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## EXAMINING THE TRAUMA FACING WOMEN WITHOUT MALE CHILDREN IN IGBOLAND AND THE CHURCH RESPONSE

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### **Abstract**

*This research explores the trauma experienced by women without male children in Igboland and the church's responsibility. The study begins with an introduction that articulates the statement of the problem, highlighting the cultural and emotional burden placed on women who are unable to bear male offspring. The work enumerates the reasons why the male child is so highly desired in Igbo society, including the preservation of the primogeniture tradition, fulfillment of socio-cultural and religious responsibilities, performance of certain political duties, and as a source of prestige and honor within the community. The study further identifies the perceived causes of "maleness absence" in families, ranging from divine providence to biological or medical factors, sexual immorality, and promiscuity. The traumatic experiences endured by women without male children are also discussed in detail, such as psychological distress, depression, repeated childbearing and its damage to the reproductive system, extramarital affairs, polygamy, and even death. The study adopts a qualitative approach, relying on descriptive and analytical methods. Data were sourced from secondary materials, including books, journal articles, and relevant biblical texts, as well as interviews and oral testimonies from women in selected communities in Igboland. Finally, the research examines Christian perspectives on addressing the trauma of these women, offering practical and spiritual interventions such as enacting and enforcing laws against discrimination, promoting the proper implementation of the Child Rights Act, encouraging societal acceptance of child adoption, preaching and teaching the value of all children, counseling, prayer, and regular Bible study.*

**Keywords:** Trauma, Women, Male Child, Igboland, Church, Response.

### **Introduction**

Children are essential to the survival, continuity, and development of society. As today's children are tomorrow's leaders. Children are the heritage of the Lord (Psalm 127:3-5), and in the Igbo context, children are regarded as the pride of their parents and the greatest value the



society possesses. This is why children are mostly cherished and consciously protected from all forms of hazards and abuse. The importance attached to children in Igbo society is the reason children are not only trained and cared for by their parents alone but by the entire community. This is shown in the names we bear, such as *Nwaora*, *Adaora*, amongst others. Children are biological offspring of one's parent which grows to become adults. The childhood period covers the *crèche*, nursery or early childhood (0 to 5 years), primary (6 to 12 years), and secondary school (12 to 18 years). During this period, children are placed under the care of the adults who may be their parents or guardians, older siblings.

This period is made up of infancy, childhood, early, and late adolescence stages of development. According to Adeyemo and Bamidele (2016), during this period, children develop their personality and character. They are very dependent on the significant others, those on whom they model their behaviour, through observation, repetition, and imitation. Their physical, mental, social, spiritual, and emotional developments start and progress to the peak at the young adult stage. For children to become responsible and useful adults, they need adequate parental training, love, and care from their family members, as well as their formal and qualitative informal education. These will enable them to develop their mind, intellects, and skills to be able to contribute meaningfully to society in the future. For female children, this may not be actualized because of male child preference in Igbo society.

Nwokocha (2007) observes that male-child preference has remained one of the most lasting cultural values in societies where male children are accorded special recognition and or higher status relative to their female counterparts. Igbo people attach strong significance to male children. A man who died without a son lived a worthless life; he is inherited by his brothers, and is soon forgotten since his branch of the family tree has ended (Isiugo-Abanihe 1993). In traditional Igbo society, the status of a man is assessed by the number of his sons. Therefore, if a man with many sons is viewed as a wealthy or an accomplished man, his neighbours cautiously avoid confrontation or litigation with him, he can contest for traditional political positions, and he is assured of a befitting burial at death.

For a woman, the birth of a male child is of paramount importance as well, because it establishes her in the family. She is said to have taken root or established a solid foundation when the first son arrives. Since the birth of a son ensures marital security, given the prevailing high childhood mortality, just a son is not enough. Isiugo-Abanihe (1993) thinks that the desire to ensure that at least one survives his father encourages prolific childbearing. The above insight implies that the importance attached to male children defies gender boundaries; both husbands and wives desire male children for their culturally perceived significance (Acsadi and Johnson-Acsadi, 1991).

In Igbo land, there are certain political, cultural, and religious rites which only male children are customarily authorized to perform. Such as breaking of kola nut (*Iwa/ Ichi Oji*), pouring libation (*Itu Mmanya*), and so forth. Akpan (1995) enunciates that the justification for the desirability of males derives from the tradition that allows only the first son to inherit the *Ofor* title, the symbol of family authority. He is then automatically bestowed with the onus of both settling disputes and



apportioning farmlands among family members each planting season. Similarly, the son represents the family in religious matters. A man who died not having a son is seen as unaccomplished and or a misfit. The birth of a male-child thus establishes a man's worthiness on one hand and the legitimacy of marriage on the other. It is apparent that the quest for such legitimacy motivates women to continue bearing children in anticipation of the 'desired child' even in conditions that threaten their lives (Arkutu, 1995), a situation which not only explains high fertility but also high maternal mortality and morbidity.

The trauma women without male children face in the Igbo geographical territory is too much. They are disrespected, cajoled, called all sorts of evil names, blamed for not bearing male children, sometimes beaten by their husbands' relatives, and forced to quit the marriage. Wives, who refuse to go out of the marriage even when their husbands have remarried are not allowed to get a tangible share of their husbands' properties. Thus, exploring trauma and how women without male children in Igbo are affected by their experience is the main thrust of this research. Further research will proffer solution to the problem.

### **Reasons for Wanting of Male Issues**

The issue of valuing male children more than females is an age-old tradition dating back to the Ancient Near East. Yahweh created Adam and gave him authority, but such authority was not given to Eve. The same Yahweh commanded Abraham to circumcise all the male people under his household including new born males born to Abraham's family, must undergo circumcision after 8 days (Gen. 17: 10-14). According to El-Gohary (2015), per the sign of the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham, as quoted in the Hebrew Bible (Torah), Abraham was to circumcise himself, his sons, and his slaves and servants. Women were not included. It was further exemplified in the birth of Moses, when Pharaoh commanded that every Hebrew newborn male be killed (Ex 1:15-16). Baloyi and Manala (2019) point out that, besides being regarded as a threat in times of revolution, the male children were people who would bring hope and revival to the nation, which Pharaoh wished to keep under Egyptian domination. Therefore, by eliminating the male Hebrew children, Pharaoh was denying the Hebrews the power and authority that would have been vested in their males. More so, as Yahweh decided to do something to Pharaoh and the Egyptians that would pain them, he killed the firstborn male children, excluding the female ones (Ex 12:12). This really was painful and unbearable for Pharaoh and his people. These biblical accounts help to explain why many ethnic nationalities came to ascribe more power to males than to females, thus affirming the perception of male children as more important than females.

### **Maintenance of the Culture of Primogeniture**

The desire to have male children is because male children are regarded as heirs of property. Baloyi and Manala (2019) assert that it has been observed that among many African tribes, a daughter was not supposed to inherit the property of her parents because she would be expected to get married, and the property was expected to remain in the family. Modu (1999) enunciates that a male child is needed in the home for smooth transfers of family property, which is normally from father to son. A male child becomes the centre of all training and importance. As



he grows, his father tells him some secrets about family property and relatives, and at times ends by saying in case you do not see me tomorrow. The mother of the boy assists the father in reminding him of what to tell the boy. In short, the social gap between the man and his wife is closed on the arrival of the boy; consequently, all his relatives of the man, who had previously hoped to share his property because he had no male child, now look somewhere else for such. Any husband without a male child must make efforts to bear a son who will succeed him.

The firstborn male child at birth is immediately seen as the head of the family who is to succeed his father and continue the family lineage. It is a duty for every man to get married, and if a man has no children or only daughters, he finds another wife so that through her, children may be born who would survive him and keep him in personal immortality.

### **Performance of Certain Socio-Cultural and Religious Duties**

Igbo people are deeply religious. Religious roles are necessary for the proper functioning of society. According to Nwokocha (2007), although Igbo people acknowledge that *Chukwu* (God) is the Supreme Being, they equally believe that men have some role to play in effectively relating with God transcendently. Women cannot and are not permitted in any circumstance to undertake certain socio-cultural and religious ritual activities perceived as consistent with the life of the community. In Igbo culture, there are certain socio-cultural and religious rituals and rites that only men can perform. They include:

#### **i. The Traditional Kola Rites and Rituals (*Ichi/Iwa Oji*)**

The Igbo people have a common understanding of the importance and the significance of the kola nut (*Oji*). Chinedu (2022) explains that kKola nut is a white, yellow, or red coloured nut or seed of the tree of the proximate genus, *Cola Acuminata* (kola nut), which contains phytochemicals like Caffeine, theobromine, theophylline, polyphenols, and so on. Kola nut has the shape of a human heart. It is the heart of the Igbo people (*Oji bu mkpuru obi ndi Igbo*). Perhaps that is the reason we say that *Oji bu omenala jikotara ndi Igbo Onu*, meaning that kola nut is the culture that unites the entire Igbo ethnic nationality. Kola nut is the heart of Igbo culture and tradition. Among the Igbo people, the kola nut is a highly valued and indispensable product and commands our respect in a way no other product has done. Below are some of the Igbo people's basic uses of the kola nut as enumerated by Chinedu (2022):

- a) Welcome/Hospitality
- b) Rites, Rituals, and Ceremonies
- c) Commerce/Marketing
- d) Oath-taking, Covenants, and Settlement of Disputes
- e) Divination and Prophecy
- f) Medical and Mystical Uses of the Kola nut.
- (g) Opening Prayers/Sacred Communion
- h) Food/Nutrition
- i) Cleansing/Flavouring
- j) Sacrifice/Worship



In Igbo culture, the traditional kola rites and rituals (*Ichi/ Iwa Oji*) are exclusively for the male gender, and the female folk are usually excluded. A male elder performs the kola nut rituals among the Igbo people. Such an elder is a symbol in itself and represents the voice of the community (Ukpokolo, 2011). Among the Igbo people, in any social gathering where the kola nut is presented, there are three stages of rites that follow before it is eaten. Ukpokolo (2011) narrates thus:

These are *igosi oji* (the presentation of the kola nut), *iwa oji* (the breaking of the kola nut), and *ita oji* (the sharing and eating of the kola nut). The first stage is the *igosi oji* (presentation of kola nut). In a family gathering, it is the duty of the head of the family to present the kola nut. The kola nut is, then, handed over to the eldest male in the gathering, in whose hands lie the power to communicate with the cosmic forces about the people's need for peace, progress, and development. The elder, thus, has the power to determine peace and progress. The eldest person approximates the ancestors, the continuity, and the essence of the community. Just like the entry of the kola nut, the handling of the kola nut by the eldest represents a passage of authority to the one who embraces the collective identity and integrity. (p. 169).

There are certain taboos associated with the kola nut in Igbo land. Ihediwa, Nwashindu, and Onah (2014) observe that because of the premium placed on *Oji* in Igbo cosmology, women do not break the kola nut. According to Chinedu (2022), the kola nut is not presented to women in any gathering at this stage of ritual performances, except that after the ritual performances, when the kola nut plate is passed round for people to take a piece, women also take from it. Also, a woman does not climb the kola nut tree. In fact, it is culturally unacceptable for a woman to pray with the kola nut in her hand in the ritualistic way a man does. According to Agbanari, cited by Chinedu (2022), says that, an if a visitor comes into a polygamous home and the head of the household is not around, the women must look for any male, no matter how young, to present the kola nut. The reason is based on the fact that the Igbo kola nut is accompanied by the symbolic act of communicating with the spirits of the ancestors. In the Igbo culture, *Ichi/Iwa Oji* is a cultural and religious office restricted only to the male sect, because the reason is that kola nut is used to communicate with the deities and shrines, and the woman does not feed the deities.

## ii. *Itu Mmanya* Rites and Rituals (Libation)

Palm wine (*Nkwu Elu*) has many religious and traditional symbols and significance in Igbo land. As kola-nut (*Oji*) is symbolic and of significant value in Igbo culture, so is the palm wine. The ontological significance of palm wine cannot be overemphasized. In Igbo territory, it is believed to have more ontological perfection than any of the local wine species. Onuegbu, Obiajulu, and Nnajofofor (2015) explain that this point is accentuated by the fact that the Igbo African cannot hold any ceremony unless it is available. This fact is also corroborated by the inevitable use of palm wine in pouring libation (*Itu Mmanya*). Its use is anchored on the belief that palm wine has more ontological potency, a kind of force that makes it acceptable to our ancestors and our forebears. Apparently, the force inherent in our local palm wine is not visible, yet such an invisible nature reinforces the belief in its power of spiritual transcendentalism and cultural communion. Nwachukwu (2014) affirms that the libation ritual called *Itu Mmanya*



precedes all traditional Igbo public and private events, including traditional marriage and meetings, and other get-togethers. During the celebration of traditional festivals and other ceremonies in Igbo land, like the coronation of kings, *Ichi Nze N'Ozo*, and so on, pouring of libation using palm wine (*Nkwu Elu*) is normally carried out first before other crucial parts of the events take place. This could be equated to the opening prayer by priests in Christian gatherings.

In Igbo culture, it is believed that the use of palm wine for libation (*Itu Mmanya*) serves as a connection between the living and the ancestors. According to Chukwuma (2021), during *Itu Mmanya*, the living call on the attention of ancestors and make requests, which the ancestors, who serve as intermediaries between man and *Chukwu* (the supreme being), carry the requests of the living to *Chukwu* and also intercede on their behalf. The invocation with the palm wine is a superficial symbol of imploring for an intimate spiritual grace of providential gods at events where individuals share a feeling of purity, protection, and hope. In affirmation of the above viewpoint, Onuegbu, Obiajulu, and Nnajiolor (2015) agree that libation with palm wine is a symbol of intimacy with the ancestors and harmony with the living. During ceremonies, libation with palm wine is ritually carried out, symbolizing the safe cyclic passage of the forebears from the spirit realm to the physical world. Even in the *Itu Mmanya* rites and rituals of Igbo culture, it is solely reserved for men.

### **Performance of Certain Traditional Political Duties**

In the socio-political structure of the Igbo people, females are not recognized or welcomed in the assembly of men. Even in modern politics, only a few women win elections. Okoh (2022) observes that in modern politics, most of them do not get the support of their husbands, families, and friends. So rather than lose their loved ones, most women would rather let go of their political quest. When a woman's family members fail to support her, are it outsiders who will? For instance, the *Ohaneze Ndigbo* gathers in a true Igbo traditional setting, where women are not part of it (Aligwekwe, 1991). Eze and Chigbo (2018) elucidate that in families without a male child are alienated in village and Community meetings where only males are recognized as bona fide members. The above explanation is said to have placed a premium on male children over and above female children and has led to male-children preference in Igbo. This further hurts mothers without male issues. Exclusion of women in traditional politics is not peculiar to the Igbo ethnic nationality alone in Northern Nigeria, especially among the Moslems, where women are not given the same platform to contest for traditional political positions.

### **Male Child as Source of Prestige**

Male children are a source of social prestige and even wealth for the family (Nwokocha 2007). People respect a man when they know that he has many sons of their age and social standing. This is biblically affirmed in Psalm 127:5: "Happy is the man who has his quiver full of sons! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. Amongst the Igbo people, for instance, men enjoy a great deal of socio-cultural prestige. Eze and Chigbo (2018) enunciate that there are special privileges and honors reserved for persons and families whose male children are warriors. When a family has male children who possess valor and prowess in the security sphere of life and warfare, it gives such a family some bragging rights over other



families that have no male children. This is well depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. In his classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which explored the contact between the Western and the Igbo cultures, religions, and civilizations, Chinua Achebe's Chief protagonist, known as Okonkwo, received great respect on account of his wonderful exploits in wars. Even when Okonkwo breached the law of the land by committing murder, albeit involuntarily, his military and gallant exploits for his community merited him some empathic, honest sympathizers (Achebe, 1994).

Moreover, according to Eze and Chigbo (2018), in the continuous transmission of life in the family lines, males play exclusive roles, as well as reserve a pride of place for themselves in the whole dynamic interaction of family life. The reason for the vantage position of the male gender in Igbo society is not unconnected to the patriarchal nature of that Society. Being a patriarchal society, then, the males are groomed from an early stage in life to assume a position of importance, honor, and authority over and above their female siblings.

### **Male Children as a Source of Protection**

In Igbo society, as in most African traditional societies, it is the prerogative of the male gender to provide security. The need for male children is on this premise; it is a social security for the elderly by their sons. Nwokocha (2007) opines that it is expected of males to join the military and to defend women, children, the sick, and the weak. In some cultures, the male youths are looked upon by their parents to work or be involved in one business or the other, make money, and take good care of their parents. They are to continue to care for their immediate family and their parents as well. This role is expected of every male youth to fulfill and any male youth who fails to fulfill this role, other family members will not be happy with him.

In the community, people avoid making trouble with families that have their quiver full of male children. Male children make everything possible to protect their parents, fathers' landed properties, and so on. A man who has male children will not be afraid to speak with his enemies because his soldiers (male children) are around peradventure trouble arises. Nwokocha (2007) pointed out that men engage in more meaningful economic activities and, therefore, are better placed to take care of their aged parents more. This does not mean that women do not take care of their parents; however, they are married out and are not always close to their parents like their male counterparts.

### **Male Children as a Source of Marital Security, Love, and Stronghold for Women in Marriage**

A male child solidifies a woman in marriage. It establishes her in the family. She is said to have taken root or established a solid foundation when the first son arrives. Since the birth of a son ensures marital security, this encourages prolific childbearing. There is the desire to bear more sons to ensure that at least one survives his father (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1993). Handwerker (1989) is of the view that childbearing was a singularly important mechanism used by women to gain access to the resources on which their material welfare depended. Childlessness is therefore a matter of deep and intimate concern to the individual, family, society, and ethnic group. Chinyere (2013) asserts that since marriage in Igbo is mainly for procreation, hardly possible for



people marry for only companionship. A childless woman can go to any length to get a child. It is also a known fact that most women in Igbo territory can do anything to bear male children because having at least a male child gives her 90% rights to stay in her husband's house.

Moreover, Eze and Chigbo (2018) opine that women gain and maintain their husbands' love when they deliver male children. This was seen in the case of Leah, who was hated by her husband Jacob, but after she gave birth to a male child, Leah said that Jacob would love her (Gen.29: 32). This love extends to the husband's relatives, as they will accord her great respect and treat her well. Even when a problem arises between the wife and husband, the husband's relatives encourage her to stay because of the children. This will be the opposite if she has no children, especially male ones.

### **Factors that could make one not produce a Male Child**

#### **Divine Factor**

Children are the heritage of the Lord (Psalm 127:3-5). This shows that God has the right to give and withhold a male child from a family. According to Nwokocha (2007), God's infinite power cannot be questioned by mortal beings. He is all-powerful but loving and gives to every man according as he wills. The divine factor as a result of not giving birth to a male child in marriage is not new. It has its root from the Old Testament. Yahweh closed Sarah's womb (Gen.16:2), and at his own appointed time, he gave Sarah a son (Gen.21:1-2). Another case is that of Rachel. Yahweh closed Rachel's womb (Gen.29:31). Rachel was so discomforted that she confronted Jacob but Jacob's response to her is a pointer that it is only Yahweh that could give or withhold children from man (Gen.29:32). Hannah was another person that could not bear children as a result of divine factor (1 Sam.1:5). Michal was another example (2 Sam.6:23). Okoh (2022) concludes thus; we can see that birth is not of man's making; it is nature and also by chance or probability, so whatever sex (man or woman) is a gift from God. Igbo people believe that God is the giver of children; hence, families who have male children appreciate God through the names they give to their children, such as *Onyinyechi*-God's gift, *Kanayochukwu*-Keep asking from God, *Chioma*- God is good, among others.

There is a belief among the Igbo people that evil spirits, ghosts, and witches can cause women not to bear male children. Belief in spirits and witches is part of African Traditional Religion (ATR). Yambasu (2002) states that most African peoples believe that their world is full of a myriad of spirits. They include non-ancestral spirits, nature spirits, human spirits, witchcraft, and ghosts (Conteh 2008). Kehinde (2013) elucidates that foreign investigators of the people's religion tend to dismiss such powers as superstitious, but this is a reality, as Igbo people have a strong conviction that these mysterious powers are there and manifest themselves in the form of incantations, magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. These powers, if used in an evil way, can disrupt peace and cause fear and suspicion in society. Conteh (2008) writes that there are bad spirits in ATR like witches, and wicked dead relatives who have not received proper burial rites, are believed to become malevolent spirits roving around in the night or day, inflicting mischief on the innocent, especially their enemies or infants.



McKinney (1985) defines witchcraft as an inherent capacity to exert supernatural influence over another person. This influence frequently causes harm, and it explains phenomena such as breaches in social relations, anti-social behaviour, unexpected occurrences, sickness, and death. This belief is a philosophical attempt to deal with the question of evil. It has its own natural logic. Evans–Pritchard, quoted by *Nmah and Onukwube* (2019) view that this explanatory system provides answers to questions of why particular Occurrences happen to specific individuals at the time they do. It does not invalidate their understanding of the empirical cause and effect of an occurrence. Rather, it deals with its ultimate cause.

There is a strong belief that witches can cause a woman to give birth to a male child (Modo 1999). If a woman is pregnant, the witches, through their sorcery power, can identify the gender of the child. According to Chinonso Gift (personal communication on 15 February 2025), if they found out that the new baby will be a male child, they will either kill or turn the gender to a female just to frustrate the mother, especially when she is looking for a male child.

### **Biological/Medical Factor**

Eze and Chigbo (2018) describe that biologically, from the science of genetics, a man has the Y chromosome, which is the major determinant of the sex of a boy. Most people have one pair of sex chromosomes per cell, usually, female have two X chromosome and males have one X and one Y. Nweze (2014) affirms that both sexes retain one of their mother's X chromosome and females inherit a second X chromosome from their father. Males inherit their father's Y chromosome instead. From the elementary knowledge of Biology, both sexes, male and female, are determined by the man. Being determined by the man means that men by nature possess XY chromosomes and women by nature possess XX chromosomes (Okoh 2022). Therefore, during intercourse, it is what the man gives to the woman that determines the gender of the child, either male or female.

However, intake of hard drugs, lack of a balanced diet, excessive consumption of artificial sugar, and so on could prevent a man from producing enough sperm (Y chromosome) that would form a male child. This could lead to a lack of male children in the family. It is observed that the lack of education and inadequate information about the above viewpoint has led many people, especially in rural areas, to blame the woman for not bearing male children instead of the man. Moreover, they sympathize with the man and encourage him to take a second wife.

### **Sexual Immorality and Excessive Flirting**

There is a high rate of sexual immorality in society. This is shown in the reported cases of rape. Many youths are guilty of sexual immorality. Indecent dressing and sex abuse appeared to be one of the most serious and most common immorality among the youths. Some Pentecostal churches in Nigeria allow their members, especially youths, to wear indecent dress to church services as they aver that God looks at the heart, not your physical appearance. The female folks may dress to kill as they seduce the pastor and the male members, which could lead to sexual immorality. There are cases of sexual harassment, rape allegations, and assault as a result of sexual immorality. Many people think that some couples at their youthful age were involved in sexual



immorality and subsequent abortions. Now they are married, God decided to punish them by not giving them any more male children.

## **Trauma Facing Women without Male Children**

### **Psychological Trauma**

The psychological trauma that women without male children in Igbo experience could be compared to that of victims of Boko Harm insurgency in North West Nigeria. The inability to bear a male child in marriage causes unbearable emotional pain and psychological trauma. According to Ojedokun (2015), it affects the victim's social life, changes the victim's perception of reality, and everything. They are faced with feelings of anxiety, depression, loss and helplessness, frustration, and rejection from people. Under such conditions, their husband will threaten to bring in another woman who would bear male children for him.

Eze and Chigbo (2018) narrate that the woman may try to resist such a plan, fight, or attempt to leave the marriage (flight) or become helpless and remain in the marriage (freeze). The freeze condition implies that their existing coping skills have been surpassed by the threats and difficulties they face in their marriage due to not being able to give birth to a male child. That freezing is trauma. Hatfield and McGaugh (2012) observe that they may begin to have cognitive failure and information processing difficulties occurring due to the consolidation of difficult emotional experiences that may affect the modulation of the hippocampus memory process influenced by the amygdala. Such women live in excruciating emotional and mental torture and a distortion of positive living. The resultant effect of this distorted process may affect the coherence of their other levels of functioning.

In Igbo land, some women without male children have been abused both verbally and physically by their husbands or husbands' relatives. The lives of the affected women are completely disconnected because of the violence and emotional challenges they face. Violence, of course, is associated with symptoms of psychological trauma (Singer, Angin, Song, and Lunghofer, 1995), and exposure to conditions where life becomes meaningless can be a source of psychological trauma for these concerned women. The traumatic experience of women in the condition above is one of pity because their personal lives become less meaningful for reason of both the physical and mental pains they are immersed in. Eckenrod (2008) is of the view that experiencing such life-threatening situations leads to bodily responses and immune system failures. These conditions are considered the physiological effects and cause emotional and psychological problems (Corbett and Milton, 2011).

Eze and Chigbo (2018) state that although an individual's interpretation of an event is important, sometimes the situation may just be so overwhelming that meaning-making and appraisal of the situation become even more difficult. In that kind of situation, a person's cognition has already been disconnected by the weight of the difficult experience. Just like the experience of women without male children in Igbo culture, it is not about what they appraise the situation sometimes; their pain comes from the knowledge that their husbands could marry another woman, and their



own girl children, if they have any, will not inherit anything from their father. Such women are helpless even in their thinking.

Furthermore, trauma exposure creates a fault line in the thought processes of trauma individuals. What happens is that people in trauma situation begin to see the world as an unsafe place for their existence. Brewin and Holmes (2003) opine that this psychic dysfunction is a mental defeat situation where an individual experiences helplessness in a profound state that makes categorization of either their emotions or their beliefs difficult. This situation, as supported in the above authors' work, could drive an individual to lead life through an irrational lens since their psychological well-being is altered by traumatic experiences.

Eze and Chigbo (2018) think that women without male children in Igbo territory are sometimes seen as witches who eat up their male children in the womb. Okereke Joy (personal communication on 15 February 2025) states that sometimes their immediate family denies them and joins hands with their in-laws to refer to them as witches. Under this condition, the woman involved has no trust in her own home as well as from her husband's home. She is helpless, as she cannot even comfortably go back to her parents since they have also accepted that she is a witch. Betrayal trust trauma (BTT) is very challenging, and experiences like this can be seen as a near-death experience because the affected women may have suicidal ideations.

More so, Levine (1997) enunciates that the psychological effects of trauma and reactions to traumatic experiences may differ across individuals because trauma affects people in different ways. What happens during a period of intense emotional disruption is that people experiencing trauma tend to bring in different defence mechanisms to avoid traumatic memories. However, Brewin and Holmes (2003) argued that a traumatic memory breaks into consciousness and intrudes in different forms, such as flashbacks and nightmares. Thus, avoiding traumatic memory may not help the trauma victim since these experiences keep surfacing into awareness. Avoidance can be a worthwhile memory defense mechanism, but when the experience becomes self-defeating, repressed memories will be forced into consciousness (Eze and Chigbo, 2018). For women without male children in Igbo land, they are always forced by insults, violence, emotional torture, and guilt to remember their predicaments each day of their lives because they are always unfulfilled.

Moreover, Naso (2008) has it that psychological and mental functioning is disorganized during trauma as the situation makes connections between the inner world and the person's outer world difficult. Also, articulation and having a felt sense of self become disconnected. The disconnected sense of self in trauma, constituted in an intersubjective context, causes effects and pains because it cannot find a relational home in which to be held (Stolorow 2011).

Again, Eze and Chigbo (2018) support that this coincides with the inability of victims of trauma to articulate and integrate their sense of cohesion because both their inner worlds and their relationships with the outer environment are affected. This may also explain why some of the women without a male child in Igbo shut down contact with the outer world because even the



outer world of their cultural context sees them as incomplete solely on the basis that they do not have a male child of their own.

The experiences of women without male children in Igbo land resemble those of psychological trauma since it disconnects the affected women's integral functioning and affect their sense of self-construction. According to Eze and Chigbo (2018), they are losing life meaning and experiencing betrayal, trust trauma (BTT) owing to the rejection that sometimes comes from their own original family. This further justifies the psychological trauma experienced, orchestrated by a feeling of helplessness from people who should have served as a relational home for their painful experiences to be held.

### **Depression/Insomnia**

Mothers who suffer trauma are always in a state of depression. Experiences of their ordeal in the hands of loved ones leave them emotionally drained and induce feelings of restlessness and temporary sadness. Ifeanyichukwu, Paul and Duru (2017) attest that depressive feeling can also trigger other life threatening feelings in victims such as helplessness, hopelessness, weight loss, loss in appetite, loss of interest in activities going on around someone, unexpected bitterness and lack of ability to take decisions, and in most extreme cases nurturing of suicidal tendencies or feeling of losing the zeal to live. Often, women who pass through the difficulty of not bearing male children find it difficult to tell others of their experiences and end up living with the trauma, pain, and sense of disillusionment.

### **Repeated Childbearing/Damage of the Female Reproductive Organ**

As a result of the high demand for male children in Igbo, mothers who have only female children continue to give birth, seeking male children. This gives rise to repeated childbearing, which, if not given enough intervals, could lead to damage of female reproductive organs. Adeyemo and Bamidele (2016) view that repeated child bearing makes them suffer from Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) (and other complications as a result of repeated child bearing that virtually destroy their reproductive organs. This is more risky in rural areas with few medical facilities; hence, mothers may not access adequate treatment.

### **Extramarital Relationships**

According to Mayuya (2012), observations in cases of childless couples, especially sonless marriages, show that there are instances where the man is so desperate for a son from his wife and that he ends up having extramarital affairs. Some husbands have affairs for the sake of having a boy child. Baloyi and Manala (2019) state that the extreme stress that the couple experiences because of the strong desire to have male children often drives men to try to father a male child outside their marriages. The worst part of this matter is that sometimes, some of the relatives of the husband are aware of this secret game, and they pretend that they do not know. But when the "side chick" gets pregnant and delivers a male child, they will collectively join hands to bring her home to the surprise of the wife.



### **Polygamy**

In Igbo, children are regarded as the crowning glory of a marriage. Evidence shows that in some instances, those who cannot bear children are regarded as abnormal and outcasts (Baloyi and Manala 2019). Hence, polygamy becomes a solution or a way of begetting children in barren marriages. Although childbearing is applauded, male children are given more priority than female children. So even if a woman has many female children and no male, the husband can marry another wife to bear male children. Polygamy has adverse consequences in families. Competition and unhealthy rivalry could be seen in a family where there are two or more wives. There is jealousy, envy, and strife present in some polygamous homes. When one of the wives in a polygamous marriage is barren or has no male child, and the other wife has her bosom full of male children, it may make the first one become a thorn in the flesh of the latter. She could insult and ridicule her. This could lead to frequent fighting and quarrelling among them. This was done by Peninnah to Hannah (1Sam. 1:2 and 6).

### **Domestic Violence**

Chhikara, Jakhar, Malik, Singla, and Dhatarwal (2013) explain that domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behaviours by one partner against another in an intimate relationship, such as marriage. In Igbo society, women without children, particularly male children, are the most vulnerable to domestic violence. It is observed that women are often in great danger in the place where they should be safest, within their families. For many, homes are where they face a regime of terror and violence at the hands of somebody close to them (husband) (Coomaraswamy, 2000).

Since it has been established above that a male child makes a husband love the wife more, as well as the in-laws. A barren woman or even a mother of female children would inevitably be hated. When there is no love in marriage, there will be a crisis, and most times, wives are at the receiving end. A lot of women without male children are prone to physical torture in their husbands' homes. Sometimes, they are beaten up by their husbands or husbands' relatives at the slightest provocation. This is done so that she can pack out of her matrimonial house, for another woman to enter. Physical beating could result in physical injury. Physical injury involves physical suffering or bodily harm. It includes: throwing things, punching, hurting, pushing, shoving, grabbing, shaking, throwing things at or slapping the victim. Twisting arms, legs, and fingers. Kicking, biting, hair pulling, banging, or shaking the head. Choking, attempted strangulation, smothering. Beating up (pinned to the wall/floor, repeated kicks and punches). Deep cuts with weapons, knives, guns, poisoning the victim, and other types of contact that result in physical injury to the victim. So lack of male children could lead to domestic violence meted out to women.

### **Broken Marriage**

Husbands in search of male issue involve in infidelity. Ojedokun (2015) observes that most marriages run into problems as a result of dishonesty from most men (husbands) who engage in extramarital affairs. Extramarital affairs or infidelity have been observed to be the root cause of broken homes in most parts of the world. Also, wives without male children face domestic



violence, psychological trauma, and other humiliating actions by their husbands or in-laws. This could make them quit the marriage to have her peace.

### **Death**

In the quest to get pregnant and bear a male child, some women drink all kinds of traditional herbs or concoctions to be able to conceive and bear male children, which, if taken in excess without prescription, may destroy their reproductive organs and subsequently lead to death. The ill treatment meted out to them and the psychological trauma experienced by these women have negative effects on them. Eze and Chigbo (2018) said that the cultural practices of male child preference might be responsible for the high mortality rate among married women in Igbo land because psychological trauma is a silent killer.

In some cases, where some of these women make frantic efforts to resist the abuse, often see themselves out of their husbands' home leaving their children behind. Even when they are allowed to go with their children, they are left with nothing to take care of the children. According to Ojukwu and Ibekwe (2018), to save themselves and their children from starvation, some decide to stay back and remain in perpetual agony, which oftentimes leads them into depression and eventual untimely death. A good example is Late Nwachukwu Osinachi, a renowned gospel singer who died as a result of domestic violence perpetrated by the husband.

### **Church Social Responsibility Towards Trauma-Facing Women Without Male Children**

The church is not only the moral conscience of society, but it also has other social responsibilities it offers to society. They include:

#### **Campaign Against Discrimination Against Female Children**

Nigeria is a democratic society where respect for the dignity of the human person is enshrined in the constitution. It could be observed that there is discrimination against female children in society. Moreover, sometimes women without male children are also discriminated against in society. This is true because in some cultures, female children do not inherit their late fathers' assets. Also, women without male children get little or no share of their husbands' properties and assets after the death of their husbands. Hence, this could be considered an infringement on their fundamental human rights.

The church, from the beginning, upholds justice, equity, and dignity of the human person; she frowns at discrimination based on race, religion, gender, and so forth. She ensures that people are not denied their fundamental human rights. It was the church that made efforts to abolish the slave trade, which infringed on the fundamental human rights of victims of the slave trade. The contemporary church could make efforts to do the same. The church could work with various stakeholders, such as the Human Rights Commission, the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, National Assembly, among others, to enact a law banning all forms of discrimination against female children as well as mothers without male children in the society. The first move for the actualization of the abolition of various forms of slavery in Igboland was first carried out by Archdeacon G. T. Basden of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1933.



In a letter to the then legislative council of the southern province, Basden (1982) submitted that the government should take steps to investigate the Osu system. This form of slavery is at the moment causing great bitterness of feelings in certain parts of Owerri Province. It is a disintegrating force that is causing division between villages and individuals, e.g., when members of one family are divided owing to some being regarded as freeborn while one or more others are seen as Osu. Basden's appeal was instrumental to the abolition of the Osu caste system in Igbo land. In affirmation to the above statement, Ubaka and Ugwuja (2014) report that:

In 1956, the Eastern Nigeria colonial government did not waste time outlawing the Osu caste system practice in 1956. The Osu Prohibition Act came in the wake of the Balonwu Commission's report that all forms of slavery had become anachronistic to the Igbo nation. Speaking boldly on the floor of the House, the Premier of the Eastern Region, Owelle (Dr) Nnamdi Azikiwe, averred that it takes moral courage for any person to attempt to disturb what is revered as tradition, but it takes social vision for the duly accepted representatives of the people to abolish such a tradition in the interest of social justice. Thus, a plethora of punitive measures were canvassed in the Osu Prohibition Act of 1956 to finally put to rest all issues and pathologies associated with the caste system in Igbo land (p. 294).

Similarly, the contemporary church should work hand in glove with the National Assembly to ensure that there is an enactment to prohibit all forms of discrimination against female children and women without male children in society. This will help to curb the psychological trauma of women without male children.

### **Campaign for Enabling Laws**

There is a need to campaign for enabling laws, such as the proper implementation of the Child Rights Act 2003. According to Nzarga (2016), the Child Rights Act 2003 was passed into law by the National Assembly of Nigeria. It states that a child shall be given such protection and care as is necessary for its well-being, retaining the right to survival and development, also to name and registration at birth. Nzarga (2016) observed that the Child Rights Act, in its rights-responsibilities approach, is culturally sensitive, compatible, relevant, and above all, in the best interest of the Nigerian child and every child at that. For the proper implementation of the Child Rights Act, the following should be done according to Nzarga (2016):

1. More advocacy for the passage of the Child Rights law should be done in the states that have yet to pass the law. The Nigerian government should also emphasize the need to accelerate the implementation of the law, not just at the national and state levels, but at the Local Government level, which forms the grassroots of our government system in Nigeria.
2. Unification of all our laws should be done so that what is applicable in one state is also applicable to the other.
3. The government should make funds available for the proper implementation of the Child's Rights Act.
4. The Human Rights Commission should work on strategies/modalities ensure the enforcement of the Child Rights Act in all states that are unwilling to domesticate it. If the above viewpoints



are adhered to by the Nigerian government, it will help in the adequate protection of girl children in the society.

Proper implementation of the Child Rights Act will go a long way to prove to the general public that the same opportunity exists for both male and female children in society. Hence, there is no need for parents to think that male children have a greater opportunity than their female counterparts. This will further help to parents to learn to value, appreciate, and cherish their children, no matter the sex. It is hoped that the stakeholders instrumental to the governance of our nation will take a bolder step in the implementation of this Act in all the states of Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

Marriage in Igbo land is tied to childbearing. Any marriage without children is not considered blessed. Igbo land seems to have a cultural practice that places a preference on male children over female ones. This cultural practice, as shown in this research, is a long-held value that is rooted in their traditional religious worldview. It is a patriarchal society where the birth of a male child brings louder joy and fulfillment to the family than that of a female child. The male child preference cultural practice leaves women without male children in excruciating conditions that make life meaningless to them. The trauma that these women suffer is better told than experienced. They are seen as witches eating up children. Others are forced out of their matrimonial home, while those who refuse to go suffer domestic violence. However, Christianity affirms that God is the giver of children and that no gender should be preferred over the other. If there is no child or male child in marriage, the Christian religion advocates for child adoption over polygamy, which is associated with various problems. Christianity further advocates for love and care of children, no matter the gender. She further upholds gender equality. Hence, the church could collaborate with other stakeholders in the society to see that the psychological trauma of women without male are ameliorated.

### **Recommendations**

The research makes the following recommendations:

- a. The National Assembly should consider enacting some laws that will benefit female children and help to reduce the emotional torture women face when they have no male children.
- b. The research recommends government intervention in adequate education of female children to equip them to stand up in defense of their rights in their various communities.
- c. The Church should partner with the government to ensure that people perpetrating domestic violence against women without male children or female children are punished in accordance with the law.
- d. The Nigerian government should strengthen the power of its relevant agencies in protecting child rights and enhancing their opportunities. Such agencies should be empowered to deal with the protection of girls' rights.
- e. There is a need for the media to enlighten the public on the benefits of child adoption and dangers of extra marital relationship as well as problem associated with polygamous marriages.

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