
GENDER AND POLICY-MAKING IN IGBO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Policy-making creates an opportunity for the community or an organization to make decisions that control the members of the organization. In traditional societies, particularly among the Igbo, women are not given equal opportunity with men to make input in decision - making (policy-making). Therefore, the paper examined the influence of gender on women participation in policy- making with the view of finding solution to the anomaly. In this research, cultural and phenomenological Approaches were used. The data collected were described and analyzed. It used primary and secondary sources. The primary source used was observation while secondary sources used were books and Journals. It was discovered that women were not given opportunity to partake in policy-making due to gender constraints. Women were expected to participate in decision-making in order to tackle the deficiency in equal opportunity between women and men in policy-making.

Keywords: Gender, Policy, Society, Politics, and Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Women in developed countries are given ample opportunity to participate in policy-making that governs the entire countries. However, in Africa, particularly the Igbo people have a contrary view over women participation in decision-making. The western conception of policy is different from the African understanding of policy. For the westerners, policy is like the law of Persia and Medes that cannot be altered once made, but that is quite different from the African perception of policy – making, which is dynamic, democratic, representative and welfare –centred. For the African, policy is made for man, unlike the western understanding of policy, whereby, man is made for policy. The aim of this paper is not to

compare the western type of policy-making with African method of policy-making. This paper is concerned with gender stereotype that poses obstacle to women participation in decision-making while their female counterparts in the developed countries have been part of decision-making process for a long time.

Traditionally, decision-making is the preserve of men that make decisions and impose such decisions on women whether they are draconian or responsive to the concerns of women means nothing to men. For instance, some decisions that have become law are men-friendly and at the same time anti-women in every respect. Sometimes, men make decisions that are protective of male dominance and subject women to all kinds of discrimination, unfair treatment, and subordination to male hegemony. Consequently, matters that concern women are grossly neglected by men that are considered the decision makers. It is partly caused by male-dominated decision-making process that has driven women to the periphery of decision-making. Women are not represented, there is no way their opinion on sensitive matters that affect them will be looked into by men. There is an urgent need for women to be part of decision-making for it to be objective and gender insensitive. The previous writers have devoted attention on the influence of gender on women equal participation in politics, education, economy, and religion but none has written on the influence of gender on women equal participation in policy-making (decision making), particularly among the Igbo of Southeast, Nigeria. Therefore, the paper will examine the influence of gender on women participation in policy-making with the view of finding solution to the anomaly.

Gender and Policy-Making

Gender is the social and cultural constructs applied to men and women in role distributions which enhance the economic and political participation of the former at the expense of the latter. The social and cultural perception of women is a responsible factor in the exclusion of women in vital decision making. It is argued that it is impossible for women to be given opportunity to make decisions when society supported by culture has capitalized on their sex to relegate their vital roles to the kitchen (domestic chores) and bedroom (baby making) (Dike, 2015). While men are assigned outdoor roles of which one of them is decision making. Similarly, gender is the apportioning of roles to men and women on the basis of their different sexes (Ofoego, Odionye, and Ebebe, 2013). Ordinarily, gender is not evil as people think unless it is used to deprive a section of humanity what makes them human –that is human rights. Women are denied the opportunity of making decisions on the misconception that women are weaker sex and inferior biological sex (Iwe, nd). However, he maintains that excellent achievements of women in all spheres of life and the remarkable growth and development recorded in organisations where women have been incorporated into policy-making bodies have made this bias on women baseless.

Gender revolves around giving roles to men and women based on their different sexes (Ofoego, Odionye, and Ebebe, 2013). This cultural practice poses an obstacle to women participation in decision making. Iwe (nd) notes other factors that are responsible for the dehumanization of the dignity of women and their attendant deprivation of women of the opportunity to participate in decision making, like dark ages, feudalism, industrial revolution and slave trade. These impacted women and men, but women as a

vulnerable group were more affected by the social problems arising from dark ages, feudalism, industrial revolution and slave trade. In Africa, women suffered similar humiliations caused by some traditional societies' insulting and disrespectful attitude toward women. Women were not accorded dignity; rather they were treated as nothing. Feudalism is practiced in some African societies where women cannot inherit land, partake in sharing land, and sell land. She cannot buy land on her own without a man standing by her. The customs forbid women from settling land disputes. It should be noted that the industrial revolution brought about capitalism where the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. Again, it caused the establishment of industries and the need to fill the industries with workers. Some women have fallen victims of working under inhuman working conditions while others do menial jobs to earn a living. The slave trade rendered the dignity of women very low. There is no available statistics to prove whether men or women had more casualties in the slave trade era. However, women were likely to suffer more casualties from slave trade than men that were considered more valuable.

Even in local arena, child marriages were rife and, in such case, the immature but married female children were not allowed to take decisions on the day to day running of the families. The young girls from some poverty ridden families were giving out in exchange for money and the money gotten through it was used in feeding the entire family (boys inclusive). These obnoxious cultural practices were not meted to boys no matter how irresponsible some of them might be to their families. The slave trade ushered in human sacrifice, outcast system (Osu) and slavery (ohu or oru) that have affected women that are labelled outcasts or slaves in occupying vital positions of policy making. There were protests by villages and communities against women or men that were regarded as outcasts or slaves to the Colonial Government and the Mission Churches that wanted to give them appointments. The segregation against the outcasts has placed a social stigma against them. They were not allowed to mix freely with the freeborn that has prevented their women from participating in decision making in some traditional societies (Mgbemene, 1996). Even today, the church with its sermons, education, and civilization has not been able to eradicate the discrimination against the outcasts (Osu) by the freeborn (Nwadiala or Nwafor).

Traditional Policy-Making

Agalamanyi (2004) asserts that in the past, the Igbo had no chiefs. It was the elders – representatives of the lineages that saw to the administration of the people. The political units consist of families, kindreds, village and community. However, each village has the right to make their decisions independent of the community. Council of elders are made up of family heads that meet to settle cases or disputes. The General Assembly is responsible for making policies that direct village affairs. This meeting is usually held at the market square or village square occasionally. This has contradicted the common view that the Igbo do not have kings (Igbo enweghi eze). Apart from that, there were communities that had kingship systems like the Yoruba and Hausa people before the advent of colonialism. These communities were Onitsha and Nri in Igbo land, but where there were no kings, the membership of the village Assembly that consisted of adult males that excluded females deliberated on important issues with the view of making decisions. Consequently, women are not allowed to participate in making decisions at the village Assembly meetings on important matters that concern men and women in the village.

In some places in Igbo land where there were no kings, the people resorted to a republican government – it is a kind of government where the family heads represented their families at the village level where decisions were made. The places where republican government existed were Owerri, Mbaise, Okigwe, Obowo, Mbano, Orlu and Uboma. Some of the pressure groups that assisted in making policies were age-grades, secret societies, titled –men and women organizations. In all the decision –making bodies, the *Amala* council (Council of elders) was the highest decision-making body (Nwala, 1985). The Igbo had no central government prior to the colonial period. Nevertheless, central government existed in Nri and Onitsha. Every village was independent of others. Leadership positions were achieved and not ascribed to the leaders.

Political Institutions consisted of compound, title- making societies, fraternities, Age grades and the General Assembly. As stated earlier, village was administered by the General Assembly that was made up of adult males. Important decisions were made through democratic means (Oyediran, 1998). The two administrative organs saddled with the administration of the village were the Council of Elders and the Village Assembly. It is the responsibility of the Council of Elders to be in charge of tradition, custom and ritual while the Village Assembly was a policy –making body (Ndoh, 1997). The Igbo society as a hierarchical society was administered by the chief priest, Council of Elders, Village Assembly, the Age grades and the patrilineal daughters (Umuada). Each of these groups had specific role assigned to it. The Council of Elders settled disputes and protected the tradition from violation. The Age grades executed the decisions made by the Village Assembly (Odoh, nd). The rules or policies made by the Council of Elders were held sacrosanct due to their relationship with the ancestors whom they represented (Okwueze, 2003).

The emergence of warrant chiefs saddled the chiefs and their committees with the responsibilities of making decisions that affected men and women in their communities (Basden, 1982). In each autonomous community, the traditional ruler and his cabinet members that are drawn from each of the villages that make up the community make key policies that govern the entire community. There is no representation of women as member (s) of the *Eze's* cabinet (traditional rulers' cabinet). It is an obstacle to women participation in policy-making in the traditional societies. In the pre-colonial period, women were not entirely excluded from decision-making; rather they were consulted on matters that concerned them before decisions were made. It was the colonialists' introduction of Victorian concepts of women in which women were perceived to be feeble and subservient that weakened the dignity of women and edged them out of decision-making. In most cases, it is the Council of Elders that makes final decisions that are bidding on men and women (Uchem, 2001). There is no doubt that women are responsible for the discrimination meted against them by accepting their low status. They refrain from participating in politics either in traditional or modern societies due to the misconception that politics is solely meant for men (Ayanga, 1999).

In the patrilineal society like the Igbo, the father makes key decisions about his family (Agha, 2003). Besides, the architectural design in Igbo traditional homes inhibits women participation in decision-

making at the family level. The father as the *pater familia* (family head) lives in the *obi* (family temple) and his wife or wives live in *npkuke* (house or houses) at the backyard. In traditional homes, *obi* (family temple) serves dual purpose of being a place where visitors are received as well as a temple where prayers are offered to the gods and the ancestors, especially early in the morning by the head of the family. It is also a place where family matters are discussed and decisions that have far reaching effects on the family are taken. Women are not allowed to enter *obi* unless on the invitation of their husbands let alone participating in decision –making process (Agbo, 2003). Gender inequality in decision-making cuts across every strata of society. It is visible in some churches where women are denied the opportunity of participating in leadership and decision-making (Umoren, 2005).

Factors Responsible for Exclusion of Women in Policy- Making

Perhaps lack of representation of women in apex decision- making body is not unconnected to the erroneous perception of women by men as regards to policy-making. It is argued that in a male dominated society like the Igbo, there are devices put in place to perpetrate and perpetuate discrimination against women in decision –making of which one of them is proverb. Some proverbs present women in a despicable manner, thereby tarnishing their image, dignity, integrity, personality and ability to make wise decisions without men’s assistance (Aragbuwa, 2018). The Igbo patriarchal and hierarchical culture uses myths, taboos, folklore and proverbs to sustain gender discrimination against women, especially in policy – making. Women are treated as embodiments of misfortunes.

The African traditional folklore portrays women as foolish, evil, slow and treacherous while men are projected as heroes, conquerors, strong, wise and brave. Men are perceived as people that possess vital attributes like wisdom, keeper of secret, confidentiality, trustworthiness and resourcefulness that give them advantage over women in policy-making. Women are regarded as people that are dishonest, revealers of secret, gossipers and people that cannot be trusted (Uka, 1999). Among the Igbo, men are associated with special attributes like strength, seriousness, consistency and superiority that are believed to be lacking in women. The disparity between men and women over attributes has resulted in some people taking men’s discussions and decisions seriously, unlike women whose decisions are not taken serious (Okeke, 2014). Men deprive women equal opportunity in decision-making on the grounds that women are emotional and unintelligent; therefore, they are not fit for policy – making (Nnamani, 2005).

Men monopolize policy-making on the grounds that they are the custodians of customs and tradition which are constantly referred to when decisions that guide the natives are made. This privilege is not accorded to women that only exercise powers in their maiden homes as patrilineal daughters (Umuada or Umuokpu) where they are more conversant with the traditions and customs of the people. In some communities in Igbo land, the patrilineal daughters are accorded respect by their brothers where they decide cases, punish erring wives as well as make decisions that defy men (Orakwue, 2011). It is worrisome for women to be denied this privilege in their matrimonial homes where they should be given respect as people that have contributed a lot to the development and continuity of their villages and communities. Instead of giving women respect they deserve, they are treated as mere property of men to be possessed, controlled and

disposed at will by men.

Quarcoopome (1987) says that western investigators and Christian Missionaries misunderstood bride wealth to be the payment for buying a wife. This misconceived idea of paying the bride wealth has influenced the Igbo to believe that payment of bride wealth has conferred on the husbands the right to possess their wives as chattels. Consequently, women are regarded as chattels of their husbands that are meant to be seen and not heard. No wonder their opinions and feelings are not taken serious in socio-political and religious sectors of the country. Opoku (1978) condemns the act of addressing married women as chattels of their husbands owing to the fact that their husbands paid their bride wealth. He argues that payment of bride wealth is an indication that women are valued and should be treated in a dignified manner as persons and wives. Despite that, some men refuse to allow their wives contest in elections and participate in public sphere where decisions are made. This anomaly has deprived women the resources and platforms for policy-making which has rendered them observers rather than policy-makers (Orakwue, 2011). It is unfortunate that instead of women occupying political seats which will enable them to assist in making policies, gender stereotype only permits them to be onlookers and entertainers of the audience with dance (Sibani, 2017).

For women to be policy-makers they need to acquire education to enable them compete with men in all spheres of life. In some rural areas, parents are yet to appreciate the necessity of giving educational opportunities for the female children. Education is prerequisite criterion for public policy-making. Where women are lacking in education, it affects their chances of participating in decision-making. But, this is not so in a situation where men feel that women education ends in the kitchen. The implication of this misconception of women education is the literate women are not immune from discrimination in terms of giving opportunities for policy-making (Orakwue, 2011).

Amolo (2019) contends with the assertion that women are edged out in decision – making when she observes that there are women group meetings designed to cater for the welfare of women, children and in some cases the entire society. The decisions reached at the meetings are complementary to the decisions of men. Again, the Women Home and Abroad meetings (August Women meetings) provide platforms for women to make policies that not only affect women but also men. However, the women group meetings and women Home and Abroad meetings are not serious political platforms for policy-making by women. As stated earlier, these are forums where welfare decisions are made rather than administrative decisions (policies) – which are the preserve of men. In most cases, women consult their husbands before serious decisions are made. It is discovered that before their decisions are implemented, they are subject to men's ratification and approval.

Gender is misunderstood by some people to mean women; it cuts across women to embrace men. It concerns role distributions between men and women. In the context of this paper, gender (male or female) is considered based on how it determines or influences one's activities, responsibilities and needs in society. For instance, men are traditionally assigned the role of breadwinners and decision makers of their families and society (Mutunga, 2006). In the pre-colonial period, elders met to make policies on social,

political and religious issues. The council of elders consisted of *Ofo* holders from various families and villages. Women were not allowed to be the *Ofo* holders that edged them out of council of elders which was one of the highest policy-making bodies in Igbo land (Nnawuihe, 2005). This practise has continued till this moment. At present, women are not allowed to participate in vital traditional cults. For instance, women are forbidden from being members of the masquerade and the identity of the masquerade must not be revealed to the uninitiated, particularly women. The patriarchal society like the Igbo capitalizes on the ritual impurity of women occasioned by menstruation to discriminate against women. There is no doubt that cults are platforms for policy-making and where women are not allowed to belong it will be difficult for them to participate in the decision –making (Oduyoye, 1986). This led Oluyemi-Kusa (2006) to state “without a voice in decision –making, women’s concerns are not prioritised, and no resources are allocated to them. Without the resources and the political platforms, women have less chance of transforming social norms and attitudes”.

The law abolished child marriages in 1956, yet child marriages still thrive in some communities among the Igbo. Child marriage is a cultural practice in which the consent of the child is not sought before she is giving out for marriage. The consent of the parents of the bride and bridegroom supersedes the consent of the bride and the bridegroom (Opoku, 1978). Child marriage deprives the female child of the opportunity of making choice of the rightful husband. The victims of child marriages have been deprived of the opportunities of making vital decisions that affect their future. Other areas women pass through disparity caused by gender are on inheritance, leadership (policy-making), employment opportunities, and religion (Ejim, 2017). Lack of women participation in policy-making has dire consequences on national development. Women as a vulnerable group are the victims of bad policies that have marred society. This underscores the agitation by women to be included in policy-making bodies that is believed to redress the wrongs done to women and the entire society. There is no doubt that if women are actively involved in policy-making, it will help in averting bad policies that give birth to injustices, oppression, self-centeredness, corruption, exploitation and subjugation of women.

It is widely held that the ultimate goal of women is to marry and bear children and whether they are involved in policy-making or not, educated or not, career women or not, having social status or not are secondary to the primary role designed for them by gender (cultural role). Consequently, Challen (2006) opines that women are perceived as “home – makers and bearers of children”, rather than policy –makers. The gentle and emotional characteristics of women are meant for caring of babies and men are hardworking and gifted in managing emotional stress and responsibilities that is suitable for leadership position and policy-making (O’Donovan 2000). Therefore, it is held by some people that assigning different roles to women is not a calculated attempt to discriminate against them; rather the aim is to protect women (weaker vessels) from hazardous occupations (Obika, 2017).) In contrast to the above view, the opposite sex deceives women by telling them that gender stereotype is informed by men’s sympathy on women as weaker sex, but it has been discovered that gender stereotype is the outcome of quest for power, undue privileges and assertion of masculine physical strength and power over women. Women are mature to know the roles that are best for them, rather than men imposing roles on them (this

is one of the weaknesses of role stereotypes) ((Nnamani, 2005).

Similarly, women are forbidden from doing certain work or profession due to their menstrual contamination. In other societies, menstrual blood is respected as a vehicle of life and power. At the same time, it is distasteful to those that believe that menstrual blood diminishes power and causes clash of powers. It is believed that menstrual blood is imbued with power that is capable of resulting in power clash when it encounters ritual powers (Olademo, 2015). The misconception of women's personality is not the preserve of the Igbo. In the worldview of Egypt, Canaan, Mesopotamia and Greece, women were misconstrued to be evil, weak, and only good for procreation. Perhaps, the misconception of women, and biological and cultural function of child birth has caused the relegation of women to the background. It is held by some people that women's role of child birth hardly gives them enough time, to participate in policy-making, since they spend time in taking care of their pregnancies and nursing the babies after delivery (Anyacho, 2013).

Effects of Women Exclusion in Policy-Making

The Igbo people of Southeast, Nigeria, practice patriarchy that is a stumbling block to women participation in decision-making. This prompted Mbonu and Iheanacho (2013) to say that patriarchy is "a system in which the role of the male as the primary authority figure is central to social organization, and where fathers hold authority over women, children, and property". Leadership position offers a platform for decision making, but where women are edged out of leadership, it will be difficult for them to contribute to decision making. Women's potentialities have remained unrecognized and underutilized in a patriarchal society like the Igbo, where decision making is predominantly controlled by men, that have pushed women out of it with the fear that if women are allowed to participate it may be an opportunity for them to retaliate against men, by subjecting them to the subordination of women as well as discarding the age long rules that perpetuate injustice, inequality, discrimination, and oppression against women. This ill feeling against women led men to barricade women from decision making (Mbonu and Iheanacho, 2013, Olufemi, 2016). It is discovered that the women phobia among men is the bedrock of discrimination against women.

Women are unique creatures which has made it difficult for men to understand them. It is said that it is only women that can understand themselves. There is no doubt that women have been hiding under the umbrella of many feminist groups to canvas for the liberation of women and its attendant creation of equal opportunities for men and women in every aspect of life, especially, decision making. All women are saying is not for them to be like men, but to be given freedom and equality with the men folk. The Igbo patriarchal society is homocentric in terms of decision making which is a stumbling block to women's realization of their dream. Dismantling of this oppressive structure is the key to the enablement of women to lend their voices in decision making for the growth and development of the Igbo race.

The Igbo people of Southeast, Nigeria, practice patriarchy that confers authority for decision-making on men. It should be noted that the word patriarch is derived from the two Greek words, *pater* (father) and *archein* (rule). Literary definition of the word patriarch is the rulership of the father. It means the father

not the mother is the ruler of the family or clan or the tribe (Diara, 2001). This prompted Mbonu and Iheanacho (2013) to say that patriarchy is “a system in which the role of the male as the primary authority figure is central to social organization, and where fathers hold authority over women, children, and property.” Their authority cannot be questioned by women that are controlled as children and property. Similarly, Aina (1998) observes that patriarchy “is a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females”. The Igbo ethnic group is a stratified society where men and women are not treated equally. There is differentiation and gender stereotype that differentiate male roles from that of the women. The society created constraints to women participation in decision by evolving widowhood rites, early marriages, food taboos, prostrating before their husbands as a mark of respect and humility, social and behaviour taboos (Aina, 1998). All these cultural practices dehumanize women. The Igbo society is a patriarchal society which has resulted in men dominating all spheres of life. It has rendered women subordinates to men. The relationship between men and women, women’s roles and activities are largely influenced by patriarchal and cultural socialization (Ugwuja, 2017). The modern politics has been influenced by traditional political institutions where powers lie on the shoulders of the Council of Elders and General Assembly that exercise authorities over the people.

The discrimination against women has gone beyond traditional societies to state houses of assemblies where laws are made. Women are not adequately represented in states’ houses of assemblies in Nigeria. Statistics has shown that women are under -represented in the houses of assemblies in the country which is evident in the 10% position women occupied in the houses of assemblies in the whole country in 2013 (Ugwuja, 2017). Unlike, western countries like Britain, India, Brazil, Switzerland, Peru, England, Germany, Australia, Thailand, and Malawi that have not only allowed women to be part of policy making, but also have allowed them to become presidents of their countries (Uka, 2013). Unlike some countries in Africa, particularly, in Igbo land where women are not allowed to talk at a gathering where men are present. Women are socialized neither to challenge men when talking nor their decisions. They are not expected to talk back to men. In fact, women’s voices are not meant to be loud or heard at conversations. This underscores the hatred shown to the outspoken women that are regarded as being vocal and loquacious. They more often than not attract shame to their families and derogatory names to themselves.

CONCLUSION

The traditional societies, especially among the Igbo operate traditional political institutions that have no room for women to participate in policy-making. The key policy-making bodies like the Council of Elders and General Assembly have no female members; all the members are adult males. Women are not allowed to be initiated into the secret societies, they are not permitted to be title holders like *Ozo and Nze*, that are known to be pressure groups as far as traditional political Institutions are concerned. There are no way women can contribute to policy-making if they are not allowed to be members of these organizations. The potentialities of women in making policy are yet to be tapped by men and political leaders. This has engendered unbalanced policies made by men that have grossly neglected the welfare and peculiarities of women and have promoted the selfish interests of men. The effects of exclusion of women in policy-

making are injustice, inequality, discrimination, and oppression against women.

Unlike in the western world, the role assigned to women in Igbo traditional society is determined by gender. This has affected women in participating in policy-making due to it is a role that is reserved for men. Although, it is believed that division of labour between men and women according to sex will help women to effectively discharge their domestic role. However, women have demonstrated that whatever men can do they can do better. Therefore, it is expedient for men to refrain from gender influence and accommodate women in policy-making, so that they will not only have sense of belonging, but it will also enhance their value, dignity and contribution to nation building. The education institution as a change agent needs to reform traditional socialization of men and women through myths and proverbs by teaching the youths not to accept myths and proverbs that dehumanize women. The government needs to enforce laws that proscribed child marriage and other obnoxious cultures that inhibit women participation in policy-making. It is expedient for the communities and villages where taboos and folklores are still in practice to abolish them, in order to liberate women from cultural practices that enslave them, for them to have equal opportunities with men in making policies that govern society.

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