

WOMEN'S RIGHTS VIOLATION AND GENDERINE QUALITY IN IGBO LAND: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENTAL GOAL FIVE (SDG 5) THE PANACEA

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Abstract

The foundational principle of human rights is that all human being are equal in right, dignity and worth. Yet we live in a world ravaged by social inequalities within the family and in the entire society. Many societies attribute low status to women and the social roles they are required to perform. This “devaluation” of women often leads to a denial of rights or unequal treatment between women and men. Women are generally regarded to be subservient to men. This paper advocates justice and equality between men and women and not sameness. Male and female denotes difference and distinctiveness but this difference has nothing to do with superiority or inferiority of one to the other. Since humans intermix in a network of relationships characterized by mutuality and equality, there should be no cause for segregation, oppression and discrimination that is witnessed by women on daily basis. One of Social Development Goals (SDGs) is gender inequality, also called SDG5. Some of the targets include an end of to all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere, eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in the public and private sphere, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation, eliminate all harmful practices such as child, early and force marriages and female genital mutilation among others. It was therefore recommended that to put a stop to women's rightviolation and gender inequality, government should enact laws discouraging this acts and enforce same, also government should endeavour to implement the ideals of the SDGs with the focus on SDG5 among others.

Key Words: Gender Inequality, SDG5, Discrimination, Oppression, Women's rights, Dignity

All over the world, women are viewed differently by different people. Men are expected to act in their masculine nature while women are expected to exhibit their feminine quality. Physically, women are considered as fragile beings, soft hearted and easily moved to tears. Some regard them as irrational in thinking and decision making but most times, women prove themselves as a double force to be reckoned with.

Woman is the primary source of life, with the family as the microcosm of the larger society. Despite this singular obligation, the woman is depicted as an underdog, a quasi slave to the husband, a second-class citizen, and the burden bearer of the society within which she should only be seen but never heard. Women experience the ugly effects of the socio-political and economic marginalization.

In most literary works, women in Igbo traditional setting are relegated to the background with the presumption that they cannot handle difficult situation. Superiority of men over women is highly upheld in Igbo society. Ezeanya (1970) affirms that the superiority of men over women in Igbo society is beyond question. Olisa (1980) stated that doubt and ignorance does not exist about the role of women in Igbo society and that women's place in traditional Igbo society is in the kitchen. Olisa posited that no matter how hard women try, it is always extremely difficult for the men to accept the efforts of these women. Uchendu (1965) observed that Igbo society is unquestionably male-oriented.

Gender bias is undermining our social fabric and devalues all of us. It is not just a human rights issue; is a tremendous waste of the world's human potential. By denying women equal rights, we deny half the population a chance to live life at its fullest. Political, economic and social equality for women will benefit all the world citizens (Globalgoals).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity and peace and justice. The goals interconnect and in order to leave no one behind, it is important that we achieve each goal and target by 2030. One of the SDGs is gender inequality (SDG5).

This focus one end of all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere, ensures women full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life, undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws among others.

Concept of Igbo Women Right infringement

There has been some corpus of works on Igbo women. The pioneer works on Igbo women were chiefly written by expatriates. Muonwe (2016) posited that Basden (1938) an English Missionary for the Church Mission Society, Talbot (1926) an English Anthropologist and Ethnographer, and Jordan (1971) a Roman Catholic Priest were the first to document the history of the Igbo women. According to Muonwe, these authors did a great job in putting down the life of the Igbo people at a time when no literature on this seemed to have existed. Their works have served as invaluable sources of information on some aspects of the lives of Igbo women. They generally present the Igbo people as those for whom men possess a nature superior to that of women. This they argue, accounts for the low states generally occupied by women in the society. Hence, the tendency in their works to exaggerate the women's inferior status to the point of suggesting that they have nothing to be proud of within the society.

Basden (1938) for instance, writing in the first of the last century about Igbo women, claims that they are of low intelligence compared to Igbo men. To Basden women are contended with low level of academic attainment. At another place the author refers to them as being considered inferior creatures, little better than other household property. The pioneer authors inability to understand the culture/ way of thinking and bias against the culture made them interpret some of the facts inaccurately. The authors ignored the role played by the sexist education and employment policies of the colonialist in making Igbo women not to consider education as a viable option at that time. Jordan (1971) misinterpreted the paltry bride-price paid on Igbo women as a form of compensation to a bride's family for the money used in training a girl. Thus in the processes the author misses the ritual symbolism of the bride price and its socio cultural significance in creating the marital bond between spouses. However, according to Muonwe (2016) some recent authors such as Agbesiere (2000) among others have made effort on recovering the power of the Igbo women by recreating the usage of the Igbo women distorted by previous authors.

Women Right Violation and Gender Injustices

(i) Husband / Wife Relationship In Marriage

The Igbos have high regard for marriage institution. It is a goal to which every young Igbo girl or young man aspires. Muonwe (2016) observed that marriage is a very strong determining factor for social recognition and adulthood for girls more than for young men. Wealth, education or any other social accomplishment by any woman without marriage seems almost meaningless in the eyes of many. A study on some contemporary Igbo women by Okeke (2009) observed that it is Igbo women roles as wives, mothers and companions to men that command the highest social regard in today's Igbo society. So far a woman to pursue any professional career, she must do so within the limits set by these primary roles and the husband permission is almost always required.

Okeke (2009) stated that in Igbo land a woman so to speak is a nobody outside of marriage thus these seem to make them be paranoid about not marrying. Hence if a woman decide, to be a single mother, the society looks at her with contempt and seen as wayward or a social misfit. A man who decides not to marry is seen also as a social misfit but his image is not as bad as that of woman. At worst, he is seen as *akalogheli or efuluefu*. If he happens to have offsprings from his extra marital affairs, he is quickly excused by the society with the slogan that men are polygamous by nature. Okeke posited that this pressure on the woman by the society has resulted in some young girls rushing into regrettable unions thus jeopardizing their future. While a man marries whenever he his ready for marriage.

The society also expects a higher moral standard from the women than it does from men. For instance, where premarital chastity is seriously emphasized and demanded of women, it is not often so emphasized and demanded of men. Nasimiyyu-Wasike (1992) noted that this has been the case in almost all societies in Africa because the woman is primarily seen as a field of production. This is made most obvious in Igbo communities. According to the author for her to remain a virgin or chaste prior to marriage indicates that this field is still intact and has not been tampered with yet, the society fails to realize that the field needs to be tilled with a viable implement for utmost fruitfulness. If a woman fails to achieve pregnancy, a woman is blamed and the man is free from blame, thus falling to understand that it takes two (a healthy man and woman) to procreate.

Another gender injustice is if a woman is expected to prove her virginity by co-habiting with the husband on a white bed sheet on the night of their wedding. Blood stain on the white bed sheet signifies virginity of the bride. Then what about the groom? In South Africa, this virginity testing is called “ukuhlolwa”. Also in South Africa, virginity is linked to access to education through so-called ‘maiden bursaries’. This was considered in 2016 in Uthukela district. These bursaries included the requirement that the recipients be ‘proven’ to be virgins, the bursary would be withdrawn on ‘failure’ of such tests.

In Igbo family structure, wives do not enjoy equal status with their husbands. There is male dominance within marriage and family life. Muonwe (2016) makes a linguistic analysis of the Igbo words husband and wife. The word for husband in Igbo language is “di” which means someone who has authority and control over another or something. Example: “di ji” implying that (yam responds to his command), “diogu” (expert in wrestling), “dinta” (master in the art of hunting)

Within the context of the family, when one wishes to express pointedly the husband’s leadership and control over his entire household, ‘di’ is normally prefixed to ‘buno’ hence, dibuno- the master and head of the household. Then, on the other hand, the word for wife, ‘onyebe’ (*onye* – person, *be*– of the home) means someone who is a member of a household where another (husband) is in charge. Again, Nwuye denotes someone in a subordinate position in relation to the husband. Henderson (1972) remarks

that the two words, husband and wife, in Igbo language, have meanings that imply 'a combination of masterful control and responsibility (that is husband – di) on the one hand, compliance (wife – nwuye or onyebe) on the other. The Igbo woman addresses her husband as nnamukwu meaning my Lord/Master or nna anyi (our father) and Oga m (my master). Henderson asserted that if by any means, he fails to exert that authority over his household or fails to make his wife subservient, he is regarded as a weakling and derogatively called 'nwanyi' which is Igbo word for a woman. This further shows the inferior position generally accorded women in the society.

Uchem (2002) opined that Besides, the Igbo men who are more egalitarian in their attitudes and behaviours towards their partners are ridiculed and taunted by those hegemonic males as not being able to control their wives. In such a case, therefore, an ideology of male domination, the ability to dominate and control a woman becomes the criterion and definition of weakness and manhood. Thus, male domination reaches its peak and creates a loophole for unkindness, authoritarianism mistaken for authority in the community.

Male dominance is also apparent in customs like paying dowry or bride price. The bride price is usually an exclusively male affair. No woman participates even the bride's mother. Thus Ilika (2005) noted that the payment of the bride price as observes empowers the man over his wife as also he accepts the duty of catering for her and their future children. Ilika posited that during traditional wedding ceremony, the bride stoops or kneels to serve the bridegroom a cup of traditional palm wine (Nkwu). This singular symbolic act of submission explicitly confers on the bridegroom the right of mastery over the bride, and reminds the bride of the need to obey at all times especially as the bridegroom is not expected to do the same.

(ii) Duties Of Wives To Their Husbands

In Igbo culture, it is the duty of the wife to cook for the husband and unbecoming to see a married man cooking. A wife must not answer or retort in a loud, aggressive voice when talking to the husband but the man on the other hand, may use harsh words on his wife sometimes without restriction, since it portrays his manliness and leadership. A wife who fails to adhere to these might have penalty imposed on her. And the commonest penalty on a wife's misconduct is preparation of chicken to be consumed by the man alone. If she refuses to fulfill her penalty, she might be sent parking. And this way eventually lead to the termination of the marriage (Muonwe, 2016).

In Igbo culture, should a fight ensue, a wife may not throw a husband on the ground. It is seen as an abomination which requires some propitiatory rites and sacrifices, but this rule does not apply to the husband (Ilika, 2005). On the contrary, Igbo culture does not see wife-beating as an abomination. It's bizarre that some women see this as sometimes necessary. Ilika observed, some of the women perceived wife-beating as a corrective measure or a chastisement. They, however said that beating should not be severe and should not be done very often. According to the authorslaps, kicks and

blows were considered to be severe, while giving a number of strokes on the palm of the hand was considered to be acceptable. People only condemned such beating if it is severe or were carried on a pregnant woman. In this case the Umuada or Nludi will step in to sanction the husband by making him to cook for himself for a period of time which is a dreadful punishment for the Igbo man.

It is true that these practices are gradually being eroded but it is also true that there is still incidents of wife beating in this contemporary society. But the fact that Igbo and other ethnic groups allows some level of wife beating is an instance of cultural approval of violence against women. United Nations General Assembly frowns at this and has called on all member countries to adopt programmes and legal framework to end this.

Sexual perversion in men are acceptable in the society but remains extremely risky and heavily stigmatized for women. Smith (2001) observed that male extra-marital relations are common and carry little stigma. In fact, male extramarital sexuality is often symbolically rewarded in male peer groups. Particularly in urban and elite contexts. For women, extramarital sexual relations are extremely risky and heavily stigmatized. It is expected that she will remain sexually faithful to her husband. Smith noted that a man can quit a marriage on the ground of his wife's unfaithfulness but the custom does not accord the same level of legitimacy to a wife to quit a marriage on the ground of her husband's infidelity. Fanusie (1992), therefore questions 'why only the females? Should not the male be virtuous? According to Fanusie a wife is expected to safeguard her husband's reputation at all cost. By this, she is obliged to make up her husband's deficiencies, even when the husband is not obliged to do the same for her. If the husband suffers from physical or biological disabilities, like impotence. Agbasiere (2000) noted that the wife should endeavour not to divulge this to an outsider even at the cost of the wife being temporary branded infertile.

(iii) Sexual Responsibility

Here the wife's concession is unimportant as long as it is convenient for the man. There are instance where women are forced against their will by their husbands to have sexual intercourse with them. Some women comply against their will because of fear that her husband might go to another woman, or marry another wife (Muonwe, 2016).

(iv) Kola Nut Ritual

In Igbo land, it is normally a taboo for a woman to climb the kola nut tree, harvest its fruits, present, bless or ritually break it either in public or in private. If a woman happens to be present whenever it is shared, she is always the last to partake of it when all males (regardless of age) must have carefully selected and consumed their choice pieces from the broken fragments in the kola nut bowl. Besides, a woman may not be allowed to take any piece by herself from the bowl, it must be given to her by any of the males. In all – female gathering, if they want to have this ritual done, it is customary that they invite a male to perform it for them. In some communities,

however, some women who are known to have distinguished themselves very well in virtues could be allowed to perform this ritual. But it must be established that they are not menstruating at the time. This exclusion of women from Kola nut rituals has been seen by some authors as a mere division of labour along gender lines. In supporting of this view, Uchendu (2003) argued that it does not imply that the woman's disability is a sign of her social inferiority. There are many other sex-linked privileges which a man may not exercise but women do.

Uchendu made a volte-face from this view when he argues in his later work that the whole kola nut ritual is a "privilege denied to women (for ritual reasons) and other social inferiors". He did not give those ritual reasons for which women are excluded. However whatever be the case, to say that women and other social inferiors remain excluded, already betray his earlier claim that it was simply a matter of division of labour along gender lines.

Nwahaghi (1996) argued that the unity which kola nut brings, is culturally meant to symbolize, is seriously weakened by the fact that women are not given opportunity to actively participate in its ritual actions. According to Nwahaghi, it does more than symbolize the exclusiveness of Igbo men, it symbolizes it in opposition to Igbo women. In collaboration with this Acholom (2006) argued that there is absolutely no thinkable reason to allow the kola nut 'palaver' to continue dehumanizing the women, and subjecting them to perpetual opprobrium. The women are generally made to feel like outcasts, disgruntled second class citizens. The practice denies them the enjoyment of an aspect of their fundamental human rights of equal opportunity with the men folk. One cannot claim it serves any purpose apart from boosting the male ego while demoralizing the females.

Uchem, (2002) regards it as a prime instance of subordination of woman in Igbo society. According to Uchem, It denies women of their equality with men, disempowers them, and presents maleness as the paradigm for humanity. She argues further that it clearly goes against Igbo sense of community and unity, and enthrone fragmentation instead.

(v) Widowhood

According to Muonwe (2006) widowhood refers to the state of a man or a woman who has lost his or her spouse and has not yet remarried. Men who are in this condition are referred to as widowers, while their female counterparts are termed widows. A widow in Igbo society undergoes several rituals and observes many prescribed customs at the death of her husband. Muonwe calls it widowhood practices. Nwoga (1984) defines these practices as "sets of expectations as to action and behaviour by the widow, actions by others towards the widow, and rituals performed by or on behalf of the widow from the time of her husband's death". Some of these practices come immediately after the death of the husband, some after the funeral ceremonies have ended while some form an integral part of the burial and funeral obligations of a widow to departed husband. These practices are very harmful in so many ways but very striking is the fact that a widower

is required to do little or nothing when his wife dies. Most of these characteristics assigned to women, the periodic pollution and impurity associated with them and the accompanying ritual have been constructed through the patriarchal manipulation of cultural formation and not just naturally ordained by God, the spirits and the ancestors as claimed. These values remain largely subdued by patriarchy so as to perpetuate its reign and gain at the expense of women.

Based on the injustice of this patriarchy structure, women clamor for equality, equity, justice and dignity.

The Fight for Fundamental Women's Right and Gender Equality

Genuine equality does not mean sameness. Ruether (1993) argued that “the question of equality is not of sameness. But recognition of value, which at the same time affirms genuine variety and particularity”. Effacing particularity and difference usually ends up either eliding one group, subsuming one in the other, or conflating both in a false unity without recognizable identity, and nothing can be more demeaning than that. To deny this fundamental difference usually ends up denying the feminine, this sometimes results to “masclunisation of women”.

While it is clear from the scripture that both males and females are created in the image of God, the phrase “male and female denotes difference and distinctness. God created the man and the woman different. This difference, however, has nothing to do with superiority or inferiority of one to the other. In fact, the distinctness is necessary for God's purpose of companionship and procreation. Maleness and Femaleness are both gifts from God and are to be cherished and respected. Any notable difference between males and females should be lauded rather than being regarded as areas of contention. One of the surest differences is the physical and anatomical differences. Human dignity does not flow from our differences or similarities but rather from God's design of women and men as God's image bearers. The issue is not whether males and females are different or not in certain areas, but how we perceive these apparent differences. One's gender, or gender role, should not determine one's value. The God – ordained human dignity, derived from the concept of the image of God, does not give room to view one gender as more valuable than the other. Their simultaneous creation shows them to be equal, with equal blessing and equal power over other creatures. Also after the creation of the woman, the joy and jubilation in the words of the man show that at last a suitable companionship has been established. The exclamation “this is the bone of my bones” also points to the fact that male and female are not opposites of each other. The words depict “unity, solidarity, mutuality and equality”. The theory of integral complementarity seems to capture this point very well. It expresses the ideal relationship between man and woman who are created in the image of God, sexually different, but equal in dignity. (Muonwe, 2016). Thus every role that a man or woman plays for the glory of God and the good of humanity, regardless of the gender, should be valued.

That spark of God in every creature, which the Igbos call “Chi” is a very potent symbol of equality, equal regard and mutual respect. Ejizu (2002) argued that, it clearly asserts the unique individuality as well as the basic equality of every person, man, woman, child or adult, irrespective of status one might occupy in society.

Muonwe (2016) in support of this view asserts that there is something of the supreme being in every person by way of Chi which reveals the dignity of the human person. Being carries of God invites everyone to show deep respect and honour to every person, man and woman alike. Hence, the current state of affairs whereby women are not accorded equal rights and respect with men both in the family and in the wider society is uncalled for and is against the basic principles behind the concept of the human person. For God to treat all equally through the bestowal of ‘chi’ without any discrimination indicates his equal regard for all, and teaches us that no one is more human or less than the other (Muonwe,2016).

The position one occupies therefore in the society does not make him or her more or less deserving of humane treatment and respect than others. For anyone to regard women as less valuable is to miss the mark. If this is understood, then the type of excruciating agony undergone by widows at the death of their husbands, on account of the latter being thought of as their Lord and one on whom their dignity largely depends would be a thing of the past. It would also change for the better the disregard generally accorded female children within the family.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The sustainable development goals are a collection of 17 global goals set by United National General Assembly in 2015 for the year 2030. The SDGs are part of the resolution 70/1 of the United Nations General Assembly, the 2030 Agenda (Wikipedia). The Sustainable Development Goals are: (1) No Poverty, (2) Zero Hunger (3) Good Health and Well Being (4)

Quality Education, (5) Gender Equality, (6) Clean water and Sanitation, (7) Affordable and Clean Energy, (8) Decent work and Economic growth, (9) Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, (10) Reducing inequality, (11) Sustainable Cities and Communities, (12) Responsible Consumption and Production, (13) Climate Action, (14) Life Below Water, (15) Life on Land, (16) Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, and (17) Partnerships for the Goals (Wikipedia).

SDG5: Gender equality

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation or a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Ending all discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, it's crucial for sustainable future; it's proven that empowering women and girls helps economic growth and development (United Nation Development Programme (UNDP),2015). The body noted that although there are more women than ever in the labour market, there still large inequalities in some regions, with women systematically denied the same work right as

men. Sexual violence and exploitation, the unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work, and discrimination in public office, all remain huge barriers, climate change have a disproportionate effect on women and children, as do conflict and immigration.

It is vital to give women equal rights land and property, sexual and reproductive health, and to technology and the internet. Thus sustainable development goal five (5) targets include viz:

- End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.
- Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.
- Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.
- Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and family as nationally appropriate.
- Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life.
- Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the programme of Action of International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.
- Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.
- Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information technology, to promote the empowerment of women.
- Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

Conclusion

Without freedom, there is no dignity and without justice, there is no dignity. The two notions are indispensable. Jones identifies five forms of oppression that women need to be freed from, namely; freedom from exploitation, freedom from marginalization, freedom from powerlessness, freedom from cultural imperialism and freedom from violence.

Men and women should participate on the quest for justice for all. This would concretely entail that we seek justice as access to the most basic necessities of life i.e education, employment, leisure, housing food, clothes etc. This also entails that we seek justice as inclusion in the various social and ecological bonds of life, from to most intimate to the most cosmic, from family and marriage or single life to friendship, culture, art, civil society, politics, workplace and to caring for the natural environment.

The joint quest for justice entails that all of us participate in the decision – making and decision implementation process of life, from the most intimate to the most global.

The human person is constituted by a network of relationships. A person, therefore seems to be defined by his or her belongingness to others, and not otherwise. All beings intermix in a network of relationships characterized by mutuality and equality. Indeed, if the Igbo should come to terms with the implications of the interconnectedness of all human beings in the society, especially the basic gender equality and unity it embodies, women as well as men will not be or feel alienated in any way. If one understands that he or she exists because of and for the other, and that his or her existence and wellbeing is implicated in that of the other, then he or she would refrain from maltreating the other since it entails the maltreatment of oneself. It also affects the very basis of his or her personhood, which is anchored on the interconnectedness of all. Besides, since living in isolation from other is strange to the Igbo, one wonders why a section of the population should consciously be isolated from most of the opportunities and privileges within the society simply on account of their gender. If to exist is to belong, then, to exclude is to deny one that right to exist, so to speak. To treat women, for instance, as not fully belonging to the community is in the least, a way of saying they do not fully exist. If we are all created by one God, as well as belong to one single family – humans, then, love, equality, justice, mutual respect and dignity should pervade all our undertakings.

There should be no room for segregation, oppression and denigration that is witnessed by women on daily basis. The joint creation of a human rights culture, within which “woman” human rights is a crucial dimension, might be a vehicle to actualize dignity, freedom, equity and justice. Thus the implementation of SDG5 and meeting all its targets by governments of the day will go a long way to put a stop to women’s right violation and gender inequality in Igbo land.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion above, the following recommendations were made

1. Government should enact laws discouraging women’s right violation and gender inequality and enforce same.
2. Government should endeavour to implement the ideals of the SDGs, with a focus on SDG5.
3. Non governmental organization should help in sensitizing the society about gender equality and women’s right violation.
4. Regular town hall meetings should be held in communities within the southern eastern part of Nigeria where Igbos are mostly domiciled.
5. Civic studies should be re-emphasized in school curriculum with emphasis on women’s right violation and gender inequality.

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