

# **TRADITIONAL RELIGION, CHRISTIANITY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AMONG IGBO WOMEN OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA, 1980-2015**

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## **Abstract**

Gender-based violence (GBV) is among the most pervasive violation of the fundamental rights of women in our world today. It manifests in subtle and blatant forms and cuts across countries and regions of the world irrespective of religion, race, educational background and socio-economic status. Gender-based violence occurs in homes, communities and state level and has severe emotional, health, psychological, socio-economic and political consequences. In spite of efforts by states, international organizations, national and international bodies to curb GBV, the manifestation of violence, especially against women and the girl child appears to be spiralling in the world generally and Nigeria in particular. The narrative is not different in Southeast Nigeria. Many studies suggest that the Southeast has the highest rate of gender-based violence in Nigeria. Socio-cultural and economic factors such substance and alcoholic abuse, unemployment, financial constraints, norms, culture, low educational attainment, among others, have been identified by different scholars as factors responsible for the spiralling rise of gender-based violence in Southeast Nigeria. This study is undertaken to critically extrapolate the role of religion, particularly, the Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR) and Christianity in the promotion and sustenance of violence against Igbo women of Southeast Nigeria. To achieve this objective, the study relies on content analysis of relevant and available primary documents as well as secondary

source materials while the Social Dominance Theory was used to underpin the study. Thematic, historical descriptive and analytical approaches were utilized in the analysis of its data. The paper submits that the Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity promotes and sustains GBV among Igbo women through inadequate responses to GBV, harmful interpretation of scriptures, harmful cultural and religious practices, culture of denial, silence, resistance, stigmatization among others. The paper recommends that the society and the church should move away from patriarchal structure that perpetuate gender inequality and oppression as well as discard all harmful traditions and theologies of the society and the church.

Keywords: Gender Based Violence, Igbo Traditional Religion, Christianity, Igbo Women.

### **Introduction**

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global challenge. It affects people irrespective of their location (country), gender, race, religion, educational background and socio-economic status. It has continued to be a recurring phenomenon in the world even in the most developed countries of the world. Its manifestations and prevalence in all continents of the world, is undoubtedly, a fundamental challenge confronting the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Gender-based violence has severe consequences on the emotional, psychological, socio-economic and health of the victims. In fact, it poses a fundamental barrier to equal participation of women in every sphere of human endeavour. Gender-based violence occurs mostly within families and inside homes. Regrettably, the girl child and women are mostly its victims (Okemini and Adekola, 2012:6).

Gender-based violence, as noted earlier, is a pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2013) observed that about 35% of women world over who have been in relationship have experienced physical and sexual violence by the intimate partner. The United Nations (UN, 2016) on the other hand, noted that over 70% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their life time from an intimate partner. Aruna (1993: 114) revealed that one in every two women in Costa Rica can expect to be a victim of violence at a point in time. He posits that 95% of Mexican woman workers are victims of sexual harassment in their work places, and that in the USA, a woman is beaten in every 15 seconds, raped in every 6 minutes and every day, four women are killed by their batterer. A Development Gate report cited by Okemini and Adekola (2012:9) observed that 50% of women in Afghanistan, 80% in Pakistan, 60% in Bangladesh, and 37% in India lived with daily abuses by their intimate partner within their homes. The narrative in Europe is not better. A report by the European Union (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Violence against Women, 2014), observed that one in every three women across Europe has experienced some form of physical or sexual abuse since the age of fifteen. In Nigeria, a third and in some group nearly two third of women are believed to have experienced physical, sexual or psychological violence in the family (Amnesty International 2007).

From the foregoing, it is clear that GBV is a pandemic. The Federal Government of Nigeria, in a bid to curtail this monster, has ratified numerous international conventions and laws meant to address the issues of marginalization and discrimination against women

including gender-based violence, some of which are The Child Right Acts of 2003; The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, ratified in 1985; The Violence against Person Prohibition Act of 2015; The Protocol on African Charter on Human Right and People's Right on the Right of Women in Africa, ratified in 2004. Others include the Rome Statute of the International Court(1998) which recognized a spectrum of gender-based violence as war crime and crime against humanity ratified in 2001; Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Person, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, ratified in 2001, among others (World Bank Group,2019:6-7). In spite of the effort by government at all levels to curb the menace of violence against women in Nigeria, it appears that gender based violence is spiraling. In Southeast Nigeria, the narrative is not better. George (2015:1-48) postulated that there is higher prevalence rate of violence against women in the southeast compare to other geo-political zones of Nigeria. This assumption is reaffirmed by Benebo, Schumann and Masoud (2018:2-17). Though, we question the premise upon which this conclusion was made. That notwithstanding, there studies points to the fact that there is high prevalence rate of violence against women in Southeast Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that this study is undertaken to extrapolate how religion, particularly the Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity have continued to provide the impetus for the promotion and sustenance of GBV against Igbo women in South-eastern Nigeria, particularly at the family level.

What then is gender-based violence? Gender-based violence like most concepts in the social science has no

universally accepted definition. Different definitions by scholars and international bodies abound. For UNICEF, gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on ascribed (gender) difference between male and female. On the other hand, the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, cited by (Mukanangana, et al, 2014: 110) defines gender-based violence as an act of violence that result in, or likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering of women, including threat of such act, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. From the definitions above, it is apparent that gender-based violence affects both male and female. However, due to the high level vulnerability of women and the high prevalent rate at which females are victims of violence, the term "Gender- Based Violence" has come to be used by most organizations as violence against women. Gender-based violence manifest in various forms, such as: physical violence, economic abuse, sexual abuse, emotional and psychological abuse. Physical violence include but not limited to stabbing, twisting of arm, slapping, kicking, hitting, shoving, punching, among others, while emotional and psychological abuse include controlling behaviour such as threat against children, threat of injury or death, shouting, separation or isolation from friends and family members, among others. Examples of sexual abuse include: rape, forced prostitution, being forced to watch pornography, being forced to have sex with friends or family members of the perpetrator, sexual harassment, among others, whereas economic or financial abuse include preventing one from having a job, preventing one from

taking part in financial or business discussion, stealing of cash, forcibly controlling one's money or asset, etc (Mboho and Udo, 2019: 30-31).

The Asian Legal Resources cited by (Ugwu, Obioji, and Eme, 2016: 101-105) identified three levels of manifestation of gender-based violence. They include: GBV occurring in the family, GBV in the community and GBV perpetrated by the state. Gender-based violence in the home, also known as domestic violence, is the most prevalent form of GBV. And it manifests in wife beating, 'marital rape', female genital mutilation, harmful traditional practices, and abuse of female children at the household, dowry related violence, forced marriage, among others. Gender-based violence committed against women in the community include: rape, sexual assault, harmful widowhood practices, sexual abuse and harassment, trafficking in women, forced prostitution, abusive medication, commercialization of women, selective abortion of female foetus and female infanticide, forced sterilization, forced marriage, early marriage, discrimination and denial of opportunity, gender preferences, undesirable submission and subjugation, exploitation, among others. State sponsor GBV manifest through obstructive legislation and state policies meant to prevent women and the girl child's enjoyment and exercise of their social, economic and political rights. This paper conceptualizes gender-based violence as defined by the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women because of its inclusiveness. Thus, gender-based violence shall be used in this paper as violence against women and the girl child in all the forms it manifests as highlighted above.

This paper adopts and the Social Dominance Theory to underpin this study. Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto

propounded the Social Dominance Theory. The theory is a multi-level theory on how societies maintain group-based hierarchy. Sidanius, Levin and Pratto (2006:272-273) observed that human societies tend to be organized according to social hierarchies, these hierarchies have three trimorphic structure systems namely :( 1) An age system where the adults exercise social control over the children. (2) A gender system where men appropriate disproportionate military, social, economic and political control than the women. (3) An arbitrary system where group is constructed on 'arbitrary bases'. This arbitrary basis could be nationality, religion, race, descent, class, estate, among others. The social dominance theorists contend that group-based inequality are preserved via institutional discrimination, aggregated individual discrimination and behavioural asymmetry. They maintain that group based inequality is not only sustained by use of naked force and intimidation by the dominant group but also by generally held belief, values, stereotypes and cultural ideologies, which they refer to as legitimizing myths (Pratto, Sidanius and Levin, 2006: 275). The legitimized myths thus provide the moral and intellectual justification for the application of naked force to maintain group inequality and group behaviour. The social dominance theory aptly described the Igbo society. The Igbo communities in Southeastern Nigeria operate gender based system wherein men appropriate and exercise disproportionate military, social, economic and political power compare to women. This unbalance power equation is preserved by institutions and individuals using intimidation, the use of naked force (violence) and cultural ideologies (legitimized myths). Religious tenets provide the

moral and intellectual justification for the use of violence as well as non-violence means to perpetuating gender-based violence against women, particularly, in Igboland.

A significant literature exists on gender-based violence. Klingorova and Havlicek (2015) explained the coronary relationship between religion and gender inequality. Their research revealed that the states where majority of its inhabitants are without religion displayed low level of inequality whereas there is high level of inequality in states where inhabitants practiced religion. According to them, Islamic and Hindu societies displayed the highest level of gender inequality among world religion. The relevance of this work to this paper lies in the fact that it established a link between religion and gender inequality. Gender inequality in itself is a form of gender-based violence. The authors, however, did not consider African Traditional Religion (ATR) in their analysis of world religion. Ugwu, Obioji, and Eme (2016) examined the trends of gender-based violence and the way forward. The major strength of this work is that it highlighted GBV, its forms and manifestation in contemporary Nigeria. The role of Christianity in the promotion and sustenance of gender based violence in Nigeria was completely overlooked in their study. On the other hand, Mukanangana, *et al*, (2014:110-122) studied gender-based violence and its effects on women reproductive health. Their work revealed that GBV, particularly physical violence, rape, spousal rape, early marriage and forced marriage have severe health implications on women. The authors however, discussed the manifestation of GBV and its impact on women reproductive without examining the contribution of religion in the sustenance of GBV. Similarly, Oladepo, Yusuf and

Aruogun (2011) examined causes of GBV. Their finding showed that GBV affects more women than men.

Researchers such as Mboho and Udo (2018); Onyeka (2017) Ajah, *et al.*, (2014); Uzoma (2015) have studied various aspects of the discourse ranging from socio-psychological perspective, rural-urban variations of GBV, impact of substance abuse on GBV, among others. However, Benebo, Schumann and Masoud's (2018) study requires a special attention. The authors interrogated the effects of individual and community level factors on intimate partner violence against women in Nigeria. They identified individual and community factors that propel intimate partner violence to include norms, culture, unemployment, substance abuse, low socio-economic and educational status, among others. Their study reveals a high prevalence rate of intimate partner violence in Nigeria. Of the six geo-political zones of Nigeria surveyed, they observed that the southeast has the highest prevalence rate of intimate partner violence. This study reaffirms the postulation that violence against women in Nigeria, particularly in Southeast, is endemic. However, the authors failed to provide reliable statistical data to support their assumption that the southeast has the highest prevalence rate of intimate partner violence in Nigeria. They also failed to acknowledge religion as a contributory factor to intimate partner violence against women in Nigeria and the southeast in particular. Importantly, Simister and Kowalewsky (2016) focused attention on how the Catholic Church's teaching on divorce encourages and sustains GBV amongst catholic faithful. The strength of this work lies in the fact that it established a relationship between Catholic theology on marriage and gender-based violence. However,

the authors narrowed the role of the church in GBV to only church teaching on marriage. The present study intervenes on the debate by showcasing the interplay of the Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity (as a whole) in the promotion and sustenance of GBV among Igbo women in the Southeastern Nigeria.

### **Igbo Traditional Religion, Christianity and Gender Based Violence in Igboland**

The Igbo like most Africans are a deeply religious people. Virtually everything an Igbo person does revolve round religion. Collaborating this assertion, Obialor (1994:117) asserts that the Igbo are traditionally and deeply religious. Similarly, Onwurah (1990: 287) noted that the Igbo are very religious and do not live without religion. For Mgbiti cited by Nnadi (2012:35), religion constitutes the controlling principle in the life of the Igbo nation. The two dominant religions practiced by contemporary Igbo inhabitants of the Southeastern Nigeria are Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity. The Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR), according to Ngele, et al, (2017) is the traditional religion of the Igbo people mostly found in Southeastern Nigeria. The Igbo Traditional Religion is a sub-religious group under the African Traditional Religion (ATR). Undoubtedly, African Traditional Religion is among the major religions of the world. Igbo Traditional Religion is a theological expression of the Igbo people understanding of and worship of their god. ITR, however, is not systematized as other religions of the world; it is however, characterized by, and visualized in myths, songs, dances, shrines, folktales, rites, proverbs, rituals, incantations, ceremonies, among others, and it permeates all spheres of their life. It should be noted that the tenets of Igbo Traditional Religion are basically the same in all Igbo communities; there may however, be slight

differences in application among the various communities that formed the Igbo nation.

Christianity, on the other hand, is among the most predominant religion in Igboland today. Its establishment in Nigeria dates back to the activities of the European Christian missionaries in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Kitause and Achunike, 2013:48). Adherents of this religion are followers of Jesus Christ; their tenets are guided by religious laws documented in the Bible, a text which reportedly contained instructions and injunctions directly from God and written by prophets and apostles of Jesus Christ through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Oluwakemi, Folarin, and Isumonah, 2020:5). There are many denominations and sects in Christianity. Consequently, their interpretation and application of the tenets of the Bible differs. In view of this, this paper shall focus on the Bible and not the dogma or doctrines of the numerous Christian denominations in its analysis on the role of Christianity in the sustenance of GBV in Igboland. The two religions briefly discussed above, have no doubt, contributed in no small measure in the promotion and sustenance of gender-based violence among women and the girl child in Igboland. How it does this shall be briefly highlighted below.

Violence against women in Igboland interestingly, is embedded in some cultural practices, ceremonies, rites and rituals associated with the Igbo Traditional Religion. In fact, these practices view violence against women from a positive perspective. Example of this could be seen in marriage rites, rites of passage into womanhood, early marriage, widowhood practices, etc. The latter shall be highlighted briefly herein. Bereavement rites in most of the

Igbo communities are very harmful and fall within the purview of gender-based violence. Example of such harmful widowhood rites include: forceful shaving of the widow's hair, most times done in a haphazard manner with razor or scissors, sleeping with the dead husband's corpse, keeping the widow under house arrest for three months, conditioning the widow to wearing rag (akwauju or akwamkpe), restricting her from socializing with friends and family members, depriving her of her husband's property, being inherited by husband's relative, sometimes, against her wish, etc. In a case where the widow does not enjoy good rapport with the in-laws or where she is suspected to have had a hand in the death of her husband, she is subjected to an excruciating, torturous and dehumanizing experience (Mbagwu, 2019). It is important to note that severity of this treatment varies from communities in Igboland. There have been attempts by government to curb some of these practices through legislation. This however, has not succeeded principally because most Igbo communities have refused to see it as violence against women but tradition.

Several studies have proved that the patriarchal structure of the society has been a source of violence against women world over, Igboland inclusive. (Archer 2000; Bystydzienski, 2001; Okemini & Adekola, 2012). Unfortunately, patriarchy has been sanctioned and ordained by Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity, examples of the sanctions are found in the following Bible passages: Genesis 3:16, 1 Peter 3: 1, Ephesians 5:23, Colossian 3:18, 1 Timothy 2: 11-12, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, etc. 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35 commanded thus: "Women should remain silent in churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission as demanded by the law. If they want to inquire something, they should ask their own

husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church (NIV).” In the book of First Timothy 2:11-12, Paul ordered that, “A woman should learn in quietness and in full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet (NIV). While the book of Colossians 3: 18 ordered wives to submit themselves to their husbands as it is fitting to the Lord.

Apart from the subjugation of women by the Bible verses quoted above, which is a form of gender-based violence and a deprivation of their fundamental rights, the Bible also barred them from occupying position of authority in the church as well as expect absolute quietness and undesirable submission from them even though women are the pillar and back bone of Christianity in Igboland. Though, few women are allowed to occupy position of authority in the church today, they are, however, few compared to the male counterpart. These scriptures among others, laid and consolidate the foundation of patriarchy in Christianity, a factor that contributes in no small measure to gender based violence in Southeastern Nigeria.

Similarly, the Bible has placed the man as the head of the family and the wife as a primary care taker who should do her job in quietness and absolute submission to the husband. The role of women as noted in some of the Bible verses quoted above is in tandem with the roles prescribed by the Igbo Traditional Religion for women in Igboland. Ene, et al, (2008: 56-76) grouped this role into three namely: reproduction, productive and managing activities in the family and communities. The reproductive duties involve child bearing and upbringing of the children while the productive role includes working for pay in kind or cash. It is no doubt that the Bible verse quoted above,

among others, not only is it in tandem with the position of the Igbo Traditional Religion, it as well strengthened and reinforced the patriarchal structure and subjugation of women in Igboland, consequently, preventing them from maximizing their potentials. Although, the narrative is gradually changing for the urban educated women. Majority of women, especially the rural-uneducated ones, who unfortunately constitute more than 60% of the population of women in Southeastern Nigeria, suffer such fate.

One critical area the church promotes gender-based violence is in the area of gender subjugation and inequality. There are numerous Bible verses that promote and encourage gender subjugation and inequality, some of which have been highlighted elsewhere in this paper. Some of these verses will be quoted herein. 1 Peter 3: 1 ordered wives to submit to their husbands. Similarly, Colossian 3:18, instructs wives to submit themselves to their husbands as fitting to the Lord, while Paul commanded women in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 to learn in quietness and full submission, for he does not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. In Genesis 3:16, the Bible ordered that the desires of a woman shall be for her husband and that the man will rule over her. Christian dogmas based on some of these scriptures have not only succeeded in keeping women under undesirable subjugation in the church and homes, it has equally promoted male superiority and supremacy. Consequently, men have tended to use whatever means to subjugate and control their wives, sisters, mothers and the girl child at home, including the use of physical violence using religion as moral and intellectual justification. Although, clergies preach against violence in churches, it is however, instructive to note that violence at home and church affects both laity and wives of clergies.

Sadly, these women, both wives of laities and clergies have continued to remain silent in order to keep up with the image expected of them by the Bible as submissive wives, thereby sustaining the vicious circle of violence against them by their spouses.

Unfortunately, even with the increasing publicity by the media on gender-based violence in the church, especially sexual abuse committed against women and the girl child by randy clergies, the church leadership has continued to maintain a culture of silence, denial and protection of the clergies involved in order to maintain the facade of holiness, morality and sanctity of the body of Christ at the expense of the victims. It is only recently that NGOs, guardians and parents have started instituting legal action against clergies involved in gender-based violence, particularly, sexual abuse. In most cases however, the family of victims are subtly cornered into out of court settlement and compensated financially, thus, circumventing a process that would have had serious deterrent effects on these randy clergies.

One major source of gender-based violence in the two religions under review is embedded in their conceptualization of marriage institution. Marriage is seen as a very important and highly revered institution in the Igbo Traditional Religion. During marriage rites, prayers are offered and the gods invoke for protection and blessing of the couples involved. Because of this reverence accorded marriage institution, the Igbo culture stresses the need to protect and safeguard family and 'family secrets'. Similarly, couples are enjoined to safeguard the inseparability of the home no matter what. In order words, women are expected to keep quiet and bear whatever that comes their way

including violence against them in the name of safeguarding the inseparability of their home. She is not expected to seek legal redress in the court of law even in the face of violence from the husband or members of the family. Worse still, she is not supposed to leave or divorce the husband because divorce is frowned at by the Igbo culture and divorcee stigmatized and discriminated against.

The scenario painted above is not different from the Christian perspective for they also view marriage as a sacrament; an institution ordained, sanctioned and instituted by God himself, thus, should not be dissolved for whatever reason including violence against the woman. The book of Mathew 19:6 states that the husband and wife are no longer two but one, therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate (NIV). From the Bible verse quoted above, a Christian woman is not expected to be divorced from the husband even if her life is under threat occasioned by violence perpetrated against her. Divorce and getting remarried to another man is not an option for her, otherwise, she would be seen as an adulterous woman for Luke 16:18, asserts that anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and a man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery too. The church theology on marriage teaches that marriage is only dissolvable by death. Thus a Christian wife who is physically, sexually, economically or psychologically abused is not permitted to divorce the husband until death. Such teaching, no doubt, contributes in the sustenance of violence against women in Christian homes, particularly in Igboland.

In Igbo culture as dictated by their traditional religion, a wife is not expected or rather, she is forbidden to sue or seek legal redress for violence against her in a court of law. The Igbo tradition, rather, expect her to seek redress

or complain to family members. Unfortunately, majority of family members that will sit on her case are usually men most of whom often than not, view ‘marital issues’ from a patriarchal perspective. Besides, the family members in most cases do not see domestic violence as something that is bad. This is because a man (Husband) culturally has been empowered as the head of the home to discipline members of his family including the wife using whatever methods he deems fit. Thus when a man for example, beats his wife, the assumption is that her refusal to submit to the authority of the husband may have earned her such beating. Since she is supposed to keep the ‘family secrets’, a woman faced with violence has no choice than to succumb to the abuse in the name of safeguarding ‘family secrets’.

Like the Igbo Traditional Religion tenets, the Christian tenet prohibits a wife from seeking legal redress of violence against by her husband in a court of law. The Book of First Corinthians 6:1 ordered: dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to the law before unjust and not before the saint (KIV). For Christians, approaching the court of law is appearing before the ‘unjust’ and ‘sinners’. They are rather encouraged to live the ideals enumerated in First Corinthian 6:1-18. This teaching that prohibits people from seeking the protection of the law, no doubt, promotes and sustains gender-based violence in the family and homes.

Regrettably, Christian women suffering violence has been socialized by the church to see such acts as suffering for the sake of Christ and the gospel. The Book of First Peter 2: 21-22 states and I quote, “...to this you have been called. Because Christ suffered for you, that you should follow His step (NIV). Thus in the face of violence in the family, the Christian theology teaches that it is God’s will

for people (women) to suffer. Phiri (2000:85-110) rightly observed that the church has socialized women to see themselves as suffering servants of Christ. Consequently, women, wives and mothers suffer and endure violence in the spirit of practicing the Christian virtue and participating in the suffering of Christ as espoused by 1 Peter 2:21-22. Thus, sustaining the vicious circle of violence against them by their spouses, brothers and fathers.

Interestingly, adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity of Southeast Nigeria who are victims of gender-based violence, particularly, from their spouses, have been socialized to locate the source of their problems in the activities of spirit husbands, unclean spirit, demons, principalities and powers. Consequently, religion has prompted women to resort to prayer as a solution to their problems. Spiritual activities such as fasting, prayers, night vigils, tithing and offering, rituals, rites, sacrifices, etc, have been organized and performed as solution or weapon against these spiritual forces inflicting them with violence through their husband, fathers or brothers. For Christian faithful, this solution is in tandem with the tenets of the scripture as written in Second Corinthians 10:4 which states that the weapon of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds (NIV). It is obvious that adherents of the two religions under review exhibit a lot of hypocrisy and non-seriousness in dealing with the social issue such as violence against women by spiritualizing the cause and proffering spiritual solution; a solution that has succeeded in sustaining the vicious circle of violence against them.

In recent times, the issue of sexual abuse and marital rape, especially in the home, has been on the increase world over. Many countries of the world have criminalized marital

rape. Unfortunately, Nigerian law excludes it in the definition of rape. The Igbo Traditional Religion does not acknowledge that sexual abuses and marital rape exists in the family. A man that is married in accordance with the Igbo cultural tradition is believed to own the wife, thus, should have intimate relationship with the wife at any time, anyhow, anywhere, any day with or without the wife's consent. It would appear that the Christian religion belief is in tandem with that of the Igbo Traditional Religion. The Book of First Corinthians 7:4 noted and I quote, ' the wife does not have authority over her own body but yield to the husband, in the same way, the husband have no authority over his body but must yield to the wife (NIV). Most husbands have capitalized on this to commit other sexual abuses on their wives, including pregnant mothers. Most often, women who have suffered from this are too shy to report to appropriate authority. Even when it is brought to the awareness of law enforcement agencies, family and religious leaders, it is treated with levity; the religious leaders in particular, have hidden under this harmful interpretation of the verse quoted above to applaud the men while subtly socializing the women to see it as 'normal'. Consequently, the home that is supposed to provide refuge from violence and harassment to women and the girl child has now become the epicenter of violence whereas the church that ought to be the conscience of the society has failed in that responsibility, as she it is seen to have allowed and sanctioned some forms of gender-based violence.

Lastly, the level of violence perpetrated against women and girl child suspected of engaging in witchcraft by the adherents of the two religions under review is indescribable, they are hunted, beaten, dehumanized,

tortured, stigmatized against, ex-communicated and killed in some case. Exodus 22:18 ordered, thou shall not suffer a witch to live (KIV). This has been used to justify praying for the death and destruction of witches in churches in contemporary Igboland. The germane question to pose is: Who is a witch? What is evil with possessing magical powers? What are the criteria of identifying a witch by the two religions under review? Are these criteria scientific or based on some spiritual guess work? Why are women and the girl child (witch) singled out for annihilation? Why not suffer the wizard (men) not to live too? Are there not wizard (men) that should be suffered not to live? There is no doubt that such scripture quoted above provides the impetus for indescribable level of violence to be perpetrated against women in Nigeria and Igboland in particular.

### **Conclusion**

The objective of this paper is to analyze the role of religion, particularly, the Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR) and Christianity in the promotion and sustenance of violence against Igbo women of Southeast Nigeria. From the foregoing analysis, it is undoubtedly that the two religions under review have furthered gender-based violence among the Igbo women of Southeastern Nigeria through inadequate response, the culture of silence, resistance and denial, hypocrisy, harmful interpretation and application of their religious tenets, harmful traditions and theologies, among others. This paper recommends that the society and the church should move away from this unjust structure that perpetuate gender inequality and oppression as well as discard all of these harmful traditions and theologies of the society and the church that promote and perpetuate violence against women.

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