

GRADUAL BUT STEADY PROGRESSION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF UNITED NATIONS DECLARATIONS ON WOMEN IN IKWERRE SOCIETY OF RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Women's rights in Ikwerre traditional society had been severely misrepresented as a result of religion, culture and societal inhibitions that restricted their total development as human beings. The patriarchal nature of the Ikwerre society, enabled men to dominate, suppress and oppress women. This led to the various forms of discriminations and exclusion of women from education, inheritance of father's patrimony, restriction from public speaking, and male preference syndrome. The spates of irrelevance shown to women in Ikwerre traditional society had them assume a second fiddle position to their male counterparts. This paper examines the traditional religious oppression and suppression of women and the socio-cultural factors that leads to such in Ikwerre society. The paper is anchored on the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its relation to women's development. The Snail-Sense feminism theory by Akachi Ezigbo is reviewed. Using the descriptive and historical approach as well as oral interview. Findings are that most women in Ikwerre society are not fully aware of United Nations declarations that protect their rights, making the implementation of those declarations such as the CEDAW to be rather gradual than rapid. Through the gradual implementation of the CEDAW in Ikwerre society, the very conservative, patriarchal Ikwerre society is beginning to succumb to modernity allowing for women's inclusion in areas they were excluded. That all socio-cultural and religious practices that negate women's development are phasing out gradually. The paper concludes that all forms of discrimination against women in Ikwerre society should be gradually jettisoned in compliance to the snail-sense feminism theory of using the qualities of the snail which is gradual but dogged, tenacious, persevering and the ability to get round obstacle on its way to its destination. It advocates for a deliberate sensitization of UN declarations and rights through workshops and seminars for Ikwerre women.

Keywords

*Gradual,
Steady,
Progression,
United Nations,
Declaration.*

1. Introduction

The place and importance of women in Ikwerre societies is fundamental as women balance, and complete the Ikwerre society due to the cardinal roles they play in stabilizing the society towards the attainment of goals and aspirations. Women's rights had been severely violated over the years in Ikwerre traditional society due to various forms of socio-cultural practices that are inherent in Ikwerre traditional society. To this end, the United Nations over the years have prioritized in fighting against such practices through postulation of laws and charters that are geared towards the achievement and attainment of equal rights between women and their male counterparts. In order to achieve this, treaties, conventions, statuses, and declarations have been set up in the form of charters, statements, resolutions or documents towards championing the course of women. The fact remains that irrespective of whatever achievements of women in the world over, the Ikwerre traditional society continues to assert that men are extremely more valuable and superior to women; this remains a strong issue to contend with. For the purpose of clarification, the discourse in this study will make use of the terms "Ikwerre Traditional Society" and "Ikwerre Society" interchangeably. "Ikwerre Traditional Society" refers to the ancient

Ikwerre society that was without civilization and rife with myriads of socio-cultural inhibitions for women's development and self-actualization, while "Ikwerre Society" refers to the present Ikwerre society where some level of civilization and some forms of the Implementation of UN covenants are evident. Although, critics as seen in Ikwerre traditional society observe that gender proponents intend to cover their act by their suggestion that discrimination against women is mainly along traditional and cultural lines. However, these cultural practices constituted barriers that prop up issues that continue to discriminate against women educationally, economically, politically, legally, professionally, and religiously.

In specificity, women's rights in Ikwerre traditional society were violated through their exposure to discriminatory practices among which includes: (1) denial in the inheritance and allocation of properties such as land with the belief that upon marriage such properties would be owned by her husbands. (2) They are seldom allowed to speak in public places especially in the gathering that includes their male counterparts. This in turn infringes on their right to freedom and expression of speech. (3) They are hinged with myriads of taboos that affect their social life first as human beings and then as women. (4) Professionally, women in Ikwerre traditional society are either dissuaded from engaging in certain careers perceived to either expose them to closeness to other men or denies them the time to perform their perceived roles of home keepers.

2. Theoretical Framework

The Snail-Sense Feminism Theory by Akachi Ezeigbo is employed to lay foundation for this paper.

The Snail-Sense Feminism Theory

The Snail-Sense Feminism theory is an indigenous model propounded by Akachi Ezeigbo's snail-sense brand of feminism. Ezeigbo (2012) elucidated that the snail-sense feminism is a brand of feminism model which was established as a result of an in-depth research (for over two decades) into the conditions, circumstances and situations confronting Nigerian women socially, economically, politically, legally among others. Hence, the snail-sense feminism is a modernization of previous feminist studies. It stresses on the provision of insights, knowledge, skill set, and base for women galvanizing resources, views, dispositions, and potentials for their effective response to the varying socio-cultural, economic and supporting forces with the intention to enhance the holistic development of women both in the past and in present times.

The Ezeigbo's Snail-sense feminism is a derivative of three major strategies via: efficient conversation and cooperation, achievement of high-quality education and individuality. According to Ezeigbo (2013), the snail-sense feminism adopts the pattern of the snail to 'negotiate' or 'dialogue' with its surroundings toward getting around obstacles on its paths through a 'well-lubricated tongue', whether the obstacles be rocks, thorns or boulders. This is the habit which a good number of Nigerian women implement in their dealings with men. Most women from diverse cultures in Nigeria usually assume a peace-making or cooperative and progressively or gradual attitude towards men in order to get what they want. This is similar to what the snail does with its surroundings in which it moves and exists. Good education even though not derived directly from the snail is added as a strategy because a woman who has all the snail's attributes of intelligence, toughness, endurance, sensitivity, persistence and hard work but if not learned is at a great disadvantage.

Ezeigbo (2012) reiterates also that, good education is the solution to unlock the access of opportunities for Nigerian women, for when a woman is educated, the family in particular and the country in general is educated and empowered socially, politically, economically, and professionally towards engaging, involving, and participating in opportunities, openings, and programmes that are targeted at enhancing societal development even in Ikwerre society. For example in politics, women who are well educated stand at superior opportunity of voting, seeking for political, elective, and even appointive positions and being voted for than an uneducated woman who most probably will lack the self-assurance to engage in politics. Apparently, there could exist some marginal successes in women's emergence in political and elective positions. Comparatively, this could be a far cry or little drop of water in the ocean in relation to men elected, appointed or serving in such positions that certain deliberate measures like gender affirmative action (tagged 35% affirmative action) is canvassing the exclusive preserve of women in order to soar up or balance the deficit in their socio-political participation.

There is an urgent need to devise effective timeline for women graduation and systematic integration in the socio-political sphere of Nigeria and in Ikwerre society. This Ezeigbo (2012) considers as a rather plausible approach for realistically tackling the years of neglect, marginalization, discrimination, deprivations, and stereotypes that have alienated women from freely participating in the affairs of the society. The reluctance of men in relinquishing some of their positions of the political, social, and economic space they previously held sway due to affirmative action continues to thwart efforts towards solving the problems encountered by women in the Ikwerre society. It is this impediment that prevents all the feminist theories that have been articulated to tackle the problems of discriminations, non-inheritance, marginalization, maltreatments, etc. meted against women in a typical Nigeria or contemporary African society which continues to persist several years after the

implementation of gender-sensitive policies, laws or legislations (Ezeigbo, 2013).

Ezeigbo (2013) emphasized the “individual” as the third derivative strategy which distinguishes snail-sense feminism from other variants of feminism theories. The quest of personal accomplishment and growth is fundamental to snail-sense feminism. The woman should not just accommodate others, rather should guarantee that she achieves recognition for herself. Self-preservation, self-actualization, and self-development are vital to a woman’s success in life and all spheres of societal development in the society, economically, politically, educationally, etc. This individualistic trait is traceable to the snail which does not move in a cluster or in the company of its young. In an individualistic manner however, a snail can exist close to other snails as a sign of sisterhood, female bonding and group awareness which symbolizes the strong point of snail-sense feminism. In other words, women would see the need to emphasize techniques, modalities, and strategies that would enable them to invest their energy, time, resources, and intellect towards enhancing their capacity, knowledge, and status before they attempt to champion the course or initiative of leading others or fellow women in the move to ending all the forms of discrimination meted to women.

Although, tackling the age long culturally and societal permissible discrimination against women cannot be attained through a sole or few effort but rather collective effort would suffice in helping women make appreciable impact. This is where the snail-sense feminism theory is viewed as a novel feminist model which contemplates in modifying the standpoints and changing the narrative of physical struggles to a more fancied intellectual struggle. This will help women enhance their capacity wherein they acquire the skill, competence and knowledge that they bring to leverage upon, whilst attempting to change the status of progressively aspiring and tenaciously acquiring the skill set and knowledge. This will help them to ethically, tactically, and intellectually engage the male folk towards revolutionizing their status from domestic players via cooking, nurturing, farming, housekeeping, housewives, etc. to professionals, academic, engineers, scientists, politicians, industrialists, entrepreneurs, administrators, technologists, competently and effectively contributing to solving all societal problems.

Ezeigbo (2012) posits that in spite of the theorizing and analysis done over the years on feminism, the problems women experience in society still continue. She added that the philosophy of common values which functions in many cultures in Nigeria makes one to be tolerant to imbibe the virtues of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance. As stated by Akanmode (2015) the snail-sense feminism strategies include but not limited to effective dialogue and negotiation and the acquisition of good education. According to Ezeigbo (2013), the promulgator of the theory, Snail-Sense Feminism adopts the practice of the snail to ‘negotiate’ or ‘dialogue’ with things in the environment that if not checked could prove as obstacles to the realization of issues of self-preservation, self-actualization, and self-development which are critical to women’s success and lifestyle in all spheres of development in any society even the Ikwerre society. This makes the snail-sense feminism to proffer solution to wide-ranging system of ideas about social life and human experience developed from a woman-centered perspective by adopting an interdisciplinary approach as propagated by the feminist theory towards resolving the stereotypes, violations, oppressions, and discriminations as well as aligning feminism in Nigeria and Ikwerre society with that which is canvassed by international community of scholars, and activists.

Furthermore, the works of contemporary feminist like Rogers (2001) was the latest brand of radical social thought and feminist movement predicated on the following reasons: (1) the general climate of critical thinking that characterized that period, (2) the anger and frustration of women activist who flocked, grouped or assembled with antiwar, civil rights and student movements, only to encounter or found out the sexist, chauvinist, bigot, extremist, or jingoist attitude by the liberal and radical men in the movement (Shreve, 1989) and (3) women experience of prejudice and discrimination as they moved in ever-larger numbers into wage work and higher education (Bookman and Morgan, 1988; Garland, 1988).

These reasons and more importantly, the third, intensified the women movement even to the 21st Century despite the failure of the women activists in the 1960s who were sabotaged by their male collaborators in the movement. This was when women issue became international movement that makes visible all aspects of women hitherto unconsidered lives and experiences. This growing new literature on women studies prompted feminists’ scholars to launch a probing, multifaceted critique that makes visible the complexity of the system that subordinates women. Today, feminist ideas have permeated but not yet transformed society as thoroughly as feminists had hoped (Stacey & Thorne, 1996; Thistle, 2000). However, this does not imply that other theories before snail-sense feminism should be discarded, since they equally attempt to solve women’s problems i.e. discrimination, oppression, marginalization, maltreatment, etc., and as a matter of fact snail-sense feminism has common features with a few other African feminist theories in addressing the discriminations meted against women in the society (Ezeigbo, 2013).

Women in Ikwerre society and different parts of Nigeria often adopt a conciliatory or cooperative attitude

towards men. This is akin to what the snail does with the environment in which it moves and exists. The snail crawls over boulders, rocks, thorns, cracks and rough terrains smoothly and efficiently with well-lubricated tongue which is not damaged or destroyed by these harsh objects (Ezeigbo, 2013). In view of this, women in Ikwerre society are called upon to imbibe the mindset or mentality of patiently, painstakingly, courageously, objectively, and steadily acquire the requisite learning, skill, capacity, expertise, competence, and understanding that will help them slowly, persistently, and consistently tackle, surmount, and overcome any challenge or impediments socially, economically, politically, educationally, etc., which hitherto are appearing as stubbles, stuns, precipices, etc. preventing women from realizing and transiting to their new roles of involving, participating or contributing to lubricating or oiling the wheels, platforms or dimensions otherwise parameters via: education, skill, capacity, freedom, and human right for attaining holistic societal development.

Furthermore, it is characteristic of the snail to withdraw into its shell which it carries about whenever it encounters an obstacle or sense danger looming, approaching or coming. This is extremely important because failure to withdraw would have hindered her opportunity to mentally surmount the challenges or problems (Ezeigbo, 2013). In view of this, women in Ikwerre society could withdraw first from seeking to confront men for the spaces or opportunities that have been denied them over the years. But they should prioritize dialoguing, engagement, strategizing, enhancing their capacity, skill set, and possessing every opportunity that could make them potentially become better or proffer competent alternatives if accepted or integrated into the positions previously held by men. Their competence, proficiency, and capacity to effectively deliver in the responsibility assigned to them though could take time, would no doubt be a better form of advocacy for the consideration of other women in related or other positions which hitherto they have been stereotyped or debased from engaging.

This Ezeigbo (2013) calls the underlying message of the snail-sense feminism. Hence, the snail-sense feminism theory identify the ability of women even women in Ikwerre society to possess the character, and exhibit the tenacity to weather the storm and survive any tempest, pressure, maltreatment, and deprivations socially, educationally, politically, economically, etc. meted by men or the male folk in order to debase or stereotype women from participating as agents of socialization, societal transformation, and development.

Even though snail-sense feminism has common features with the other variants of feminism theories by other women feminist scholars, there is a distinguishing element of individualism in snail-sense feminism. This individualistic tendency is observable in the snail which does not move in a group or in the company of its young as a hen or a duck does, however it can exist close to other snails in an individualistic manner. According to Ezeigbo, (2012), the individual must empower herself before she can empower others. She must stand before she can help other people to stand. The pursuit of individual success and development is central to snail-sense feminism. Thus, the knowledge or awareness of the snail-sense feminism would instill in women in Ikwerre society the consciousness to first self-develop or enhance themselves prior to becoming crusaders for gender rights or equality in societies such as Ikwerre society. Furthermore, Ezeigbo, (2012) points out that there are qualities about the snail that triggered her endorsement of snail sense feminism which are doggedness, tenacity, perseverance or persistence and ability to get round obstacles (like social, economic, educational, political, etc.) no matter how formidable by exercising effective skills and sensitive attitude. It has nothing to do with speed and movement but rather it is likened as a proper way or definition of the feminist movements wherein deliberate and conscious efforts are made over time (which is not a one off or one day thing but years) to improve the capacity (socially, economically, educationally, politically, etc.) of women in the society. Therefore, Ezeigbo's (2013) emphasis is on the ability of the snail to smoothen rough spaces to enable it to make its movement easy. In like manner, the Nigerian woman ought to be wise, sensitive and proactive in her quest for justice, self-actualization, and self-development in order to enable them effectively explore their potentials, capacities, and opportunities that are available for them in the society.

Areas of Gradual but Steady Implementation of United Nations Declaration on Women in Ikwerre Society

Denial in the Inheritance and Allocation of Properties

In the past, the Ikwerre traditional society frowned at the inheritance and allocation of properties from her father's house to women. Women were denied assets that came from the family of her birth simply because they are women and will get married into another family, and will be inherited by their husbands alongside the property. Esther Lasebikan (2001) observes that "traditionally the girl-child is not recognized as an important member of her family, and a family with only female children is regarded as barren". Wotogbe Igwechi & Ngozi Iheanacho (2017) noted that "The traditional Ikwerre society considers a male as very important and accords little or no recognition to the female child, especially during inheritance". To this end, a family without a male child is regarded as lost family. This belief and practice of traditional Ikwerre society, made adult female financially handicap as landed property is an asset to its owner any day and time.

Inheritance practices under the customary laws in traditional Ikwerre society were not favourable to women. The female right to inherit property in line with the UN conventions on women was infringed upon under the guise of family values, tradition and culture as well as the absence of a legal framework empowering women and granting them explicit rights to land in their capacity as citizens. However, the United Nations having considered the level of injustice that is meted out against women in this area enacted laws based on equality and non-discrimination through the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) stating that “all individuals are equal and entitled to their human rights relevant to access, use and control over land without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, ethnicity, age, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, disability, property, birth or other social status as explained by human rights treaty bodies”. (CEDAW).

Furthermore, in a sweeping victory for women in Rivers State, Ikwerre Women in particular, the Rivers State government under the immediate past Governor, Nyesom .E. Wike signed into law in September, 2022 the Rivers State Prohibition of the Curtailment of Women’s Right to Share in Family Property Law No.2 of 2022. This law is important to the development Rivers State as it makes Rivers State the first state to achieve this feat and enables people to actualize their potentials with women allowed to inherit by law their entitlement. By this law, women are further encouraged to stand up for their rights and challenge any discrimination against them in a notable court of law. With this, the idea that women are forbidden to own lands and inherit property is eroded in Ikwerre society.

They are Seldom allowed to Speak in Public Places especially in the Gathering that includes their Male Counterparts

The patriarchal nature of the culture of the traditional Ikwerre society promoted gender disparity and made women to see themselves as substandard to men. On the side of the men, the patriarchal nature of the culture of the traditional Ikwerre society made them to develop a master-servant relationship with the womenfolk, thereby promoting gender based violence that constitute a hedge around women as the vulnerable class, who are at the receiving end to the norms, structure, and activities in the society. This on its part; also constitute an affront and hub in the wheel of progressing and redirecting the society towards holistic alignment with the emerging new order of transforming the social and cultural practices that have somewhat clipped and in rare cases completely extinguished women chance of freely accessing and aspiring educationally, politically, socially, professionally, and emotionally. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Article 10 on public hearing states that: Everyone is entitled in full to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

In the traditional Ikwerre society, traditional forums intended for decision-making are generally dominated by men. Women can hardly ever take part in decision-making in fact they were not allowed to speak in a gathering of men. They were to remain silent and have a representative who will speak for them whenever elders (men) are gathered. This no doubt hampered on their self-esteem, emotional stability, dignity, freedom of speech and affected their resourcefulness to contribute and participate in societal development.

However in recent years, there have been changes. Women are no longer restricted from speaking in public places. In fact they are now allowed entrance into the gathering of men. Ikwerre women now represent their wards in the Rivers State House of Assembly. HRH Engr. B.A. Worgu Eze Chiorlu (oral Interview) admitted women into the council of chiefs in his Rmumuchiorlu kingdom by joining the women and men meeting together. He even went ahead to assign very key positions to them. For instance, a woman holds the position of the treasurer of the council and others. Although this did not go down well with the men at first, as most men left the meeting, but that notwithstanding, it is a sign of a good thing for the women in Ikwerre society and an indication of a brighter future for them in public hearing. This is in accordance with the recommendations of the UDHR Article 10 on public hearing as cited above. Hence, it was achievable due to the gradual but steady implementation of the United Nations charters, conventions and declarations on women in Ikwerre society.

They are Hinged with Myriads of Taboos that affect their Social Life first as Human Beings and then as Women

Document 14, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 article (1) declares that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights they are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”.

The UN has described equality between men and women or gender equality to mean that all human beings, regardless of sex are free to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make choices without limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices. To this effect, both men and women have the equal right to achieve, become, attain and develop to their full potentials without any form of hindrance. Equality between men and women is fundamental of human right law. Nearly all international

declarations forbid discrimination on the bases of sex and assure women and men equality in the enjoyment of the rights covered by the declarations. In the traditional Ikwerre society there are myriads of “dos and don’ts” hedged on women in order to buttress the extent of inequality between men and women in Ikwerre traditional society. A few of them will be cited here: the traditional Ikwerre society forbid a young girl of puberty age to climb trees, it was forbidden for women in traditional Ikwerre society to sing while cooking for their husbands, women are not allowed to eat certain types of foods in Ikwerre traditional society and so on.

(Nyeweali Omagwa, oral interview), admits that after a thorough thought by some well-meaning chiefs and elders of Ikwerre society, there has been a unanimous decision that the custom of women not climbing trees is limited and restricted to the confines of Ikwerre traditional society alone. Furthermore, over the years, such stringent and restricting laws against women in Ikwerre society have been reviewed; such that their effect/consequences for defaulters are minimal. The relaxation of such law was done with the consideration that women’s competency should not be measured with regards to their gender. This consideration is being made in line with fact that gender construction itself which involves the roles which women and men play in the society is dynamic meaning they change over time. Also, in line with the present reality of Nigerian’s economic situation, women’s roles in most society, just like that of the Ikwerre society of our focus here which traditionally is to take care of the household and children, while the role of the men is to provide for the family by working outside the home, have automatically changed and are constantly evolving. Customs that have negative effects on women is analyzed from gender perspective in present Ikwerre society to help eradicate the areas in which women experience human rights violation in present Ikwerre society. By so doing, hierarchical and unequal value relations and roles between men and women are explored to make it possible for UN human rights policies that are yet to be implemented to become fully domesticated in Ikwerre society.

Professionally Dissuaded

Women in Ikwerre traditional society were professionally dissuaded from engaging in certain careers perceived to either expose them to closeness to other men or denies them the time to perform their perceived roles of home keepers. Unemployment in Ikwerre society was thing of choice as most times women are discouraged from choosing any job that takes them away from the home which is considered to be their original place of work; where they take care of the home and everything that has to with the home front where they are saddled with cleaning, cooking, washing bearing and raising children. Apart from subsistent farming, any other job acquired by an Ikwerre woman is frowned at and discouraged; and so most women remained unemployed for fear of “abandoning” their assigned roles as mother and wife. This made them very selective in terms of work activities they got involved in. To this end, their choices in terms of when, where, and how to function in the work place without offending the existing laws of the land became of great concern. The UDHR declaration Article 23 Document 1 states that: Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and protection against unemployment. Similarly, the European Union Charter of the Fundamental Human Rights (EUFHR) article 15 document 1 states that: Everyone has the right to engage in work and to pursue a freely chosen and accepted occupation. But in recent times, with the aid the United Nations declarations on women which has aided the removal of cultural barriers that limit freedom and choices of work on the part of individuals, women in Ikwerre society now enjoy flexibility in choosing whatever type of work that best suits them.

3. Conclusion

The implementations of United Nations declaration on women in Ikwerre society have been gradual but steady. The paper has shown various ways in which some of those declarations have helped to lessen the yoke of patriarchy on women in Ikwerre traditional society. The latent and hidden ability of women suppressed by sexism has been liberated to a certain extent in Ikwerre traditional society of Rivers State. The opportunities given to the women by the influence of United Nations declaration have opened their minds to contribute meaningfully to their Ikwerre society and the nation at large.

4. Recommendations

The paper therefore recommends that:

The state government should do everything within her powers to eradicate all negative culturally postulated laws that seem to discourage the total development of women.

Women professionals in Ikwerre society should encourage other women especially those in rural societies to try out their hands in other modern fields as far as their level of education can carry them this will aid their self-esteem, dignity and integrity.

The government should be more intentional about the education of women because only when women are educated that a society can be fully developed.

Women in Ikwerre society should be encouraged to know their rights and be able to stand up to defend these rights in the face of culture and tradition.

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