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# ATTITUDE TOWARDS A MALE AND A FEMALE CHILD AMONG THE IGBO OF NIGERIA

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**Abstract**

*Igbo people are socially and culturally diverse; one of the three tribes in Nigeria and the second largest population in southern Nigeria. The Igbo believes so much in child bearing and failure to give birth denotes failure to womanhood. They believe so much in passing their inheritance to their male children, this is why the birth of a child is received with joy and gladness and the birth of a male child received with remarkable jubilation and festivity than that of a female child in Igbo culture. Women folk pass through hell, based on the issue of childlessness or of not having a male child. The overall purpose of this study is to determine the ways of changing the Igbo ideology concerning male child, female child and childlessness; and specifically, to find out the problems people face due to not having male child or being childless The research employed a descriptive survey approach. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The findings revealed that the main reason for marriage among the Igbo is to be able to give birth to a child that will take over the parents' inheritance and take care of their parents in their old age. The paper concludes that the male child and female child are all children from God and that they should be treated equally.*

**Keywords: Attitude, Gender Issues, Igbo People, Marriage, Cultural Values.**

## Introduction

Indeed, in the study of Igbo culture, child bearing is of great importance. Marriage is a valued and indispensable obligation that is used to rate the status of men and women in Igbo society in South-Eastern Nigeria. A man or woman who has reached the age of marriage and is not married is taken as an irresponsible person. Among the Igbo people of Southeast Nigeria, marriage is perceived as a divine injunction from Chukwu (Great God). Traditionally, one major objective for which people are born is to marry and bear children. Marriage is the one experience without which a person is not considered to be complete perfect and truly a man or a woman. It is part of the definition of who a person is according to African views about man. Every other achievement of an Igbo, wealthy, firm, education and so on is secondary to marriage and procreation.

The Igbo as a patriarchal society believes in passing the family inheritance along the male line excluding the female. This socio-cultural belief and practice leads to gender role problems, especially in the case of families with no children or male child who will inherit the family estate. Family inheritance is shared among the male children of the family. The female children are excluded because when a female child is married out of the family, her position

shifts from her Fathers family to that of her husband's family. Her position in her husband's family also depends on her bearing a male child for the husband. The implication of this is that a woman with no male child for her husband has no right of inheritance both in her Father's house and in her husband's house.

The Igbo ideology of a male dominance makes a man to marry as many wives as he can to have a male child. A woman who is able to bear a male child for her husband is considered a fulfilled woman. She is also accorded greater respect in her husband's house more than other wives who have no male child. In some parts of Igbo land a man who does not have a male child after marrying many wives have to perform some traditional rites and allows one of his daughters not to get married. She is to stay in his home and produce male children who will bear his name *"Nhachi Nwaanyị."* The ritual known as *"Nluikwa"* makes the daughter a male daughter.

Traditionally, childless women in Igbo land also take the blame and are espoused to all sorts of ill treatments, whereas men are exempted from the blame. This makes a woman to accept any man who is able to impregnate her and endure all sorts of sexual pains as far as she will be made a mother. Motherhood makes a woman fulfilled in her marriage, especially when she has a male child. She is ready to accept practices socially and culturally that makes her to get a male child whom she can call hers. The childless wife or a wife who has no male child is given the legal right to marry another wife to produce male children to make the woman achieve recognition in her husband's home. This would make the wife a "female husband ". In view of the above, the study stands to investigate into the factors that will help to alleviate peoples thought against female child, male child and childlessness. Base on this, Igbo people as well as other people around the world especially the male gender will find the results of this study useful for it will help them to know that the female gender does not determine the gender of a new born baby.

**Childbirth in Igbo Land**

The birth of a child in Igbo land is greeted with a shout of joy to the parents and relatives. Eweoma (2018:4) supports this motion by saying that marriage between a man and woman is a union of togetherness of man and woman in accordance procedure in the tradition which will give them the certificate to have sexual intercourse in other to bear children. He furthermore illustrates that God supported it right from the beginning of His creation. Kioko (2015:1) states that the main purpose of marriage in Igbo land is giving birth. For instance, a husband and wife in Igbo land will always say that, the reason why they are getting married is because they want to have children of their own. Nwankwor (2012:20) viewed his mindset by saying that so many research that has been done in this topic is pointing that child birth brings joy, harmony and love in a marriage. This is true because in Igbo land when a husband and a wife look back on their children, they have hope on their lineage continuity and also who will take care of them in their old age. Because of this every parent pray for their children because when things are good for the children they believe that it is also good for them. Below are the five unique Igbo traditions that emphasized their strong belief on child birth-

**1. Post Partum Care *Ọmụgwọ***

It is vital and important aspect of Igbo birth traditions, it takes into consideration that a new mother might be overwhelmed and needs help and care after birth. In Igbo tradition, it is a

period in the life of the new mother when her own mother or another close relative comes and stay with her for upwards of one to three months, right from the time the child is born. During post partum care, the visiting mother is in charge of preparing spicy yam, pepper soup, hot water massages. In this way the visiting mother takes care of the new mother and the new born baby.

**2. Pay Homage** ***Nzu***

When the news of childbirth breaks, delivered safe and sound, the child is welcomed into the world with much joy and jubilation. The women group and neighborhood will gather, begin to sing loud and joyful songs, after which they will go in the house and rub *Nzu* on their necks as a sign of purity of heart. Recently, in cities, most people use white powders.

**3. Naming Ceremony** ***Ịgu Nwa Aha***

The naming ceremony is usually on the 7th to the 12th day after the birth of the child. This is a way of formally presenting a child to his people such as family, friends, kinsmen and the entire community. The breaking of kola nuts then takes place and prayers are offered on behalf of the child. However, in recent times this tradition has been adapted. Now people take the ceremony to church and have the priest preside over the child.

**4. Circumcision** ***Ibe Ugwu***

Circumcision is an ancient Igbo tradition that involves the removal of the foreskin covering the Penis. In the past, this practice is performed in many Igbo communities. For most circumcisions, it is done on the 8th day after birth

**5. Pot Buying** ***Ịkpọ Ọkụ Nwa***

Another Igbo tradition tied to childbirth is the pot buying. During this, people sent pot or give the mother some money to buy a pot for the new born. If the new baby is a girl, some men may send money to the mother. This signifies their intention to marry the girl if she grows up. Time changing, this particular custom is hardly practiced in Igbo communities.

Igbo people are insatiable longing for children. In every community children constitute a source of pride and joy to their parents. A man who has a lot of them within his compound is accounted worthy and fortunate. Among the Igbo nothing is as good as childbirth. Each time an Igbo person think about marriage, what comes to mind is childbirth. The significance of childbirth to the Igbo is reflected in the kind of names Igbo people give to the new born. For example: *Nwakaego* means having a child is greater than having money, *Nwabugwu* means child is prestigious, *Nwabuife* means child is light. *Nwabueze* means every child is a king, *Nwabuzo* means child is the first. Igbo people believe that it is not just the parents of a child that own the child; names also reflect this belief as in, *Adaora* means Daughter of the community, *Obiora* means Aspiration of the community, *Nwaora* means child of the community

Another way Igbo people belief that childbirth is the greatest gift in marriage is in the greetings among Igbo. Example, *Kedu maka nwa?* Meaning how is the baby?, *kedụ maka ụmụaka?* Meaning how are the children? Igbo people have so much belief in Child birth that when exchanging greetings they ask themselves about their children. If there is no reproduction of the offspring, succession would eventually discontinue, as a result the society

will cease to exist. According to Janneh (2015:746), among the Igbo, nothing is comparable to childbirth, each time an Igbo person think about marriage, what comes to their mind is childbirth.

**The Birth of a Male Child**

A lineage is a group of individuals who trace descent from a common ancestor. In a patrilineal society individuals are related as kin through the male line of descent. In Igbo land, when a child is born, there are two types of congratulations, the first congratulation is that a child is born and the sex of the child whether male or female determines the second congratulation. This second congratulation is received when the child is a male. Parents tend to show more preference to the born of a male child and also show preferential attitudes towards such child right from conception. Male-child preference involves having more value for boys than girls to the extent that it breeds negative effects on the girl-child, women, the home and the society (Egede and Egede, 2010). A woman, who achieves recognition and status by the birth of at least one male child, is considered fulfilled and ultimately accorded greater respect by the relative to her counterparts who do not achieve the same feat (Nwokocha, 2007).

Igbo people covertly live by the conviction that male children are more precious or of more valued than female children. In the sociopolitical structure of the Igbo, females are not recognized and welcomed in the assembly of men. When for instance the Ohaneze Ndigbo gathers in a true Igbo traditional setting, women are not part of it. Families without male child are alienated in village and community meetings where only males are recognized as bona fide members. Male child preference among the Igbo is rooted in their deeply religious worldview. In exchange between divine and human, some significant roles are reserved for males, for instance, in offering sacrifices to the gods, males play more prominent and dominant roles than females. It is true too that some deities in Igbo land have women as priestess, but generally males perform most sacrifices and ritual in Igbo traditional religion as even evident in the worship of Ani in Chinua Achebe "things Fall Apart" where the chief priest (Ezeani) is a male. The male preference has remained one of the most lasting cultural values among the Igbo, this is evident in the special role and respect accorded to the male child than his female counterpart, a woman's position is secured in her husband's house only when she is fruitful and has produced a male offspring (Akubuo, 2021). In moments of sibling's disagreements, it is not strange in traditional Igbo setting to hear a little boy remind his sister that she would soon be married off while he would own every asset of their patents. Some parents also patronize this man of the house syndrome - an expression which in grains in the young boy's Psyche a sense of superiority over his sisters.

In Igbo land a man is not limited to one wife. Male children are preferred to female children because a man without a son is perceived as having lived a worthless life. His lineage is forgotten and at death his female children forfeit his own share of any landed property or asset which belongs to him. Male gender preference is a dominant feature of Igbo culture. More than half of the women desired to have male babies in their present pregnancies for various reasons predominant of which was protecting their marriages and cementing their places in their husband's hearts (Ohagwu, Eze and Ohagwu, nd.) A woman who does not have a male child for her husband in Igbo is inflicted with violence which is of course is a cultural practice in such environment. In such conditions women are subjected to all forms of discrimination and ill treatment which sometimes leaves them helpless. Because of the belief

of male child in Igbo land due to both cultural and socio-cultural factors a handful of women are melted with emotional torture both from their own parents and from the parents and families of the husband. In the case of married women who do not have male child, they are faced with the feelings of anxiety, depression and rejection from people. Under such condition, their husband will threaten to bring another woman who will bear a male child for him. It is believed that the males are the pillars of the home, as they do not leave the family but rather go out to marry a woman to increase the number of people in the family. And so, when a male child is born into a family, to show his supremacy over a female child, Akubuo, (2021) observes that, the names given to the male child in most cases reflect the importance attached to the male child. Among the Igbo, names like Ahamefula, Ikemefule, Eziefule, Okezie, Obiajulu, Okekemdi, Chimamkpam, express the joy of the arrival of a male.

**The Birth of a Female Child**

There is a gender level and gender sensitivity to the extent that males are brought up to see themselves as a super sex to females, and as such, boys feel stronger, more important and indispensable while the females are trained to see themselves as weaker sex or even as appendages to men folk. This is as a result of what Ibekwe, (2018) calls "natural factors" where she submits that women are placed in subservient position in society and thus situates them mostly for indoor activities. All in all, a serious conception about women: delicacy, vulnerable, sensitiveness, tolerance and considerateness, etc. are the products of the society and culture. They are formed by the male based on their needs but not the result of female's specific physical structure (Umunnakwe, Ikenga and Abakare, 2021). So the moment a girl child is born in Igbo land, she starts to encounter discrimination. Lewu (2015:564) laments the discrimination against female gender thus; people who come to facilitate often greet the birth of a girl child with less glee than that of a boy. Generally, the male child and the female child in traditional Igbo society are not treated equally because the female child is assumed to be a transit, as she will eventually marry and loss all identities that make her a member of a certain family.

Concerning the education of the female gender, Acholonu (2001), affirms that, there are some debilitating gender factors like socio-cultural, economic and political factors and myths that imposed incapacitations on female education. Female child is believed to be intellectual inferior to the male children, in such discipline as science, technology and mathematics. This is a human tragedy because, intellectual capacity have no sex. Traditionally, a female child is appreciated only as a secondary inferior appendage giving to male, as the bearer and rearer of man children. This attitude accords a lower status to womanhood. In the past female education is erroneously seen as not being economically beneficial to the family, as marriage is the ultimate goal for the average female child. Highly educated females are generally seen as high risk in marriages. Many traditionally oriented males are still scared of highly educated females. A female with Ph.D degree is derogatorily interpreted as "push her husband Down" (Ph.D). However, recently, it has come to be appreciated that a wife's earning capacity which is very much dependent on her educational attainment, is a necessity for the average family's very survival and maintenance of a reasonable standard of living.

Despite the above, among some families, even in the case, where a married woman returns to her father's house, which is considered as abomination, she still does not have the same right and privileges as her brothers. One of the significant expectations of a female child is to get

married. It is believed that the female body is formed and fashioned by "Chineke" God the creator to carry pregnancy and give birth. The most important role of female in Igbo is to bear children. Achebe describes the birth of a Child "as a woman's crowning glory". Thus, that is why marriage in traditional Igbo is highly esteemed especially for procreation of life.

**The agony of Childlessness**

Childlessness is seen as an abomination in Igbo culture, looked upon as a curse in the family one is married to. Because of the importance of child bearing, any woman that does not have a child continues to cry. Igbo people use to say, *ugwu nwaanyi bu di luru ya Ebe mma nwaanyi by nwa,* which means that a woman's honour is her husband while her beauty is her child (Nwankwor 2012:9). Childlessness in marriage is an issue that involves both husband and wife but the patriarchal mentality in the Igbo has made it more of a woman's problem.

Women are often seen as men's property and this assumption puts them into unfavorable conditions in attempt to please men (Mbiti, 1969). A childless woman is always under serious pressure and tension to satisfy the societal expectations that it is her duty to bear children for her husband, even when the process of begetting children does not lie on her alone. Among the Igbo, the inability of any married woman to bear a child is always seen as an unfavorable situation, the woman is regarded as *Onye Chi ọjọ* - one who is a misfortune. This is an indication that men carry fewer burdens as far as childlessness is concerned. Based on this, Obioha, (2021:116) declares that one of the causes of domestic violence is infertility. He affirms that the report from the fertility clinic have revealed the reaction of some infertile women, who reported of domestic violence. According to Obioha (2021) the violence is often institutionalized, or formalized in societal structures especially in traditional laws and customs that permit husbands to physically punish wives.

It does not excuse the woman before the society, even when the husband decides to raise children with another wife, the childless women will continue to bear a scar which is not possible to erase. Nobody sees her as a responsible wife until she is able to bear a child and if she gives birth for the first time especially a male child, there is always a name like *chukwuebunyemoche* - God has given me sit. *Amaechila* - let not the community go extinct. *Ahamefula* - let not my name get lost.

**Findings**

Among the Igbo giving birth to a male child is very important, most especially when it comes to their thoughts on how they see male child. They view giving birth to a male child as something to be honoured. It gives an Igbo man joy that he has seen someone who will take over his name and properties when he eventually dies. Igbo people see female child as someone else's property. They believe that properties are meant to be shared to male children not female. This is the reason why they do give their male child names like : *Obiechina, Obiefula, Obodochi, Ahamefula, Obioha, Onochie, Eziechila, Obiajulu* etc. They also name their male child *Nwokediuko.* This particular name comes when a woman seeks for a male child so long that she almost loss hope. Also, it is because of the importance of a male child among the Igbo that made them to leave very important titles only for the male gender. Title names such as: Ọzọ, Igwe/Eze, Onowu etc.

Furthermore, Igbo people see giving birth to a male child as what one must achieve as a married woman, if not, one will not be comfortable or stand firm in ones husband's house because relatives and neighbours will swing one as if that one does not have a say in the community or at gatherings. There is throwing of insults and the mother -in-law will also not going to allow one to have a rest of mind. The mother-in-law will try every possible means to make sure that his son ended up getting a second wife who will bear him a son. Any woman that finally gave birth to a male child would be celebrated in her family.

Generally speaking, Igbo peoples thought about giving birth to a male child made them to say that a male child is the pillar of the family, and that without a male child the family is likely not to stand firm. They believe that any family without a male child is not going to be respected or recognized. The right to kinship is given more importance when it comes to the question of patrilineage which is the basis of social organization among family and kinship pattern. Descent was reckoned in the male line, this tie among kin groups is agnatic. A male child has right of descent patrilineally. Patrilineage is the male line or common agnatic kinship system in which an individual's family membership is derived from and is traced through his or her father's lineage (Benokraitis, 2011). It generally involves the inheritance of property, rights, names or titles by persons related through male kin. This means that a persons' family name is passed from father to son.

Igbo peoples' thought and belief when it comes to female children is not encouraging. Female child is viewed as someone else's property. This is the reason why in the past they do not take it serious when it comes to the training of a female child. In the olden days Igbo people find it difficult to sponsor their female children in anything concerning academics. They believe that women's place is in the Kitchen. They believe that allowing a female child to go school is a waste of time and money and also because they felt that female child do not have the intellectual capacity to go into education. They also believe that any female child that ended up going to school will be a challenge to her father's family and that of her husband's family. At marriage, automatically the married girl moves to her husband's clan. She joins her husband's household and does not normally contribute to the support of her own natal family and parents. Igbo people also believe that a female child does not have a say or to get any property when shared in her fathers' house. When it comes to a family that gives birth only to female children, they were regarded as people that are not in existence. They can be disrespected, since they do not have a say in the community and normally, no one that will fight for them when things go wrong.

Among the Igbo, every parent wants their children to achieve success in whatever activity they involve themselves in, this also show in the parents' attitudes towards their children. In the past, parents tend to give more encouragement to the male child's education more than the female child's education. Such attitudes manifests in forms of favouring the educational activities of the male child through encouragement of early attendance of the male child to school, provision of books and other materials for the male child more than the female child, sending of the male child to the best school, encouragement of the male child in academic activities more than the female child. Generally, there is a development of the male child's interest in school activities and encouragement of the male child academic activities and job or career aspirations than the female child (Umanah, 1996).

Among the Igbo, childlessness is a big problem to the family in question. A childless woman is regarded as barren and seen as someone who has defiled the land. The woman would be nicknamed a man because of her inability to bear children. In some communities in Igbo land they cast out barren women out of the community or in some cases people will stop associating with her. Most times the relatives will go to a native doctor in their village to make enquiry on the curse of the barrenness. And to also know whether the woman is an *Ogbanje*, based on the result of the verification, the relatives will do their possible best to make sure that they perform the necessary rites in other to appease the gods to have mercy on the woman and give her a child.

Igbo people favour male child more than the female child because they believe that the more male a woman bears determines the source of income the family will get, as the male sons will eventually give back into their foundation, while females goes out into another household to drop their wealth. Moreover, almost 8% of the social and cultural traditions such as death rituals, making firm decision, boundary settlement etc. in Igbo land are performed by the male gender. That is why a male child is needed in every home. Generally speaking, Igbo people are very watchful to see that their lineage carries on to the fourth, fifth and sixth generations, and for this to happen a male child is needed, and as perceived by Igbo people, boys are preferred.

**Suggestions on how to Bridge the gap between the Male and Female Child Discrimination among the Igbo**

Igbo people should adopt a change of some cultural practices as the world has kept on providing new sciences and technology that suit every gender. Education also has made people to be exposed, therefore, most places in Igbo communities that still hold the old practices of male dominance over female should abandon their old practice and custom to embrace the new ones. It is advisable for the man of the house to write a will for their children both male and female making it hard for extended families to penetrate, and if any extended family should try to deviate from the will of the father, the family member will be sued to court.

Barren women should not be isolation, disgrace or mocked. They can go for adoption, more especially the educated ones. They can adopt any gender of their choice since the constitution of Nigeria gave people right to private life without much pressure. Moreover, family is a bond of a woman and a man to become one and to raise offspring either by birth or by adoption.

Government should create laws that will shun discrimination, which will give people right to liberty, right of participation to any legal practice without discrimination. This will help a lot and also help in giving grants and scholarship to children and youths irrespective of being a boy or a girl. In view of the above, Olugbemi and Osuji (2021: 398) on gender equality were of the opinion that gender equality entails a lot of benefits which ranges from the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation to the stoppage of harmful practices, such as child early and forced marriage. Therefore, fathers should shun the idea of a girl has to marry and that her education ends in the kitchen. Girl child should be encouraged, after all women like Dr. (Mrs.) Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Late Prof. Dora Akunyili, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiichie, among others are from Igbo land. Encouraging

the girl child will go in no small majors to help in curbing some nasty behaviours that are found in women, which includes sex workers, women slavery, domestic abuse and violence, ignorance and illiteracy, and poverty, with this, the society will be more productive.

**Conclusion**

Child bearing has being the most aspects of an Igbo man's life. Igbo people see child bearing as one of the most important aspect of getting married. A man among the Igbo, who is childless or who is without a male child does not count. A man having only female child is believed to be training another man's property and the female child will not have access to her father's inheritance. Igbo preference of the male child is purely do to their belief on inheritance and lineage continuality.

When a woman could not give birth to a child or could not bear a male child, the blame is usually goes to the woman. It is important to know that the fault of this nature could be either of the woman or the man and therefore should be handled with caution. Moreover, whether a child is a boy or a girl should not generate hatred or discrimination because both are special gifts from God. Parents should consider the fact that educated women can as well sustain their families irrespective of the fact that she is married or not. Families with much female should give room for their training both economically, morally, socially and politically, because when you train a girl child, you have trained a nation.

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