

## **Girl child development in the traditional Igbo society: Model for Contemporary women empowerment**

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### ***Abstract***

*It is a fact that among the Igbo of Nigeria, male/boy child is preferred more than the female/girl child. The reason may be because the male child retains the name of the lineage and continues to promote the values of the family lineage. Whereas, the female child is married out to another man's family to help in sustaining another man's lineage. In recent times, possibly due to modernity and feminist ideology, attention is given to girl child development (empowerment) in traditional Igbo society. Hence, the statement 'nwanyi bu ife' (women are important). This study sets to investigate girl child development in the traditional Igbo society as a model for contemporary women empowerment. The findings suggest that Igbo women are not given rights and positions with men in Igbo society and it recommends among other things that Igbo women should be educated on the 'iru mgbede' (rite to prepare women for adulthood and marriage) for them to take their proper place in the society. The study will adopt a multidimensional approach as well as use primary and secondary sources of data collection.*

**Key words:** Girl child development, Women empowerment, Traditional Igbo

### **Introduction**

The traditional understanding about women stresses submission and dependence. A woman's role in relation to home, church and society is to be in submission to her husband (or to male leadership) and dependent upon him/them. She has her own sphere and freedom to exercise her spiritual gifts; but it is ultimately under the leadership of the male, who takes the lead in the home and in the church. In Igbo culture and traditions, the training of children differently was not a mark of discrimination. Female children were trained differently from the male children because they were trained in different aspects of life that will help them through their adolescence and adult stages of life as mothers and wives to be.

Ezeaku (1990) points, Igbo women in the past were not fully economically empowered. They were only allowed to do menial works that may earn them little or no money. They depended on their husbands for virtually everything. The only way they were able to secure wealth for themselves were through the burying of their children umbilical cord under economic plants which became theirs after their mothers' death. The position of women in this simple culture was dependence-oriented, hence a common address to women as "*Oriaku*" the consumer of wealth" (p. 18).

It must be noted that in Igbo worldview, life its preservation and enhancement, remains upper most in the family system and the Igbo community. The survival of physical existence depended on the availability of basic resources like food, water, shelter and every member of the indigenous Igbo society had to play his or her part in the provision of the basic needs.

Against this backdrop, the Igbo people belief that right from the day a woman starts to bear children in his husband's house was the day she starts to earn economic gain as woman. This was

because at the birth of every child, the woman acquires some of the family's wealth through the burying of her children's umbilical cords and first natural hairs. The implication is that the economic plants under which these are buried have automatically become the grandmother's own which should be handed over to her daughter (the child's mother) after her death. Therefore, it must be noted that right from the onset, women have been part of the economic pursuits in Igbo land. The only difference is that their economic pursuits are quite different from their male counterparts.

### **Women's role in economic development in Igbo society**

In the past before the advent of the western colonization, women were not allowed to do heavy works not on the ground of discrimination but on the fact that women are special beings which should be handled with care. They were allowed to do simple work while men are obliged to take full responsibility of their families. This is to say that women do not play significant roles in the production of wealth in the family. They depended on their husbands for their economic welfare. That is why majority of women still value wealth given to them by men as against the backdrop of fending for themselves. Yet there are some women who are naturally strong and they like to help their husbands in their economic pursuits. These women will go extra miles of engaging in different trades just for the praise of their husbands. Hence, the name *Osodi eme* (strong supporter of her husband).

However, with the advent of western civilization, African women have become very active in agriculture, trade and other economic pursuits. In 1985, women's shares in African labour forces ranged from 17 per cent in Mali up to 49 per cent in Mozambique and Tanzania (World Bank, 1989). African women

contribute significantly to their children's welfare and have explicit responsibility to provide for them materially. They are the household managers, providing food, nutrition, water, health, education, and family planning to an extent greater than elsewhere in the developing world. This places heavy burdens on them despite developments such as improved agriculture technology, and changes in women's socioeconomic status, which one might think would have made their lives easier. In fact, it would be fair to say that their workload has increased with the changing economic and social situation in Africa. Women's economic capabilities, and in particular their ability to manage family welfare, are being threatened. Modernization has shifted the balance of advantage against women. The legal framework and the modern social sector and producer services developed by the independent African countries have not served women well.

It is not an over statement to say that African women, in common with women all over the world, face a variety of legal, economic and social constraints. Indeed some laws still treat them as minors. In Zaire for instance, a woman must have her husband's consent to open a bank account. Women are known to grow 80 per cent of food produced in Africa, and yet few are allowed to own the land they work on. Agricultural extension and formal financial institution and technology, resources and credit. Agricultural extension and formal financial institutions are biased towards a male clientele' despite women's importance as producers (this has spurred the growth of women's groups and cooperative which give loans and other help). Eze (1984) also opines:

Few persons will argue against the estimate that women are responsible for 60 – 80 percent of the agricultural labour supplied

on the continent of Africa, that women form of the majority of the commercial sector in many Africa towns and cities. They continue much on the self-help projects on rural development programmes. It is estimated that women in Lesotho do 90 percent of the road under the food- for-work programe. Again women have the biological and social tasks of bearing, nurturing and providing initial education for children in general, ensuring the well being of their families (p. 7).

In Igbo economic structure, women do not plant some crops like yams, palm tree. They do not mark land boundary or sell land. While their husbands are still alive they do not own land of their own because they are under their husbands. Basden (1921) observes this in Igbo culture when he states, “The only possessions 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” (p. 93).

Nmah (2003) is of the view 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 and be the “Oriaku”

food consumer or “Odoziaku” Wealth organizer. (p. 65).

Nmah also states that all these “dos and don’ts leave the women numbed, cold and afraid, even to look at people straight in the face. The result is non-response to any stimuli for self expression and actualization.

Furthermore, Shiver (2001) writing about Indian women states:

In most Indian families, women do not own any property in their own names, and do not get a share of parental property. Due to weak enforcement of laws protecting them, women continue to have little access to land and property. In fact, some of the laws discriminate against women, when it comes to land and property right (p. 25).

It is observed here that Indian belief system exclude women from ownership of any property especially land as was stated in their law. And this was akin to Igbo belief which says that women do not own land while their husbands are still alive.

Robinson (2004) discussing women in economic life in Ghana says:

In rural areas of Ghana where non-commercial agricultural production was the main economic activity, women worked the land. Coastal women also sold fish caught by men. Many of the financial benefits that occurred to those women went into the upkeep of the household, while those of the men were reinvested in an enterprise that

was often perceived as belonging to his extended family (p. 45).

Robinson is saying that Ghanaian women especially rural ones take active part mostly in subsistence agriculture in which they produce only for family consumption, while men produce mainly for commercial purpose.

Nina as quoted in Hodder (1969) contributing to the economic life of women in Yoruba land asserts:

The sex division of economic activities among the Yoruba was related to the settlement pattern. The Yoruba lived in large urban-like settlements with the farmlands some distance beyond the walls of the responsibility for defending the society against attack that is, the men. The women assisted only in the harvesting, women were engaged in marketing in the local town markets, and long distance trade was undertaken by both men and women, who travelled in caravans for protection (p. 73).

The above onset observed that Yoruba women largely controlled their own local economic activities and in the case of the big trade, employed both slave and freeborn male labour. Showing that women sometimes are dependent on men, they always need when works are harder because men are stronger than them.

### **Traditional ways of women empowerment for economic development**

The researcher discovered that every Igbo woman before the advent of formal education trained her girl-child to do menial works that may earn them little source of income before they can own economic trees where they buried their child's umbilical cords. The trainings the young girls received from their various homes between childhood and early adulthood were seen to be enough for them to start lives on their own. Thus the child grapples the seemingly family activity for which the family is known as, so makes a good living from such activity. The mere fact of fending for oneself as taught by the system eradicated unemployment in those days.

Furthermore, it was also discovered that in Igbo pre-colonial setting when children reach the age of about four or five, they are often expected to start performing a share of the household duties. As the children get older, their responsibilities grow. They are trained differently based on their gender differences. Young women helped with the cooking, fetching of water, or offering laundry services. These tasks helped the children learn how to become productive members of their family and community. As children, many of them learn that laziness is not acceptable; everyone is expected to contribute. Mothers trained their daughters on some crafts and trade to equip them very well for future in their husbands' houses and this made them to be respected. Thus Basden (1921) also states:

Practically, the whole of the trade in the Igbo country is in the hands of the women, and they are extremely capable. The more expert a woman proves herself to be, the more she is appreciated by her husband. Ability in this direction is always a

desideratum in a man's choice of wife (p. 90).

Some of the crafts and trade include hair plaiting, dress making, mat making, basket making cloth dying, food selling, and a host of other trades and crafts activities which parents and guardians engaged in and so, train children in them. The major ones are pottery making that is molding of pots with clay; Spinning and weaving of clothes; freehand drawing on person by means of stains, mat making. Some of the pots they mold are meant just for decoration, but most of them are mainly for fetching and storing of water. Pottery has its processes. It is not baked but burnt by fire and it is not difficult process because women involved in them do that at their own convenient time and place.

Mat making is another important crafts women were trained in. mats are of different types. There is one called "Asaba Mat" in the western side of the Niger. This type of mat is made from the pitched of bamboo palm fronds that is cut into long thin strips whilst green and then keep outside in the sun to dry. This type of mat is made from five to seven feet in length and from thirty to forty inches in width. Another type of mat is made from the leaves of water flags (Akamala).

The above crafts and trades were the areas Igbo female were trained in the past which helped them to be self employed then and thereby contributing to the economic development of the community in particular and the nation in general. However, it was observed that most of these traditional ways of training our young females have been forgotten hence, they become victims of unemployment. It should therefore be penitent if the government will support Igbo women in order to train their

female children in these old ways as well as incorporating new techniques in production of soap, shoes, fashion and design etc. This will help them to be self employed and employers of labour.

### **Women empowerment as an effective strategy for enhancing economic development**

From the foregoing, it must be emphasized that to enhance economic development in our country, there is need to empower women especially Igbo women. The neglect and discrimination of women in economic sphere has enormously contributed to the poor economic development of the nation. In the past, Igbo women were not given right to some economic pursuits, however, the status quo is changing but more still needs to be done for instance, in mining industry, aviation, politics etc. Enemuo (2001) puts it that:

Empowerment entails the improvement of women in their political, economic and social conditions. It therefore involves the transformation of patriarchal society through a process of enlightenment, sensitization, and collective organization and therefore necessitates collective action by women to discard patriarchal beliefs and attitudes (p. 20)

Also, Okpoko (2002) opines that, “empowerment implies that the person or group of persons being empowered has hitherto lacked power of authority by circumstances either by denial or fault”. Therefore, empowerment leads to the involvement of the community members in identifying issues and needs in the community. The base of all economic development is investment.

Current realities and future challenges of economic development give rise to three foundational principles on which economic development investments should be based. They are: exports, productivity and sustainability. Exports have motivated much of economic development activity in the economy of the nation in the past, but the shift from the manufacturing service based economy and increasing global competition has emphasized the importance of productivity. A growing awareness of the need for human development and the scarcity of natural resources also highlight the need for a sustainable approach. Exports, productivity and sustainability are the three principles of economic development.

Warner, et al (2011) posits that, “Use of business incentives is one of the most common local development strategies” (p. 33) It must be noted that no meaningful management of community development project can be successfully achieved without the empowerment of the community members, especially the womenfolk. This is because empowerment leads to the development of relevant skills, knowledge and attitude among the members of the community. Therefore, government should give business, farming and other investment incentives to Igbo women in order to utilize their potentials for economic investment which in turn will help in the economic development.

## **Findings**

1. Igbo women were not given equal rights and positions with men in Igbo cultural beliefs but this will not prevent the government from supporting Igbo women in order to contribute to economic development.
2. Female children in some part of Igbo land are no longer given the type of training as in the olden days; this is why most

- present young girls lack good morals and feminine role traits, such as cooking, keeping the house in order, being self employed and taking care of their children and husband
3. Female-children in the past underwent “*Iru Mgbede*” rite to prepare them for adulthood and marriage but it is no longer practiced these days and this accounts for the rampant breakdown of many marriages thereby affecting the society. The *iru mgbede* that the researcher advocates is not going back to the status quo but picking the values it has and rebrand it in a more acceptable way.

### **Recommendations**

The researcher therefore makes the following recommendations:

- Government at all levels should establish craft centers in urban and rural areas to encourage and educate our women to learn craft like soap making, confectionaries, bead making, tailoring etc.
- Igbo women should be educated on the importance of “*iru mgbede*” rite: where the young adult-girls were trained and taught in the past on how to manage their families when they get married. This is very important in this era where many young girls do not know how to take care of the families because they lacked this basic training. Possibly because of urban-rural shift
- Igbo women should not imitate the western concepts of feminism because they are alien to Africa culture rather they should devise a better realistic and complementary existence of the men and the women folks for more humane and ordered society which will enhance economic development of the society where they live. This can be achieved through folklores, folktales, drama and seminars.

- There is need to reintroduce in primary and secondary school system a period for hand work within the school hours (like the MOSAI template). It will motivate the desire for learning craft among the student. The Igbo proverbs says, “*Adighi amu aka ekpe na nka*” (one doesn’t learn new skill at old age)
- Religious organization should develop center for learning and teaching craft in their premises. These will help to contribute in youth interest especially women in taking to craft.

### **Conclusion**

Igbo traditional education produced children whose characters and behavioural patterns were excellent. In those days, young girls were taught to behave themselves at all time for them to get married. It was also found out that before the advent of western education; every Igbo parent educated the child to be self employed. Men taught their sons to work with their hands and to provide support for themselves than roaming about the villages and women were taught different arts and crafts. This training which they got between childhood and early adulthood was enough to help them start their own lives. Thus a child grapples the activity which the family is known for and makes a good living from such. It was found out that traditional practices and curriculum imparted in the children the traditional beliefs, customs, norms and cultural values of Igbo people and thereby helped in widening the children’s knowledge and appreciation of Igbo cultural traits which made them good citizens. A child that is brought up in their own culture will never depart from it when he grows up. The Holy Bible says “Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it”. (Proverb 22:6) With this type of training, the Igbo people gave their children in the past, they were able to overcome the

problems of unemployment and if Igbo people should go back to their traditional ways of training their female children, they will be able to produce children that will be self-employed which will help to improve our society.

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