

PRACTICES AGAINST WOMEN IN OHAFIA TRADITIONAL SOCIETY: CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

Despite the important roles women play in economic, political, religious, cultural, and social spheres and nation-building, they suffer a great deal from harmful socio-cultural and religious practices inherent in society and sustained by patriarchy. Women also suffer a great deal from health problems that are culturally bound. Aspects of Ohafia culture that are inimical to women's health and well-being have been identified. These include female genital mutilation, child marriage, obnoxious widowhood practices, taboos, preference for the male child, wife battering, and other forms of spousal abuse. The objective of this paper was to examine the impact of harmful socio-cultural and religious practices against women in Ohafia traditional society, which have hindered the positive contributions of women to sustainable development, thereby perpetually projecting Ohafia as a male-dominated society. The paper employed a historical survey method involving primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary source comprised information obtained from key persons' interview schedules and questionnaires, while secondary sources of data collection involved information obtained from journals, books, internet materials, and conference papers. The study adopted conflict theory as its theoretical framework. The paper found that women in Ohafia play significant roles by serving as part of the social capital in overall development, but these harmful practices have negatively affected and undermined such contributions, where women submit to patriarchy. The study concludes that these practices still flourish

despite the fact that campaigns against them have been taken to many rural communities. It therefore suggests that a high-level, community-based approach based on proactive campaigns and a legal policy framework will be a panacea if sustained and will reduce the harmful socio-cultural and religious practices to a lower level, since they cannot be eradicated completely.

Keywords: Harmful, Socio-cultural, Religious, Traditional, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

In South-East Nigeria, the Ohafia community in particular, women contribute a great deal to the totality of societal development and nation-building. This role is not a recent one; rather, it dates back to ancient times. Women play a more active role in the modern economic system and are being recognized as such. There are women business executives, bankers, lawyers, medical doctors, journalists, and engineers. The above contributions of women notwithstanding, women suffer a great deal from socio-cultural and religious practices. These include female circumcision, child marriage, widowhood practices, wife battering, rape, sexual taboos and exploitation, domestic violence, and preference for the male child over the girl child (Eghafona and Abiodun, 2003:249).

There is tension in society, as some of these practices have been identified as traumatizing and inhuman. Harmful socio-cultural and religious practices against women are sociological and cultural issues. Gender relations in society enthrone an egalitarian society and enhance economic, political, social, cultural, and even religious harmony in society. The challenges resulting from harmful socio-cultural and religious practices against women affect sustainable development (Ezera, 2013:135).

In Ohafia traditional society, as applicable to other communities in the South-East region, women allege that they do not have freedom of association like their male counterparts. They lack the right to own major property such as land, the right to inherit from their fathers and deceased husbands, as well as the right to traditional leadership or kingship of the community, in spite of the Supreme Court of Nigeria judgment in favour of women on this. In Ohafia community, the wife of a deceased husband is sometimes subjected to widowhood practices which are culture- and tradition-bound.

In a society dominated by men, there is an outcry over the serious imbalance in gender relations from women. Women in this society are seen to be oppressed based on culture, tradition, and religion, which include deprivation, domination, discrimination, exploitation, and injustice.

Ohafia is an Igbo group or clan of 26 villages and towns of varying sizes, most of which trace their ancestry to a common father called Uduma Ezema Atita. The traditional Ohafia society did not constitute a single centralized polity; rather, it was a composition of village republics united into a unique commonwealth, cemented by the people's pronounced matrilineal kinship descent system (Kalu, 2012; Nsugbe, 1974).

Geographically, Ohafia is located in the north of Abia State with a total landmass covering about 1,050 square miles or 400 sq. km (Uduma, 2000). Ohafia shares common boundaries

with Edda in Afikpo South LGA of Ebonyi State in the north, Ikwun and Biakpan in Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State in the east, Ihechiowa in Arochukwu Local Government Area in the south, and Igbere in Bende Local Government Area in the west. Demographically, Ohafia had a population of 245,144 in the 2006 population census and a projected population of about 502,000 in 2022 (Uduma, 2000; StatisticsTime.com, 2022).

Based on the foregoing, this paper examines the impact of harmful socio-cultural and religious practices against women in Ohafia traditional society: challenges to sustainable development in South-East Nigeria.

Problem of the Study

In many Nigerian societies, women are perpetually dominated by men despite their positive contributions to nation-building. Many aspects of their contributions to sustainable development in terms of education, economic contributions, and family income are continually relegated to the background and institutionalized through very obnoxious socio-cultural and religious practices, especially in South-East Nigeria. The 2022 International Household Survey Network reported that 82.1% of women in Nigeria actively participate in the informal sector, which is an essential source of livelihood for many households.

In Ohafia, the age-grade system, which is a major source of social capital, has seen women compete favourably with their male peers in infrastructural development, community mobilization, capacity building, and wealth creation (Ugwueje, 2021). Yet, these positive contributions are continually relegated due to institutionalized harmful socio-cultural and religious practices, which have made women continually perceive themselves as passive agents of sustainable development in Ohafia.

Inheritance, community membership, succession, and family authority, which are part of the indices of descent, have a very visible prevalence in Ohafia, where women are perpetually exploited through institutionalized discrimination. There are traces of the corporate existence of well-structured matrilineages, but they only play complementary roles in terms of inheritance, succession, and community membership (Onwuka, Uduka, Duru, Ogadinma & Nwaugo, 2022). There are many other obnoxious socio-cultural practices, including female genital mutilation, in spite of intensive campaigns against it by health experts; early girl-child marriage; obnoxious widowhood practices such as shaving the hair and drinking the water used in bathing the corpse of the deceased husband as proof of innocence in the husband's death; taboos that limit the human capacity development of the girl child and women; and preference for the male child over the girl child. These problems have affected the health and well-being of many women and have invariably denied recognition of the great contributions women have made to the development of many South-East societies in Nigeria, especially Ohafia in Abia State.

The objective of the study was to examine the impact of these harmful socio-cultural practices against women, which have projected Ohafia in Abia State, South-East Nigeria, as a male-dominated society where women do not make any contributions towards its sustainable development. This qualitative study identified and highlighted the indices of inheritance, succession, and family authority, and how the harmful socio-cultural practices have influenced women's rights to inheritance, succession to social positions and statuses, as well as authority in an average family in the South-East, especially Ohafia.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed research design that involved historical research and survey design. As a survey, the study afforded the researchers the opportunity to ask questions to research subjects in Ohafia who had insight into the indices of inheritance, succession, and family authority, which were selected to establish such harmful socio-cultural practices using interviews and focus group discussions. The historical research design was used to gather and integrate data from secondary sources and events in order to analyse such data with a view to determining its relevance and accuracy in identifying such harmful socio-cultural practices in Ohafia.

Study Instruments

Two qualitative instruments of data collection were used to obtain primary data for this study: key persons' in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). These two instruments were used to determine the degree of corroboration that could be established between the findings from both as a measure of the authenticity of such findings. Again, as a study of a simple society with a majority of non-literate and semi-literate indigenes, the use of such instruments, which permitted the use of the vernacular language, was considered imperative, while participant observation, oral tradition, and other literature formed part of the secondary instruments for data collection in this study.

Study Population

The population for this study comprised adult indigenes of the Ohafia community living at home. Adults, unlike children, have stayed long enough in the community and have acquired sufficient insight into the past and present cultural practices of the community. Purposively, however, the following four categories of people were studied: opinion leaders (male), opinion leaders (female), youths (male), and youths (female). Survey teams met these research subjects at their various locations in Ohafia and collected data for the study. There were twenty key persons (interviewees) and one hundred and sixty (160) FGD discussants, yielding a target population of one hundred and eighty (180) respondents.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The study adopted a multi-level sampling technique in which the 26 villages of Ohafia were clustered into four broad categories based on their kinship ties. Four villages—Elu, Asaga, Okon, and Akanu—were selected through simple random sampling from the four clusters. Furthermore, five key persons, including the village head (Ezeogo), were purposively sampled as interviewees from each of the four communities, while each FGD in the four categories had ten participants in each community.

Method of Data Analysis

This study, which made use of two qualitative instruments of data collection (interviews and focus group discussions), correspondingly generated qualitative data. The study adopted a verbatim transcription technique using QDA Miner software as the qualitative data analysis tool. Hence, the opinion of all, or the majority of, the respondents in an interview, or discussants in an FGD, was regarded as the popular opinion and formed the basis for

decision-making on the issue being analysed. Therefore, the opinions of three to five respondents in an interview session formed the basis for decision-making in favour of the issue at stake. Similarly, the opinions of six to ten discussants in an FGD informed the decision.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the class conflict theory of Karl Marx was adopted as the framework for this study, which aimed to explain the impact of harmful socio-cultural and religious practices against women in Ohafia traditional society as a challenge to sustainable development in South-East Nigeria.

Conflict Theory: Conflict theorists emphasize antagonism and conflict rather than consensus, and violent rather than peaceful change. In the views of Karl Marx, the father of conflict theory, until communism is instituted, no society can be in true equilibrium. For in all class societies, one class exploits the others. Exploitation creates conflict and violence and, eventually, social change. He contends that capitalism creates new social classes, new antagonisms, and new sources of conflict. These contradictions set the stage for yet another revolution and a higher stage of history. Overwhelming, irresolvable, and conflicting forces explode and propel society to a new and higher level of history. The final stage of history, communism, represents a kind of social plateau, a point where all conflicts have been resolved and social change and revolution are no longer needed (Goode, 1984).

The society is experiencing this problem, and this theory captures the basic arguments of this study well. The problem in society is the exploitation of some sections or classes by the dominant group, particularly the male-dominated class. No sociologist today would doubt the importance of conflict in social change and integration. In every society, as applicable to Nigeria, the South-East, and Ohafia in particular, social groups and classes compete with one another for scarce resources, often economic resources. Sometimes, this competition breaks out into overt violence. Most conflicts, however, usually involve peaceful demonstrations and protests, debates in the mass media, group agitations for economic or political control, electoral manoeuvring, lopsided political appointments, and the subversion of laws, which often end in the polarization of social groups. The target and product of conflict in Nigeria, particularly in the South-East and Ohafia, are usually peace-building, the review of resource allocation, the removal of all harmful socio-cultural and religious practices against women in society, and all other relevant processes that involve building a new consensus between men and women (Kalu, 2015).

Conceptual Issues on the Harmful Socio-cultural and Religious Practices against Women

This section of the paper examines the identified practices against women in Ohafia traditional society and includes the following:

1. Female Circumcision or Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Adebajo (1992:1) describes female circumcision as a traditional practice in which a person, sometimes unskilled or a health worker, cuts off part or all of the female external genitalia. Female circumcision is now largely known as female genital mutilation (FGM). However, because of its health consequences, female circumcision has been widely condemned. Female

circumcision is performed through a number of crude procedures, resulting in the excision (cutting) of part or all of the external genitalia (the area consisting of the clitoris and hood, labia minora (inner lips), labia majora (outer lips), and the vaginal opening).

Female circumcision, as it is traditionally called, has both long- and short-term health consequences. Because it is often carried out without anaesthesia, the short-term effect of the crude surgery is excruciating pain. Due to the bluntness of the instruments and the struggles of the women or girls, the cutting can injure major blood vessels and cause trauma to adjacent sexual organs. Bleeding can lead to shock and, in some cases, infection or sepsis through the application of herbs and other unhygienic surgical procedures and instruments (Uju, 2023).

The long-term effects of female circumcision, particularly infibulation, include the formation of scar tissue and cysts around the wound and stitch line, as well as the narrowing of the artificial vaginal opening. There is also pain during urination (painful urination). Infection of the vagina can lead to reproductive tract infections and chronic pelvic pain. Women who become pregnant endure additional agony since the artificial vaginal opening is too small for normal childbirth (Nwanyinma, 2023).

2. Widowhood Practices

According to Ezera (2013:144), widowhood is a state in which a woman enters after the demise of her husband. According to Eme (2004), there exists sustained unjust treatment of widows that violates the principles of human dignity, equality, and rights. A widow is compelled to shave her hair, wear black clothes, and refrain from bathing for days.

There are cultural, traditional, and religious rituals of widowhood that are dehumanizing and dangerous to the health of bereaved women. These women are forced to undergo some nefarious rituals and rites in the name of tradition and are subjected not only to physical but also mental abuse. At times, they are accused of being responsible for the deaths of their husbands. Findings from studies show that women are compelled to live in seclusion, wear only one dress (black or white) throughout the mourning period, normally one year, and, if suspected of being responsible for the death of their husbands, are compelled to drink the water used in bathing the corpse of the husband. This widowhood practice is oppressive to women (Kalu, 2013:145).

Widowhood is a cultural practice that affects women's health in Nigeria. This practice creates conditions that institutionalize the maltreatment of widows. Ahonsi (1997) noted that in African societies there are many cases in which widows have been deprived of their husbands' wealth and therefore have had to start life all over again.

3. Child Marriage/Forced Marriage

In many Nigerian societies, women tend to marry at a very young age or are forced to marry older men by their families, especially their parents. Often, these inexperienced women or young girls are married at the age of 16 or 17, and in some areas even at the ages of 12 or 13 years. A number of reasons are given for the practice of early marriage in various Nigerian societies. Poverty makes parents and family members eager to give out their underage girls in marriage and receive the bride price or be relieved of the burden of paying for the girl's food, education, clothing, and health care. Girls marry early because their families want to avoid the risk of illegitimate children (Grace, 2023).

According to Adebajo (1992), child marriage has negative effects on the psychological, physical, and social well-being of the young girl. Other consequences of child marriage are exacerbated pregnancy symptoms, chronic anaemia, obstructed labour, a higher risk of maternal and child morbidity, childbirth complications, prostitution, etc.

4. Pronounced Preference for a Male Child

In every African society, the male child is valued more than the female child. This practice is known as son preference. Generally, it is deeply rooted in African culture, Nigeria, Igboland, and Ohafia in particular. The practice plays a major role in the devaluing of female children vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Son preference originated from the practice of patrilineal kinship. It also originated from the need to have enough male children to work on their fathers' farms and businesses, as well as to assist in vital family economic pursuits. There are many cases where wives who are unable to give birth to male children are divorced by their husbands and their families. Such women are maltreated, dehumanized, marginalized, and abandoned (Kalu, 2015; Eghafona and Abiodun, 2003; Kindness, 2023).

This practice has some negative effects on women's health. The desire for male offspring often results in high rates of child mortality among young girls, untimely death of the mother, and emotional and psychological trauma arising from not having a male child or children. One of the psychological and health consequences for female children is that they grow up with low self-esteem, having internalized feelings of inferiority and worthlessness (Usman, 1999). This trend ensures that the cycle of inferiority continues because mothers pass the same feelings on to their children. One of the implications of son preference is that female children often suffer from discriminatory feeding practices during infancy and childhood. This affects their physical growth and can cause stunting. Whatever the root causes of son preference, wherever it is pronounced, the resulting discrimination against daughters begins very early in life. Whether the discrimination is conscious or not, if it is strong enough, it can have very serious consequences, especially for girls whose families are living a marginal existence (Smyke, 1991).

5. Female Forced Marriage (Ojonkijo)

Marriage is the social institution for the establishment of a family by a man and a woman who have agreed, by law and tradition, to be husband and wife (Kalu, 2022:10). Marriage is said to have been consummated when a man has paid the prescribed dowry or bride price to the family of the wife.

In some Igbo societies, a woman is regarded as an item to be inherited in the event of the death of her husband. This is called widow inheritance. This practice presupposes that a woman is forced to marry the brother of her late husband or any man in the family against her consent or wishes. In Igboland, marriage arrangements are made in such a way that they place the burden of women's lives and destinies in the hands of men (Agwu, 2023).

In Ohafia traditional society, wife or widow inheritance is not practised and is not part of Ohafia culture and tradition. The community rather practises what is called forced marriage. When a woman reaches a certain age and is unable to secure a husband, the society forces a man on her against her wishes by publicly conducting a traditional marriage and taking her to the man's house by force. This practice is called "Ojonkijo" marriage. It is a harmful socio-

cultural and religious practice that affects and infringes upon the fundamental human rights of women, particularly their right to choose a husband.

6. Denial of Rights of Inheritance

Ownership and control of family resources and wealth are usually allocated to male children in the event of the death of parents in Ohafia traditional society. The sons alone have rights of inheritance in the family because the daughters are believed to have been married into another family. This practice is strongly backed by the socio-cultural traditions and religious beliefs of the people. Under this cultural arrangement, a childless widow or a widow without sons may be given only a portion of land for agricultural purposes. She cannot dispose of or sell such land since, practically, the land belongs to the sons of the deceased husband or his brothers. If the deceased man has only female children, the land and other property are transferred to his brothers to hold in trust for the daughters. Thus, property jointly acquired by husband and wife is denied to the woman under the guise of culture, tradition, custom, and religious practices (Okoye, 1995; Ubaka, 2000; Kalu, 2015).

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study revolve around three indicators for measuring harmful socio-cultural and religious practices, which include inheritance, succession, and family authority in Ohafia, beyond the other harmful practices mentioned in the literature reviewed.

Inheritance, which is a determinant of descent and an integral aspect of the socio-cultural life of Ohafia, has been used as a tool for the continuous subjugation of women through socio-cultural practices, especially in denying them their due from their families of orientation and procreation, respectively. Women do not inherit from either their patrilineage or matrilineage. In response to the interview item, "Who inherits from a man or woman in this village/community after his or her death?", responses showed that it is either the deceased's brothers, maternal kins headed by a man, or male children who inherit, while only a paltry portion of the deceased's property is given to their sisters.

A key aspect of sustainable development is ensuring that the development needs of future generations are met. In the history of women's role in society, we find more patriarchal cultures. There is a persistent belief that women are somehow subordinate to men in the family, workplace, and society at large (Ferguson, 1999; Kingsley, 2008). However, below are the challenges to women's participation in sustainable development caused by harmful socio-cultural and religious practices.

1. **Patriarchy:** This is the organization of society in such a way that men hold the majority of the roles associated with social power. Patriarchy subjugates women. It is a social system in which the father or eldest male is the head of the household, having authority over women and children. It is also a system of government by males and the dominance of men in social or cultural systems. This vulnerability of women soon became an exploitable commodity. Males began to see women as property with value for trading and increasing their wealth through offspring. Within society, women were the property of their husbands, and crimes perpetrated against them were considered crimes against the husbands. The value of a woman was reduced to her ability to produce children and carry out her domestic duties. Many people still hold this worldview today (Martin, 1984).

Patriarchy places economic power in the hands of men. Igbo society has made it possible for economic power to remain mostly in the hands of men. Due to the patriarchal nature of society, economic power resides in the hands of men who work and earn substantial incomes, while women often do only menial jobs. It is clear that men control the economy, and many companies and establishments prefer male workers to female workers. Childbearing and child-rearing limit women's active participation in income-generating ventures (Ezera, 2013:154). Men use their economic power to control women. They provide for the needs of women, while women look up to them for the provision of those needs. This economic factor, perpetuated by patriarchy, is a major challenge to sustainable development, as it tends to subordinate, marginalize, and oppress women, thereby limiting their contribution to societal progress (Nnenna, 2023).

2. **Lack of Political Strength and Vision:** Women suffer from political illiteracy. They lack an ideological framework that could give strength to a collective position adopted by women. Women are politically disadvantaged and are not adequately represented in political decision-making processes. Men make the laws that tend to keep women perpetually marginalized and disadvantaged.
3. **Lack of Education, Exposure, and Skills in Negotiation, Advocacy, and Lobbying:** Women often lack the education, exposure, and skills required for negotiation, advocacy, and lobbying to change their social position in society and within the family. Women have traditionally been kept away from the political arena and decision-making processes; therefore, in many situations, they are unable to participate effectively.
4. **African Traditional Religion and Gender Relations:** In African traditional society, as applicable to Ohafia society, gender relations and gender construction are greatly influenced by various taboos relating to women's perceived uncleanness. Such taboos, including those relating to menstruation and childbirth, hinder women from participating in sensitive religious and cultural rituals and celebrations within their families and society. Ohafia community assigns certain duties exclusively to men and excludes women. For example, women are not allowed to pour libation, break kola nuts, or climb palm trees. Gender imbalance is perpetuated by religion, and religion serves as the repository and custodian of culture, social norms, and values. Therefore, the unequal distribution of roles in society is reinforced by religion.
5. **Lack of Social and Political Platform:** Without adequate social and political platforms, women remain on the margins of action and lack confidence in participating in sustainable development. Women lack the forum to organize and channel their sustainable development goals to the appropriate government and community authorities (Eunice, 2023).
6. **Lack of Resources (Material and Financial Support):** It is obvious that, most of the time, women's groups lack the resources to support their activities. In some instances, they lack media networks to promote their sustainable development goals and campaigns, and they lack the voice to speak against male dominance. They are not part of the major fundraising channels and networks and do not receive the same level of community support as their male counterparts.
7. **Lack of Visibility:** Women's contributions to sustainable development are confined largely to the informal sector and, very often, remain at the periphery of the official policymaking process. Women are relegated to the background and are not invited to

participate in the formal policymaking and implementation processes relating to sustainable development goals (Esther, 2023).

Conclusion

It is obvious that in African, Igbo, and Ohafia communities, women sometimes face dehumanizing treatment rooted in harmful socio-cultural and religious practices. In this paper, we have seen many aspects of the harmful practices meted out against women, which invariably affect their active participation in sustainable development goals. We have seen how female circumcision or genital mutilation, widowhood practices, wife battering/assault, infant/child marriage, forced marriage, son preference, restrictions on women over the tradition of breaking kola nuts, and witchcraft accusations affect women. The paper also noted that there were institutional challenges affecting the role of women in sustainable development, including patriarchy; lack of political strength and vision; lack of education, exposure, and skills; African Traditional Religion and gender relations (imbalance); lack of social and political platforms; lack of resources (material and financial support); and lack of visibility. All these factors have, in one way or another, impacted negatively on women's efforts to contribute their quota to sustainable development, thereby posing a challenge to the achievement of this goal.

While many aspects of Ohafia culture enhance healthy living and development, there are others that harm women and affect their health. These harmful socio-cultural and religious practices must be discontinued. Women's health is more affected by these cultural practices than that of their male counterparts. In fact, many women and girls have died as a result of these harmful practices. Based on this situation, governments at all levels, non-governmental organizations, and community-based associations have engaged in serious campaigns against harmful socio-cultural and religious practices against women. However, these combined efforts have not yielded the desired results. Considering the seriousness of the problem, more proactive efforts to combat the menace should be put forward.

This paper concludes that there is inequality, oppression, deprivation, discrimination, and marginalization against women, but it also believes that a high-level, community-based approach founded on proactive campaigns and legal frameworks will help curb the menace of harmful socio-cultural and religious practices in society.

Recommendations

From the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. There is a need to overcome the challenges hindering the development goals of society. Women need to take advantage of the transformative experiences of the twenty-first century and women emancipation programmes.
2. Government should promulgate laws that seek to ban all forms of harmful socio-cultural and religious practices and prescribe appropriate punishment for offenders.
3. Government should make use of the electronic media (radio and television) to educate the people on the harmful effects of negative cultural practices. The awareness campaign should be conducted in indigenous or local languages and should include drama, documentaries, lectures, and seminars aimed at educating rural dwellers on the need for and benefits of eradicating these social problems. The use of town criers for proper information dissemination on the dangers of harmful socio-cultural and

- religious practices should also be encouraged. The international community should support and facilitate the involvement of local women in sustainable development goals aimed at empowering women for a better society.
4. Empowering women through quality education and economic empowerment will help to reduce their overdependence on men for their livelihood.
 5. The application of religious ethics and morality will go a long way in transforming society for sustainable development.
 6. Socio-cultural and religious changes in the attitudes and orientation of the custodians of culture and tradition, who oppress, marginalize, subjugate, deprive, and discriminate against women, should be encouraged.

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