

Sifting the Chaff from the Corn Using Proverbs: Accusations of Female Subjugation among the Igbo

By

Aloy Nnamdi Obika, PhD

Department of English
Madonna University Nigeria, Okija Campus,
Anambra State
aloyobika@yahoo.com+2348033820690

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Ezenwamadu, Nkechi Judith, PhD

Department of English
Madonna University Nigeria, Okija Campus,
Anambra State
ezenwamadunkechi@gmail.com+2348037058043

Abstract

From time immemorial, women have been so subjugated to the extent that in some cultures an example of which is the northern district of Indian, female foetuses were aborted because the people preferred the male child. However, due to changes in people's view of life, globalization, and civilization and so on, the intensity of this subjugation has been declining. That can explain why in Igbo land of Nigeria, such accusations as widows drinking the water with which their husbands' corpses were washed, wife battering, inheriting wives of dead men and so on are now anachronistic. In spite of the current situation, some writers are still retelling outdated happenings as if they are current ones. But for this paper, the researchers had to make use of the proverbs of the people, published sources and interviews. It was discovered that the ancestors of the Igbo nation established such women organizations like *Umuada* (society of the daughters of a particular locality), *Inyomdi* (married women of any place) and so on. The church then came up with some women organizations and the two sources merged so as to give voice to the women. But *ab initio*, the Igbo have been seeing women as acquiring both wisdom and masculine attributes with increasing age. That can explain why old women have the same right with old men. In other words, talking of women subjugation among the Igbo is anachronistic. In few cases where it is seen, it only affects few unfortunate and sometimes guilty women thereby making it laughable to generalize that Igbo women are marginalized or subjugated.

Keywords: subjugation, women, maidens, proverbs, marginalization

Introduction

There was hardly any patrilineal society the world over where women were given due recognition. In most places, they were taken as chattels of their husbands, fathers and brothers. People in such places uphold this seeing that their lineages would survive through the male children since the female would be married off to other families and places. There, where they

were married into, they were seen as strangers who were purchased with money so as to help the families.

Naturally, males are physically stronger than females. Since these societies under consideration were in their inchoate state with people being farmers, wood cutters, labourers and were employed in manual labour, the ability to fight against predators and feed the family was lauded and those who could do so were revered. That accounts for the male chauvinism in those days.

As Pooja Vatsh observes in an online article, “In India, some women choose to terminate their pregnancies when expecting daughters but carry their pregnancies to term when expecting sons”. As this scholar further states:

... genetic testing for sex selection has become a booming business, especially in the country’s northern regions. Indian gender-detection clinics drew protests from women’s groups after the appearance of advertisements suggesting that it was better to spend \$38 now to terminate a foetus than \$3,800 later on her dowry (n.p.).

However, this is an exceptional case because of the culture. Here in Igbo land of eastern Nigeria, although patrilineal system is in practice in most parts of the place, there is nothing like abortions since there is no paying of dowry so as to settle their daughters’ husbands. What is obtainable is that the intending husbands have to bring bride price to the family of the future wives. Together with the amount involved are different types of food and drinks. In addition, in the event of any death, the sons-in-law will attend the funeral with their friends and members of their families. A cluster of such sons-in-law will boost the occasion and is a source of joy and pride in the bride’s family.

As it was observed in India, so it was in ancient Rome. According to Shreya Deora in an online paper, women have faced discrimination and biasness in social, political, familial and economic life since time immemorial. It dates as far back as ancient Rome where women had few social and legal rights. To buttress this, the scholar points out that adultery then, when committed by a married woman, would end with her death while a married man was free “to commit any illicit sexual act” (n.p.).

These researchers then points out the status of women in China because of the culture of foot binding. As it is in this article, this foot binding became a popular culture in the upper classes where women’s feet, were bound tightly to prevent further growth. It was seen as a sign of beauty and was referred to as the lotus feet. The perception was that this practice would make the movements of women more feminine and dainty. But it caused severe disabilities and lifelong problems for them. An attribute of a woman with bound feet was the limitation of her mobility and therefore, her inability to take part in politics, social life and the world. Bound feet rendered women dependent on their families, particularly their men and became an alluring symbol of chastity and male ownership since a woman was largely restricted to her home and could not venture far without an escort or the help of watchful servants (n.p.).

However, one can see that this binding of legs was part of beauty make-up of Chinese women and as such, it was not forced on them. That their men later saw the gain in it should not be seen as a fault. It is similar to some modern women using dryers on their heads so as to dry their hair. The chemicals applied on the hair sometimes hurt them. Also, some use bleaching cream so as to change their complexion. One of the current researchers lost his ex-classmate when she had an operation and the medical doctor was unable to stitch the incision because the skin was too soft and was tearing because of the action of bleaching cream. She then died in the process. Nobody forced her to tamper with her complexion. Her attempt to look more alluring and seductive caused

her death and as such, situations such as this can hardly be classified as female subjugation. In view of such cases, it is not all reported cases of female subjugation that can be seen as such.

But no matter the case above, there are innumerable cases of women being treated despicably not because of any crime they commit but because they are of the female gender. That can explain Christine M. Rodrique's observation in an online page. According to this researcher:

Women in most settled societies of the world and virtually all cases, societies have experienced low status, exploitation, oppression, and loss of self-determination. For example, most settled and class societies transmit names and property through the male line (n.p.).

Some of these observations are made about Igbo women. Some are done through the study of anthropologists while others are looked at through the prism of literature. It is under the latter case that one can classify N. Chidi Okonkwo's study. According to him, "Numerous tales and proverbs cast woman as treacherous, capricious, vindictive, small minded and frequently brainless" (76).

Many are the observers who see negative regard of women in traditional Igbo literary creations most especially in their proverbs. One of such people is Obododimma Oha in his study of Igbo proverbs. According to him: "In the sexist Igbo proverbs, women are portrayed as being childish, irresponsible, foolish, weak, unreliable, wicked, dangerous and generally inferior to men. Also, they are suggested as [being] sexual objects" (92).

But the present researchers do not quite agree that such is the case in the real Igbo world, hence the production of this work. Some of the accusations could have happened in the past but most of them being presented at the present era cannot be taken seriously. To the current researchers, those who produce such works are simply pandering to amaze and entertain those who want to see Igbo people from a negatively preconceived perspective. The truth is that the Igbo nation of today, according to C. C. Ohagwu et al:

... cannot be described as typically traditional. The Igbo have become one of the most sophisticated tribes in the present Nigerian nation. They are profoundly educated, widely travelled, economically advanced, socially advanced and psychologically active. As a consequence, Ndiokwere is of the opinion that the Igbo traditional identity is fast being eroded as many Igbo leave their country for other places in search of greener pastures (175).

A nation of this status cannot be backward in some areas. In order to prove this, the researchers avoided having much personal influence on the proverbs used in this study for they are from major published texts. At inception, the compilers of such proverbs were all out to present what was obtainable in society unlike what personal interviews can garner since a collector can be either positively or negatively influenced by his informants who may give him what he wants to hear.

In view of such an influence, the researchers had to go for one of the earliest and most comprehensive collections of Igbo proverbs, *Ilu Igbo (The book of Igbo proverbs)* by F. C. Ogbalu. It was published in 1965. The reason for taking up this collection is to show that some of the accusations never happened and are in print today for the sake of sensationalism. If they did not happen in those days, can they happen now?

The other collection is F. O. F. Onwudufor's *Mmanu Eji Eri Okwu (Igbo Proverbs)* vol 1. This collection was chosen to show that some of the accusations are not happening now since the collection was published quite recently, in 2008. If the different proverbs these collections depict are similar, then it can be understood that the accusations neither happened in the past nor are they happening now.

An Array of Unfounded Accusations

Among the most damaging reports presented about the plight of Igbo women is the one co-authored by Sylvia Chika Ifemeje and Nneka Umejiaku. According to them, “Some Igbo customs demand widows to drink the water that was used to bathe the corpses of their deceased husbands. This, needless to say, compounds the psychological trauma widows are already passing through in consequence of their husbands’ death” (20).

If a thing like this is meted out on widows, then it is indeed dehumanizing. However, our enquiries among the Igbo of different states do not substantiate this. But at Nnobi which is in Idemili South Local Government Area, the researchers met John Okeke, an elderly man of over seventy years. Okeke told them that in far off years, whenever anybody was suspected of poisoning somebody and in the course of the ensuing sickness the person died, the suspect would be forced to drink the water used in washing the corpse before its burial. The belief then was that if the accused was guilty, he would be attacked by the spirit of the dead man. However, with modern civilization, knowledge and law enforcement agencies, nothing of such happens nowadays.

In continuing enquiries into this nauseating practice of drinking mortuary water, the researchers interviewed Pius Afulukwe of Umuobia village, Umuoji of the same Idemili South Local Government Area of Anambra State. He explained that the term “water used in washing a corpse” does not mean that in actual fact. There is a secret ceremony the elders conduct when there is suspicion of murder. That it is given such a name is to instill fear into the suspect.

Therefore, if these scholars who made the above assertion ever heard of such water being given to any widow, they should have noted well that the woman was suspected of having poisoned her husband and so, she was subjected to undergo such an experience. In other words, she did not live in peace with her husband.

So, in the days when drinking the water used in washing corpses was in vogue, it did not happen to every widow, for some lived in total harmony with their husbands. Take the pathetic case of Ogbuefi Ndulue and Ozoemena his wife as reported in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. “When the youngest wife of Ndulue went to call her again to be present at the washing of the body, she found her lying on the mat, dead” (54). As one of the characters says, “It was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind” (54). There are in the real world many Ndulues and Ozoemenas. Under this, who can ever suspect such wives of homicide? That marriage among the Igbo in real life does not always end up in fracas but in genuine love can be seen in the observation of Solomon C. Madubuike. According to a personal interview he made in June 2014 at Omuma, Rivers State, one Joy Nwokoma aged 78 years revealed to him that, “It is a world turned upside down; in our days, we only know of our mother and father, *Nne and Nna* who lived as one in one and achieved together” (49).

Earlier, this researcher reported how they contacted Anyanwu Udo, a 101 year old indigene of Umudim Eziala in Anioma, Delta State. According to this centenarian, “The very fact that a man paid dowry on a woman as his wife indicates that he loves her; he adores her and he cherishes her and respects her” (46).

Therefore, it is clear that only few marriages end up in crisis. In other words, in the days of drinking the water used in washing corpses, only few cases could be recorded. In other words, these few cases involved widows not because they lost their husbands but because they were suspected murderers.

To show the intimacy between couples, Madubuike has noted this: “The signification of praise names [which] husbands give to their wives in recognition of their capability to produce,

reproduce, protect and defend their children and even husbands in men's world shows that the Igbo culture recognizes the importance of womanhood in a man's life" (45).

Such praise names, this researcher presents are: *Obidia* literally meaning the heart of the husband; *Odoziaku*, the stronghold of wealth; *Ezenwanyi*, queen; *Nnediya*, mother of her husband; *Agudiya*, her husband's lion ... (45). That a man gives such cultural names to his wife is an indication that they are not living like cats and dogs. In addition, some women chose names that portray their relationship with their husbands. That can explain why some answer *Obidiya* (Heart of the husband), *Dimanu* (Husband marries [me] well), *Ogbodiya* (Friend of the husband), etc. If that is the case, where then is the feminine subjugation some present, probably to be recognized.

Again, Ifemeje and Umejiaku have other atrocities which they said are being meted out on widows:

Compulsory shaving of hair, sitting and sleeping on the bare floor throughout the mourning period, crying out at regular intervals, finally false improvement (the widow's movement is usually restricted within the house; she is banned from trading within the lengthy mourning period, as a mark of respect for the deceased partner (20).

Of all these observations, some were presented out of ignorance of the culture of the people and so, those who present them do so due to a shallow understanding of cultural implications. For one, shaving of hair during mourning is not just peculiar to Igbo land. It can be seen even in the Bible as it is in Deuteronomy 14:1. For the other, when any of the parents dies, all the children, excluding the married ladies, are expected to shave their hair. Therefore, that widows' hair is cut does not call for a special attention.

But then, there is an aspect of culture involved here. In the course of this work, the researchers were at Awuda, Nnobi. They got a story of a woman who was divorced by her husband. After the death of the man, the children who were young when the parents separated had grown up. They went and recalled their mother. However, the woman ought to have shorn her hair and mourned for the husband but she did not. It did not take long before she became insane. The people attributed her state to the unshaved hair. She continued like that until her death. So, since both sexes cut their hair while mourning for each other, why the shaving of women's hair receives special attention is baffling.

Crying intermittently during the mourning period is not compulsory. If a woman does so, it is an indication of the enormity of her loss and a show of her love for her deceased husband. Nobody forces her to do so. Nobody is there to record whether she cries or not.

That the mourner's movements (not only those of the women) seem to be restricted is as a result of visitors who come in to commiserate with her. The days of length mourning are over. In most places, after the funeral ceremonies, the following Sunday of the same week the funeral holds, the people go to church for a thanksgiving and the following day, they would go on their different ways. Some towns nowadays have made it as a law that the people would wear the mourning clothes for six months after which they have to go back to the church and the mourning will be over. That the situation of the women is highlighted as a form of wickedness to them is wrong, knowing that the church participates and monitors the proceedings of everything. Which church will allow the marginalization of its female members?

Also, sleeping on the bare floor throughout the period of mourning is another outlandish assertion. In stating this, do not the writers know that some of these widows have grown-up children who can resist the victimization? Do they not know the medical implication of such an act and the financial involvement? Writings like this show a shallow attitude towards research.

That a woman for one reason or another slept on the bare floor does not call for such a generalization on all mourning widows.

Banning her from trading for some time happened many years ago in some places and not in all parts of Igbo land. Also, some of the women were not traders but were earning their living through some other means. To discredit the work where these copious accusations are made, there is no mention of towns where such things happen and names of people involved. As was mentioned above, such works were written so as to pander to the expectations of some people. If the writers are intent on showing current happenings, what do they say of paid workers whose duration of mourning is stipulated by their employers? Knowing that some widows are highly educated and some are even law enforcement officers, how do you force them to obey you and in the process lose their jobs or face humiliation? Such views as we have been looking into were produced without adequate research.

Other accusations by Ifemeje and Umejiaku are the following: "... on dissolution of Igbo customary law marriage; [the woman] goes away empty handed;" "denying the female genders the right to inherit their deceased husbands' or father's landed property" (21) and female genital mutilation (23). As it is in this source, the traditionalists "claim [that] it curbs female promiscuity, prevents still birth in pregnant women, enhances male sexual performance, preserves female virginity ..." (23).

Before looking at the inheritance of landed property, one must remember that the society involved is a patrilineal one. If the land of a particular family is ceded to a divorced woman, will that land not be transferred to another family? What happens is that the land must remain in that family and be inherited by the children of that woman. But what happens is that if the land was bought, it could be willed to the daughters who are married, or if the divorced woman participated in its purchase, she could be given part of it. Alimony payment is a show of the ineptitude of the woman because it shows that she cannot survive without the help of the man.

Some well-to-do men tend to settle their daughters with landed property which they bought with their money and not which they inherited from their ancestors. Any person, who has ever been at a scene of selling of ancestral land and the limit of where to invest the money gotten from the sale, knows the spiritual implications involved. Either one uses it to marry a wife or he builds a house with it. Invest it in any business; the people believe that the business must fail.

On the accusation of female genital mutilation, none has said anything about circumcision of the male child. If the researchers are silent on this and if it is right for the male child, it will also be right for the female child to undergo genital mutilation. Nevertheless, such outdated issues should be jettisoned for nobody talks about it nowadays. Even, in the days when it was being practiced, the people were doing it according to the level of their wisdom and what they believed would help them. Therefore, outdated issues should be thrown overboard for modern ones to be used to build the society.

Another researcher who has an array of the injustices meted out to women is Godson Ezejirofor. According to him, "Gender inequality creates fear of abandonment and rejection in women, and as a result, women live under the supremacy of men and as subservient partners in the relationship" (69). Married women whom the current researchers interviewed never saw it from this perspective. To cut it short, marriage is a social contract just like employees in any establishment stay there with the hope that they are benefitting or will benefit. They represent the managerial set-up and they try their best to see that everything works out well. In all, show us any progressing establishment without a head for these employees must work in tandem with the will

of this head just as the woman must be in tandem with the will of her husband. Therefore, the marriage contract as presented by this researcher has been distorted out of shape.

This researcher also points out that “Marginalization of women, subjugation and subservient treatment of Igbo women in Anambra state have kept women from reaching their potentials” (70). Probably, this scholar is referring to an inexistent Anambra state or another Anambra state in an inexistent country. In the Anambra State where the current researchers reside, there are uncountable Igbo women professors in all fields of study. This state is the first in Nigeria to produce a woman governor. In addition, it has produced women commissioners, ministers, heads of government parastatals, ambassadors and so on. Marginalization has to do with individual experience and as such, writing about subjugation of women in totality is nothing but hollering “Wolf! Wolf!” where there is none.

Most laughable of all the accusations he leveled against men is the one which states that “In many communities in Anambra state, women are not allowed to partake in discussions that affect the community in which they live. Community meetings and deliberations are only for men” (72). Just as the males have their organization known as *Umunna* that oversees the affairs of the kindred, so have the women, *Inyomdi* that does the same thing. In addition, the women have *Umuada* also known as *Umuokpu* who are married daughters of a particular locality. In addition, they go to the Catholic Church and form Catholic Women Organization just as the men have Catholic Men Organization. They go to the Anglican Church and form Women’s Guild, Mothers’ Union, Girls’ Guild and Anglican Youths Followership. The last mentioned has both sexes as members. When you go to other churches, you find other formations that have women members only and these control society in one way or another. In all, the men are not serious. The women are very serious -- holding August meetings during which they discuss vital societal issues such as what to build, what to curtail and how to checkmate the behaviour of members, and so on. The men are just lukewarm. In running the affairs of the community, the greater control comes from the women. Therefore, saying that women are not allowed to partake in discussions that affect the community in which they live is nothing but balderdash.

Therefore, Ezeiofor’s conclusions that: “Research unveiled the magnitude of women marginalization in Anambra state [and that] women are relegated to the societal and cultural margins of near irrelevance except for making babies” (75) are, to say the least, myopic and without foundation. At Nnobi, a two-storey building which has been turned into a hospital was funded by the women of Madonna Catholic church. The men funded none. Throughout the Igbo nation, *Umuada* is a formidable force. If they come back from the different places where they are married into and decree anything, that thing must hold. Even the men cannot alter such because there is a belief that their orders receive spiritual back-up and so, whatever they decree receives no challenge. Where then is the societal and cultural marginalization into which they have been relegated?

To buttress how powerful, organized and focused these women who are called *Umuada* are, it is noteworthy that:

In the case of social injustice for the outcaste (*Osu*) or slaves (*Ohu*) and widows who are denied of free movement, interaction or right to personal or husband’s property or abuse of their other rights in the society, the masquerade or the daughters of the land will handle the case effectively to avoid social injustice (Amaechi 88).

If the *Umuada* (daughters of the land) are all that powerful or can be equated to the very powerful masquerade cult, how can somebody say that women are subjugated? What will these women further achieve in order to convince people that they are independent and have their own

say? That there are some widows who are being deprived of their rights does not mean that Igbo women are subjugated as if it is general to the entire nation. Rather, one can point out a certain widow who is being maltreated, not that all widows are deprived of their rights. Because this obnoxious attitude is not socially and collectively approved, that is why the *umuada* and the masquerades can intervene successfully.

In summarizing the activities and achievements of these daughters, Louisa Amaechi avers as follows:

The use of masquerade cults and *umu-ada* association in fostering peace and maintenance of social justice in Eastern Nigeria has helped a lot in sanitizing the society, reduces the unnecessary shading of innocent blood in different communities. It eradicates the cultural habits of maltreating the widow in Igbo land. It brings peace, peaceful co-existence of different people in their communities and environments (89).

The reader should note that these social activists are the very people who are said to be marginalized. What happens is that they are the people who call the shots. Finally on the accusations from this scholar is the statement that:

Marginalization and cultural disempowerment of women result in gender inequality, poverty, ignorance, and lack of assertiveness. When a group of people or population is limited in access to open economic, political and social opportunities, there is bound to be pervasive illiteracy and poverty (Ezejiofor 78).

If the women who are here referred to as not being assertive and are culturally disempowered are those who in 1929 at Aba carried out a riot because the white colonial masters wanted to introduce taxation the way it was in their country, then saying that they are unassertive is wrong for what they did in those far off days was highly assertive. If today, there are many Ezenwanyi who control some divinities and men go and enquire from them, then women are not culturally disempowered. If many of them control their businesses and some own industries while some are involved in international trade, then, they cannot be referred to as being poor and ignorant.

Other researchers touched by the supposed plight of Igbo women are Christian Chima Chukwu et al. One of their accusations is the way women are beaten up. They cited Burns et al who “submitted that everyday women are slapped, kicked, beaten, humiliated, threatened, sexually abused and even murdered by their partners. Accepting the foregoing, Brown et al (1997) argued that women were the sole victims of battery” (53). In asserting this violence against women, these scholars are silent on the few women whom the Igbo people refer to as having single bones. These win fights even against men. If these women are beaten up as it is stated here and sometimes are murdered, one wonders the number of corpses that are discovered everyday. But then, that some husbands beat up their wives cannot warrant the reference and the generalization that among the Igbo, women are battered.

To show the limitation in the assertion, note that some of these women have grown up children. All of them are from other families who think fondly of them. In view of the extended family system, these women have numerous “children,” “brothers” and “sisters” who can go on revenge mission when they are maltreated.

One of the current researchers once went to a cousin’s house Nwachukwu family of Ebenesi, Nnobi because of the way her brother-in-law was maltreating and threatening their “sister.” That mission attracted the entire village of the man, who denounced the behaviour of their kinsman. They seriously warned the man not to attract the wrath of the powerful and populous family against them, for the invading family is known for fighting injustice. Some of the elders

must have heard of the case when a member of the family, Stephen Ezeugoanata single handedly went to fight for his cousin, Enuma because the stammering husband was always beating her at the touch of any provocation. After that intervention G. B. as the man was known, stopped beating her.

That it is the culture of the Igbo people to fight for maltreated women is shown by Chinua Achebe in his *Arrow of God*. As it is in the novel:

Not very long ago, Obika had come very close indeed to committing murder. His half-sister Akueke often came home to say that her husband had beaten her. One early morning, she came again with her face all swollen. Without waiting to hear the rest of the story, Obika set out for Umuogwugwu, the village of his brother-in-law (11).

The story ends with the man being thoroughly beaten up, and with his friend Ofoedu, Obika ties him to a bed and they carry him to their village and place him underneath an *ukwa* (bread fruit) tree. The tree has many ripe fruits which can fall down and crush the man at any time (11). Do you think that after this experience that the man will ever dream of beating the wife again?

This is one of the ways of settling marital problems in the course of which the woman is beaten up. The *umunna* (the male kindred) is there to intervene. The *inyomdi* (married women of a locality) can enquire from their member who has been battered. After considering the situation, the members of the *inyomdi* can contact the *umunna* to call the man to order.

One can see in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, how Oduke takes the case of the beating of his sister by her husband Uzoewulu to the masquerade group *Egwugwu*. According to the plaintiff, his sister has lived with the husband for nine years. During those years, no single day has passed in the sky without his beating the woman (65). This beating two years before was so serious that the woman miscarried. The main masquerade Evil forest has this as his verdict: "It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman" (66).

Therefore, saying that Igbo women are battered by their husbands is a misinformation. For one thing, not all women are beaten by their husbands and so, the idea of women subjugation does not hold. For the other, when some are beaten up, there are social set-ups that curtail the excesses of some men who vent their anger on their wives.

In all many modern Igbo women can have their way when what they desire is in consonance with cultural requirements. Therefore, some of the allegations about marginalization are just cock and bull stories meant to entertain those whose ears want to hear of depravity and backwardness in Africa. This is clearly stated at Agbor, Delta State by a 98-year-old man, Samuel Oko who is a retired civil servant who worked at the University College Hospital, Ibadan (Madubuike 49/50).

Come to think of it, women who are so bold that as far back as 1929 at Aba could challenge the colonialists, can then be easily intimidated? If they could do so then, what can they do in this era of education, civilization and liberty? The observation of Lord Fredrick Lugard is worth noting. As cited by Chukwuma Azuonye, Lugard in assessing Igbo women has this to say:

She is ambitious, self-reliant, hard working and independent She claims full equality with the opposite sex and would seem indeed to be the dominant partner. The women's council (approved and trusted by men) enact laws for the protection of crops and enforce them by suitable penalties -- including ridicule (2).

In view of the misinformation so far dished out to the reading public, the current researchers find it necessary to take a second look at Igbo women and the accusations of their being subjugated. Since the traditional society had no means of recording history and experiences but coined them into folklore, they hereby look at Igbo proverbs so as to know the status of Igbo women.

Igbo Proverbs as a Repertoire of History and Social Happenings

The question that first comes to mind is: can Igbo proverbs furnish us with the culture of the people as it was and as it is now? Yes they can, and from them somebody can know the truth about the regard Igbo people have for their females. If these proverbs have no record of the maltreatment of these women, it all means that whatever any woman is passing through is not socially sanctioned and so it is peculiar to her and to few others.

To emphasize that these short sayings have worthy content, the founder of the society for promoting Igbo Language and Culture, F. Chidozie Ogbalu has this to say:

Ibo proverbs are accumulation of Ibo experiences throughout the history of the Ibos. In absence of any written history, they serve as the medium through which much can be learnt about the Ibos. Their past history, their philosophy of life and family structure, their politics and religion can best be learnt through the proverbs (5).

This view is not different from those of other scholars. As Jasper Ahaoma Onuekwusi puts it, "Proverbs give insight into a people's culture, philosophy and traditions. They constitute a pool of wisdom that unites the people in their perception of reality about different aspects of human existence (51).

Also, according to Nkem Okoh:

To a large extent ... a people's literature codifies their very existence -- their experiences, struggles, philosophies, aspirations joys and sorrows. In no other genre are such "facts" and circumstances better encapsulated than in the society's proverbs. Virtually, every aspect of a people's cosmological, human, or philosophical experience is captured, analyzed or reflected upon. Thus, proverbs essentially reflect the realities of the society that coins them (124).

In other words, our search for the status of Igbo women starting from far away years to the present can be found in these proverbs. In the two collections referred to, there are many proverbs that refer to the female gender. Some refer to the young and unmarried ones. Others refer to the middle-aged and married ones and others only refer to the aged ones. What they say about one group is different from what they say about the other. Therefore, a rewarding study of female subjugation in Igbo land must take the three groups separately. But then, there are some that do not pinpoint the age being referred to. However, since proverbs can be twisted to suit the user, we are to look at the literal meanings of the genre.

What the researchers did was to copy out all the proverbs that explore the position of women. Using random sampling, they selected five proverbs under each of the four sections. That the number was limited to five is to save space. That these proverbs were grouped into four sections is that the import of the proverbs changes when referring to women who belong to different age grades.

General Social Expectations from Females

There are many proverbs that refer to the female members of the Igbo society. Some instruct them on the correct mode of behaviour. Some simply assess their behaviour. But from them all, none can be seen as marginalizing them. Rather, the majority of them are out to correct some untoward character portrayal. Here are some of them.

Igbo Proverbs	Literal Translation
1. <i>Nkụ kọ ajọ nwanyị, ọ nya uko</i> (Ogbalu 18).	When an evil woman lacks firewood, she uses the ceiling of the house.
2. <i>Onye na-eso nwanyị, ntutu adighi eto ya n'isi</i> (Ogbalu 100).	Whoever that follows after women does not have hair on his head.
3. <i>Onye iko yo nwanyị yiri ibianu, na-anụ ikili ụkwụ ndị mụọ</i> (Ogbalu 110),	A man whose lover promises to come hears the foot falls of the spirits.
4. <i>Nwanyị zuta akwa ọhụrụ, ya aga zụọ ahịa</i> (Ogbalu 150).	When a woman has purchased new clothes, she walks round the whole market.
5. <i>A hụghị nwoke n'ubi, a rịọ nwanyị ji</i> (Onwudufor 6).	When a man is not seen in the farm, a woman should be begged to give out yams.

The first of these proverbs can apply to anybody not just to females. People tend to make use of anything handy in order to satisfy their pressing desires. The second and third entries refer to men who cannot control their lust for women. These women can lure them to go to any extent. Therefore, if there is any subjugation, the males are also included because of their unbridled sexual desire. The fourth studies the flamboyant display of some women so as to show off and attract admirers.

Finally, in the absence of a man, the woman takes over. That can explain why she is to be begged to supply yam tubers, the crop being known as a man's crop. The implication is that men and women can switch over to roles assigned to the other. That, to say the least, casts doubt on the inhuman treatment against women. If a particular woman is so unlucky that she is surrounded by wicked men that is a different case because one cannot simply generalize that Igbo women are treated inhumanly. But then, one should study the society's expectations from maidens who are yet to get settled or pull their legs into a house. This is the people's euphemistic way of saying that a girl is yet to get married.

Proverbial Appraisal of Unmarried Girls

The societal expectation is that every girl will eventually be married off her father's family unless the situation is such that the family has no male child to continue the lineage. In that case, some ceremonies are performed that will enable her to procreate and save the family from extinction. Else, all girls are expected to comport themselves in such an approved manner so as to attract good husbands. As the people say, "*Ka odi ko odi kpoba, ka odi ka odi egolu* - As somebody is who displays something for sale, so are those who shall come to purchase it." The meaning is that like attracts like. But from our random sampling, the following proverbs were selected.

Igbo Proverbs	Literal Rendition
1. <i>Mgbe nwagbogho tara akara n'ahịa ka ugwu ya ruru</i> (Ogbalu 86).	When an unmarried girl eats fried bean cake in the market, her dignity has been defiled.
2. <i>Anaghị asikwa nwa agboghọ atula ime mgbe oge ya ruru</i> (Ogbalu 101).	An unmarried girl is never told not to be pregnant when its time comes.
3. <i>Agboghọ amaghị n'ụwa dị njo</i> (Ogbalu 120).	An unmarried girl does not know that the world is bad.

4. <i>Nwagboghọ sinyere ite na-agba egwu, o chere na ndị siri nri n'oge ochie dabara n'ọkụ</i> (Onwudufor 32).	A maiden who has put a pot on the fire and is dancing, does she think that those who cooked in the past fell into the fire?
5. <i>Ọ buru na nchiche ebie nwagboghọ imi, mkparịta ụka ya ga-abụ sọ ya na nne ya</i> (Onwudufor 82).	When leprosy has eaten off the nose of a maiden, her conversation will only be with her mother.

The majority of the sayings above have to do with the correct way a maiden should comport herself. If she eats uncontrollably at any place as it is in number one, her dignity will be eroded. Once such happens, no man will be willing to marry her. In fact, the way girls who bear children before marriage as it is in Proverb 2, is the way she will be seen and regarded. Sexual desire should be put on hold until the appropriate time. Chastity projects the image of a maiden better than lasciviousness.

But Proverb 3 suggests that some of these maidens do not actually know that this world is bad. They take everything very easily without proper assessment. This also is the message of Proverb 4. Without studying the lives of those who went before them, they take every situation very easy.

Finally, in Proverb 5, the leprosy can be anything that tarnishes the image of the maiden. Once such happens, the maiden's only companion will be her mother. What of the father? He will be so disgusted and angry that he would not have anything to do with her. When such happens and the maiden is depreciating into the status of an old maid, the Igbo people usually refer to her as *oto n'aka nne ya* -- she that sticks to the hands of her mother. The final stage is that she now lives in her father's house so as to become a nuisance to everybody because the Igbo society is such that marriage is very important and she who fails to get married is looked down upon, and she is never at ease. Many of them with any tinge of envy now become threats to their sisters-in-law. From maidenhood, the female gets to the level of marriage and below are the randomly selected proverbs about that status.

Married Women and Igbo Proverbs

Igbo Proverbs	Literal Translation
1. <i>Nwanyị gbakarịa di ya n'ụzọ ụtutu, ihe chere di ya n'ụzọ ewere ya</i> (Onwudufor 5)	When a woman departs too early in the morning before her husband, what awaits her husband will take her.
2. <i>Nwanyị ọbula burula ajadu, ọ dighi onye ga-akoro ya banyere ihe isi ike</i> (Onwudufor 242).	Nobody will explain what hardship is to any woman who has become a widow.
3. <i>Nwanyị chekwube di ya, o were mma gbuwaa okwu</i> (Onwudufor 12).	When a woman hopes on her husband, she uses a machete to cut words.
4. <i>Nwanyị lelia di ya, ike akpo ya nku</i> (Ogbalu 9).	When a woman looks down on her husband, her buttocks will dry up.
5. <i>Nwanyị ire oma, di adighi ajuru ya nri</i> (Ogbalu 16).	A husband does not reject the food of a woman who has a pleasing tongue.

The majority of these sayings have to do with harmony in the family most especially between the wife and the husband. It is when the wife respects her husband that he fends for her and so, she can be presentable. The woman's buttocks will dry up when she becomes disobedient.

That is the explanation of Proverb 4. Because of her suave talks and her not being acerbic, Proverb 5 says that her husband will never reject her food. That her husband distances himself from her connotes suffering and disunity. But this suffering is most intensified when he dies or so it is in Proverb 1. The summary of the whole thing is that the burden of the family is the duty of the man and not that of the woman. But then, some women over rely on this and can say or do anything since the husband is at her back. That, in essence, is the import of Proverb 3. Such women are arrogant and domineering and have no respect for constituted authorities.

Finally, on the way Igbo proverbs refer to women, it is pertinent to look at what is said about aged women, *agadi nwanyi*.

Aged Women in Igbo Proverbs

Igbo Proverbs	Literal Interpretation
1. <i>Ma ọnwụ egbughi agadi nwanyi, agadi nwoke ga-etinyere ya ọkụ</i> (Ogbalu 22).	If death does not kill an old woman, an old man will make the fire for her.
2. <i>Agadi nwanyi hụrụ onye na-ele ya nka, ya si n' agburu ha adighi aka nka</i> (Ogbalu 93).	The old woman who sees the person that fends for her says that her lineage does not get old.
3. <i>Na agadi nwanyi adighi ike ọsọ abughi na mgbe ewu buru mkpọ ụtaba ya</i> (Onwudufor 204).	That an old woman has no strength to run does not hold when a goat carries away her snuff box.
4. <i>Agadi nwanyi oyi na-atu, ọ buru na ọ nyaghi ọkụ, ọ nyaa anwu</i> (Onwudufor 135).	When an old woman feels cold, either she warms her body with fire or she basks herself in the sunshine.
5. <i>Ugwu mụta igbaji ukwu, agadi nwanyi amuta a rikata, e zube ike</i> (Onwudufor 129).	When the hill learns how to dislocate waists, the old woman learns how to rest at intervals when climbing it.

From Proverb 1, one can see the respect accorded to old women among the Igbo. The implication is that as a woman's age increases, so does the regard society has for her. Is it not amazing that it is an old man that makes fire for her? It is because the older she gets, the more she turns into a man. That can explain why some of them are admitted as members of masquerade cults where they are now referred to as *nne mmuo* (mothers of the masquerade). They are taken as members who should be let into the secret of the society, and not that they should put on the masks and be displaying in public. They, after such initiations, know that contrary to the general belief that masquerades come out from ant-holes when palm wine is poured into it and a yellowish palm frond is beaten on it, that these ancestral spirits are human beings.

On the respect accorded to old women, Oha has this to say: "Indeed in Igbo land, old women are accorded greater respect and granted more rights than younger women. (This ... seems to give the impression that women are growing persons, and have to grow to meet the standard already attained by men" (91).

It is not only in proverbs that the image of old women comes out positively. From Azuonye's own words, we have the following: "In all the various representations of womanhood in *Akukọ ifo*, only the figure of old woman comes out with any positive significance. In general, the old woman features in the tales as a personification of the conscience" (25).

From Proverb 2, one can see that the frailty of the old woman can be controlled when she is well catered for. Under that condition, she can say that her family does not get old. But no matter her state, in the case of an emergency, she can try her best to escape or save her property. That can explain why she can run after a goat that takes away her snuff box as it is in Proverb 3.

The last two proverbs portray what one can see in the behaviour of these old women. Sometimes, one sees them warming themselves either at the fireside or during sunshine (Proverb 4). Due to old age, they walk for some time and rest before continuing as can be seen in Proverb 5. That Igbo women are marginalized, subjugated or even battered has nothing to do with the aged women.

Conclusion

That some women all over the world are marginalized or subjugated is a fact. But the extent to which it is voiced out does not tally with what is obtainable. That such happened in the olden days cannot be contested. But with today's education, civilization and globalization, saying that all women are marginalized is a misnomer for it does not happen. What is obtainable is that some, due to one reason or the other, are having it rough.

In view of this, the present researchers had to study the proverbs of the Igbo people in order to see their content. In the course of doing so, they discovered that what the proverbs imply about women depend on the age of the person involved. For the spinsters, the majority of the proverbs, advice them to be of good manner, for them to attract worthwhile husbands. The married ones are educated to know the importance and status of their husbands. Their pride and strength are embedded in that knowledge. When it comes to old women, they have so grown that they have turned into men. Therefore, the statement that women, and by implication all of them among the Igbo, are subjugated should either be taken with a pinch of salt or be utterly discarded for what the person is saying is something from the archives of the Igbo nation.

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