

**CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS TO WOMEN'S SOCIO-POLITICAL
AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN ORLU L.G.A. OF IMO STATE,
NIGERIA**

BY

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Abstract

Challenges and constraints to women's socio-political and economic development in Orlu L.G.A. of Imo State, Nigeria is an attempt to highlight the areas women and particularly Orlu women were marginalized in socio-economic and political settings of the society. Considering the fact that, coherent continuity in any relationship is built upon the foundation of mutual relationship and guaranteed by the fact that, men and women are created equal and should as well, excise equal opportunity in consideration of gender-roles, is the main thrust of this paper. In spite of the crucial roles women play in the society, their efforts are undermined and relegated to no importance. This paper therefore, emphasizes the need for women to engage meaningfully in the society through expunging decrees and laws that are obnoxious to womanhood. Interesting issues such as widowhood practices, lack of inheritance of land and other valuable properties by women were discussed. Consequently, issues such as Biblical creation of man and woman were also studied. With the use of qualitative method of secondary and primary sources, the paper submitted that, in spite of the difficulties meted on Orlu women, they still have the opportunity to wrestle power with the men, because power is taken and not given. Finally, it is generally observed that, women and Orlu women in particular are willing and have been contributing to make Orlu a centre of socio-economic and political excellence.

Keywords: *Challenges, Constraints, Development, women,*

Introduction

In Nigeria and Orlu in particular, women were secluded from the main stream of socio-economic and political activities owing to the fact that, the society structured the system to the disadvantage of women. They women have been constituted to permanently remain at home for domestic duties. Worse still, as they have to carry their unborn babies during pregnancy for nine months and during this period, women were denied some freedom because of medical condition as a result of pregnancy. Others include, cultural barriers ranging from stereotypes that were leveled against women such as, women were not allowed to eat certain meat or food, especially when staying together with their male counterparts. Most of these conditions are man-made because statistically men are stronger than women as such coerce women to accept conditions that are not conducive to them. For instance, I remembered the day my uncle maltreated the wife because she could not remove plates after they finished eating. Instantaneously I asked the wife you didn't retaliate, her response was that, "my husband is stronger than me: it is only few women can fight their husbands". Thus, men used such opportunity of been stronger than women to impose certain conditions that are against womanhood on the guise of natural condition. Therefore, the work will address the importance

of women involvement in the affairs of the society and recommend ways to enhance the status of Orlu women.

Geography and People of Orlu

Orlu local government area is one of the twenty seven local governments in Imo State Nigeria, with population of about one hundred and eighty thousand, three hundred and forty.¹ Orlu is located in the southern heartland of Igbo people. It shares boundaries with many towns, and local governments. It bounded in the Northern axis by Ideato people, Western axis by Orsu LGA, Eastern axis by Nkwerre and Isu L.G.As and Southern axis by Oru and Njaba L.G.As. Orlu occupies a land area of about 200.2 sq kilometers.²

The area leading to Orlu town is through Ihiala L.G.A of Anambra State, to Orsu L.G.A of Imo state, then to Ihioma in Orlu L.G.A. Another entrance is through Owerri to Njaba, then to Umuowa in Orlu L.G.A, also through Mbanjo to Nkwerre, then to Eziachi in Orlu and through Uga in Anambra state to Ideato, then to Mgbee in Orlu. The headquarters of Orlu L.G.A is Ugwu Nwapali in between Umuna, Orlu and Amaifeke autonomous communities. Although, in the ancient times, there were speculations that, Ihioma community bounded with Umuna exactly where All Saints Anglican church is presently located at Nkwito junction. Moreso, Orlu L.G.A is the headquarters of Orlu geo-political zone that is made up of twelve local government areas namely, Orlu, Ideato-North, Ideato-South, Oguta, Nkwerre, Orsu, Isu, Nwangele, Ohaji egbema, Oru-East, Oru-West and Njaba. However, the research is centered around Orlu Local Government Area.

Brief Cultural Identity and Traditional Taboos

“Ofo” (The Staff of Authority) is made up of piece(s) of wood tied together, chosen from a special Ofo tree. It is an epitome of power, peace, love and truth. It is a staff of authority and office. In Igbo nation, tradition demands that the first son of a father (Diokpara) holds the family Ofo as an inheritance on the death of his father, and tradition demands also that in determining any issue whether of facts, tradition, culture or custom, the Diokpara who, coincidentally, is the traditional head of his family will assert his authority by holding his Ofo with his hand or place same on the ground before his kinsmen to overrule in any issue. On the contrary, it is a taboo in Igboland for a woman to touch or hold family Ofo.

Another important aspect of cultural Identity is kolanut (oji). It is an edible seed obtained from the kola tree. It is now chewed raw, unlike in the past when only alligator pepper is used in chewing the oji. Groundnut pastry is presently prepared as a palatable seasoning which is very delicious when chewed with oji. Oji is sacred and highly respected in Igbo society. Usually it appears in two colours of pink and white. The white one from the Igbo species is regarded as oji ugo (eagle kolanut). The seeds of the popular kola trees grown in Igbo nation have more contents of lobes ranging from three up to ten lobes when separated or broken. The oji Igbo seeds appear mostly in pink colour. The other kolanut seeds in white colour are mostly grown in the Delta Coastal Regions of Nigeria. This is popularly called gworo, its seeds contain only two lobes when separate or broken. It is therefore stated that:

The significance of oji in Igbo society is enormous in many ways; first, it portrays love, peace and openness of mind on presentation to a visitor. Secondly, it is used to appease or apologize to the offended. Thirdly, it serves as a means by which seniority of a person could be identified in a gathering of men. Fourthly, it serves as a means by which we communicate with our ancestors after the ceremonial morning hand

ablution. Fifthly, it is used in ritual sacrifices to appease the spirit of the ancestors as well as in oath taking during traditional covenant.³

It is important to note that, in a gathering of men and women, the female folk are not permitted to break Kolanut, even the male folk won't eat kolanut broken by a woman as such act is considered taboo.

Challenges to Women's Contributions to Economic and Political Development

One of the major challenges facing women's contribution to economic and political development is the 1999 constitution. This appears to be the most immediate economic and political challenges which the women's movement and lovers of democracy must confront. As we all know, the constitution is the soul of the nation. Being the document that provides the ground norms of socio-economic and political practices, its provisions, when they are progressive, can provide instruments of change and empowerment. The constitution needs to entrench affirmative clause to provide a legitimate ground to improve the representation and involvement of women in nation building.⁴ Also, the law on rape does not protect a wife from physical sexual assault from her husband. Thus, under the law, marriage permits a man to sexually assault his wife thereby, reducing her economic and political chances in the society.⁵

Consequently, the preamble of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria signed on 10th January, 2011 by Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan the then President of Nigeria in page 19 stated thus:

We the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; having firmly and solemnly resolved: to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation under God dedicated to the promotion of inter-African solidarity, world peace, international co-operation and understanding and to provide for a constitution for the purpose of promoting the good government and welfare of all persons in our country on the principles of...equality and justice ,and... the unity of our people.⁶

The point to make here is that, the preamble of the constitution told a lie. It told a lie about its republican charter when it stated, we the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, having firmly and solemnly resolved..., the question of who constituted the "we" became paramount in gender question in Nigeria constitution. No woman was a member of the Provisional Ruling Council of the military regime of General Abubakar that eventually promulgated the 1999 constitution that ushered in the 4th republic. Accordingly, chapter two (2) of the same constitution stated categorically that:

National integration shall be actively encouraged, whilst discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited.⁷

Also, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria stated that no citizen of Nigeria shall be subjected to any disability or deprivation merely by reason of the circumstances of his birth or sex. The point to make here is that, in spite of this statutory right enshrined in the constitution, women are still discriminated against. For instance, the most striking example of operational procedures and protocols within most law enforcement agencies with overwhelming bias in favour of men is the Police Act, which views and treats women as not on equal standing

with men. For example, although women have the right to post bail for police detainees, in practice, women are frequently denied this and other rights on insufficient grounds.⁸The rights of women enshrined in the Nigerian constitution are consistent with ideals of humanism, unfortunately, the rights and ideals have remained paper tigers.

Society consciously or unconsciously has systematically relegated women to the back stage, which has terribly resulted in the debasing of womanhood and as such, different forms of undesirable acts have been brought upon women. For instance, in the case of human trafficking, the greater numbers of trafficked victims are women and girls who are subjected to the worst forms of mal-treatment such as working as slaves in the house of their masters.⁹As if that is not enough inhumanity, they are repeatedly raped and most girls end up in the systems as sex workers.

Regarding the role of women and challenges associated with it, *Awake* observed that, women are the primary protector for each child's health, education, intellect, personality, character and emotional stability.¹⁰ One of the many women's responsibilities is that of education of her children. A child's first words and its pattern of speech are usually learned from its mother. This is true because women spend more time with their children than the men, thereby affecting the time they would have allotted for economic venture.

Another challenge is lack of adequate education by greater number of Orlu women. In most developing countries like Nigeria, parents fail to invest in their daughter because they do not expect them to be able to make an economic contribution to the family.

Again, women are responsible for carrying out 70% of agricultural labour, 50% of animal husbandry related activities and 60% of food processing activities.¹¹Despite all the agricultural integral role that women play, men are generally presumed to be the chief actors in agricultural production and as such, are often the main participants in recipients programme related support. Also, it is extremely challenging on how to integrate the principles of gender awareness, sensitivity and responsiveness within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other regional and global instruments with the extant national macro-policies such that gender equality becomes more than just the concerns of women and the few gender sensitive institutions and people, but part of the goals of governance at all levels and within the populace.

Apart from the challenges mentioned above, there is the challenge of dealing with local customs that impede women's participation in all spheres of life. For instance, during traditional marriage, women are not allowed to stay with men during negotiation of all affairs concerning the marriage. It is a fact that, among the several challenges facing Orlu women, overcoming most of these customs and traditions that are repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience is the most herculean task they must deal with, in this modern era.

Consequently, following the way politics in Nigeria is played, it is being perceived that, it is for individuals that has no regards for human rights and are quick at compromising their virtue for indecent gains. Therefore, women aspirants who ventured into politics are looked upon as shameless and promiscuous considering the kind of politics played in Nigerian hence, stigmatization of women. Also, meeting schedules to strategize and map out political plans either for the pre or post-election periods are odd and is not conducive for responsible and family women. The stated time are often time which women are expected to take care of their children and family. This method of schedules is viewed as an attempt to side-line women from engaging in political process, and one of the cardinal challenges facing woman of the contemporary time.

Constraints to Women's Contributions to Economic and Political Development

The reality discovered by this research study is that, despite the very substantial accomplishments of women's groups, individuals and their potentials as vehicles for meaningful development, their initiative and rewards were endangered and exploited by male-dominated government and societal activities. The marginalization of women cut across all spheres of life such as education, health, politics, economy, socio-culture, etc. Their participation in these areas is shaped by the socio-cultural structures in such a way that, they remained the losers and the exploited. The rest of this section will highlight some of the areas in which Nigeria and Orlu women have encountered problem in their contributions to economic and political development.

Discrimination against women dates back to the ancient times. This is deeply rooted in most societies and in the most intimate aspects of the lives of the people, their culture and leadership. Even the religion, which is liberal in nature, has ingrained prejudices in the biblical origin of the human specie, God created women from the rib of the man indicating that, she falls short of her full complement. On expelling the sinful pair from the blissful Garden of Eden, He condemned her (Eve) to the domination of the man, by saying, "I will increase your trouble... yet you will be subject to him".¹² This could be regarded as the genesis of the discrimination of women in all aspects on the human existence. The word is from the Holy Bible which is highly revered, the best known book in the world and has been the basis of deep convictions because it shaped not only Judaism but also the Christian and Islamic doctrinal views of women.

The Mosaic instruction around Mount Sinai is very clear and it reads, "Be ready by the third day; do not go near a woman".¹³ From this Jewish belief, women are seen as profane and contagious and therefore should be avoided when it comes to taking decisions. Stories in the old Testaments demonstrated how the Bible from cover to cover degrades women. For instance, women go nameless in the Old Testament. The phrase, sons of God and daughters of men correctly captured the attitude of writers towards women. Most times, women are addressed as Jewish daughters who signify immaturity, dependence and subordinate partner or connection.

Even in the New Testament, it was proclaimed widely that, women had no voice of their own. St. Paul observed:

..., the women should keep silence in the churches for they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says if there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church.¹⁴

The above expression is a clear indication that women are insignificant to decision-making. As clearly stated above, the incident took place in the Christian era when almost all corners of the world assume fairness and equal opportunities to all sex. Little wonder in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo came home with a strange lad Ikemefuna and handed him to his most senior wife and told her, he belongs to the clan so look after him. The wife politely asks a question, is he staying long with us?, Okonkwo brutally responded by saying "do what you are told woman, Okonkwo thundered, and stammered. When did you become one of the ndi ichie of Umuofia?"¹⁵ The woman took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions. The ndichie Okonkwo is referring was the titled men of Umuofia or the male decision makers of Umuofia in which no woman was involved. Even, in the traditional Igbo society women's view are not honoured individually except on a rare occasion by the representative of "Umuada", female

members married outside their communities or “Ndi Alutaradi”, women married into the community.

Another area that impedes Orlu women’s economic development is poverty. This is due largely to the modern money economy which reduced the value of women’s work in the society. In the traditional society, for example, women like men, took part equally in economic activities. Even when women and men did different types of work, women’s economic contributions to their families and the community were publicly recognized by everyone. However, when the British introduced the new type of money economy, it was mostly men that they recruited to work for wages and salaries. This was because, the British at that time believed that, men should be the bread winners of their families, that is, men are the ones to provide for their families, while the women remained at home.¹⁶Probably, they got the idea through, “The Victorian concept of women”. This idea was developed in the medieval Europe where women should only be subjected to domestic duties alone. They became the exhibition and decorations of their husbands’ wealth.¹⁷The mentality made women to be naturally subservient to men and employment opportunities were rare. From then on, the economic contribution of women began to be less valued. They could not compete in an economy where money determined everything.

In fact, financial constraint is the major factor that militated against Orlu women’s active participation in business and most especially in seeking elective positions. Men who were privileged to participate in governance particularly during the military era had amassed a lot of wealth, which enhanced their businesses and political activities. For example, Mrs. Jibril Sarah’s aspiration for presidency in the Third Republic was denied her because she could not provide five hundred thousand naira, (500,000.00) which was required for issuance of nomination form.¹⁸It is indeed, a pathetic one. Orlu women are not financially viable; they do not have the financial muscle to compete favourably with men. In politics and in business, few Orlu women with the right credentials lack funds to pursue serious political agenda. It is this financial disadvantage that has restricted Orlu women to supporting role, making them to tail behind the men in political and business activities.

Educationally, Orlu women are lacking. For Orlu women to achieve their objective of being fully integrated in the economic and political affairs of Imo State and the country, education is necessary, because it is a powerful tool which will enable them to know their democratic rights and obligations to the nation. Education has been identified as very important towards the economic emancipation of women. Mass education and mass enlightenment are very important in economic activities as both education and enlightenment are interwoven. There is no doubt that, men have educational advantage over women due to the education policy of the colonial masters. The colonial government deliberately opened mostly boys schools to deprive women of education.¹⁹Even after modern education had come to stay more boys than girls are still being sent to school.²⁰This is still so because of wrong belief such as parents believing that it is better to have more boys than girls and as such, they spend more time and money in the education of the boys than the girls.

Also, the attitude of Orlu women towards their fellow women is one of the factors militating against women’s socio-economic and political participation. Most women find it difficult to accept and appreciate successful women. Anduenowo believes that, women are their own enemies when it comes to effective participation in politics. Furthermore, it is clearly stated that, “The women don’t like themselves, they envy each other, pull themselves down, they cannot agree on anything. This is why they have not been able to actualize their plans”.²¹He went further to counsel them that, unless they are able to close ranks and speak with one voice, they will still work at cross-purposes and against each other. Another disturbing factor is the

widowhood practices in most places of Igbo community and Orlu in particular. The widow is kept in seclusion for a period ranging from eight days to three months during which she suffers complete alienation with psychological and mental torture. The widow is regarded as being culturally contaminated and therefore needs cleansing.²² Widows are treated like mere chattels inheritable alongside their dead husbands' material possession by the deceased's brother or male members of the extended family.

Moreso, most girls were not given the chance to make choice over who will marry them so as to develop into viable and productive women. Rather, the arrangement will be done outside the knowledge of the parties involved.

As Osuji rightly observed

,... neither the consent of the lady nor that of the young man was required in early Igbo marriage tradition. Even the consent of the mothers was not needed, what was important was the consent of the two fathers. Once they had agreed, the feelings of each of the parties were immaterial and such feelings were not made open even if they existed²³.

In addition to all these factors affecting Orlu women in political and economic development, comprehensive research proved that Orlu women lacked access to land. Women rarely owned land in Orlu and when they did, they were only allowed to insignificant portion at the mercy of their husbands or sons. With this unsettled land issue in Orlu, women cannot compete favourably with their male counterparts in agriculture and other economic activities.²⁴

Also, another impediment to women's agricultural development in Igboland is women relationship with their husbands. Most of these women, when quarreled with their husbands will not be allowed to farm on any land by their husband. Worse still, after the quarrel if they (women) were sent parking to their fathers homes, they will not be allowed to come back and harvest on their crops.

In economic system, women in their traditional Igbo society do not plant some crops like yam, palm tree, etc., they do not mark land boundary or sell land. Also, while their husbands are still alive, they do not own land of their own as earlier stated because they are under their husbands. As Basden rightly observed, "the only possession that can really be labeled as the property of a wife are her water pot, market basket and calabash, together with cooking utensils and all the vegetables."²⁵ This implies 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. She should not go in gainful employment because she should stay at home and depend on her husband. As Nmah affirmed. The dos and don't leave the women numbed, cold and afraid, even to look at people straight in the face.²⁶ the result is non-response to any stimuli for self expression and actualization.

Conclusion

Generally, Nigerian society and Orlu Local Government in particular should engage in deconstruction of patriarchy of all form. Gender inequalities should be dismantled. There should be a remolding and reconstruction of our cultural values where both men and women will be seen as partners in the development of Nigerian society. This is true because considering

the evidence stated above, Nigeria and Orlu people in particular are victims of such crime and should be encouraged to be gender sensitive. By doing this, they are expected to ensure access to education to all, respect reproductive rights, strengthen legal protect, achieve better political representation, empower women in the workplace which in turn guarantee gender equality in which access to rights, resources and opportunities is equally distributed between genders, including men, women, boys, girls and individuals of other gender identities.

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