
Feminism and Covid-19 Survival Strategies in Igbo Traditional Religious Society

Emmanuel Ikenna Okafor (Ph.D)

*Department of Christian Religious Studies
Peaceland College of Education, Enugu, Nigeria*

Kolawole Raphael Omorinoye

*Pg Student, Department of Religious Studies
National Open University of Nigeria, Jabi, Abuja, Nigeria*

Adinoyi Peter Anakobe

*Ph.D Candidate, Department of Religious Studies
National Open University of Nigeria, Jabi, Abuja, Nigeria*

Theophilus Adama (Ph.D)

*Department of Arts Education,
Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria*

Okorie Ubong Bassey

*Ph.D Candidate, Department of Religious Studies,
National Open University of Nigeria, Jabi, Abuja, Nigeria
&*

Grace Obiageli Odinye (Ph.D)

*Examiner, Department of Health Science,
National Open University Of Nigeria, Enugu Study Centre, Nigeria*

Abstract

The concept of Feminism has been an issue of contention in Africa generally and the Igbo nation in particular. At the unprecedented outburst and spread of COVID-19 in the world, survival strategies were adopted among the Igbo as a whole, and individual households particularly. This study observes that some of these survival strategies raise tension and arguments on the Igbo cultural perception of feminism as a concept among traditional religious people of Igboland. In order to thoroughly examine these problem and findings, the research adopts historical and phenomenological research method. The study among other things recommends that gender stratification should be carefully managed among the Igbo people of the South East, Nigeria. Data were gotten from primary and secondary sources. Data collected were analyzed with hermeneutical style of data analysis.

Keywords: *Feminism, COVID-19, Survival Strategies, Igbo Traditional Religious Society.*

Introduction:

The upsurge of COVID-19 persuaded the governmental of so many countries in the world to enforce rules and lockdown of social, economic, religious, political, academic and educational activities in order to control the spread of the pandemic diseases activities. In Nigeria, the same control rules and guides were given. The lockdown specifically was too harsh to the upkeep of numerous families. At a time the lockdown was waived out, social and physical distancing was insisted to be observed by all and Sunday. This skyrocketed the Fares payable for the individual's movement from one location to the other. Therefore, survival became a very difficult task for the majority of the citizenry.

In the Igbo traditional religious society, activities and human engagements are highly gender sensitive. The lockdown particularly posed a very strenuous challenge to the traditional religious society of the Igbo people in the struggle for survival during the lockdown. People in both rural, semi-urban and urban settings in Igbo land had to strategize as breadwinners to at least put food on the table for the members has made them to think otherwise even though some of these jobs and engagements are not traditionally honored to be undertaken by the woman. The Igbo foe mist observances became in tempted in the face of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown and lockdown. In consideration of the social religious and cultural dimensions of gender involvement in Igbo land worldview, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and its rules might be potentials perceived as a sort of feminist liberation to an extent. It is a similar to what happened in the favour of the woman in their interactions with Jesus as against the culture and expectations of the Jews. Jess and Boffey (2019:1) point thus:

On Saturday, they rested. But early Sunday morning, the woman leaped into action. Motivated by love, they gathered spices and perfumed to the honour the body of Jesus. Little did they know that Sunday morning marked a new day in human history. God choose a small group up of woman to share the greatest news of all time.

The information about the resurrection of Jesus Christ was first spread by a small group of women who were the first to witness the resurrection. For the Jews it was supposed to the men or at least a man that should first witness the rising Jesus appearance.

The problem that bothers this research the fact that COVID-19 outburst and its survival strategies have increased the status of the responsibilities of women that displeases the majority of the men in Igbo traditional religious society to an extent that they find it difficult to involve themselves in domestic responsibilities for the family where the women are unviable. This is because, some women who likely turned to be breadwinners have refused to withdraw from those survival strategies and engagement or businesses. It is discovered that some men resist their involvement in domestic jobs because such strategies are in opposite to the feminist culture of the traditional religious settings of the Igbo people. More so, at the end of the lockdown men hope to vigorous face their business which would not accommodate attention to domestic duties, and finally most of them (men) re not used to household and kitchen works. The study aims at addressing the discrepancies created by the feminist interest and misconception among the Igbo people. The research adopts historical and phenomenological research method. The study recommends among other things that gender stratification should be carefully managed among the Igbo people of the south-east, Nigeria. Data were generated from primary and secondary sources. The data got were analyzed with hermeneutical style of data analysis.

Classification of Concepts.

The terms that are defined in this research include: Feminism, COVID-19, strategy, and Igbo traditional religious society. Feminine according to summers (2001:511) defines feminine as: "having qualities that are considered to be typical of women especially by being gentle, delicate and pretty." This definition association the adjective feminine to female gender (especially the adult) that is "woman" women. "summers (2001) further defined Feminism as "the belief that unities as men". Summers2001:512) also views. Feminist as." Someone who supports the idea that woman should have the same rights and opportunities as men. Merriam- Webster (2021) points thus:

Feminism was among our most searched for words on March 8th, 2021 as a global interest in international Women's Day prompted the word to surge in lookups. Our 2017 word of the year, feminism is currently defined as "the theory of the political, economic,

and social equality of the sexes” or “organized activity on behalf of women rights and interest.

The word has not always carried a meaning related to the rights of women; our earliest citation comes from Noah Webster’s 184 dictionary, in which he glossed the word as “the qualities of females.” This sense is not particularly common in modern use. The meaning of feminism which is common today began to gain currency at the end of 19th century. Presently, the concept has gone beyond the qualities of women to equitable distribution of political, economic and social rights and interest in the 19th century, but today it constitutes part of the courses taught in school and tertiary institution.

COVID-19 on the other side of the coin, has elaborated World Health Organization(2020) in been by Okaforetal (2020) in stating that: COVID-19 is the name given by the World Health Organization(WHO) on February11,2020 for the disease caused by the novel corona virus SARS- COV2 . It started in Wuhan, China in late 2019. Historically, according to WHO, on December 31, 2019, a strange new pneumonia of unknown cause was reported to the chase WHO country office. A cluster of these cases originally appeared in Wuhan a city in the Hubel province in China. The infection were found to be caused by new corona virus which assured the name”2019 novel corona virus” (2019-COVID).It was later given another name “severe” acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2” or SARS – COV2 by the International Committee on taxonomy of viruses on February 11, 2020. It was renamed SARS-COV2 because the virus is a genetic cousin of the corona virus which caused the SARS outbreak in the year 2002 (SARS-COV) ...

Covid-19 is a health challenge to the entire world, its effects extends to economic, political, social, religious and educational/academic activities of every human being in the global. Despite the health effects and deadly nature of the disease, the effects on economic and other affairs of the people with the African region generally and Nigeria in particular seriously influenced culture of gender responsibilities. It became feasible that survival of every family should not consider gender responsibility. More women became integrand of their family’s survival with the approval of the men or husbands even though it is contrary to the culture, though, not an abomination. The Igbo traditional religious society is seriously affected by this survival decision and diversion.

Survival has been defined by Summers (2001:1455) as: “The state of continuing to live or exist” Summers (2001:1426) defines strategy as: “a well planned series of actions for achievement an aim ...” Therefore, one would be Keen to emphatically say that survival in the midst of COVID-19, with series of restrictions especially during the first wave was of utmost importance to the whole world. The Igbo traditional religious society also took the need for survival to every high esteem that the women became seriously involved I economic activities to liberate their individual families. This thought became paramount as a dependable strategy to make the families survive.

The Igbo traditional religious society according to Mr. Nwannebike Udeh (Personal Communication 2 February, 2021) is the society in Africa where people observe a lot of religious and cultural rules and regulation. This explanation agrees with the view of Mbiti (1969:1) when he points that African are notoriously religious. The Igbo are not excluded in this act of belief system. The Igbo meant in this research are the set-icers of the present South East geo-political zone in Africa. They live in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States.

Origin and types of Feminism

Feminism has about three waves of it origin on history. Humm and Walker (2019:3) point thus:

The history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first feminism wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century's, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. Feminist theory's emerged from a variety of disciplines such as feminist geography, feminist history and feminist literary criticism.

In another interaction, Simone de Beauvoir (2018:7) in Humm and Walker (2019:3) writes thus: "the first time we see women take up her pen in defense of her sex" was Christine de Pizan who wrote *Epître au Dieu d'Amour* (Epistle to the God of love) in the 15th century ... First wave feminism refers to an extended period of feminist activity during the nineteenth century in the United Kingdom and the United States. Originally focused on the promotion of equal contract and property right for women and the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women (and their children) by their husbands. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, activism focused primarily on gaining political power, particularly the right of women's suffrage. Yet feminist such as Voltairine de Cleyre and Margaret Sanger were still active in campaigning for women's sexual, reproductive and economic right at this time. In 1854,

Florence Nightingale established female nurses as adjuncts to the military. In Britain the Suffragettes and possibly more effectively, the Suffragists campaigned for the women's vote. In 1918 the representation of the people Act 1918 was passed granting the vote to women over the age of 30 who owned houses ... Second wave feminism refers to the period of activity in the early 1960s and lasting through the late 1980s. the scholar Imelda Whelehan suggest that the second wave was continuation of the earlier phase of feminism involving the suffragettes in the UK and U.S.A. the second feminism has continued to exist since that time and co-exists with what is termed third wave feminism... Third wave feminism began in the early 1990s, arising as a response to perceived failures of the second wave and also as a response to the backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second wave.

Feminism as an idea or movement from its history as shown here to its pace or origin from United Kingdom and United States of America. It was in the late 1990s and early 2000 that it began to receive viable attention in Nigeria. On the political scene, women began to assume competitive offices within the 4th Republic as Ministers and so on with the ratio of 70:30 percents.

In Igbo land, such opportunities were offered to women. But on the basis of traditional and cultural economy in Igbo land such opportunities are very slim on the part of the women. The implications of the women involvement in survival strategies during COVID-19 as it affects their traditional and cultural economy will be discussed in the subsequently section of the research.

Types of Feminism

In religious studies, four types of feminists are recognized, which include: liberal, cultural, socialist and religious feminists. Claudia (F) *et al* (2020:6) but listed liberal, radical, socialist and cultural feminism discussed three types of feminism thus:

Radical feminism is a movement that believes sexism is so deeply rooted in society that the only cure is to eliminate the concept of gender completely... the second type of feminism, called socialist feminism is slightly less extreme but still calls for major social change. Socialist feminism is a movement that calls for an end to capitalism through a socialist reformation of our economy ... Cultural feminism is a movement that points out how modern society is hurt by encouraging masculine behaviors but society would benefit by encouraging female behavior instead ...

Clauda, F *et al*, have three types of feminism, where two types of feminism recognized in religious studies are contained. For the religious scholars, liberal feminists/feminism is concerned with political and legal structure of women, seek's equal rights in socio-political context. The liberal feminists share similar idea with radical feminism. The suggested difference is that liberal Feminism concentrates total equality of all genders in the area of socio-political context, while radical transcends to every context. Religious feminist which solely belongs to the field of religion focuses on patriarchy in religious system.

Survival Strategies Among Families In Igbo Traditional Religious Society During Covid-19 Upsurge And The Implication

The emergence of Covid-19 pandemic threw so many families out from their normal state, for the Igbo in their traditional religious society, there is an added anxiety where the strategies attempts to survive the restrictions and rules promulgated as a result of the need to control the pandemic tampers with the religious culture that approves and disapproves women's involvement in activities traditional peculiar to men, Idyorough Kayode et al (2019:306) discusses gender as widely shared expectations and norms within a society about approximate male and female behavior, characteristics and role. It is a social and cultural construct that differentiate women and men interact with each other. Gender is a social construct that allocates functions, roles and expectations to males and female in any given society.

Furthermore, Idyorough (2005) stresses on gender main streaming as a process by which gender issues are integrated into the general developmental projects and programmes of a society. When gender mainstreaming calls to mind, there is always the need for the strategic and practical needs of men and women to be eliminated in order to meet up with those needs. The feminist concept in the words of Kayode et al does not leave traditional Igbo religious society untouched. It took many families, some sacrifices and understanding to manage this gender issue in adapting and accepting possible strategies for most families to survive.

First of all, on the economic survival during COVID-19 lockdown and other rules associated with it, it became imperative that some families ought to allow the women or wives to be actively involved in breadwinning their families. Of course, this women's involvement to a reasonable extent obstructs the traditional religious culture of the people during the lockdown, there was continuous postponement of the 14 days lockdown of businesses and inter-state movements. Some husbands invest the little savings in this palms in their Wives Street and petty businesses for the up-keep of the family.

Mr. Ejiofor Ezekiel (personal communication 14th January, 2021) explained that as a trader who goes to Lagos on weekly basis for his trade on fairly used motor parts found it difficult to let his family survive during the lockdown, but later strategized with his wide, that will sponsor a petty trade of her choice to enable them feed the family. Mr. Ejiofor said he gave his wife N180, 000.00 to embark on rice and beans trade. According to him, his wife buys them in bags and sell in cups and bowls. The most challenging experience he said he had was the fact that his wife could not carry the business alone, because at a time, there was need for them to begin to add Moi-Moi and fry Akara ball with the beans he himself became actively involved that in some occasions he will be the one doing the grinding of Moi-Moi and Akara beans and sometimes fries Akara and cooks the Moi-Moi and stayed in the same Kiosk with his wife virtually every day.

As an Igbo man, Ejiofor was not comfortable with the development because his wife has tuned to appear as the major breadwinner of the family, while he perceives himself mere auxiliary partner, his household. For him and many other members of Igbo traditional religious society, it is abnormal for a man of such status to be overtaken by his wife in the discharged of family

responsibilities and occupations. More so, during Covid-19 lockdown and its rules, many people from Igbo land travelled to their villages. This influx created some economic tension. In Igbo traditional religious society, men own the high quality species of yam, diocese app Adaka, Opotoe.t.c which are always scarce while the women own the low quality species of yam popularly known as Mbana/Mvuna/Abana in Igbo language. The population drift now made it impossible for the scarce and high quality species of yam to serve many families. Many men had sell their high quality yam and went for the low quality species which are cheap and available in the hands of women.

Mrs. Obiageli Anidiobi (personal communication, 2nd January 2021) asserts that during traditional religious worship in 2020 COVID-19 heat, the many men could not afford to offer the Gods the required quality yam due to the economic situation on the ground. She said that men offered the same Mbana- water yam women offer. This is understood as a high level of economic assault against men of such religious society against their gods. Mrs. Ojiakaiefiediegwu (personal communication, 4th January, 2021) avers that many women made a lot of money from large quantities of Mbana- water yam (Diosispp) that reasonable number of women bought high quality yam last year, 2020 and have their farm filled with both high quality and low quality species. In some Igbo communities, there are some economic activities women and girls prohibited from doing. For example, within Enugu and Anambra State, some communities prohibits the woman and girls from making heaps for yam or sowing yam of any species. Ozonwoye Anichebe (personal communication 29th December, 2020) points that title men from his neighbor communities of Obuofia, Umumba and Agbaumana have started further negotiation for abolition of some of these traditional restriction against aided by unforeseen experiences in the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the socio- political sphere, men especially in the rural traditional settings are not used to steady meetings, markets etc with the rule of social and physical distance observation, the men feel at home with their farm works, blacksmithing, wine tapping, etc. some wine tappers hand over their daily product to their wives or female friends, some farmers also did sell their products at the mercy of their wives, etc. in his case, it is culturally abnormally in such traditional religious society of Igbo origin for a woman to serve the local palm wine in a public scene where customers demand to have the taste of the palm wine before buying. But it was condoned for the sake of the survival of individual families. The men became increasingly very scarce in the local market until recently in the year 2021 that men scantily started going to markets. During the sharing of the palliatives denoted by individuals, organizations and government advanced men were scarcely seen in such public arena. In one of the occasions according to Mr. Matthew Odogwu (personal communication 20th February, 2021) said that kola nut present the palliative, but there was no elderly man was available to say the traditional prayer and blessings, “Igo-oyo”. They gathering devised an alternatively by letting a little boy held an elderly woman who just said a very brief prayer in form of the traditional prayer, “Igo oyo” for the people gathered.

The situation was similar to a conflict era to many families which has some adverse effects to the society even though the people are surviving on the basis of getting daily bread notwithstanding the quality and quantity consumed. Ejike and Okoye (2019:280) buttress thus: “The effects of war on nay, poverty, Hideouts in dangerous places and deaths. In this context, four implications are extracted from the effects of listed by Ejike and Okoye. The observable implications in the women involvement in the survival strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic in Igbo traditional religious society include: Sexual abuse, pregnancy, poverty and death.

Some women, who were interested in moving from one man to the other, now saw the opportunity to achieve their goals. Some young female teens/teenagers who joined their mothers to trade or other means of survival, became exposed sexual knowledge and abuse. In a short while unexpected pregnancies set in villages and families. Unexpected poverty came in some women who are actively involved in the household fund management could not appropriate funds or resources probably because they are inexperienced of the technical know-how needed. Some women died because they became exposed to a harsh and unusual life and high stress level.

On the other, some women became used to resources management because of their involvement, some continued with the businesses for the upkeep of the family. Some found no reason to be submissive to their husbands, very few others now understand what their husbands and other male adults pass through for survival and became more humble relaxed over their responsibility because the women have come to their aid, while industrious ones saw it as an ample opportunity to expand the wealth in the family. Domestic responsibilities lost gender identity. Men and children jointly became active in domestic duties like cooking, washing clothes, sweeping the house, bathing the children etc. Amaefula (2016:135) points that “feminism entails a woman awakening to distortion on her social status ... “Women as part of COVID-19 survival strategists became more awoken to their social status. Ume (2020:83) concludes that: the socialization of men from a young age is what makes them perceive women as the subservient sex and enforce limitations to their roles and desire in society”. A look at the indiscriminate role acquisition during the COVID-19 pandemic calls for a re-adjustment to such socialization.

Recommendation

1. Feminism should be looked into from both religious and cultural points of view for proper adjustment.
2. Gender mainstreaming approach should be fairly applied considering the two sets of one environment that is the modern thought in a traditional society.
3. Gender role modification is needed right from the households.
4. Physiology of both sexes should also be held at esteem in allocation of roles.
5. The media publicity and public enlightenment through conferences, seminars should be intensified for better results.

Conclusion

Traditionally in Africa societies, the males are given a lot of opportunities more than the females. The orientation presents the females with limited opportunities in property ownership, marriage contracts, political and other social inclusion, etc. Later within the United Kingdom and United States of America movements started developing for equal economic, social and political right for all genders.

Igbo traditional society finds it very difficult to totally succumb to these feminist views. The upsurge COVID-19 pandemic has made more women in the society to assume some roles the men do, for survival of their families with gender discrimination. Though some affected the religious and cultural practice of people, yet women were accommodated to such responsibilities while some men were also accommodated to women roles. The religion and culture would be systematical be reliable agent gender role adjustment among Igbo traditional religious people.

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Interview

1. Mr. Nwannebuike Udeh, Enugu State, Traditional Chief Priest, 52years 2/2/2021.
2. Mr. Ejiofor Ezekiel, Anambra State, Trader, 54years 14/1/2021.
3. Mrs. Obiageli Anidwbu, Enugu State, Farmer and a Female Priest of fecundity, 42 years, 2/1/2021.
4. Ozo Nwoye Anichebe, Enugu State, Farmer and Mason, 74yrs, 29/12/2020.
5. Mr. Mathew Odogwu, Imo State, Trader, 38yrs, 20/2/2021.