



## CHILD NAMING IN TRADITIONAL IGBO SOCIETY OF NIGERIA: A GENDER ISSUE

Udaba, Regina Obiageli Ph.D.\*

### Abstract

*This paper exposed the phenomenon of gender discriminatory practices in Igbo land and by extension, African countries. The phenomenon which cuts across all human endeavours has even engulfed a practice like child naming in Igbo land. The statusquo of gender equality at creation was highlighted and it became obvious that gender inequality is traceable to society. Apart from the physiological differences as arranged by God, He did not create the female to be inferior to their male counterparts. He endowed them with intellectual gifts and good reasoning faculty. By research in books and personal interviews the finding is that parents in Igbo land give their children unisex names, names that are exclusively males' and those to be borne by females, names that show belief in protective power of physical elements which they are borne by only males, powerful praise names for the males and for the females names that celebrate beauty or an appendage to the husband. It is recommended that parents should re-orientate their mind set and give their children equal opportunities to develop themselves. Affluent members of the society should empower the less privileged ones to develop themselves.*

**Key words:** Gender, empower, discrimination, inequality, physiological, etc.

### Introduction

At the beginning, the Creator of human race created male and later saw the need to give the male a suitable companion, and a help mate. This made Him form all the animals and birds which he presented to man to name. Man after seeing and naming them found none a suitable companion. "Then the Lord God made man fall into a deep sleep and while he was asleep, he took

out one of the ribs and formed woman out of the rib and brought her to him" Gen:2:21.

It is pertinent in this Biblical account, to see the source and essence of woman i.e. female-formed from the same ribs from Adam's body, without any further re-fashioning or amendments. Man's reaction to the presentation of woman to him was. "At last this is one of my kind... Woman is her name because, she was taken out of

\* Department of English and Literary Studies, Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu, Nigeria.  
E-mail: [peya@noun.edu.ng](mailto:peya@noun.edu.ng) Mob: 07035817730

man" (Gen: 2:23). Both God and the first man created by God attest to the equal dignity and responsibility of woman with man. This position is further strengthened by Pope John Paul II: 'In creating the human race 'male and female', God gave man and woman an equal personal dignity, endowing them with the inalienable rights and responsibilities proper to the human person' Odozor (ed.) 2001:276)

### Origin of Gender Discrimination and Differences

It is obvious therefore that this deviation from the 'norm' at creation, can be traced to societal organizations. After investigation and study of male and female behaviours in primitive peoples of New Guinea the view by Margaret Mead, student of Boas, one of founders of social anthropology is, '... Standardized personality differences between the sexes are...cultural creations to which each generation, male and female, is trained to conform" (Howard Sherman, and Wood 1982:113). A traditional anthropologist Clellan Ford observes that 'in every culture, men are the more dominant, aggressive, sexually active while women are more emotionally expressive and nurturing' (109).

The social structure of many societies give rise to early socialization of children, which eventually culminate in gender discrimination and gender roles ascribed to them. Societies have been known to operate patrilineal structure and this forms a strong base to people's level of gender equality or inequality and their socialization processes are built on this framework. Although many world societies are patrilineal, matrilineal societies can still be found in some areas of Africa, among America and Canadian Indians, among the Dravidians of India.

In matrilineal societies, the status of women is very high and in some of them, it is similar to the status of men. Even then, there is no clear evidence of matriarchy- a clear evidence of female dominance. Studies reveal that through socialization people have already become sexually biased and so treat the male and female children differently. A study of parent's reactions to their new born infants show that 'girl babies are described as softer, finer featured, smaller or more inattentive than boy babies' (Rubin, J., Provenzano, F. and Luria, Z. 1974 quoted in Sherman and Wood :131). Another study by Luria and Rubin shows that students described girl babies, as 'littler', weaker' or 'cuddler' as reported in Parade 22<sup>nd</sup> Feb, 1976.(Luria in Sherman & Wood :131). These biases have resulted in over protection of little girls as against independent and exploratory behavior by boys, which give them the early intellectual head start in being better at spatial perception (visualizing objects out of context) a requirement for sciences. That is why girls are tended towards non-science subjects. Boys explore, solve problems on their own. Evidence of parents' and societies' encouragement of gender differences include producing and buying boys' toys which are more varied, more likely to encourage activities outside the house and have, competency- eliciting values (Vaughter, R.M 1976 quoted in Sherman and Wood 1982: 132). Even in nursery schools, children are strongly encouraged to play with appropriate toys.

In one study, father takes pride in his son being 'holly terror', but is worried if his daughter is 'bossy'. Fathers rather expect their daughters to be nice, sweet, pretty, affectionate and well liked' (Aberle, D.F and Naegle; K. D in Sherman and Wood: 132.)

In another study of nursery school, "parents valued malleability, co-operativeness and willingness to take directions but disapproved of assertiveness and quarrelsomeness in girls. In boys, independence, assertiveness and inquisitiveness were valued; timidity and fearfulness disapproved" (132).

The writer of this paper had had a similar orientation as a secondary school student in a boarding school headed by a white woman principal. She drummed it into the ears of students especially at the assembly ground, 'that ladies are seen and not heard'. Any sign of assertiveness or boldness was vehemently suppressed. Generally, the result of this type of socialization is that as children grow up, girls' opinion of boys' abilities grow better with age while the boys' opinions of girls grow worse. Girls begin to develop a negative self-image (if not corrected) at an early age. Even television programmes, children's books, home, chores e.t.c. influence the child's perception of what is 'normal and appropriate' i.e. men's work is outside the home and women's work in the home. In specific areas of family life, there is a widespread social and cultural tradition, which has considered women's role to be exclusively that of wife and mother, without adequate access to public functions, inadvertently, supporting the axiom 'a lady is seen but not heard.'

This unfortunate socio-cultural stigma has formed the bane of discriminatory acts against women. Areas gravely affected include education where the boy child is sent to school in preference to the girl child who is rather betrothed to a man old enough to be her father. Some courses have been (until recently), exclusively reserved for boys e.g. science-oriented courses. In business

and commercial enterprises, the males are readily encouraged to undertake huge investments while the females are directed to sell foodstuffs, and other petty wares. In politics, the males dominate the field and edge out females, preferring to vote them into less functional posts. In governance, ministerial and high-powered posts are shared among the males with insignificant ratio thrown across to the females. In employment circle, entrepreneurs prefer to engage male workers for fear of women going on a maternity leave and where the female is eventually given a job, half salary is paid to such a person while she is on a maternity leave. In literature, males present females in a negative form example, as prostitutes, appendages to men, being responsible for failure of marriages e.t.c. Even in religion both traditional and modern, women are hardly made priests. In community leadership, men dominate, leaving the subsidiary groups to be managed by women. Some forms of discriminatory practices which affect and seriously harm particular categories of women, e.g. childless wives, widows, separated and divorced women and unmarried mother, still persist in some societies. In other words, gender discrimination cuts across all human endeavors.

### **Child Naming in Contemporary Societies**

It is obvious that naming a child in many societies center around adult male members of the child's kindred, to the conscious neglect of the female members- a gender practice. This is underscored in the Biblical account of the naming of John the Baptist when his kindred male members were trying to give him a befitting name, since Zachariah his father was struck

with dumbness because of his unbelief. Elizabeth his mother, suggested the name John but they rejected the name claiming that no relatives of theirs bears such a name. Then they made signs to his father, asking him what name he would like the boy to have. Zachariah asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John" (Luke 1:62-63.) In some societies child naming is often treated with levity; after all, Shakespeare's Juliet retorts:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;  
Thou art thyself:

though not a Montague.... O! be some  
other name; What

is in a name? That which we call rose  
by any other name

would smell as sweet....

Romeo & Juliet Act 11sc. 11

In the same vein such people as Juliet believe people can bear names without adherence to semantic consideration. That is why some English names like Lynda which means serpent, Sylvester which means bush, are borne by people. Other names like Stone, Drink water, Pepper e.t.c. abound. In Christian religion, names of people who had led good lives (saints) are suggested, in fact, are insisted upon in naming children because it is believed that names have effect on the behaviors of the people that bear them. However nobody is known to have taken the name Judas especially after his encounter with Jesus Christ. To recognize the equality of gender, provisions are made for female gender in many names in Christian religion e.g. Patrick/Patricia, Dominic/Dominica, Reginald /Regina, Felix/Felicia, Wilfred /Winifred, Joseph/Josephine, Clement/Clementina, Paul /Paulina, Anthony /Anthonia, Emmanuel /

Emmanuela etc. This type of provision in child's naming showing equality of genders, demonstrates the status of human person as God established it at creation. It is therefore important to underline the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men.

### Child-Naming in Traditional Igbo Society of Nigeria

#### Who Are The Igbo?

The geographical location of the South East of Nigeria houses one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria called the Igbo. Cardinal Arinze Francis delimits the Igbo land boundary thus: "The neighbors of the Igbo are the Igala and Tiv in the North, and the Ekoi and the Ibibio in the East, the Ijaw and Ogoni in the South and the Benin and Isoko in the West". (Arinze, F. 1970:1) A further description of the Igbo is stated thus: 'They occupy a common territory, speak a common language though with many dialectal variations. There are a number of cultural factors which are common to all Igbo areas, such as kingship structure, cult symbols (like ancestral cults) which are widely spread' (Green, in Nwala, 1996:17).

Before naming a child in Igbo society, many ceremonies of purification of the mother of the new-born baby take place. These are circumcision of the baby, official presentation of the new baby to his father's kindred members. At this presentation, "the father of the new, —born invites and presents the baby to the adult male members of the kindred, with items of gifts as a goat (for male) or hen (for female) (Ogbukagu, 1997:216). The items given here are symbolic of the aspiration of the child at adult stage of life. The question is then, why goat for male and hen for female babies? This is gender bias because a female

shall never rise up to a successful farming enterprise, to be able to keep goats. It must be keeping of less significant, less valued, less finance- yielding domestic stock, like fowls.

At the naming ceremony, 'male adult members of the child's kindred are given a choice dish e.g. yam *fufu* i.e. pounded yam with vegetable soup, while the (inyom-di) wives of kindred men of the child are served with items of food like tapiocca (abacha- ncha) mixture of okoro and spices, a less superior dish, at the entertainment grounds' (Ogbukagu,; 217). While the child is being named, only the men folk are invited at the village arena where the ceremony takes place. The mother of the new baby is made to hold a newly born clayware oku as a drinking cup for the baby. Her sitting position is backing her husband (italics mine). One may ask, why must the baby's mother back her husband? perhaps, to remind her of her inadequacy for equal participation at the naming of a child born by her. Will there be any wonder if a name given to a girl child is fraught with gender sensitivity?

Igbo parents and relations give names that are reflective to their offspring; 'The day of birth, special circumstances at the time of birth, experience with people around them, events occurring at the time of birth, all control and suggest names parents adopt for their children' (217). Other areas covered in child naming include belief in the supreme deity, philosophy of life, belief in the creative and protective power of physical elements, resignation to the phenomena of death, praise names to celebrate prowess and achievements. In all these, there are traces of gender bias, gender discrimination here and there. This

paper therefore attempts to highlight such a tendency even in child naming in the Igbo traditional society.

### **Kinds of Names Given in Igbo Traditional Society**

#### **i. Unisex names:**

These take their bearing from the supreme deity-Chukwu or chi which is a variant of the Supreme God. Because of the equality of male and female before God, these names fit into the circumstances of both genders. Examples are:

Chukwu-ebuka - God is mighty/great.

Chinedum - God leads me

Esomchi - Am I in the company of God when or during His works

Chidera - Once God has sanctioned

Chekwube Chukwu - Trust in God

Chukwuweike - Power belongs to God

Chimaobim - God knows my desire

Chinwendu - God owns life/author of life

Chiagorom - God has vindicated me

#### **ii. Names given exclusively to male children**

Ifeanacho - (that which is desired) (the Igbo are a patrilineal society and so the gender desired is male)

Obiajulu - (the heart is quietened) The family now has a male after a succession of female children.

Nwaorah - Child destined to serve the people

Obiorah - Child desired by the people

Nwa-eke/oye/ofo/nkwo - A male child born on any of the four market days or to the market deity. The prefix nwa should equally

apply to female because nwa means a child. But no! It must be further qualified to get the female equivalent e.g. nwamgbo-eke/ oye/afon/nkwo. Mgbo means a girl child. Other names are:

Chiagorom - G

Igboanugo - the Igbo race has heard something — the birth of a male child

Ibezimako - My kindred should advise me (the women folk are regardless, people without intelligence and so the women can't advise people and cannot be given this name.

Afamefunna - let my name not be forgotten. Males are believed to be ones to continue the family lineage.

Igboezue - the Igbo race is complete. With the birth of a male child, Igbo race is seen to be complete i.e. continuity of race and humanity. To show the superiority of males these males names are usually used as surnames.

### iii. Names that show Igbo philosophy of life

Ndubuisi - life first before any other thing.

Arubalueze-ama - There's no mark to predict who will be a king in future i.e. you can't predict destiny.

Emenanjo - Don't do evil

Uwaezuoke - Life is not a bed of roses. No perfection in life

Igwebuike - Numerical strength is power

Ora-abuueze - The populace cannot be a king at a time. Someone must be a ruler.

Bilikambili - Live and let live

Nkechinyelu - Which ever gender God gives is accepted (instead of none)

Chikadibia - God is greater than concoction by diviners.

Akubailo - Wealth generates envy

Nebechi - Look up to your God for what He has in stock for you.

Igbo philosophy of life has bestowed on the males the ownership of the majority of these names. Only a few names in this category can be taken by the female.

### iv. Names That Show Belief in The Creative And Protective Power of Physical Elements

Here, gender discrimination is evident because only males are given these names.

For reverencing land.

Anichebe - Let the land protect

Aniereobi - Impossibility of land to change its location

Aniagbaoso - Land is not hasty/remains where it is.

For reverencing hill

Ugwuekee - Hill has created

Ugwuneche - Hill protects

Ugwuanyi - Our Hill

Ezeugwu - King of Hill

For reverencing some creatures

Agunecheibe - The leopard that protects others

Agukwu - The big leopard

Agunta - The small leopard

Ubaenyi - Footstep of an elephant.

No female Children bear any name from this category.

### v. Names reflecting resignation to the phenomenon of death

Onwubiko - Death please spare me

Onwudinjo - Death is bad.

Onwurah - Death leave us alone

Onwumechiliuzo - Death has closed the gate

Onwujuluwa - Death is all over the world

Onwuamaeze - Death does not recognize kingship

Ohwuanua - Death has ravaged

Onwuasoigwe - Death does not consider large population

Onwuanuoge - Death does not consider time.

Onwuanumba - Death does not listen to admonitions

In all these names the female gender is excluded because these names are used as family names which females are consciously denied.

#### vi. Exclusive Female Names

Adaora - daughter of the people

Ifeoma - that which is good

Ukamaka - religion is good

Obiageliaku - She who has come to enjoy wealth

Nnennaya - Mother of her father

Akuabata - Wealth has come in to the family

Ndidiamaka - Patience is goad

Onyinyechukwu - Gift from Good

Uzoamaka - Road is good

Nwamaka - A child is a good thing

Ezinne - A good mother

Nneka - Mother is supreme

Ebelechukwu - God's mercy

Chioma - Good destiny

It is obvious from these names that beauty, goodness, tenderness are celebrated

and that is why the males hardly bear such names. The males settle for prowess, dominance and superiority over women wealth e.t.c. For the fact that there are names set aside for male or female children, gender bias is already entrenched.

#### vii. Praise Names /Titles

This is where the female gender is most cheated. The praise /title names recognize achievements of all sorts. Rather than extend such names to females, they are given names that celebrate beauty, dependence, tenderness, and never prowess. Let us consider these names,

Nwokeadinjo- Men can't be considered ugly as long as they are wealthy. Omemgboji- He who is benevolent when he has the where withal

Agbanwodike izu- if an important man is excluded in consultation meeting the meeting is repeated.

Ofiadiulu - the bush /wilderness that is profitable.

Ebube dike - Mighty in strength and prowess.

Udoabagunonu - The noose never enters the leopard's neck

Dike n'ubosiogu - Powerful man on the day of battle.

Ogbata obie - One whose arrival settles a disputes.

Omekagu - One who behaves like a leopard.

Nkenke-enyi an' chu igwe enyi oso - Small elephant that scares numerous elephants /small but mighty

#### viii. Female Title Names

Oyilidiya - One who resembles her husband.

Omenwa - One who enjoys being petted

Omuma awuaru - one who needs no bathing because of her beauty

Mkpulumma - seed of beauty

Agbomma - lineage of beauty.

Oyidiya - friend of her husband

Adaku - A daughter of wealth

Erimma - Can we eat beauty

Arukakwa - Glossy skin that is better than cloth

Ngala kwesili - One whom pride fits best

Ugodiya - glory of her husband

Egbediya - Her husband's gun that is a shield from her husband enemy

Despite the efforts of women to match men's activities e.g. in politics, social situations, prowess, academics, the female gender has consistently been denied the privilege of such attributive names, just to perpetrate and perpetuate gender bias, gender discrimination and inequality of opportunities. Women like Moremi of Yoruba land, Queen Amina of Zaria are females in the west and northern parts of Nigeria who have distinguished themselves and had shown prowess, and had militantly saved their people in wars. In spite of these, nobody had deemed it justifiable to honour them with names befitting their achievements. It is still the effect of sociological barrier which oppresses the female gender in general and especially in the Igbo society.

In conclusion gender bias and discrimination cuts across all spheres of human life and it continues to be an issue

to be redressed and balanced. The fight for gender equality has started gaining grounds in the African Continent, and in no distant time the female gender will start to bear such names which are regarded as exclusive rights of the male gender. The on the spot experience which parents come face to face with is that the girl child is more serviceable, more caring in their homes than the boy child. This has helped to reshape their mind set and so, consider seriously giving their male and female children equal opportunities in all spheres of life. Through this the issue of gender inequality will be a thing of the past.

### References

- Abbey Library (1975). *Romeo and Juliet; The Complete Works of William Shakespeare.*, Romania: Murray's Sales and Service Co.
- Arinze, F. (1970). *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion.* Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Madu, R. O. (1992). *Studies in African-American culture.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Nwala, U. (1982). *Igbo Philosophy.* Ikeja: Literamed.
- Nwanunobi, C. (1992). *African Social Institution.* Nsukka: University of Nigeria press
- Odozor (ed.) (2001). *Sexuality, Marriage and readings in the Catholic Tradition.* Indiana: University of Notre Dame press.
- Ogbukagu, I. (1997). *Traditional Igbo Belief and Practices.* Owerre: Novelty Industrial Enterprises Ltd.
- Sherman, H. & Wood, (1982). *Sociology; Traditional and Radical Perspective.* Calif: Wadsworth.
- St. Pauls (1979). *Good News Bible.* New York: Deuterocanonical Books.