DEVALUATION AGAINST IGBO GIRL CHILD: A CHALLENGE TO SOME FAMILIES

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Abstract
It is obvious that most African societies including Igbo operate patriarchal system of male headship and female subordination in social and cultural values, hence, male headship and women subordination is both social, religious and cultural values among African societies. Since values define the position and role of sexes among the Igbo, they equally pose serious challenges to some families who cannot fill the gaps created in their homes by unavailability or incapability of available male children to perform some task. Availability of female children in such families makes no difference as opportunities are denied them merely because of their sex. The inefficiency on the male side most often make the parents to wish the sex can be switched. The objectives of this study are: to highlight the resultant effects of devaluation against the Igbo girl child in some families, to reveal continued segregation and gender bias among the Igbo society despite enlightenment and development level and to proffer solutions to remedy the situation. Again this work is to discourage women hyper-subordination in social and cultural values especially in this twenty-first century. Gender inequality theory is used. The study is expository and survey research. The research used literature materials and interviews posed to some individuals to source data. Among the findings of this work is that gender inequality is merely a socio-cultural construct. It is advised that equal values should be placed on both male and female children as this would help to harness the natural capabilities of every child irrespective of the gender.
Keywords: Value, Family, Girl, Igbo.

Introduction

It is almost presumed in Igbo culture that readiness for marriage is readiness for child bearing. For one to get married is an opportunity to contribute freely through procreation to the survival of one's lineage and society at large. Igbo people have this belief that child bearing is the major reason for establishing marriage. Whenever Igbo person thinks of marriage, what comes to mind first is child bearing. Children are wonderful gifts from God. In Igbo land, the joy of every married couple, family members, friends, and relatives is made complete with the arrival of a child in the family. Procreation not only brings joy to the family but equally serves as a glue that binds the union. This is why most times, a union that lacks this bonding glue finds it difficult to survive. Anozie (1999:234) buttresses that "The value of fruitfulness is very important and plays a central role in the survival of the marriage." It is easy for a marital union to break when it is yet to produce a child, but almost impossible when the union has produced children. Most husbands and wives having misunderstanding in their marriages most often say "if not for these children, we would not be staying in this marital union."

The sign of pregnancy is the only fact assures fecundity of both husband and wife. This is why one of the most important enquiries a core Igbo family would make before marriage to any girl is about her family's fertility. Obi and Chris (2019) corroborate that one of the major points of investigations carried out on the potential bride before the actual marriage is whether her family has a history of infertility in the linage. Any family that has traces of infertility is stigmatized. It is usually very difficult for a girl from such family to secure a husband. But the situation is not entirely the same when it is the man's side that has problem. In the pre-colonial era, nobody would dare mention or say that a man is impotent. A woman married in a family where the man cannot beget a child would be encouraged (most times with the knowledge and consent of the husband's parents) to get pregnant from outside. The outsider must be a man of reputable character and one that would respect their family values. Mbiti (1975) acknowledges this cultural practice when he says that a marriage which does not produce children becomes miserable unless other arrangements are made to get children, for example through the marriage of additional wives if the first wife is barren, or through fathering children by a close relative, if the husband is the one who is unable to bear. Ifemesia (1979) concurs that in the case of the impotence on the part of the man, arrangements would be made by his parents to provide the woman with a robust, reliable and reputable friend outside her own and her husband's patrilineages. Ifemesia(1979) posits that the whole affairs would be conducted with such decency and privacy that the man's self-esteem would be carefully preserved. Childlessness and its glaring implications in Igbo society is worsened by the traditional belief that procreation is the major reason for marital union among Igbo people.

However, when progenies begin to come, there is this expectation to have both sexes, traditionally known as *ọgwa nwa*. It is usually a challenge when a woman did not have a male child. Even in a situation where the woman has three, four or more female children, the society still considers such family as one with no future and continuity. The man who has no male child is treated with disdain among his kinsmen. In some cases, the unenlightened members of the man's family conclude without proof that the problem is from the woman. With the level of enlightenment and development, some individuals have continued to believe that whenever a couple is childless or has no male child, the problem is from the woman. The woman herself feels incomplete as a childless wife or even as a mother without a male child. She is never sure of what the future holds for her because, the husband can decide to take another wife in quest for a male child. This is mainly because the Igbo nation in southeastern Nigeria as a patriarchal society believe in passing the family inheritance along the male line excluding the female. The study highlights that this traditional belief and practice leads to gender role issues especially in a situation where there is no male child who should be the heir of the family property or where the male child is incapable of performing up to required expectations. The findings of this study will benefit Igbo people and the entire world especially societies that practice male dominance as it will help them to understand that, children as gift from God should be given equal value which will help to harness their potentialities.

Literature Review

The Concept of Devaluation

Devaluation cuts across all human endeavor. In this context, devaluation means to reduce the quality, worth, or importance of something. It can also mean not giving the full recognition or taking something or someone with little or no importance. Ani and Anachunam (2021) observe that devaluation is evident where there are two things but one is regarded as higher and of greater importance than the other. They explain that in such a situation, the less valued and the one who is treated as worthless would live in perpetual agony. All efforts by the person to be appreciated like the other, prove abortive consequent of the role apportioned by the culture.

Igbo Ideology of Male Dominance

Igbo nation is highly patriarchal in that male is regarded superior to female. Culture as a people's way of life mirrors the philosophy, beliefs and thoughts of the people. Male dominance and beliefs in patriarchy hold women as subordinate to men, and sons preferred to daughters. Urama (2019) states that gender inequality is clearly evident in families and in the society; the girl child is exposed to insecurity and rejection just because she is born a female. The girl child is aware that she is not given the same acceptance and equal opportunity as the male child right from infancy due to the preferential treatments given the "desired male child". Corroborating Urama, Ajakor (2019) observes that among the Igbo of Nigeria, male/boy child is preferred to a female/girl child. He explains that the reason may be because the male child retains the name of the lineage and continue to promote the values of the family lineage. Whereas the girl child is married out to another man's family to help in sustaining another man's lineage.

The belief in male dominance makes a man to marry as many wives as he can to have a son. A woman suffers a lot if she bears no male child. Such woman only has a very thin-line difference with a woman who is barren. Ojilere and Igwe (2021) opine that the Afrocentric beliefs in succession and male primogeniture prevalent in Nigeria also placed a heavy social and psychological burden on a wife who bears only daughters and no son as she is considered to be "standing on one leg". What this means is that a woman who has no son is yet to secure her marriage and her position in her husband's family. Urama (2019) writing on male dominance in Igbo culture observes, that the ideology of male dominance makes a man to marry many wives in order to beget a male child. She asserts that a woman who is able to have a male child for the husband is considered a fulfilled woman. Such woman is accorded greater respect in her husband's more than other wives who bore no male children.

Male dominance is also the basis of the difference in gender roles among Igbo people. Traditionally, Igbo placed certain roles for girl child and some for the male counterpart and which must not be interchanged. In Igbo nations, roles like cutting palm fruits, family representation in a meeting among others are specifically male affairs. Female members in a clan are not allowed to attend such meetings. Ajakor (2019) points, a

woman's role in relation to home, church and society is to be in submission to her husband and depend on him. Ajakor (2019) elucidates that in Igbo culture and traditions, the training of children differently was not a mark of discrimination. He believes that female children were trained differently from the male children because they were basically trained in the aspects of life that will help them through their adolescence and adult stages of life as mothers to be. According to https://openstax.org (2021), a phrase like "boys will be boys" is often used to justify behaviour such as pushing, shoving, or other forms of aggression from young boys. By implication, such behaviour is unchangeable and something that is part of male nature. Again, https://openstax.org (2021) further explains that aggressive behaviour when it does not inflict significant harm, is often accepted from boys and men because it is congruent with the cultural script for masculinity.

Nmah (2003) expresses that male chauvinism is the expression of male superiority and suppression of women. There are always reasons why a woman should not do certain things. She should not have say in the home because it is the man's prerogative to decide everything. Nmah also elucidates that a woman is not allowed to go for a gainful employment because she should stay at home and depend on her husband. According to Nmah, all these "dos and don'ts leave the women numbed, cold and afraid, even to look at people straight in the face. As a result of these kind of treatments and, some of them who are naturally endowed and gifted end up living unfulfilled lives.

This research concurs with the view of openstax.org that aggressiveness is usually attributed to boys as Igbo parent would often scold a girl child thus: "don't you know that you are a girl? You must not play roughly." Any child that plays roughly would definitely be wounded whether male or female. The nature does not exempt the masculine gender from injury which might result from playing roughly. Again, the research argues that giving the girl child equal opportunity to exercise her natural gift should not be viewed as unsubmissive. These culturally constructed roles for women inform devaluation of Igbo female child in the bid for her to remain dependent on the male.

T**heoretical Framework**

Gender inequality theory explains women subordinate position in society. Theorists on gender inequality see gender inequality as part of universal problem of exploitation of the weak by the strong. The theory has brought clearly the extent to which women occupy disadvantaged positions in traditional, economic and social arrangements. According to https://en.wikipedia.org (2020), gender inequality is a phenomenon in which people are not treated equally on the basis of gender. This inequality can be caused by gender discrimination or sexism. The treatment may arise from distinctions regarding biology, psychology or cultural norms prevalent in the society. Sen (1995) writing on concrete questions of justice for women, introduces the issue of co-operative conflict and argues that the conflicts are often rooted in traditional conceptions of women's role, which are internalized as 'nature' by the women themselves. Sen's

contention is that the capabilities approach can handle these conflicts better. For Sen, the central problem is to confront the underlying prejudice directly and outline the need for and scope of reducing inequalities without accepting that this project necessarily causes great inefficiency.

According to Glasberg and Neubeck (2005), males have used the ideology expressed in "biology is destiny" to create and maintain system of gender inequality in which they dominate. The concept of patriarchy is used to refer to such system. In these societies characterized by patriarchy, not only domination but oppression and exploitation are common themes. Glasberg and Neubeck aver that men and women are not equal sharers of power, be it economic, political or social. This is the case, to a greater or lesser degrees in most societies around the world including Igbo communities.

According to https://openstax.org (2021), gender socialization occur through four major agents of socialization namely: family, education, peer group, and mass media. It stresses that each agent reinforces gender role by creating and maintaining normative expectations for specific behaviour. Exposure to secondary agents like religion and the workplace also happens. Repeated exposure to these agents overtime leads men and women to a false belief that they are acting naturally rather than following a society constructed role.

Empirical Studies

Ojilere and Igwe (2021) examines some of the abuses and violations as they occur in three critical circumstances of a woman's life namely: at conception before birth, after birth, and in widowhood. They posit that devaluation of the girl child starts from conception because at conception, most Nigerian couples and families wish that the pregnant woman gives birth to a boy rather than a girl. Ojilere and Igwe (2021) explain the cause to be the sociocultural beliefs in patriarchal and primogeniture whereby the world is seen from the lens of the male who is considered the only source of the family succession and continuity. Ojilere and Igwe's work relates to this study because they are based on the devaluation of girl child but are different because Ojilere and Igwe studied various levels of devaluation of girl child in Nigeria while the present study is on devaluation of Igbo girl child and its challenges to some families.

Oha (1998) in his research on "The semantics of female devaluation in Igbo proverbs" avers that from the use of the female-related proverbs in Igbo discourse, it is clear that there is a greater tendency to portray women as inferior and emphasize their differences negatively, but illogically. Oha (1998) uses feminist theory to support that there are sex differences in the choice and use of sex related proverbs. The main objective of his study is to highlight the negative representation of womanhood in Igbo proverbs. Oha's study relates to this research as both centered on devaluation of Igbo female child. The difference is that Oha (1998) uses Igbo proverbs to highlight devaluation of Igbo female while the present study is on the devaluation of Igbo girl child and its challenges to some families.

Analysis of Findings

Challenges of Devaluation of Igbo Girl Child

Many Igbo families face various challenges as a result of devaluation of their daughters. In most cases, the affected families do not complain openly to the society about their feelings towards the poor performances of their sons. After all, there is a saying in Igbo as "*nwoke adị njọ*" meaning that a man is never ugly or bad whatever be the case. Evelyn Obiekwe believes that *nwoke adị njọ* in Igbo makes it difficult to even point out whenever a man is not living or performing up to expectations. She made reference to when a man is impotent or cannot bear a son, and his family swore to protect his self-esteem by arranging for a reputable friend or relative to bear children or sons for him. But when a woman is barren, she is sent away from her husband's house. Achebe (1958) buttresses that some families live in perpetual regret due to devaluation of Igbo girl child. Achebe indirectly uses the attitude of the protagonist Okonkwo towards his daughter to portray gender inequality and devaluation of Igbo girl child. Despite that Nwoye has taken the given role of a man just because his gender assigns him the duty, it is Ezinma his sister who performs the role perfectly. Okonkwo always regrets having Nwoye as a son because (according to Okonkwo) of his feminine character. Okonkwo as a man who basically values only masculine qualities, strongly wishes that Ezinma had been a boy which from his frame of mind shows how he loves, respects and values her (pg 44). But because Ezinma is a girl, she must take the inferior value as subjected by her people's culture. If culture and society had given equal value to Nwoye and Ezinma, Okonkwo would not have to regret either silently or otherwise, knowing fully well that either of the two children can be maximally of benefit.

Achebe (1958) avers that Ezinma sits like a man, asks questions and takes on task of a boy, talks with brazenness unknown to her sex. She also has temper tantrums like her father. Unfortunately, she still has to be subjected to her proscribed gender boundaries. Ezinma performs her traditional feminine duty when she brings food for her father. However, when she commands her father to finish his food and sits down to make sure her order is fully followed, Ezinma demonstrates a sense of self-possession and assertiveness that Okonkwo considers masculine and wishes his sons had. Many families live in the same regret, wishing their daughters should have been born sons. According to Nwaanyịmma Obidike, some families in Igbo land live in covert challenges and wish that some of their daughters were born sons. She explains that some parents are not fulfilled in their lifetime simply because the traits they look for in their male children are rather imbedded in their female children. Obviously, because the Igbo tradition has placed certain roles on feminine and others on masculine gender, such families are helpless. Nwaanyịmma Obidike illustrates where a woman is forbidden from attending her kindred meetings, situations often arise that warrant a bolder spokesperson for the family, opportunity is denied the daughter despite that she might be bolder than her brother.

In her contribution, Cecilia Chukwurah narrates how Elias Okoye who had four sons still chose to send his eldest daughter (Theresa) to school. According to Cecilia Chukwurah, Theresa's father trained her up to tertiary institution and also sent her abroad to further her studies which Cecilia Chukwurah maintains was because the father of Theresa, Elias Okoye dictated traits in his daughter which his four sons lacked. Eventually in their family, Theresa was the finance backbone of the entire family. She neither disappointed her father to regret training a girl child nor abandon her natal home after marriage, instead Theresa single handedly established her siblings.

Obidiebube (2015) portrays that a well trained daughter can as well attain greater heights of achievement. She reveals how Chiadikaobi was regularly humiliated by Idigo his brother and the entire kinsmen because he has no son. Even with five daughters, Chiadikaobi is consistently reminded that he has no root which implies that when he die, everything about him would be forgotten because none of his daughters would become Obiefuna or Amaechina. Obidiebube (2015) reveals that sometimes, the family involved may not hold on to the social constructed gender inequality. But the community in which they live and share their culture reminds the man and his wife that they do not have any share of their ancestral inheritance because they do not have a son. This is evident where Nweke bluntly reminded Chiadịkaobi that their sons will definitely not share their ancestral land with his daughters because doing so is an abomination.

Eventually, Obidiebube (2015) instructs using Chiadịkaobi's daughter Nwaanyịbụihe that the basic thing in life should not be the sex of a child but to empower each child and provide him or her with the enabling environment to thrive. Chiadịkaobi's brother Idigo and his wife learnt this lesson later when Nwaanyịbụihe stepped into their lives and worsened their misery condition. Despite that Idigo had three sons, none of them could significantly ameliorate their family's living condition until Nwaanyịbụihe who is of the devalued gender came to their rescue. Chiadịkaobi trained his five daughters and loved them equally. Nwaanyịbụihe, the last child later became a medical doctor and was instrumental in developing her natal home and community; built a house for her parents, built a hospital for the community and bore pipe borne water for them. Obidiebube exposes that the only difference between a male and a female child is the physical features. Adequate training of a child should be the paramount priority because that would help to utilise all the natural capabilities a child may possess.

Advantages of Appreciating Girl Child

Every child is a precious gift from God and as such, should be appreciated and valued equally. Empowerment especially of the girl child is very important. This is because many women have proved even more efficient in the areas they were entrusted with daring tasks. Prof. Dora Akunyili (late) was appointed the director general of National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control NAFDAC. She served in DG capacity for eight years (2001-2009) and fought with special motivation against the counterfeit drug issues. This was because Dora Akunyili was said to have watched her sister aged 21 die after being given fake insulin injection for regular diabetes treatment.

She stood her ground despite threats to her personal life and family which she faced in the course of her work. However, by gradually winning the bolstering confidence and thrust of both the Nigerian people and government, coupled with creating extensive awareness about fake drugs, and pursuing the counterfeiters with an unwavering dedication to the course, she and her team significantly reduced the problems of drug and food control that had had significant repercussion in Nigeria. (https//:sucessfulsocieties.princeton.edu.)

Obviously, if Prof. Dora Akunyili was not given the opportunity to serve as the DG of NAFDAC, no one could have thought that a woman could be bold enough to challenge the anomaly in the country's food and drug business sector. In an interview granted her by the Princeton university on September 4, 2009, Prof. Dora Akunyili, stresses the importance of never compromising one's ideals and "selling out" to the very people one is expected to bring to bars. Apart from her brave achievement at NAFDAC, Prof. Dora Akunyili won numerous accolades for her doggedness and work in pharmacy, public health and human rights including a Grassroots Human Rights Campaigner Award by International Service in 2005. These turns of achievements really show that feminine gender given same opportunity as their counterpart can contribute meaningfully to human and social development. It also means that naturally, the female gender is equally endowed with various potentialities that beg for harvest in a male dominated society. What is mostly needed is empowerment and opportunity for them to live fulfilled live and society harness their capabilities.

Conclusion

This study tried to expose the devaluation of Igbo girl child and the challenges it poses to some families. Gender inequality theory was used to reveal that culture and society constructed the inequality in value of male and female gender which leave men and women to believe that the roles they play are natural rather than roles constructed and designated by the culture and society. Findings show that designation of certain roles to masculine gender and some others to feminine gender has kept unfulfilled the expectations of most families; most especially when the culture and society provided that these roles must not be interchanged. As a result, some families cannot fill the gaps created in their homes because there are no male children or the available ones are incapable of performing some expected audacious tasks. Truly there will always be wishes and every child unique, but if equal value is placed on both male and female child, families would not have to wish they rather have their female children as male. It has also been discovered that potentialities of male and female children could be harnessed when provided with equal opportunities. Another findings reveal that some families even when they have sons, benefit more from their daughters who are often times more audacious and efficient than their brothers. It recommends that devaluation of girl child be discouraged and discontinued as it jeopardizes that worth of the girl child. Rather, equal opportunities should be given to masculine and feminine gender in order to maximize their natural potentialities.

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