

# **IGBO SOCIO-CULTURAL VIEWS AGAINST FEMINIST ABORTION RIGHTS' ADVOCACY: WHOSE RIGHT TO LIFE IS SUPREME?**

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## **Abstract**

Abortion right has been a subject of a vexed debate in many parts of the world; it has been the subject of religious, social, political, feminist and legal discourses. From a liberal feminist pro-choice stance, women should have total control of their bodies and autonomy in making abortion choice. According to this group of feminists, until women have control of their reproductive choices, they will not be able to partake fully in paid employment, education and other areas of life that they desired. Proponents of this viewpoint claim that abortion issue is a unifying force in women's liberation movement. However, despite the gradual progression towards more liberal abortion right laws in the world, the feminist abortion right campaign has met little success in sub-Saharan Africa. Many scholars contend that the abortion right debate is inextricably tied to race, cultures and traditions in ways that Western feminist groups seldom confront, and that less attention has been given to the local discourses and realities that circulate within the African culture. This study locates the abortion right debate within the socio-cultural and structural constraints on African women's abortion decision. While Africa still remains what forms the larger scope of our study, the study has selected as an area of particular interest, the Igbo residents in Awka L.G.A in Southeastern Nigeria. It examines in particular, the Igbo people's perceptions on the 'right to life' against the feminist articulations of rights, and other alternatives for advocating women reproductive freedom. The research is

based primarily on the data emerging from semi-structured interviews. The primary sources were complemented by books, and journals articles, among others. The research concludes that even though there had been emerging trends led by liberal feminists to normalize the termination of pregnancy, the Igbo society remains a strong promoter of life and this life begins at conception.

**Keywords: Abortion, Igbo, Pro-choice, Pro-life, Feminism and Reproductive Health**

### **Introduction**

With the growing awareness of women's reproductive health and freedom, liberal feminists have increasingly identified abortion rights as women's right to self-determination. According to this group of feminists, a woman should be granted the right to make decisions about her own body and the choice concerning the outcome of a pregnancy should be the woman's alone.<sup>1</sup> Jane Roe in *Roe vs. Wade* advocated that women should be granted the right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy based on an implicit fundamental right to privacy<sup>2</sup>. Susan Sherwin explains that pregnancy causes many women to get sick, sometimes sick enough that they cannot continue with jobs, school, or housework: "Not every woman is able to put her job, career, and studies on hold." "Women who feel too young, too old, or who are unable to maintain lasting relationships may recognize that they will not be able to care properly for a child at this time".<sup>3</sup> Thus, in order for women to control their lives, they need to be able to

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control their reproductive choice. The history of liberal abortion laws started in the United States of America. In 1973 the United States' Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* rendered what was at the time a landmark judgment, and by which it struck down all state laws banning abortion. Thus, a woman's legal access to abortion was positively established and this became a persuasive precedent cited in most jurisdictions<sup>4</sup>. In all these permutations, abortion rights debate will be best understood along African cultural and value system.

Meanwhile, Ayanele asserted that it is nearly impossible to consider sexual and reproductive health and rights without simultaneously considering the role of religion and culture. Several practices that infringe on African women's reproductive health and rights are culturally acceptable<sup>5</sup>. Hence, despite the feminist campaigns for abortion rights and the articulations of these rights in several international documents and national laws, not all communities in Sub-Saharan Africa support the right of women to terminate their pregnancies at will. The feminist advocacy on the right to privacy; which means state refraining from interfering in women's abortion decision could not be easily perpetrated in Africa. Unlike other human rights document, the African Charter on Human and People's rights reflects communal values and duty; it does not provision a right of privacy<sup>6</sup>.

Additionally, Africans have been presented as race of humans that prize life above every other thing. Little surprise then, that the *African Charter of Human and Peoples Rights*,

succinctly schematized the right to life. It provides as follows: “Human beings are inviolable. Every human being shall be entitled to respect for his life and the integrity of his person. No one may be arbitrarily deprived of this right.”<sup>7</sup> According to O.A., Ayanele, it was more or less a sacrilege to advocate for sexual rights, safe abortion and reproductive choice in Africa.<sup>8</sup>

The Igbo from whom the data for this research comes are typical Africans; they preserve most of African rich values in their lives and cultural practices. There was a wholesome acceptance of and respect for life in all its totality, form or state in Igbo society<sup>9</sup>. Life for the Igbo people is given and controlled by the Supreme Being, Chukwu. It is viewed, accepted and lived in a communal setting involving the living, the ancestors/living dead and the not yet born<sup>10</sup>. From these perceptions of life, which anchor heavily on the sacredness of human life, any social acceptance of abortion rights becomes a clear reflection of moral decay in the society and a corresponding valorisation of a culture of death via the instrument of law<sup>11</sup>. The Igbo perception of the value of life as well as the local discourses on the implications of abortion rights on Igbo traditions and belief offer an insight to the factors militating against feminist abortion right in African communities. First, the fetus is regarded as a human being in Igbo society and second women are seen in the context of their social milieu, and how they affect, and are affected by those around them when making the abortion decision. Hence, the abortion right

debate involves argument on women right to abortion and the fetus right to life, which one should enjoy priority? This is what this study engages.

The research is divided into five unequal sections. This ongoing introduction is followed by the section which handles basic definitional and theoretical issues. The third section examines the Igbo perceptions on abortion rights. The fourth part engages the theme of the generational influence on Igbo perception on abortion right. The research is concluded in the fifth section.

### **The Idea and Functionality of Abortion in Traditional Igbo Society**

Abortion has been defined as the discontinuation of a pregnancy before attainment of viability. In other words, the termination of pregnancy before the fetus is capable of independent existence<sup>12</sup>. Abortion is conceived as the destruction of life after conception and before birth. It is bound by non-conception, on the one hand, and by infanticide, on the other. It is the expulsion of the living fetus from the womb – uterus – before viability. This deliberate ejection of the non-viable fruit of the womb from the mother's body or killing it while it is still in the womb excludes all premature delivery of a viable fetus as long as it can be kept alive, and all 'natural miscarriages'<sup>13</sup>. In ethical discourse, abortion is understood as the deliberate choice to terminate a pregnancy through an action which either directly destroys or causes the expulsion of the embryos from the uterus before viability<sup>14</sup>.

Globally, abortion is seen differently by peoples and cultures. While some traditions see it as permissible, others see it as a taboo. Under Nigerian law, interfering with pregnancy no matter how early in the course of the pregnancy is criminal unless such interference is undertaken to preserve the mother's life as prescribed by the Criminal and Penal Codes. The fetus is regarded as a human life from the moment the ovum is fertilized and one in which the society has an interest that must be protected by law. It is only when the mother's life is at risk that it is conceded that there is an overriding interest that allows abortion to be tolerated<sup>15</sup>. In Igbo society, abortion is called '*Ite ime*' or '*Ishi ime*'— removing of pregnancy. The pre-colonial Igbo people did not intentionally abort or remove a pregnancy; because children were of great value in Igboland; a child that does not want to stay goes on its own' so, there was no reason to commit abortion as it is done today by many women especially unmarried girls.<sup>16</sup> The practice of inducing abortion was very uncommon in traditional Igbo society before the advent of Christianity or the colonial period. What was common was miscarriage<sup>17</sup>. Obianuju Ekeocha asserts that abortion is un-African and that the call for safe abortion from European countries amounts to neocolonisation<sup>18</sup>.

Contrarily to forgoing, we have it on good authority that abortion practices in Igboland date back to as long as one can recall. Local herbs and traditional practices were used to terminate unwanted pregnancy. What is today known as ectopic, which is the growing of a fertilized ovum outside the

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normal uterine cavity; such abnormal fetuses were called 'Osaka' or 'Ajonwa', meaning 'witchcraft baby' or the 'devil's child', that has come into the world to kill its mother and in order to prevent that, traditional and 'patent' medicines are used as abortifacients to terminate such pregnancy. In Igbo culture, when an unmarried girl becomes pregnant it is referred to as 'Ime mkpuke' which means 'unwanted pregnancy', and the Igbo society seriously frowned at it. Most times, a product of 'ime mkpuke', 'bastard' is not well received in Igbo families and the society at large<sup>19</sup>. One can deduce from the foregoing that abortion is not a Western-imported idea, although, in pre-colonial it was done discretely and secretly because to procure an abortion in traditional Igbo society is an abomination, 'Imeruala'.

### **Socio-Cultural and Intellectual Dynamics of the Abortion Rights Debate**

The theory of right to life stands at the very centre of the abortion right debate. The right to life theory is a belief that a being has the right to live and should not be killed by another entity<sup>19</sup>. This theory is a fundamental human right, central to the enjoyment of all other human rights<sup>20</sup>. Efforts to promote recognition of right to life before birth have always met with strong opposition from the feminist abortion rights campaign. Feminists' primary arguments for women abortion right is that the fetuses at an earlier stage is not a human being and thus has no moral right to life. Scholars like Harris argue that "the embryo or the fetus has no brain; hence, lacks value and should be aborted at will"<sup>21</sup>. Hence, until a fetus develops a neurological body, it is not human and can be terminated.

Ikwun avers that there should be abortion right because it prevents overpopulation<sup>22</sup>. Other reasons given for the argument for abortion rights includes the view that the fetus is the property of the woman so she could do whatever she wants with it; the woman's right supersedes that of the fetus, and thus in cases of danger to the mother the child should be aborted; and finally the opinion that abortion helps in the reduction of unwanted children who most often end up as street children and hoodlums<sup>23</sup>.

On the other hand, those in opposition to abortion rights argue that allowing women reproductive autonomy conflicts with the right to life of the fetus. They advance reasons for their stance. Noonan for instance, thinks that the fetus is human because it is conceived by human parents, and on the basis of its humanity needs not be aborted. He contends further that at conception the fetus receives genetic code which determines its characteristics as a human being<sup>24</sup>, Koop affirmed that, "human life begins at conception and is continuous whether intra or extra-uterine until death"<sup>25</sup>. According to Beckwith,

the fact that she engaged in the act of sexual intercourse, which she fully realized could result in the creation of another human being is an indirect statement of responsibility for a baby, and thus when it comes even after taking every precaution to avoid such a result; it must be maintained in existence. Abortion he holds "opposes family morality, which has

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as one of its central beliefs that an individual has special personal obligations to his offspring and family which he does not have to other persons<sup>26</sup>.

Other reasons given *by* anti-abortionists are (1) the fetus is created by God in his image and thus should not be tampered with; (2) abortion promotes promiscuity; abortion denies the inherent right of the fetus to life; (3) abortion is using wrong to correct the wrong; (4) abortion is murder and is as bad as murder since the fetus is a human being, among others.<sup>27</sup>

For the traditional Igbo society, the theological and philosophical 'battles' on whether life begins at conception or at later stage has no place. The sense of the child-ness of the fetus often originates with the quickening that is, when the mother first feels movement. The moment of quickening marks the existence of a living being in the woman's womb without a technological mediation. Historically, it was this traditional medium that establishes the existence of a fetus, at this point the child has the right to live<sup>28</sup>. Also, the value which the Igbo place on fetus is found deeper still in the solemnity with which they treat 'blood'<sup>29</sup>. From the Igbo perspective, blood represents life. A respondent asserted that even when the fetus is still in blood form, that its blood is the same as the blood of the man and the woman which comes to form the baby, 'the fetus is a part of both of them'. This explains the reason Igbo families mourn when a woman experience miscarriage for it is to them the loss of a human being. The abortion right debate and the right to life theory

principally polarized the world into two camps: the pro-life and the pro-choice group. *Pro-life* supporters deny the mother's right to terminate her pregnancy owing to the fetus' right to life. Conversely, *Pro-choice* supporters claim that mother's right to terminate her pregnancy is superior than the fetus' right to life<sup>30</sup>.

Feminists' perspective on abortion right appear to be in favor of recognizing the mother's autonomy to be superior than any claim of rights of other parties like fetus, state, father etc. Liberal feminist perspectives on abortion right generally adopt a pro-choice stance, emphasizing women's freedom of choice in the abortion decision making. Feminists contend that women's rights such as the right to self-determination in relation to their reproductive biology prevail over the speculative rights to life of the fetus. Thus, women should be guaranteed access to legal abortion<sup>31</sup>. The defense of liberal feminists in support of their position on the 'great debate' is bifocal: first, are those who argue for the permissibility of abortion on the grounds that the woman has the right to control her own body. These feminists have typically expressed their point with this slogan; my body; my choice. The second liberal's approach is to argue that the fetus at any stage is not a person and so has no right or fewer rights than the pregnant woman. Thus, it is morally permissible for the pregnant woman to destroy it or rather have it destroyed, if that is what she wants. According to the second argument, possible cases involving a conflict between the woman – a being with full moral rights and the fetus, a

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being lacking full moral rights, should be settled by favoring the woman, especially in the case of life or death<sup>32</sup>. Allison M. Jaggar made her defense of abortion rights over concepts of responsibility and decision-making. She changes the so called 'right to life of fetus to right to a full human life' which demands adequate nutrients, air, clean water, compassion etc. Among them, 'being born' is just one requirement to get a full human life. It should be objectively accepted that mothers predominantly take care of these requirements that fetuses demand while third parties such as doctors, state, theologians, and fathers provide only the delivery process and they do not meet other needs of fetuses to achieve a full human life. Second, she claims that women will be affected mostly from the decisions of termination of pregnancy in comparison with any other third parties. According to her; from the reasons stated above, women should be the sole authority and the only decision maker in terms of termination of pregnancy<sup>32</sup>.

Some feminists see the opposition to women abortion rights as a reflection of broader patriarchal issues of women's inequality in society and the perpetuation of women as natural child bearers and child nurturers<sup>33</sup>. Women have historically been denied individual rights and the right to life accruing at birth is part of a deliberate attempt to deny women the full range of reproductive health services and freedom that are essential to safeguarding women's fundamental rights to life, health, dignity, equality, and autonomy, among others<sup>34</sup>.

### **The Igbo Perceptions on Abortion Rights**

While the advocacy for the right to abortion has been an internationally recognized feminist agenda since the 1990s, abortion rights have been a ‘taboo’ in traditional African societies. It was more or less a “sacrilege” to advocate for sexual rights, safe abortion and reproductive choice<sup>35</sup>. By Igbo traditional and cultural standards, abortion is ‘*a taboo*’ and a direct attack on human life. The Igbo people’s opposition to abortion rights stems from the deeply held conviction that the destruction of a fetus is equivalent to murder of a human being. ‘Murder is murder irrespective of the stage of the pregnancy’, Kate asserted and anyone who commits such abomination desecrates the land and offends the gods, she added<sup>36</sup>. Hence, she is required to do some ritual-cleansing of the land. Culturally, the Igbo people of the Southeastern region of Nigeria generally posit the value of and right to life of the unborn as the basis for their argument against abortion right. Life ranks supreme in the Igbo hierarchy of values and this life begins immediately at conception<sup>37</sup>. For the Igbo as for all Africans, life is sacred; the sacredness attached to life has a lot to do with the Igbo understanding that life comes from God (Chukwu Okike). Hence, no one has the right over the life of the other for every life belongs to God. The sacredness attached to life is extended even to the unborn hence abortion is extremely intolerable in Igbo society<sup>38</sup>.

Furthermore, the attitude of Igbo society towards barrenness affects the acceptance of feminist abortion rights

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either because of the fear of the damages it will cause to the uterus or the fear that the gods will refuse to give such person a child later in the future. A woman's body is a delicately balanced ecology, not meant to have its natural, healthy process disrupted by invasive machinery. In addition to the women who are punctured or killed on abortion tables, there are more subtly damaging effects. The opening of the uterus, the cervix, is designed to open gradually over several days at the end of a pregnancy. During an abortion, the cervix is wrenched open in a matter of minutes. The delicate muscle fibers can be damaged — damage that may go unnoticed until she is far into a later, wanted pregnancy and the muscles give way in a miscarriage<sup>39</sup>. In Igbo traditional society, fecundity is cherished as one of the greatest gifts and blessing from God, so much so that every Igbo woman looked forward to and was very pleased being pregnant<sup>40</sup>. In most African traditional societies, failure to give birth to a child is equivalent to death. Mbiti states this fact more explicitly when he writes, “Unhappy is the woman who fails to get children; for whatever quality she might possess, her failure to get children is worse than committing genocide; she has become the dead end of human life, not only for the genealogical line but also for herself.”<sup>41</sup>. Catherine has somewhat jejunely asserted that every woman has the number of children God has destined for her to produce. Therefore, if women are allowed to commit abortion at will, they will carelessly abort the entire children in their womb and become barren by the time they are ready to bear children.<sup>42</sup> It should be also noted that the Igbo people

believe in providence, that every human is created for a particular purpose which he or she should live in order to fulfill that purpose. One of the respondents stated that by allowing abortion right we are not only denying the unborn baby its right to life but also terminating the purpose for which the child is created. The fetus that is to be aborted today just to satisfy the mother's interest may be worth ten times more valuable to the society and the future generation than the mother if allowed to live, what appears to be weak and inconsequential today may become very significant tomorrow<sup>43</sup>. With this belief, the Igbo society saw the need to interfere in women's abortion right decision making.

Opposition to abortion right is also based on its social effects. In Igbo traditional society, one's actions though '*personal and private*' are perceived first from its societal effects. According to Igbo customary laws, committing abortion desecrates the land, it adversely affects not only the woman but also the entire community; Hence, Abortion like suicide and other crimes against life in Igbo society, is not a private offense, it has its communal effect. Man's conduct in Igbo land is regulated in detail by the *Omenala which means customary laws and rules* which one must not only observe, but must also be seen observing it by others<sup>44</sup>. An illustration of this is seen in the cultural belief of some Igbo villages in Anambra state that if any girl that commits abortion, cooks for elderly people those people will die<sup>45</sup>.

Social standing in the community affects individual family member's behaviour and choices towards abortion

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rights. Families, concerned about their own reputation, are less receptive of abortion right. Despite the stigma or shame that comes with unwanted pregnancy. Some families will prefer to have the child instead of abortion because they don't want to be part of an abomination. Respect for life is for the Igbo a vision, a mission, a commitment and a communal affair as well<sup>46</sup>. The conceptualization of the body as a community entity further inhibits the abortion right campaign. With the notion that the body is necessarily universally shared, any attempt to make abortion right operational in Igbo society must begin with an understanding of how the population conventionalizes the body and the body ownership. The Igbo construct of the body as the property of the society have limited control over the uses to which their bodies and the bodies of others are put. In many African cultures, it is revealed that even though the body as a personal entity belongs to the individual. There is alternative view of the body as the property of the wider community including the life inside the body. In the same vein, once a woman's bride price is paid in the traditional Igbo society she becomes a part of the family and she is no longer the sole owner of her body, it is expected that any decision she is to take, she does so with the consent of her husband especially as he is the head of the family. Hence, the decision as to whether or not to seek an abortion does not belong to the woman alone<sup>47</sup>. And if she insists and do so in secrecy, she will be chased out of her husband's house or even banished from the land if discovered.

The idea of reincarnation which sees life as transitional, that is, a repeating cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is also presented in making a strong case against abortion right in Igbo society<sup>48</sup>. The Igbo believe that human life comes from the Supreme Being in direct association with the deities, ancestral spirits and other cosmic forces. Ancestors are the clearest expression of the traditional Igbo belief in after-life. The ancestors are the most benign ambassadors of their succeeding children in the spirit world. They reincarnate in the young ones to ensure that their respective lineages continue<sup>49</sup>. If a fetus is then aborted, the soul within it suffers a major karmic setback. It is deprived of the opportunity to re-join his family. Thus abortion right hinders a soul's spiritual progress<sup>50</sup>. One of the respondents narrated her personal story which helps affirm the Igbo after-life belief. According to her story, her boyfriend's late father appeared to her in a dream while she was still considering abortion and told her not to abort the child she is carrying that it is him that is reincarnating and that even if she insist on aborting the child, she will not succeed. She said she ignored the dream and went ahead to take some abortion pills several times but none was successful. This she said made her afraid and she didn't make any further attempt to abort the child. Her story is a confirmation that the Igbo ancestors and forefathers also denies women of abortion right.

Many women grieve silently after abortion, some suffer depression, nightmares, suicidal thoughts; some wake in the night thinking they hear a baby crying. The Igbo

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people believe that the cry of aborted babies reaches God asking him to revenge their death. It was their plea that causes misfortunes and loss of peace of mind to the parties involved especially the woman. A man who saw his wife slowly disintegrate after an abortion asked, “What kind of trade-off is that: Gain control of your body, lose control of your mind?” In the above light, one of the respondents stated that although she appreciates the several rights feminism have campaigned and gained for women but the abortion right should be out of it, for a woman’s natural responsibility is to nurture life and not to destroy it.<sup>51</sup>

### **Generational Influences and Differences on Igbo perception on abortion right**

From our dataset, it appears that generational influences and differences provide an important vehicle that shapes Igbo perception on women abortion right. This is to say that Igbo public opinion towards abortion right does not follow a linear path as age, personal experiences and technological advancement has shaped opinions. For instance, majority of the younger respondents in Awka Local Government have positive view towards abortion right while majority of the older respondents in have negative view towards abortion.

However, in recent times, emphasis have been made that even though abortion right is unheard of in Igbo society, it is still permissible to perform therapeutic abortion when the pregnant woman’s life is in danger especially in cases of ectopic pregnancy. Speaking from the medical lenses, Regina Okolie emphasized that even though abortion is a taboo, it is

still permissible to perform abortion in cases of ectopic pregnancy in order to save the life of the woman. She went further to say that many Igbo women have died from ectopic pregnancy because of their stubbornness and religious belief against abortion<sup>52</sup>. Christian Alozie affirmed by narrating the story of a mother of four children who died during childbirth leaving behind her other children. He concluded that *a life should not kill another life*<sup>53</sup>.

Traditionally, life is sacred and worthy of protection but the unborn child's life is not greater than its mother because one is a potential life while the other is already in existence with an accrued value. The mother's life is valuable in terms of her duties and responsibilities to herself and other members of the family. It would be cruel to sacrifice her right to life for that of the fetus which has not yet acquired a personality and which has no responsibility or obligation to fulfil. It is better for the water to pour away than for the calabash to be broken. This means that all hope is not lost when a woman loses her unborn baby because she is alive to have another pregnancy<sup>54</sup>.

While pro-lifers regard embryos and fetus as 'pre-born children' and consider women to have the same moral obligations to their fetus as they do to their born children<sup>55</sup>, a respondent argued that the trauma women face as culture forces them to carry and bear a bastard child is worse than the criticism against abortion itself. He suggested that abortion rights should not only be given in cases of ectopic pregnancy but also in cases of pregnancy brought about by

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forced sex such as rape and incest. Abortion rights should be given if the woman does not want to give birth to a child conceived without her consent, culture or morality should not interfere in a woman's decision to abort such child '*Umudamirida*' meaning bastard in his language. There should be abortion right, if the girl chooses to abort her baby in order to save herself from the emotional trauma and financial responsibility of having a baby she did not bargain for.

Not like I am giving a holistic approval to abortion right but in such cases as rape and incest, the traditional Igbo culture should not restrict the woman's right to her reproductive and mental health, the moral view that 'Thou shall not kill' is a stringent one in such case, however, this is not to say that the Igbo society should embrace abortion. But rather they should be conservative in understanding the plight of women who conceived through rape or incest, in such case, abortion rights should be given<sup>56</sup>.

Other emerging conservative feelings towards women abortion right in Igbo society include terminating unwanted pregnancy resulting from deceit. Because of the several cases of divorce and child welfare, some respondents are of the opinion that irrespective of Igbo traditional and cultural values, safe abortion should be part of women's right in cases where she discovered that she is already pregnant for an irresponsible and deceitful man. Women should not be forced

or pressurize by the society to marry a man because she is pregnant for him. These have resulted to more broken homes and having of children who grow up in poverty, experiencing health and psychological problems, and suffering from higher rates of abuse and neglect. Some younger respondents averred that no woman should be forced to have a baby she is not ready to cater for that will increase the level of poverty and the number of hoodlums in the society. By giving women the right to abortion and legalizing it, it saves women from opting for unsafe abortion because despite our elders and forefathers disapproval for abortion right women still practice abortion secretly. This is to say that even if women did not get the right formally they will still indulge in the act. Some added that it is better to allow abortion at an early stage than at a later stage. Ekene Nwobi added that licensed medical practitioners in Nigeria are only permitted to perform surgical abortion when the fetus poses a great threat to life of the woman. According to him, in cases of ectopic pregnancy, abortion becomes a lesser evil. However, he added that abortion right on health ground should not be approved without restrictions. He feared that if abortion right is allowed in Igbo society without restrictions, there will be increase in the rate of promiscuity and killing of innocent babies among unmarried men and women; some of these women might even die or get their uterus damaged by quacks<sup>57</sup>.

While Feminists agitate for the right of women over their bodies, there has been argument by younger male

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respondents that whether a woman chooses to abort or keep the child she must do so with the consent of her husband. Studies show that despite the high value placed on human life, there have been recent cases of men in Igbo society supporting and even forcing their women to have an abortion because he is not ready to cater for a child. Morvia Krisztina reasons that a man's decision to ejaculate into the partner's vagina when no contraception is used equals the decision to reproduce except in cases where the woman tricked the man into ejaculating inside her. Aside from the latter case, what would we say of men who ejaculate into the woman's vagina and after being 'conscious again' typically hopes that no pregnancy occurs or that the woman will 'choose' to have an abortion.<sup>58</sup> In an attempt to reflect Igbo women's real experiences and story this article captures the influence of the patriarchal power structure relation in Igbo society.

Feminists like Morvia Krisztina suggest that we should separate the right to self-determination and the right to access abortion. We should not approach the abortion right debate as women's method of controlling their bodies but also as a redress of the denial of the right to control one's body, an ultimate restitution' for the violation of a woman's right to bodily integrity. The right to abortion should secure a woman's right not to have children and the right to bodily integrity should secure a woman's right 'not to abort'. Most abortion in Igbo society was not the personal decision of the woman, but of the man. This is to say that while abortion remains a taboo in Igbo society, one should not see abortion as the free choice of women alone. We should rather

recognize that most women in Igbo society today were forced to opt for an abortion. Some men as individuals want to have children when they decide to have them usually because of the economic situation of the society. They argued that losing control over this decision means a loss of power as well as loss of their means as they might have to support raising an unwanted child. While discussing with a male respondent XYZ, he adjudged that women cannot make the abortion decision alone. In fact, it will be very difficult for her to go through the emotional, physical and mental stress alone; whether she chooses to keep or abort the child, she needs the support of the man. And if the man wants her to abort the child, she should submit to his decision as he is the man and head of the family except if she intends to raise the child alone and that comes with a lot of stigmatization and challenges in the Igbo society both for the mother and the child<sup>59</sup>. In other words, the patriarchal power structure relation in Igbo society places the decision of the man as the head of the family above women's right to abort or not to abort. Men fear losing their power at women's hands in feminist abortion right debate because the woman in deciding whether or not to abort gives her the power to determine when to reproduce as oppose to the power relation in Igbo society.

### **Conclusion**

The discourse of women abortion rights is a highly emotional subject and one that excites deeply held opinions. While Liberal feminists successfully gained a range of rights for

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women, their campaign for abortion right for women wasn't completely successful in Igbo society because it ignored fundamental aspects of power imbalances and the effect of the multiple social influences on an individual. Though, factors such as colonialism, industrialization, globalization, western education and modern technology may have weakened indigenous Igbo cultures, several key aspects such as the 'sacredness of life' and 'right to life' however still persist. A large number of Igbo women and girls resort to unsafe abortion in order to respect the values of their community. Meanwhile, it must also be noted that while women do make the choice to abort, the choices are, more often than not, are in response to structural factors such as unemployment and poverty; partner rejection and abandonment; and the fear, stigma, and shame of being pregnant and unmarried. Structural oppressions and limitations, which force women into decisions that may go against their moral impulse, must be confronted, challenged, and eliminated.

However, there is need for increased access to safe abortion practices as a medical necessity when the pregnancy threatens the life of the woman such as ectopic pregnancy. Many Igbo people still believe that witches, witchcraft and evil spirits are the causative agents of ectopic pregnancy hence would rather visit the herbalist or spiritual home rather than patronize orthodox hospitals and health centres. Such traditional belief affects their attitude towards reproductive healthcare issues with dire consequences. Sex education is a vital tool here for informing young unmarried and married

women about pregnancy prevention, knowledge about contraceptives, access to and use of it and then safe abortion practices.

In another word, women's struggle should not be on achieving abortion right for women but should be at reducing the incidence of unwanted pregnancies and promoting practical solutions to the factors that cause women to opt for abortion choice has made discussions on abortion right very paramount. Efforts should be made at inculcating moral values in our adolescents. In the struggle for their rights, women should also seek to maintain their dignity and womanhood. Sexual promiscuity should be discouraged and the root causes of sexual promiscuity amongst the adolescents addressed. Efforts at promoting abstinence and sexual discipline should be increased. This would not only reduce the risk of unwanted pregnancies, but also reduce the risk of STIs. Further, there should be increased access to family planning information and methods. Religious and cultural practices that enhance the dignity of women should be encouraged<sup>60</sup>.

Finally, in an age of globalization, when the world is collapsing to a simple village model, when intercultural/legal exchanges are indispensable, the Igbo can share much of her legal-cultural heritages with the wider world. That is to say, it 9 organs, respect for and sanctity of virginity, respect for, and sanctity of blood and what it stands for<sup>61</sup>. This article advances that the Igbo value of sacredness of human life, considered as the "summum bonum" (highest good), should

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worth universal consideration and women should not wait till they become pregnant to begin seeking for abortion right. Abortion remains a taboo in Igboland and by force of the defunct Igbo customary criminal law outlawed and tantamount to murder in Igbo traditional society<sup>62</sup>.

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