespective of their ethnic background as more private companies sprang up and most government companies were up for privatization. As such post-adjustment economy of Nigeria threw up opportunities for the Female gender in the Igbo society to compete for better-paying employments unlike their male counterparts disadvantaged by the difference in educational attainment over time. (17)

This acted as great female empowerment among the Igbo. The men, who were under pressure of financial success, ignored education, instead embraced entrepreneurship. The women embraced education and this caused a shift in gender balance as in most tertiary institutions in Igbo land, the women are greater in number and most families prefer training their female children than their male children. The women aren't under any financial pressure and can easily take time in their spouses' houses to find jobs or read further while awaiting jobs. In the current Igbo population of below 35, there are more tertiary school-trained women than men.

Ihonvbere throws more light on this as he writes about the perception of education by the current Igbo men. Due to the high rate of unemployment and the uncertainty of tertiary school life, most Igbo young men prefer to get into business or become apprentices than pursue education. He reports that "at a point in the 1990s it became a social challenge that male enrolment in schools was dropping significantly in Igbo states. The implication of these reflected in the reversal of the situation whereby for many families, only the Female were empowered educationally with the skills to undertake formal positions in the bureaucracy or corporate enterprises" (15).

Thus, education among the Igbo came to be known as an uncertain part to take. Young men who were in a hurry to start making a living or couldn't gamble on the success they would encounter after studying in the university opted for entrepreneurship. This is the most prominent female empowerment among the Igbo as in the corporate world, women have achieved a near 50 - 50 presence with their male counterparts. Even in all these Igbo-dominated tertiary institutions, the ladies perform better than their male counterparts. The young Igbo men that manage to get into these schools are easily distracted by the desire to be like their business counterparts; thereby they lose focus and perform lower than the female.

Allen, in his own opinion about female empowerment among women, writes that in the present time Igbo society status that manifests in wealth, generosity and oratory is achieved and in recent times has been linked to the men and the women population (51). More women are being trusted by their families, especially after the civil war, to get educated, go higher on the ladder of corporate businesses, run and own businesses and become celebrities and politicians. Women are also empowered to become top doctors, pharmacists, economists, and more. While the men see the fastest way to make wealth in petty businesses and entrepreneurship, women who are not under major financial pressure take their time to acquire all the certificates and training and then begin in their career growth.

However, even though, it seems there is an improvement of life and living for the female gender in Igbo land, more needs to be done. In the case of inclusive governance and politics, women in Igbo land are still very much sidelined. In a study carried out in the Nsukka urban area of Enugu State, the women questioned, lamented in non-inclusion of women in

governance. They earn but earn lower than their male counterparts, and they are heavily controlled by their husbands and are not given a fair ground to vote or vie for elective positions. One of the women states that,

Women's low level of participation in politics could be attributed to the poor economic base, burden of domestic and reproductive roles of women, and illiteracy. The majority of the female respondents also included the discriminatory attitude of men as a contributor to the low level of participation of women in development processes. Although some empowerment initiatives exist in Nsukka, for example, micro-credit programmes, skill training centres, adult literacy centres, women cooperative societies among others, the effectiveness of the initiatives have not reached the expectations. Women perform better economically than before but there are far below the public expectations. (33)

The interventions that were introduced by the government of Enugu State and Nsukka Local Government are also spread throughout Igbo land. Even though, there is steady progress made and the Igbo women are progressing better and getting on to better careers, it is still below expectations. For one, the mentality and consciousness of their male counterparts have to change and lead to equal treatment and opportunities for men and women.

## **Conclusion**

Women should not only be offered good educational opportunities but a level playing ground should also be created in terms of political and economic opportunities. Even with the better education performance of the female gender, it

has been noted that most women still do not earn as high as the men and are economically deprived of living better lives and contesting for political positions. Nevertheless, women at this present time are better with their rights, education, and standard of living than they were in the past. There is improved female empowerment in Igbo land, but more needs to be done to meet the expectations of the people and the government.

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