

THE HERMENEUTICS OF IGBO WOMEN STRUGGLE FOR EMANCIPATION

Cletus Umezina

Department of Philosophy, Bigard Memorial Seminary
Enugu

Abstract

The issues about women are many and diverse – social, political, psychological, cultural, epistemological, etc. One particular theme that runs across these levels of studies is the nature of a woman. Is a woman equal or unequal to a man? This is a gender issue. This has become a burning issue because of the manner in which women are maltreated, mistreated and excluded in vital areas where their contributions are needed for the development of the society. Some say that women by nature are inferior to men, for others they are superior to men, and yet for others, they are equal to men. Of particular interest is an opinion that maintains that the Igbo women, in the South East Nigeria, have a low mindset about themselves; they pretended their nature as inferior in the traditional society in order that men would protect and care for them. And that it is on account of this, that they refused to assert their rights and develop their talents. This paper challenges this view. It believes that even before the arrival of the colonial masters in their midst, women had fought against their being treated as inferior and never pretended their gender as weak.

Keywords: Women, Men, Inferior, Pretended

Introduction

The status of a woman in a society has remained a paradox. A woman is loved. This is indisputable. But unfortunately, this love is not translated appropriately into practical reality. The recognition of her dignity in terms of her inviolable rights, liberty and self-worth does not correspond to that love. Ironically a woman loves her children, male and female, more than her husband. The reasons for this are: 1. she knows more than her husband that the children belong to them, 2. she suffers more than him in bringing them to existence (Aristotle, 1994, 549). She carries each of them, for example, in the womb for nine months. She accompanies the children gingerly and with tremendous love as they grow up. The children appreciate this love in many ways and naturally return the love to their mother much more than they do to their father. But the intensity of this love

diminishes at different strata of the society – kindred, village, town, ethnic group, country etc. The way the society is structured at these levels does not provide an adequate platform for effective expression of the love that a woman deserves. She is denigrated, relegated and tethered to a social status that is *infra dignitatem*, one that does not give her the power to make her optimal contributions to the development of the society. Whereas the man who is loved less by the children at the family level is given, in the society, a recognition that is higher than that of a woman. What is the reason behind this inferior women status?

For R.N. Uchem and E.S. Ngwa, the source of the inferior status of women is culture and religion (Uchem and Ngwa, 2014, 143). But Pauline Aweto disagrees. She says that women did not really have inferior status in the traditional African society (Aweto, 2003, 485). In some places, according to her, women made conquests, helped in building cities, kingdoms and leading in wars. There were women who were queen mothers and reigned together with kings. Sometimes, a woman in a village was designated to preside over the meeting scheduled only for men. Women had courts in which they resolved issues relating to themselves. They even took part in cult and rituals. However true this may be, it may not be so for every ethnic group in Africa.

With regard to the Igbo in the Southeast of Nigeria, Uche Uwaezuoke Okonkwo says that the origin of inferior status being attributed to women and their subsequent subjection and domination by men is because of the Igbo theory of evolution (Okonkwo, 2010, 111-114). In this theory, God was dealing directly with men (*Eri* and *Nri*) in utter disregard of women. He gave them the ownership of land, lucrative professions like blacksmithing and superior crops like yam and palm. Women were assigned inferior crops like cocoyam and breadfruit.

But Chimakonam and Agu lay the blame on the inferior status of Igbo women squarely on the doorsteps of the women themselves. According to them, women “more often than not pretended weaknesses of body and mind” (Chimakonam and Agu, 2013, 61). They looked down factitiously on themselves as inferior and weaker sex. They feigned their status as inferior and claimed that men must have to protect and provide for them. For Chimakonam and Agu, this false perception or the “mindset” which the women made of themselves might be the origin of the impression that the men had on them. This women’s mindset appears to have been adopted as part of Igbo culture for as

Chimakonam and Agu affirm: “In the pre-colonial era, Igbo women had been “spoilt” by a culture that placed all responsibilities of survival in a dangerously tropical environment on the man – he was to protect and provide” (Chimakonam and Agu, 2013, 71). This false women perception and poor assessment of themselves is what Chimakonam and Agu call the “epistemology of womanhood, where they (women) pretended to be weak and gave impression that they were defenceless and inferior” (Chimakonam and Agu, 2013, 74). The women embraced this flawed assessment, hook, line and sinker for they thought it was beneficial to them. As a result, they refused to assert their rights and use their talents.

The claim of Chimakonam and Agu on women’s pretence or mindset on their nature is of interest to this paper. Their assertion which seems to be *Deus ex machina* does not appear to be successful. Their claim which can be taken as a conclusion of an argument, is supported with reasons and assumptions. Their article is very scholarly. The presentation is clear, distinct and precise. Reading through the article, one would find the reasons and assumptions for the claim interspersed in it. The first reason why the women pretended their sex as inferior and weak, according to Chimakonam and Agu, is because this assures them protection and maintenance by the men. They have “centuries old mindset that they are the weaker and inferior sex who must be protected and provided for by men” (Chimakonam and Agu, 2013, 72). The second reason is that the motive behind women opposition and fight against the British during the colonial administration is because they wanted to retain their faked inferior social status, in which they enjoyed the attention and protection of men; men whom they considered as “living gods”, “their chis” (Chimakonam and Agu, 2013, 65, 71). The third is that the pet names like *Oliaku* (eater of wealth), that the women bore shows that they really cherished their status under men (Chimakonam and Agu, 2013, 67). The fourth is that the women disguised themselves as weak and inferior and would like to be seen as such. The reason is because of the cultural practice that after the demise of their husbands, their brothers-in-law automatically took over the responsibility of protecting and maintaining them (Chimakonam and Agu, 2013, 71). The underlying assumption in all these is that women were not economically independent. We shall examine these reasons critically. We shall argue that the above reasons do not give adequate support to the claim that women pretended their inferior status or that they feigned it in order to

enjoy its benefits. We shall hermeneutically examine those reasons supporting the conclusion. This paper argues that the women did not pretend their status as inferior in order to draw the attention of men to come to their assistance. On the contrary, they fought against their being treated unjustifiably as inferiors. Their struggle against this, which started well before the colonial administration, was a struggle for emancipation.

a. Protection and Care of Women in Igbo society

The Igbo society protects and makes provision for everyone in it, men, women and children. This does not mean that everyone is adequately protected or provided for or that the women were comfortable and satisfied with how they were treated in the pre-colonial days. There were constant battering, verbal assaults, domestic violence and injustice that some women suffered in the hands of their husbands. This left them, sometimes, with no choice than to assert their right to be treated as humans. Sometimes to give effect to this, they abandoned their marital homes and went back to their natal homes. Some made firm resolve never to return back. And the right was respected. Sometimes, however, such a decision had forced the two families of the couple to come together for a dialogue on how to build bridges of confidence and trust and restore peace to the estranged husband and wife. At such meetings, the overbearing and brazen behaviour of the man was outrightly condemned. The aim of the condemnation was not only to restore the right of the woman to be treated decently as a human being but also to woo the woman to rescind her decision and return to her husband.

The existence of the frequent altercations and harsh recriminations between a husband and his wife is irrefragable evidence that the women were not adequately protected and maintained by the men. The fact that they could quit their marriage is symptomatic of their dissatisfaction and frustration. Such women who pass through this kind of agonising experience of abuse in the hands of their husbands would never say they enjoy their status as women. How correct then is it to assert that they pretended their status as inferior and refused to assert their rights? One thing that is clear is the converse, namely, they did not enjoy their pre-colonial status and ipso facto did not pretend their gender as inferior. The demand by women to be treated well began even before the colonial days. Hence, the women had begun to burst, long before the advent of colonial administration, albeit in its nascent stage, the shackles of inferiority carefully

crafted around them through the ingenious male contrivance. This demand to be treated well was a struggle for women emancipation in its embryonic stage.

At the time of the colonial administration, the story was the same. There was sustained effort at emancipation made by the women. They objected to being treated disdainfully as inferiors. Shanahan, a Missionary, narrated a chilling and mind-boggling story of a striking mistreatment of women in a district in Igboland (Jordan, 1971, 212-215). According to Igbo custom, the women cultivated cocoyam around their compounds. Out of their callousness, indifference and air of superiority, the men were letting out their pigs meant to be used for sacrifice to roam about uncontrollably in search of food. They destroyed the women's farms and ate their cocoyam. This was provocative and extremely irritating. The women complained bitterly and grimly. Their complaints fell on deaf ears. Their men rather ignored them and grinned over the matter. They thought that this complaint was a storm in a teacup. But they were mistaken. The women decided to upset the applecart. They were no longer prepared to grin and bear it. They developed a ploy on how to coerce the men to obedience. It was a guided stratagem. They wanted to spring a surprise and take their men unawares. Each woman prepared delicious meals that would last for a week. The aroma from the meals scented the air. The men were in their respective huts salivating and waiting for the meals to be served. But the women calmly and discretely left their respective compounds and congregated at the agreed location. They abandoned their husbands and children to fend for themselves. After days of experiencing the difficulties of managing the household, the men swallowed their ego and obliged the women their demands and sold off the pigs. This story shows in no small measures the lack of concern and care of the womenfolk by the men. The women had to react against this unwarranted provocation that tended to portray them as inferior and helpless in the face of an aggression. Because of this dramatic reaction, it is not fair to assert that the women were complacent and contented with their status in the traditional society because they were adequately protected and provided for by the men. If they were, they would not have reacted against the men as they did.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe shows how women were at the vanguard in the enforcement of the law against open grazing of cows. Cows were owned by men. If a cow was seen wandering about, the women would come out *en masse* to exact

punishment on the owner of the cow. Any woman who failed to join was appropriately fined (Achebe, 1994, 114-115). All this was done in the colonial period. And yet, it is said that before 1980, women never reacted against Igbo culture (Chimakonam and Agu, 2013, 66).

Again, to assert that women pretended their gender as weak in order to cling to the apron strings of men folk on account of its beneficial effects is to imply that women were economically ruined in the traditional society, that they were totally dependent on the men. The assumption is inaccurate. Surely, the men owned land and crops like yam, and economic trees such as palm, pear, kola, coconut, etc. They also engaged in money-yielding professions like smithing, palm wine tapping, hunting, fishing, carving etc. Those of them who were talented and assiduous could combine many tasks and became stupendously rich by so doing. But women on their own part, owned such things as cocoyam, breadfruit, melon, okra, vegetables, pepper, maize, cassava, etc. They planted, harvested and sold these crops and retained the money for themselves and their families. They joined their husbands in clearing the ground for planting. The men made the ridges and mounds; they sowed the seed yams and staked the sticks for the yam tendrils. The women planted their own crops beside the ridges and mounds. They came at intervals to weed the grass. At the harvest time, they harvested their own crops. Hardworking women earned sufficient resources for themselves and did not absolutely need to be maintained by men. They managed their income unhindered (Uchendu, 1965, 87).

Apart from farming, the women had their own domestic animals like goats and fowls. They were engaged in the works of arts like weaving, pottery, spinning, mat and basket making, etc. These were regarded as women professions. At Ndoki, for example, a man, out of vicissitudes of life, decided to weave cloth, a profession reserved for women, in order to have some resources to take care of his sick mother (Chimezie, 2010, 81). The man was said to have committed a taboo against the earth goddess by so doing. The town's people, both men and women, condemned him for his action. His sudden death, later, was attributed to this offence against the deity. This confirms that women were engaged in legitimate lucrative businesses from which they generated money for themselves. Besides, if they were not economically independent and relied solely on the largesse of men, they would not have reacted angrily and ferociously against the men when the pigs were destroying their cocoyam as noted earlier. So, it is not proper to

assert that the women pretended their inferior status and refused to put their abilities to use because of the protection and the maintenance they enjoyed from men. From the above, it is crystal clear that the women did not pretend their gender in order to be protected by men. They asserted their rights. They did not absolutely need the maintenance of men since they had their own sources of income. This fact that they have their own resources is one of the reasons why many women could survive as widows for many years after their husbands had passed on; they could maintain themselves from their resources.

b. Women War against the British

The claim that Igbo women war in 1902, 1929 and 1956 against the British was essentially fought because the latter had subjugated and oppressed the men, who the women themselves had considered as their little “gods”, for the very fact that they made life comfortable for them, is very far from the truth. The women fought for their own welfare and not for the sake of their men. This is particularly the case with the 1929 women riot. And this has to be seen in its proper context.

Before the build-up of the women war of 1929, the women were already feeling that their world was systematically being turned upside down by the colonial administration (Matera, Bastian and Kent, 2012, 139). Their social and economic status was badly affected. They were frustrated, disillusioned and disenchanted with the British. Their male counterparts were not as disgusted as the women for they benefited more from the colonial administration than the women. The educated Igbo men served as warrant chiefs and in local courts. Women were totally excluded in these political appointments. In the court processes, the men arrogated to themselves and arbitrated in cases which, in the traditional society, were the prerogatives of the women themselves (Eboh, 2003, 509). From the economic point of view, they were ruined. They lost control of the market space which ordinarily belonged to them; they lost control of determining the price of palm kernel and oil to the colonial administrators who introduced the measures for assessing these products before fixing the price, thereby denying them the opportunity to bargain or haggle; they lost control of getting back their bride price to the warrant chiefs in the event of a divorce, etc (Matera, Bastian and Kent, 2012, 140-142). They expressed their anger and frustration by attacking places of significance and

interest to the British, particularly those that serve as *fons et origo* of their social neglect. M. Matera et al, articulated the various structures on which the women ventilated their anger. According to them: “Property that served to exclude women or circumscribe their activities within privatized, masculine spaces attracted their wrath: warrant chiefs’ compounds; native court buildings; fences around mercantile, colonial, and some mission schools, railroad and telegraph stations; and European shops, banks, and factories” (Matera, Bastian and Kent, 2012, 143).

The last straw that broke the Camel’s back happened in 1929 when the rumour was flying about that the women were going to be counted and taxed. It was the culmination of their feeling of frustration and humiliation under the colonial administrators. The hell was let loose, a can of worms was opened when an elderly woman, Nwanyeruwa, told her fellow women that Mark Emeruwa, the messenger to Chief Okugo Ekezie, the warrant chief, came to her compound to inform her of the counting and the taxing of women (Matera, Bastian and Kent, 2012, 148). The news that was simply a rumour became a reality. A pandora’s box was opened. The women galvanised and mobilised themselves and put up strong fight against the policy. Even though they suffered casualties, the administrators were forced at the end to discard the policy. It is clear from the above that the women were fighting not in defence of their husbands but for their own world that was being decimated and impoverished through political exclusion policies which affected them badly, and which was certainly going to be worse if they were to be paying tax. According to Agatha Nnazor “Igbo women’s political consciousness and their ability to collectively champion their cause was clearly manifested in the 1929 Aba women’s riot, often described as the first Women’s liberation Movement in Africa” (Nnazor, 1993, 54). So, the Igbo women were not fighting in defence of their men who they considered as their “chis” because they protected and provided for them. The women fought for their own welfare.

c. Pet Names are not Titles

Chimakonam and Agu maintain that in the Igbo traditional society, women took glory in being addressed as *Oliaku*. They liked to be ‘spoiled’ and pampered by their husbands. This, according to them, is why they would prefer to remain in this “comforting” life status and would resist the temptation to claim their rights or exercise their abilities. For

them, women cherished to bear the pet names, such as *Oliaku*. What is *Oliaku*? It literally means “the eater of wealth.” Put in other words, it means “the eater of the wealth of her husband.”

Nevertheless, it is good to understand *Oliaku* in its proper context. In the pre-colonial days, yam occupied the highest place in the hierarchy of crops. It was the most valued crop. It was precious staple food. To steal yam was one of the crimes or abominations among the Igbo (Arinze, 1970, 30) and the punishment for this crime was death (Basden, 1983, p.148). At harvest time, New Yam festival was celebrated with pomp and pageantry. Yam was owned by men. Achebe would say: “Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop” (Achebe, 1994, 23). Emefie Ikenga Metuh describes yam as “the main source of wealth” (Metuh, 1985, 62). Possessing a number of barns of yams was a sign of affluence. It was something that showed how wealthy a man was. The men flaunted this wealth, by joking called the women who were the immediate beneficiaries of this wealth, *Oliaku*. That is the genesis of this word.

Oliaku, therefore, is a pet name. It is not a title. A pet name is a name given to someone by another to indicate affection. It is not the bearer of the pet name that gives himself or herself the name. And there is no formal ceremony that is conducted within which a pet name is conferred. Title, on the other hand, may be chosen by the bearer or by someone else. “Individuals choose their title names while the community/society confers some of them” (Okafor, Emeka and Inyama, 2008, 286). But whether a title is chosen by the individual or by someone else, it is conferred and confirmed on the bearer through official ceremony.

Now since the pet name, *Oliaku*, is not chosen by a woman herself but is given to her by her husband or someone else, it cannot reasonably serve as a premise to the conclusion about the avowed and avid desire of women to remain under the domination of men. And by the way, this pet name was not given to every married woman. It was given only to those whose husbands were reasonably in opulence. A wife of a poor man was not called *Oliaku*. Would the wife of Unoka, the father of Okonkwo, in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* be called *Oliaku*? “He (Unoka) was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat” (Achebe, 1994, 5). How can the wife of such a person be called *Oliaku*? Besides, there were some men who were so poor and wretched that they were financially unable to marry. If they had wives, such were made possible for them

by their brothers. Would such wives be called *Oliaku*? Certainly, not. In the book, *Igbo Personal & Title Names*, *Oliaku* does not appear in the list of Igbo title names; it appears in the list of personal names. And there *Oliaku* is explained as a name given to “A girl born into a very rich family; assimilator of wealth” ((Okafor, Emeka and Inyama, 2008, 227). So, it is not every girl or married woman that bore the name *Oliaku* either as a pet name or a personal name.

Nevertheless, in attempt later to translate the English, “Mr and Mrs”, the equivalent of which was not found in Igbo language, *Mazi na Oliaku* were used to represent them. But the women found the pejorative implication of the *Oliaku* and rejected it. Since they own property, work hard to earn money and financially reasonably stable, they prefer to be addressed as *Odoziaku* – balancer of wealth. They balance the family income through their contributions.

This “balancer of wealth” is logical and appropriate. This is because during the traditional process of marriage negotiation, the would-be wife was required to go and spend some days in her prospective new home. This afforded her the opportunity to know the father, mother, brothers and sisters-in-law. It was also the occasion for the latter to assess whether she was going to be a good wife. Apart from being respectful and obedient, she was expected to exhibit signs of industry and duty consciousness. If she was judged to be indolent, that could bring the marriage to an end. *Ab initio*, therefore, a man was not prepared to get into marriage with someone who was going to be a burden and liability to him. A wife was expected to assist in solving the economic needs of the family. And since married women make enormous contributions for the family upkeep, it is justified to call them *Odoziaku* rather than *Oliaku*.

There were other pet names like *Obidiya* (the heart of her husband), *Enyidiya* (the friend of her husband) mentioned by Chimakonam and Agu. They gave these pet names interpretations, however, different from what they really are. But if they are properly interpreted, it would be seen that they do not convey the idea of dependence and inferiority. *Obidiya* conveys a strong sentiment. It shows that both the man and his wife share similar sentiments. If the man detests laziness and is irritated by it, so is the wife. What gives joy to one, does the same to the other. And what grieves one, grieves the other. *Obidiya* does not denigrate the status of women. It is like the pet name, *Oyiridiya* (semblance of her husband), which the women also bear. *Oyiridiya* showcases the

similarity existing between a man and his wife. If the man is hardworking, duty conscious, productive, courageous, prudent, reasonable, so is his wife. *Oyiridiya*, as a pet name does not belittle the womanhood. It does not evoke the idea of dependence of a woman on a man or her being inferior to him. But the pet name *Enyidiya* is much more significant. It highlights the dignity of women. We explore the significance of *Enyidiya* in details.

Enyidiya is a combination of two words – *Enyi* (friendship) and *Di* (husband). In this word ‘*Enyi*’ is a prefix’. A prefix is a word that is put before another word to alter its meaning. When a woman is called ‘*Enyidiya*’ the idea is to change the natural relationship between a husband and his wife and replace it with the relationship that exists between friends. The relationship between husband and wife is ideally characterised by justice. There are basically two forms of justice – geometrical and arithmetical justice. In geometrical justice, unequal people share things unequally while in arithmetical justice, equal people share things equally (Aristotle, 1990, 211). Some couples relate to themselves on the basis of geometrical justice while others on the arithmetical justice. Igbo couples relate to themselves, namely, with geometrical justice. Nevertheless, the relationship based on the principles of friendship is superior to that based on either geometrical or arithmetical justice. Friendship relationship does much more than justice. In justice, whether geometrical or arithmetical, each person is given what is his or her due. But friendship goes beyond this, for friends do things to one another *ex gratia*. Good friendship is characterised by freedom and equality. Friends see themselves as equals and they freely do things to one another without sticking to or exacting what is due; they go beyond this. This is perhaps why Aristotle says “And if men are friends, there is no need of justice between them; whereas merely to be just is not enough – a feeling of friendship also is necessary” (Aristotle, 1994, 453). So, when a man calls his wife, *Enyidiya*, it is a sign that he recognises the self-worth of the woman, that he wants their relationship to run along the line of freedom and equality of persons. In the light of this interpretation, the man who calls his wife *Enyidiya*, does not intend to demean her or look down on her as inferior to himself.

We can explore the significance of *Enyidiya* further by examining more deeply the notion of friendship. In his treatise on friendship, Aristotle recognises three kinds of friendship based on three objects of love, namely, the good, the pleasant and the useful.

Hence, there are good, pleasure and utility friendships. The good friendship is called perfect friendship while the pleasure and utility friendships are inferior friendship. As I argued elsewhere, the good friendship in which friendship is based only on goodness, does not exist among the Igbo (Umezina, 2014, 172). The good friendship for the Igbo is a mixture of goodness and utility. It is what I call good-utility friendship. The Igbo want their friends to be good and useful to them. So, in *Enyidiya*, where the husband relates with his wife at the level of friendship, it means that both are not only good but also useful to each other. There is no domination, oppression or subjugation. Hence, if Igbo women preferred their pre-colonial status, it is not because they wanted to be protected and provided for by their husbands, but rather they wanted to enjoy the friendly kind of family life characterised by freedom, equality, and mutual sharing of goodness and utility. Hence, all the pet names which Chimakonam and Agu mentioned, in support of their thesis, if they are properly interpreted and evaluated, would rather cause their thesis to crumble.

d. The up-keep of the widows

The upkeep of the Igbo widows in the pre-colonial days was said to be the automatic responsibility of the brothers-in-law. The assumption is that the protection and provision for the widows continued uninterrupted after the death of their husbands. This was part of the reasons Igbo women were said to have feigned or pretended to be inferior or weaker sex. This does not seem to be the case. The emotional anguish that the women went through at the announcement of the death of their husbands does not lend credence to this. They bemoaned and bewailed their loss. Sometimes some women who had long and protracted grief became mentally deranged as a result of this (Jordan, 1971, 124). This would certainly not be the case if the so-called protection and provision of their welfare by their brothers-in-law would bridge the missing gap created by the death of the husbands.

The idea that there was automatic taking over of the responsibility of caring and protecting a woman after the death of her husband does not give strong support to the conclusion that the women pretended to be inferior and refused to assert their rights and use their abilities because of the expected benevolence of their brothers-in-law. The chink in the armour in this line of thought are as follows: 1. It assumes that the brother-

in-law may be as effective in caring and protecting a widow as his late brother, 2. that the widow would want her brother-in-law to take up that role, 3. that there was no enmity already existing between the widow and the brother-in-law, 4. That some women would not prefer to go back to their natal families to remaining in the marital homes. These assumptions are debatable and so they cannot be used to support a claim.

Besides, how could women be said to enjoy their pre-colonial life when they suffered imponderable indignities during the obsequies of their husbands. In the burial rites, there were certain practices that demean the *amour propre* of the womenfolk (Umezina, 2007, 48-59). In some towns, a widow was not allowed to pour sand into the grave of her late husband. Sand was considered a symbol of unity between the husband and the wife. To pour sand into the grave is to consolidate the marriage bond of unity between the couple. So, the widow was restrained from doing so in order that the bond might be dissolved. This would then give the widow the freedom to marry another man. If she did not break this bond, by not pouring the sand into the grave, her late husband would strike dead any new husband or any other person who interfered in his connubial life. That was the belief. In some areas, the marriage bond was dissolved through *Ichu iyi iri* (fetching water ten times) while in other places, it was done by preventing the widow from seeing the corpse of her late husband before burial. Of these three ways of breaking the marriage bond, only the last one was binding equally on the men. But even at that, the emphasis on compliance was laid more on the women than on the men. Nevertheless, some women after having broken the marriage bond, went back to their family of birth; some remarried. They did not wait to be protected and provided for by their brothers-in-law. This, of course, goes to flaw the huge claim, that the widow's welfare was assured at all times.

The plight of women was compounded during the mournful period, which lasted for about a year in some towns. The women were ushered into the mournful period through complete shaving of their hairs. At this time, some widows were not allowed to take their bath, change their mournful clothes, comb their hairs, or apply any cosmetics on their body. They ate in calabashes that were broken. Some were even asked to swear that they were not instrumental to the death of their husbands. To do this, they were required to drink the water that was used in washing the corpse of their deceased husbands. This is despicable. Widows were also barred from social interactions, for they

were believed to be polluted as a result of the death of their husbands; they were carriers of pollutions. They related more intimately with them than anyone else. Hence, they contacted the disease of the deceased more than any other person. Thus, they must be prevented from spreading this contagion to others. Indeed, during the mournful period, the widows were completely refused the *joie de vivre*. How could this widowhood practice justify the claim that women feigned their inferior status because it assured them comfort and protection by men. If they were happy with their status, they would not have reacted to torpedo substantially this obnoxious practice as they have done to their credit.

e. Women did not pretend their status – Articulation of Arguments

This section includes observations and summary of major arguments that bolster the view that women did not pretend their status as inferior. The Igbo nation is patriarchal in nature. It is governed by men. This is so at all the strata of human society – the family, kindred, section, village, town, etc. At all these levels, they make laws and decisions that bind men, women and children. As would be expected, they enact them to be in their favour. The women are in general disadvantaged in the patriarchal legislations. They are legally oppressed, repressed, denigrated and relegated to the background. The men enforce compliance to their legislations through coercion, physical force, customs and traditions. Biologically, women are not fitted physically to challenge the excesses of the brutal force of men. And so, they succumb to men's unwieldy authority. It is not because they are happy with their social status. It is simply because they are in patriarchal society in which men use taboos, religious laws and brute force to enforce obedience.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that even in the patriarchal system, in the pre-colonial era and after, the women did not pretend themselves as weak, they did not present themselves as defenceless, as people who needed help or as people who were comfortable because they were being maintained by men or as people who failed to assert their rights. The first thing that showcases clearly that they were not comfortable with the way they were treated was their formation of women associations. Since by their *sui generis* nature, they could not confront the men individually, they resorted to collective confrontation to curb the excesses of the patriarchal domination. They believe

in the strength of the multitude – *iwibutice* (multitude is strength). And so, they have women groups like *unmade* (the association of daughters in endogamous and exogamous marriages), *Ndudi* (group of women married into the kindred, section or village). The objective of *Umeda* is to ensure peace in their natal place. They exact punishment on any man who behaves like a bull in a China shop, whose overbearing behaviour is disgusting and unacceptable. The *Ndudi* women group protect their members when any of them is unjustifiably maltreated. If women enjoy their inferior status there would not be any need to form these associations. Besides, as noted earlier, they asserted their right not to be treated as inferiors by quitting their marital homes for their natal homes whenever they were abused beyond endurance. They did not pretend about this.

Secondly, women were not lazy or indolent to the extent that they pretended their weakness in order to be helped and protected by men. On the contrary, they were industrious and enterprising. As Green notes, women were really breadwinners (Green, 1964, 170). Their income was used in the maintenance of their families. The sources of their income were the staple crops like cassava, cocoyam, palm kernels, vegetables, plantain, etc. The men provided yam and occasionally fish or meat for the preparation of meals. But the other condiments like salt were provided by the women. Because a woman provided the bulk of the food eaten in the family, she could decide not to prepare food for her unruly husband if she made up her mind to punish him. Because it is the women who for the most part supplied and prepared food, “this gives them a lever both individually and collectively by which they can, if need be, quietly bring pressure to bear on the men” (Green, 1964, 171). And if this is the case, how then and for what reason should women feign their gender as weak in order to be maintained and protected.

Thirdly, women, in the precolonial era and after, owned personal properties. The fact that the Igbo women fought the British government who wanted to count and tax them is an eloquent epiphany that they had personal properties from which they generated their personal income. Why would they pretend to be weak and defenceless in order to be supported by men when they owned properties from which they generated personal income? They were generally not lazy. They were hardworking. They combined farm work, trade, family chores, bearing and rearing of children to their credit. If they were

able to multitask without complaining or grudging, it does not stand to reason that they would falsely affirm themselves as inferior gender needing to be supported (Green, 1964, 174).

Fourthly, the women asserted their rights unchallenged by men. Women had constant conflicts with the men over the destruction of their farms by the animals owned by men. An instance was given above on how the women called the men to order. On some other occasions, the women killed such animals that destroyed their crops. When such happened, the men did nothing in terms of retaliation. The women felt it was not proper for men to let their livestock wander around destroying their sources of income which they used to feed them. If the women had the temerity to challenge the men in this way without any reprisal, it would not seem even in the wildest imagination that they would feign their weakness in order to extract sympathy and favour from the men. They asserted their rights over things that belonged to them.

Besides the above points, women formed subscription associations (cooperative associations) to maintain their families. This is like a bank or provident bank. It has different local names like, *itis*, etc. They contributed money weekly or as agreed. The money collected each week was given to one of their members. They used the money to increase their trading investment or to solve urgent and pressing financial needs. Why would they have a mindset of giving false account of their nature if they could engage in this type of profitable venture?

In any case, in Igbo society, it can sometimes be debatable whether the men or the women are inferior. This is clearly evident in two Igbo sayings, namely, *Di butuGunanny* (the husband is the honour of a woman) and *nannybutuGu di yam* (a woman is the honour of her husband). The first saying, *di butuGunanny*, shows that a woman's prestige is dependent on the husband. This can mean two things. First, a woman has no prestige or respect if she is unmarried. Second, if she is married, the level of prestige is dependent on how popular her husband is. This saying showcases the superior nature of men. But the second saying is much more significant – *nannybutuGu di yam*. An unmarried man in Igbo society has no prestige or respect. He is childless. And if he dies childless, he is not given funeral rites. Consequently, he becomes *analogia* (useless fellow). He becomes a wandering spirit at death and cannot join the ancestors in the spirit land. This is why a man who is unable to marry on account of

financial difficulties is assisted by his fellow men to do so. From this traditional practice it is not evident who is superior to the other, the man or the woman.

Conclusion

Women everywhere suffered cultural bias. The Igbo women were no exception. They struggled to emancipate themselves from this. They were discontented with their being humiliated, ridiculed and assaulted because of their gender. They protested against this and never pretended their gender as inferior. Historically the quantum of their protest was not the same. The protest was dependent on the level of awareness and the magnitude of the cruelty against them.

In the pre-colonial period, Igbo women protest was mild and generally on the individual basis. During the colonial administration, it was both individual and collective. At this period, they carved a niche for themselves by being the first women liberation struggle recorded in Africa. The post-colonial era witnessed more efforts made by women to free themselves from the clutches of male domination.

Having said this, it would be *non sequitur* to claim that the women feigned themselves as weak and defenceless in order to draw attention of men to help and protect them. If this were the case, they would never have reacted against the men, neither would the men have maltreated them. Women were hardworking, financially stable and independent. They did not need to have the so-called mindset of falsely claiming to be inferior in order to receive favour.

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