



Women and harmful traditional practices in Enugu state: An empirical investigation

Onodugo Ifeanyi Chris¹, Igatta Amaka Evangeline², Olachi Chuks-Ronnie³

¹ Department of Business Education, Enugu College of Education (Technical), British West Indies, Nigeria

^{2,3} Department of Business Administration, Charisma University, Turks & Caicos Islands, British West Indies, Nigeria

Abstract

We verified the negative perception of females and the consequent obnoxious and harmful practices perpetuated against them particularly in Enugu state. Scholars have expressed increasing concern about these obnoxious practices. These have found practical expression in a lot of work by experts, international agencies and non-governmental organizations. We examined the people's real and major reasons for practicing the identified obnoxious practices; verified the opinions and intentions of men towards such practices, discussed the effects of these obnoxious practices on female in Enugu state and suggested ways of eradicating these ungodly and evil practices. The instrument we used in the study includes observation method, questionnaires and oral interview. Data generated by the study was analyzed through descriptive statistics, and contents analyses. The study made some findings which sustains this negative perception which includes the believed that once married, a female and all she has revert to her husband, and that bringing girls up is like planting flowers in another man's compound while living there or putting water in a leaking pot. The work made some useful recommendations that will reduce these obnoxious practices to a vanishing point.

Keywords: perception, women, harmful, traditional practices, affecting, Enugu State, Nexus

Introduction

The perception of women from history has contributed significantly to the current obnoxious practices, women are being subjected to particularly in Enugu state. Writing with patriarchal background Simone de Beauvoir (1953:113) argued that women was dethroned by the evolution of owning personal property and her lot through the centuries has been linked to that. Ever since then, as Ogwude (2003) ^[25] pointed out it has become nigh impossible to discuss the status of women or the state of womanhood in any effective sense without an understanding of patriarchy. The author noted further the telos of the patriarchal system was to acquire and maintain wealth for man. That is man as the head of a lineage or in the person of a male child on whom his father's wealth and mantle of authority will fall on as heir. Sequal to that, the female child must live with no financial standing. She cannot inherit wealth because once married, a female child and all she has reverts to her husband. Her value consists solely in her reproductive capabilities.

According to Ogwude (2003) ^[25] desire for ownership private property of and to have successors from his line so as ensure that the family wealth is maintained within the family explains the burden on the women for male children. As a double-aged sword, the production of "unuseful" female children worsens her status and brands her a failed woman. The female child's lot can thus be traced from patriarchy connection which denies women the right to possess and bequeath property and this is the foundation of the obnoxious traditional practices that women are undergoing throughout the world particularly Enugu state.

Infact for some time now, development specialists like UNDP, WACOL, etc, have expressed increasing concern

over negative perception of women and consequent inhuman treatment practices against them. Globally, Okoli (1988) noted, these practices have attracted the gaze of well meaningful citizens, international agencies like UNICEF and other philanthropic organizations. Accordingly, intensive and extensive attempt have been made through research, studies and conferences to confirm the existence of such practices and trace the noxious effects on females. This is because aside from these practices constituting violence against women, they also ruin the future of women.

A demonstration of commitment towards eradication of these obnoxious practices have found practical expression in a quite number of research by expert, international agencies and non- governmental organization. Unfortunately, as Okoli *et al* (1998) pointed out most studies have mainly concentrated on women empowerment, training and enlightenment campaign. This is largely because studies conducted among women without deeply investigating the disposition of female toward the phenomena. It is possible that women succumb to such obnoxious practices as a result of the expectation of men or out of fear or the desire to meet such expectation Okoli (1988) further noted.

In view of the above observation the desire to shift focus from women to men in terms of investigation and intervention becomes a development out of extreme necessity. Such shift in focus according to Okoli (1988) would enable us ascertain feelings and disposition of men on these practices and also verify appropriate type of intervention measures necessary to tackle harmful Traditional Practices. This study therefore will be highly significant as it will shift focus from men to women and unravel the corrosive effects of these obnoxious and harmful practices on women in Enugu State.

2. Background to the Study/General Overview of Perception of Women

In the 15th century, according to Ogwude (2003:3) ^[25] the Catholic Church instituted an open enquiry into whether women had souls. Obviously, this was simply a euphemistic way of asking if women were human! Even after it had been conceded that women are possibly human, St. Thomas still contended that a woman lacked virility and was in fact an, “incidental”, “occasional” an incomplete being: or an imperfect man. St Augustine in his summation was less abrasive remarking nonetheless that they are neither “constant” nor “stable”. Ogwude (2003:4) ^[25] further noted, that in 1917 the canon law also decreed that women was “the devil’s doorway” a position revalidated in 1984. She further asserted that the Koran proclaims man’s “superiority based on the qualities in which God has given him pre-eminence because he provides dowry for women.

The tragic plays of the Greek poet/dramatist, Sophocles (496-406BC) unfortunately did not portray women in good light. His Theban plays formed an essential aspect of the canonical texts in the syllabus of most undergraduate survey courses. In fact as early as that time, he doubted if women will recognize her son. Similarly, Sigmund Freud and his essentially phallogocentric analysis of female sex reduces the dignity of womanhood to insignificant level. His oedipal and electra complex bears eloquent testimony of his view about women.

More recent studies in psychoanalysis explain man’s degradation of female as cognitive and learned prejudice despite the role of women in development which has attracted world-wide attention as documented by Benson and Duffield (1979) ^[12] Ahab-yehia (1977) ^[6] African – American Scholars Council Inc. (1995) Ssenkoloto (1983) ^[3] and Okoli *et al* (1988) among others.

Despite the above documentations, notable secular philosophers participated in this vilification of women. Aristotle cited in Ogwude (2003) ^[25] asserted that she was afflicted with a natural defectiveness”. Counting his own blessing, Plato said he was grateful first for being free and then for being a man. Pythagoras went extreme by asserting that man was created by a good principle, the same as has created order, and light; and women by an evil principle the same as has created chaos and darkness.

On his own part, Hegel (1967) ^[8] reduces women to stereotype and limits her activities to the home. Similarly, president Buhari once quoted as saying that his wife belongs to the kitchen and one other room. Using Sophocles’ Antigone as basis for his rhetoric, he contends that women can only rely on her relationship with a brother for universal unconsciousness and social expression. He writes in addition that “in externality” her sex organs were “passive” and “subjective”. Continuing, Hegel contends further that the “difference in the physical characteristics of the two sexes has an intellectual and ethical significance. He abusively remarked that a woman’s sex organs render her incapable of thinking

Despite the fore goings, the crucial and strategic role of female sex in development has drawn worldwide attention. Across the broad spectrum of the African continent, scholars are out studies on the best way of eliciting meaningful development initiative from women. This is because women who according to Okoli (1988) constitute a significant percentage in the globe population are not making corresponding impact on development. This is a worrisome

matter to both governmental and non-governmental development agencies. The search for possible explanation for this apparent paradox according to Okoli (1988) was spearheaded by the UNO through conferences on women in development in Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980) Nairobi (1985) and Beijing China (1995) among others.

3. Problem Statement

Speaking specifically about Nigeria, Okoli (1988) contends that women constitute a significant percentage of global population yet in development literature has revealed minimal contributions to women. Nigeria’s developmental efforts in all spheres of human endeavour, women in Nigeria particularly women in Enugu State appear to occupy the back stage not necessarily because of their innate inferiority status, but rather because of discrimination and traditionally – rooted bias, discrimination and marginalization against them. These unwholesome practices have noticeably become worrisome for it has assumed an alarming proportion and assumed a disturbing dimension. This equal necessitated this study. Arising from this, the questions that this study tends to raise are:

1. What are these obnoxious and harmful practices against women in Enugu State.?
2. What are the people’s real and intentions for practicing the identified harmful traditional practices?
3. What are the disposition of men to these harmful practices against females particularly in Enugu state?
4. What are the effects of these practices on women in Enugu State?
5. What can be done to eliminate these unwholesome practices or reduce them to a vanishing point?

These and more are the main trust of the paper.

4. Objectives of this Work

The broad objective of the work is to verify the nexus between perception of women and harmful practices against them in Enugu State.

The specific objectives are

1. Identify these harmful practices against females in Enugu State.
2. ascertain the people’s real and major reasons for practicing the identified obnoxious practices in the State.
3. Verify the disposition of men to these practices directed at women.
4. Examine the effects of the practices on women in Enugu State.
5. Suggest methods of eradicating these practices on women.

Research Methodology

Data Collection Instruments

1. Observation method

We used observation method. This is because this method brings the researchers into face to face, with people in village squares, burial/funeral ceremonies and festivities. Through this method the researchers gained tremendous insight into problems of these maltreatment against them. The researchers observed circumcision, traditional feasts for purification, and for atonement. Equally through the method the researchers observed young girls during circumcision.

By identifying with the people under study, the researchers observed preferential treatments given to male child; maltreatment given to widows and the girls undergoing circumcision ordeal.

2. Questionnaire

We developed and standardized questionnaire and develop appropriate skills of administering the instruments. These were administered to people in the population under study.

3. Oral Interview

Indebit oral personal interview were further deployed to some groups who are knowledgeable in the issues and practices involved.

Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data collected for the study. Percentages and mean were equally used.

Brief Literature Review

According to Okoli, Onah and Amujiri (1998), in no other sphere of women studies have literature proliferated as in deplorable conditions of female in the developing nations. The pathetic and deplorable conditions of women has assumed a matter and/or subject of serious intellectual concern that literature on it have not only proliferated, but have revealed more information on the problem of women. Hence, in a survey of the position of women in Latin America, Bronstein (1982:168) ^[14] cited in Okoli *et al* (1998) concluded that:

Although peasant women are oppressed as citizens of under developed countries and as peasants living in terrible impoverished conditions, it is their oppression as women in male-dominated societies that is the focus of this book. More than 40 peasant women from Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, El Salvador, and Guatemala speak out about man's control over their lives by enforcing their (men's) "right" to women's labour, to beat them, have sex whenever they like it and denying them access to education, the opportunity to have birth control-in short to become persons in their own right by developing a consciousness of their own.

The situation above by Bronstein is not unique to Latin America. This is same throughout the developing nations. Many authors are in agreement. Fox (1977), in his "Nice Girl" identifies and discusses three basic strategies used by society to regulate the freedom of women and exert control over their behaviour. These are confinement, protection and normative restriction. Mince (1982) ^[21], in a similar vein, examines life within the traditional Arab Family, and explains the notions of honour, shame and identity which condition women's experience, and analyses how ordinary women cope with her extended family being adapted to modern urban life.

In Bangladesh, Cain, *et al*, (1979) analyse women's role in rural economy in which society is marked by a powerful system of male dominance: patriarchy. But if the condition of women in patriarchal society is deplorable, it is equally objectionable in a matrilineal society. Richards (1982), describes girls' initiation ceremony among the Bemba, a matrilineal society, the element of the ritual and its importance in the Bemba tribal system. She effectively shows how women's ceremonies portray and try to enforce the social obligations of marriage and the institution of the kinship group, and the conflict that this involves.

According to Okoli (1998) all these documented harmful societal discrimination against them are supported by

identification of specific practices which afflict individual woman. Abdalla (1982), succinctly portrays this in well – written book, *Sisters in Affliction Circumcision and Infibulations of women in Africa*. Female circumcision is among the condemned evil practices against women which have attracted world-wide attention. In Egypt, Assad (1980), has documented the evils of this practice in his work "Female Circumcision in Egypt: Social implications, current Research and prospects for change". Female circumcision, or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) has been identified as a curse on women reproductive ability in addition to exposing them to all kinds of health hazards.

What are these Harmful Traditional Practices against Women?

According to Inter-African Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (2009) harmful practice, are those practices done deliberately by men on the body or the psyche of other human beings for no therapeutic purpose, but rather for cultural or socio-conventional motives and which have harmful consequences on the health and the rights of the victims. While obnoxious practices are those practices that reflect the values held by members of a community for a long and are harmful to specific group especially women. As such, these harmful practices do negatively impact often irreversibly on the life of the girl, the spouse, the mother, the husband or family members, hence it is a negative societal phenomenon. These practices according to United Nations Division for the Advancement of women (2009) have remote and mysterious origins, and are based on absurd and vague reasons and violates the right of women.

These Harmful Traditional Practices according to Anor (2009) include the Female Genital Mutilation (FGM); Forced feeding of women; Early or Forced marriage; massage of the clitoris, Breast-ironing; domestic violence, culturally related food taboos, abduction and widowhood rites etc. they all have serious effects on the value placed on women and the girl child by society. These practices persist in the State because women and girls child have unequal access to education, wealth, health and employment inheritance, and other things that make like worthy of living. These harmful beliefs and behavior have anchored themselves deep in the area with a view to keep women in submission, as the good pleasure and whims of men. This we intend to verify its effects on women in the state under study.

1. Female Genital Mutilation

According to Richard (1982) Female genital mutilation (FGM), or female circumcision refers to, surgical removal of parts or all of the most sensitive female genital organs. It is perpetuated in many communities around the world. FGM according to WHO as cited in Anor (2009) forms an essential aspect of the rites of passage ceremony for some communities, marking the coming of age of a girl child. Perpetrators of these inhuman act believed that, by mutilating the female's genital organs, her virginity will be ensured before marriage thereafter. The World Health Organization (WHO) insists that FGM has a serious effect on the health of women. The WHO further contended that FGM violates, other international human rights laws such as the right of the child to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health", as contained in article 24 (paras. 1 and 3) of the Convention on the Rights of the child. The period of mutilation varies from area to area the world over.

Reasons for FGM

FGM is a custom or tradition synthesized over time from various values, especially religious and cultural beliefs. Scholars like Steward (1977), Fox (1977), Assaadm (1980) among others argued that the purpose of maintaining the practice include religion, custom, decreasing the woman's sexual urge, hygiene, and ensuring fertility, etc.

Effects of FGM

Health and Psychological Implications

According to WHO (2008) FGM has no health benefit but creates many health risks. WHO (2010) further asserted that the effects of mutilation have short-term and long-term implications? Haemorrhage, infection and acute pain are the immediate consequences. In rural areas where untrained traditional birth attendants perform the operations, BFGHS (2004) contented that complications resulting from deep cuts and infected instruments can result to death of the child. WHO (2014) argued further that most physical complications result from infibulations, although cataclysmic haemorrhage can occur during circumcision with the removal of the clitoris. It can also result in infections when carried out with unhygienic instruments. The WHO maintained that the application of traditional medicine equally results to infection leading to tetanus, general septicaemia, infertility and anemia. Rab – work B (2006), WHO (2008) noted that in addition it result to physical and emotional consequences FGM reflects severe gender discrimination. According to them it robs communities of the full contributions of females and limits there to attain their potentials.

2. Son Preference

According to WHO (2010) and ANOR (2009) Son preference has its origin on the tradition of inheritance and traceable to patriarchal system which allows wealth to be accumulated for man. Their conception is that man (male child) is the head of his father's wealth and that the mantle of authority falls on him. Due to this believe, the female child must live but with no serious financial backing. Ogwude (2003)^[25] supported this patriarchal school of thought when he posited that a female child is not allow the inherit her father's wealth because once married, all she has reverts to her husband. According to Ogwude (2003)^[25] a female child's value consists solely in her reproductive capabilities. Consequently, desire for private property accumulation and its ownership accounts for the son preference and the burden of female on male children. As a double-edge sword Ogwude (2003)^[25] further noted, the production of "unuseful" female children worsens her status and brands her a failed woman.

Ogwude (2000)^[25] hypothetically x – rayed the plight of female child and the desire for sons preference thus: once born, the female child is doomed to a life of dependency first on her father and later on her husband and she must bear the emotional and psychological pill out of such dependency.

Consequences of Sons Preference

Sons preference has unfortunate and undesirable consequences to the women or girl child in particular and the entire society in general. In Enugu State in particular, family administration revolves on the male children. This is because as Ogwudi (2003) noted the preservation of family name is guaranteed through the sons. The fear of not

preserving and maintaining a family name due to lack of a male child prompts families to wish to have a son. Hence one of the consequences of son preference is polygamous family life. In attempt to get a male child, some men may take a second or a third wife to be sure of getting a male child. This has undermined the Christian life of some men in Enugu State through marrying many wives which Christianity frowns at.

Another consequence of this desire is the high rate of divorce in Enugu state which is traceable to lack of male child in a family. Some families in Enugu State have divorced their wife due to inability of the wife to bear a male child. Most of these men according to Onah (2016) believe that son is the family pillar and the well as a means of family continuity.

Unjustifiable maltreatment of women without male child is another consequence of sons preference in Enugu State. In some communities, in the State most female are not given opportunity to attend good school. There is also discrimination in the feeding and care of female infants especially in procurement of Christmas cloths and in sending children to go for holidays etc.

Furthermore, it has lead in protracted legal tussle over ownership of property. Whenever a man who has no male child dies, the man's family used to struggle over the deceased's property with his wife. The immediate family will feel that the property should be reverted to them since the man has no male child.

The practice of adoption is another consequence of son preference. In traditional Igbo setting, adoption is an alien culture. Most "royal" or "blue" blood family frowns at bringing into the family somebody with strange blood through adoption of a male child. In some cases, the adopted male child will be a torn in the flesh of family members who adopted the child and who has nothing in common with him.

3. Widowhood Maltreatment Practices

A widow as the name implies is somebody whose husband has died and marks of permanent physical separation between the died husband and living wife. In a traditional Igbo setting a widow desires decent treatment considering the trauma such person undergo after her husband's death. However, in Enugu State, the reverse is the case. For most widows in the State are subjected to inhuman treatment. Most of them are suspected to have been instrumental to their husband's death. This is why widows in the State are forced by tradition into a process of proving her innocence and she must undergo extremely distressing rites. In some cases, widows in Enugu State are forced to drink the water used to wash the dead body. She is denied sleep, food and appropriate care.

Widowhood practices in Enugu State violate fundamental human rights of women due to inhuman treatment they are subjected to. Mamah (2016) in his study documented how in Nimbo in Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area of Enugu State, wives of king mourned their husband for a total of seven years before such man is buried and another one year after interment. Mamah (2016) however, pointed out that the advent of Christianity has helped to waterdown most of such practices against widows.

In the olden days, in the Eastern part of this country, widows were meant to mourn their dead husband between ten months and two years during which they remain in secluded areas. Mamah further noted that in some areas, widows would not also take their bath for about three weeks

after which they are accompanied in the dead of night to a river for shaving and bathing. During such journeys people are not allowed to see them because they are naked. There they will take an oath to prove their innocence over their husband's death before shaving exercise. Should there be any suspicion that the women had a hand in the death.

In Enugu State today, there are a lot of maltreatment of widows ranging from the denial of rights or privileges; physical assault; seizure of husband's properties both moveable and immovable prevention of widows from participating in burial ceremonies; oat-taking to prove her innocence and taking widows to shrine for covenant (Igbandu) before they mourn her husband. In some areas they are forced to dip a kola nut into water used in bathing her late husband and chew the kola nut.

According to Vanguard Newspaper of April (2016), in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State for instance widows had to mourn their spouses for one year in black dresses, black ear rings, necklaces and black foot wears. The newspaper reported that widows are made to stay indoors for six months before appearing in public after observing certain rites of the community. In the same Ezeagu, for instance widows of Ozo title holders observe more strenuous task while mourning their spouses. After the burial of their husbands, they are made to stay in secret rooms where people are not allowed to enter unless female virgins and older. The widows in question are forced to stay in the secret room for two weeks where food and water were given to them by virgins before coming out to observe other cleansing rites before such widows could mix with the community and the outsiders in that community.

4. Early or Child Marriage

Another traditional practice that has equally affected females is early or child marriage. Women have kicked against this practice and have used all sort of strategies to frustrate it. Nawal (1983), writing under the title, *Women at point zero, a feminist novel and "paradise"*, describes how a young Arab girl from a poor family ran away from the repulsive elderly husband she was forced to marry and took to streets in Cairo. In northern Nigeria, a young Kanuri girl, had to amputate her leg rather than marry an elderly man her parents chose for her as a husband.

Consequences of Early/Proceed Marriage

Agreed upon and consummated before the girl is 18 years old, with her sexual organs not yet mature, and her consent irrelevant, early marriage is a tragedy for females. According to WHO, For that reason, early marriage is like child trafficking and both are bad. The WHO X-rayed consequences of early/forced marriages to include: domestic violence and rape; undesired pregnancies; death of the girl in question.

5. Domestic Violence against Women

Scholars like Okoli (1988), Minces (1982) ^[21], Young (1985) among others noted that In many areas of Africa, violence against women and girls is widespread. According to them gender-based violence refers to physical and brutal attacks against women by her husband. In most cases, it is an attempt to force woman into unwanted sexual intercourse. Domestic violence affects women adversely and therefore harmful.

Findings of the Study

The study identified the following obnoxious practices

against women in Enugu State. Female genital mutilation, son preference; keeping women in miserable condition after her husband's death, early or forced marriage; giving young girls to gods or fetishes (Igere); differential assess to property; denial of women from inheriting property of parents and or husband; domestic violence among others.

From various gather gathering instruments content analysis of the documents we assessed, responses of respondents in the questionnaires and what we observed, we discovered that many reasons were given for that inhuman behaviour towards women. All the reasons border and stem from the fact that Enugu State society is largely patriarchal. The males in the area understudy desire to perpetually exercise their domination on their women. This finds practical expression on son preference syndrome and the anxiety associated with sonless couples. In almost all communities in Enugu State, boys are given preferential treatment. Here, girls are perceived as objects that should be seen and used in the house, thereafter given for marriage. This accounts also for reasons given for female circumcision; differential assess to wealth; inheritance and school; the reasons being simply that a woman occupies a secondary and inferior place in society, the practices are highly glued to culture and all though culture can change according to Okoli *et al* (1998) the change is usually sluggish and difficult because of inherent resistance from the people who are unsure of what will happen tomorrow..

The study further revealed that the idea for a tradition of keeping a widow in a bad condition ranges from respect for the dead man, through suspicious that a widow is instrumental to the death of her husband to cultural reasons.

The study also discovered that men's attitude towards these practices in the area understudy shows that many men there favour these practices against women. Not only that they feel satisfied that these practices are existing but that they see nothing wrong with these practices.

Finally, it was revealed from the study that the effects of these obnoxious practices against women in the area of study are numerous. These include clear lack of confidence on the part of girls in the state; lower literacy level of the women, exposure of women to high reproductive risk; poor empowerment of women, physical, social emotional and psychological dislocation of females in the area under study among others.

Conclusion

From our discussion so far, desires for the private property owners to have successors from his lineage and to ensure that the family wealth is maintained within the family explains the burden on the woman for male children. As a double-aged sword, the production of "unuseful" female children worsens her status and brands her a failed woman. This is more pronounced in Enugu State where women are not allowed to inherit her father's wealth because once she is married a woman and all she has reverts to her husband. The female child's lot can therefore be traced from this ungodly and heartless custom which denies women right to possess and bequeath property and this is the foundation of the obnoxious practices that women are undergoing in Enugu state today. Their value consists solely in their reproductive capabilities and she is treated like slaves in those olden days. This has made people to perceive women as an accidental human being to humanity in Enugu state and that is why in Enugu state to day, bringing up girls is like

watering the neighbour's garden or planting flowers in another man's compound while living there.

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