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Article

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SOCIO RELIGIOUS EVALUATION OF GENDER DISCRIMINATIONS IN IKOT ABASI LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA

Aniediabasi Okon Ekpatt

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Uyo

Email: okonekpatt@gmail.com

Abstract

Gender discrimination in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, is a pervasive issue deeply rooted in patriarchal cultural practices, norms, religious influences, and historical colonial disruptions. This systemic inequality manifests across socio-economic, political, and health domains, limiting the agency and development of Ikot Abasi women. Despite Nigerias constitutional guarantees against discrimination and commitments to international frameworks like the Convention on Eradicating of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), enforcement remain weak due to inadequate domestic implementation, lack of awareness, and persistent socio-cultural barriers. Politically, Ikot Abasi women face significant obstacles, including illiteracy and fragmented political agenda, which hinder their participation in decision-making processes. Economically, women have transitioned from restricted roles to becoming major contributors to agriculture. Culturally, traditional beliefs often confine women to domestic duties, reinforcing subservience and limiting their engagement in public life. The study adopted historical and survey research methods, and while data were collected from primary and secondary sources, interviews and focus group discussion were also used. The findings revealed that culturally, women are viewed as inferior to men and a male child is generally celebrated and allotted higher portions of properties. Some of these harmful cultural practices remain a serious problem and threat to women. It is true that women have great potentials that will impact positively on the society when properly harnessed. It is therefore important to create a level playing ground for both male and female, as the society will benefit very much if all hands are on deck to contribute to its welfare. The study concluded that all forms of inhuman cultural practices and discrimination perpetuated against women should be challenged if the society

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wants to protect the status of women for their contribution to the development in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area.

Keywords: Gender Mainstreaming, Gender Discrimination, Patriarchy, Ikot Abasi Local Government Area (LGA)

Introduction

Gender discrimination is acknowledged in many societies in Africa. It manifests particularly in specific cultural and religious contexts. In Ikot Abasi Local Government Area, located in the present-day Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, gender inequality is deeply intertwined with socio-religious frameworks that dictate societal organisation and individual opportunities. These differences in the opportunities of life found between men and women have made women in many contexts to bear a subordinate position. However, in Ikot Abasi the rights and opportunities accorded to women have never been at par with the rights and opportunities accorded to men. Unfortunately, regardless of the global commitment to eradicating gender discrimination and promote womens rights. They are still being marginalised and discriminated. Economically, women in Ikot Abasi have become very challenged as they are also discriminated, in matters of land ownership, acquiring of loans and credits.

The far-reaching effects of violating womens rights and discrimination against women have included the feminization of poverty (Agarwal, 1994) and gender-based violence. The discrimination against women are driven by many factors such as traditions, customs, as well as the religious laws that control behavioural patterns in society. These issues have led to gender inequality and have caused infringement on the rights and dignity of women in Ikot Abasi. This issue of gender is also socio-culturally cooked with taboos aiming at frustrating and suppressing elsewhere particular sex. Therefore, gender discrimination is widespread in religious, socio-cultural, political, economic and educational spheres in many cultures of the world. The global concern for gender discrimination and other human problems led to the 1948 United Nations Declarations of Human Rights which placed human beings as free born and equal in dignity and right, with freedom without distinction based on sexes. (Ekpo,1999). Accordingly, Spencer (1982), a sociologist, sympathised with women as suffering an ecological cultural prejudice because of their sex and culture. As Allpart (1954) noted, gender discrimination hostilely separates a person from a particular group. Discrimination makes a distinction which may either favor or oppose a person or thing in a group, not on basis of individuals attributes. It ignores individual merit or behaviour and makes its distinction on the basis of categories. Their enthusiasm for active participation in politics, and their creative and constructive ideas are most times ignored with impunity. Although, gender specific policies have been directed towards all classes of women in order to improve their standard of living and despite the giant strides of many women in their field of endeavours, especially in politics, Ikot Abasi society is still yet to adhere to gender inclusion and viewing women as inferior. Finally, Selassie (1994) saw women as victims of analytical terms used to distinguish between sex and culture; the resultant effect is the limitation of women development. The study attempts a socio-religious evaluation of gender discrimination in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area.

Statement of the Problem

In Ikot Abasi Local Government Area, just like in many other places in Nigeria, the socio-religious norms surrounding gender discrimination seems to perpetuate discriminatory practices that encourage men superiority over women. Some scholars such as Ekpo (1999),

Sibani (2014) Essien and Ukpong (2012) and many more have used words like frail, passive, weak and child factory to describe women. More so greater percentage of women in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area has been denied the right to inheritance from their late parents and husbands. Women are discriminated against even in religious setting. Most Churches in Ikot Abasi are not helping matters in this situation. For instance in Wings of Redemption Ministry, the Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church Nigeria, some men and women have castigated and criticized women placed in leadership positions. They also teach women to be silent and only to seek answers from their husbands at home. These deprivations erode their enthusiasm in areas of national development. Issues such as, wife battering, acid attack, domestic violence, widowhood rites, polygamy, early marriages are but a few of the forms of abuse that women in society are faced with. Indeed, the status of women over the years in Ikot Abasi has been of great concern and interest that require serious attention. Therefore, the researcher views these socio-religious discriminations very seriously and considers them as issues that could be addressed. Women are created in Gods image and should not be enslaved and subjugated to the dictates of male chauvinists.

Objectives of the Study

- i. analyse the perception of women in Ikot Abasi traditional society in the light of the socio- culture of patriarchy
- ii. examine the socio-religious causes of gender discrimination in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area
- iii. assess the Implications of gender discrimination in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area
- iv. proffer solutions and possible recommendations to socio religious Implications of gender discrimination in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area

Theoretical Framework

Social Theories of Gender Relations: The study adopted The Structural Functional Theory and the Postmodernist Theory which have proactively influenced gender discriminations.

The Structural-Functional Theory sees role of women in the family as expressive- providing warmth, security, emotional support and stabilization of male adult personalities. The need to take care of children and generally care for the members of the family, establishes the fact that the womans primary place in society is the home. To Parson (1955), gender differences help to integrate the society. This is accomplished through the fact that different family roles complement each other in family units. Distinctive socialization is therefore required for the two sexes to stamp appropriate gender identity and impart skills needed for adult life. Thus boys are told that it is feminine to cry why girls are told that tree climbing is masculine. Boys are meant to be competitive while girls must be co-operative. These differences are very opposite. Freud (1973) for instance, saw women as men without penises who envied men for possessing one. Cixious (1981) has described this as phallocentric and male-dominated language. She maintained that women must rise up to assert themselves in learning and discoveries so as to unlock in society a sexuality that is just as much feminine as masculine. Oakley (2002) berated Talcotts notion of the expression of the role of women as an example of the intrusion of Western male-dominance ideology into scientific analysis.

The Postmodernist Theory contends that women subordination results from the cultural construction of who a man or woman is. It argues that the use of word and language affect our psyche on the definition of men and women. They points to the effectiveness of the capacity of language to shape our thoughts and desires. Postmodernist conceptions of why

women are oppressed has been criticized for neglecting the social context of power relations and failing to recognize the systematic oppressions of gender, class and race (Walby,1992). These theories point to the fact that, despite some infiltration from the western education or modernization, gender roles are still mostly specified by culture and that gender discrimination is still present in this contemporary time.

Perception of Women in the Traditional Ikot Abasi Local Government Area.

Ikot Abasi culture, just like many other cultures in Nigeria is saturated with practices of male dominance. In the traditional and social circles, one can easily perceive strong tides of patriarchy. The male preference is deeply rooted in the culture of Ikot Abasi. The man is regarded as the head of the family. Men assumed headship in traditional structures in the villages and in the clans. This traditional relegation of women in the political institutions in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area today significantly, in that not many women are in leadership position in the political sphere. Despite the importance attached to balanced political system by which men and women should be given equal and level playing ground in the global political landscape. Women in Ikot Abasi, continue to suffer marginalization in the political landscape.

It is on the basis of the awful marginalization of women that prompted Umoh (2000) to say that Ikot Abasi political culture has not given room for more women entrenchment and structures. Women are perceived as part of mens property. Hence, a man is free to marry as many women as he can afford, whereas, a woman is not expected to have a friend beside her husband. This gender preference and disposition to male sex informs the belief that a man can do anything that pleases his sexual ego and satiates his manly desires whereas a woman cannot. Also, there is gender disparity during the distribution of property among members of the family in traditional Ikot Abasi society. While men are given shares of their fathers property, women are not considered. This could be attributed to the perception of women, and general belief that men are more important than the women in the society. Another area where there is a display of patriarchal proclivities among the Ikot Abasi people is in the institution of marriage. As rightly pointed out by Essien and Ukpong (2012), to boast the ego of men in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area, the man is expected to bear the cost of getting marriage alone. Sadly, the average cost implication for getting a wife is approximately one million naira for low income people, an amount which an average man cannot earn in a year; such a high bride price keeps women in constant subjugation to men.

In the Traditional African imagery, marriage seems to be the proper womens end goal, she must be meek and humble, not speak when men speak, never challenge his authority, and never look into the eye of her husband or leader because that would be highly disrespectful. These are as a result of misplaced information. Women are not really being treated as second class citizens; rather women see themselves as inferior to men. This is what the society made them to believe by according men more prestigious post than women. Women become dependent on the male counterpart economically and financially as a result of the orientation that they should be under men. Oluwagbemi-Jacobs & Uduma (2015) disagreed with the views that evaluate women as second rate or persons that play the second fiddle. Nzegwu (2004) maintained both males and females are expected to be industrious and to excel. Asuch women should not be treated differently in our society. This oppression of women often encourages domestic violence as the men wrongly consider the woman as their talking furniture. Another area where women have been relegated in the traditional Ikot Abasi society is in religious sphere. Women are denied significant roles in the shrines and the cultic activities of the traditional religion. This perception has been

adequately adumbrated by Essien and Ukpogong (2012) who explained that in a traditional set up, it is a taboo to think of women leading or being in charge of community shrine. The common religious ritual is the pouring of libation, a form of invocation and imploration of the ancestors for blessings and protection. No woman can dare to attempt to perform this ritual, even if she is the eldest and most religious in the community.

Cases of Gender Discrimination in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area

The plight of women in Ikot Abasi traditional society is also not a consoling one. Here women are not permitted by tradition to chant incantation, offer sacrifices, pour libation and give offerings. Few women of Ikot Abasi origin are Priestesses of *Ibok, Idiong, Nyama, Ndem*. The few so chosen are based on the decision of the ancestors. Contrarily men set up temples, altars and shrines at their own will for them to communicate with the ancestors. Also, many totems in Ikot Abasi cannot be sacrificed by women. They are strictly reserved for men and the patrilineal ancestors (Ekong, 2001). In many families, the birth of a male child is celebrated more than that of a female child. A male child is valued more than a female child to the extent that a man that has only female children is not only mocked but is seen as weak and not active. Male children are treated and most valued than the female children, and they are exempted from certain house chores such as sweeping, cooking and so on. Odusanya (2023) in collaboration with this observation in the original post, it is unthinkable for a boy child to involve himself with household chores or to be seen to help his sisters in the kitchen, to do so would be interpreted to mean that he is becoming less a man and might even be mocked by his peers

Causes of Gender Discrimination in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area

The sufferings of women in the hands of men are as old as creation. Ikot Abasi women are all born into a system that accepted violence against women and abuse as a normal type of socio-discrimination, trampling on their dignity and self esteem (Ekpo, 1999). Religion and culture are the cause of gender discrimination in Ikot Abasi. Traditional religion projects the men as the head and women as second class, consequently, 90% of leadership positions are given to men. (Sibani 2003). The rules and regulations of the society are formulated by these men in authority who arrogated this power and advantage for themselves to the detriment of the women. The men in authority (priest) made all the people to believe that all their pronouncements, particularly against women are from the gods and that any disobedience would incur punishments by the same gods. Socio-culturally, women in Ikot Abasi are traditionally socialized to stick to their husbands, suffer in silence and endure everything for the success and unity of the family. Men and women are brought up and socialized differently; the men are socialized to take advantage of superior opportunities while women are socialized for lesser positions in the society. In most cases, the socialisation process promotes social inequalities between men and women. This has led to women subordination not only within the family but also in the entire Ikot Abasi society.

The cultural bias in favour of men saps Ikot Abasi women of their confidence in their own ability and limits their accomplishments for self- actualization. It is crystal clear that from the beginning, if Ikot Abasi women had economic strength they would logically resist their inferior social status. In villages in Ibibio society there is an abundance of women, depending on men for their livelihood. In a personal interview with Nsebom Ineme (Pers comm)(2024, September 26) in his palace, he confirmed that even when a woman struggled to gather some wealth, the men would level false accusations on the woman and domineeringly impose a fine on her to deplete and scatter all her wealth. The traditionalists would misinterpret the fine

imposed to reflect a demand from the gods. The researcher was further told that, traditional economic sanctions such as prohibition of women from certain farms on certain days, laboring for men many days of the week, men imposing ownership on all the womens domestic livestock, offering all eggs laid at night to the gods reinforced the already bad economic situation of Ikot Abasi women. Any legal system takes into serious consideration the culture of the people and their religion.

In Ikot Abasi land, the customary law which deprives women of certain privileges like inheritance, land ownerships, naming their children after them, breaking of kola nut for men and others originated from the system of Religion. Ikot Abasi women are rendered economically disadvantaged when they are denied land ownership through inheritances, an injunction given by traditional priest and said to come from the gods. Female children are often subjected to early marriage. Women often times become the victims of violence and sexual assault both at work and home and our culture is not helping matters. Poverty makes women to do low paid job and depend more on male. As a result of poverty, most women got involved in prostitution and child trafficking. Therefore, the root cause of discrimination and violence against women is religion. What is seen in the modern Ikot Abasi society is a reflection of the peoples deep belief in their religion.

Implications of Gender Discrimination in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area

Our society through the ages has been dominated by men. This according to Fried (1980) is a situation in which men have highly preferential access to those activities which the society accords the greatest value. Human endeavour is largely directed and determined by culture. Thus, male dominance is regarded as a norm, value and a role to be passed down. Against this Ekpo (1999) posited that ancient civilization placed women in minor and inferior positions. Akpan (2000) posited that in Ikot Abasi, widows have no right to their late husbands property except she has a male child to the husband. A widow who remarried forfeits the right to her late husbands property. If she is too old to remarry, she can thus be allowed to remain in the family and attach her inheritance rights to those of her sons. This is in total disregard of the widows joint or independent contribution to the acquisition of the property. The culture in most parts of Nigeria is homogenous, especially the Ibibio culture which is socially constructed under customary laws and traditions. Widows are treated as properties to be inherited by their brother-in-laws in order to prevent them from inheriting the property or estates of their deceased husband. (Ekong ,2001). In the traditional judicial system the male is the legal boss who presides over legal matters at home and in the community. He could lay false accusations of infidelity or disrespect on his wife, most times, with no repercussions. When the family court is set to try the case, it is the oldest man in the family who presides over the case. Oftentimes, women are found guilty simple because of the gender regulations propounded by men. (Sibani 2014)

In an oral interview, Obong Sampson Akpan (Pers. Comm.) (2024 September 17) in his office highlighted some socio-cultural taboos meted on Ikot Abasi women. A woman is not allowed to sit in the midst of men with legs crossed. She is not to hit the table in anger while talking with a man. A stubborn and dishonest child in Ikot Abasi culture is named after the mother because the culture believes that his/her misbehaviour is the mothers fault. After marriage, a woman is required to quickly take on her husbands name and surname and her husband is also at liberty to change her first name if he desires. Socio-culturally, female gender is constructed by men to undermine the position of women in global issues. The fate of a woman is most times determined by the men around her. Gender discrimination in Ikot Abasi

Local Government Area from the socio-cultural point of view originates from religion. The traditional and cultural life of any society is determined by their belief system (Akpan, 2000).

Political Implications of Gender Discrimination in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area

Empirical evidences from the works of scholars around the world are replete with a common theme of domination of women by men in the socio-political and economic scheme of things. According to Nmah (2003) and Sibani (2003) “increasing domination of women by men has several varied theoretical underpinnings”. On the one hand, women are less represented in politics due to persistent cultural stereotypes, abuse of religious and traditional practices. In the same vain, this is related to the kind of societal social structures in operation at a particular point in time. In most societies in Nigeria (Ikot Abasi inclusive), economic, political and social structures are strategically dominated by men and the women have been largely subjected to the roles of second fiddle in the affairs of things. Agbalajobi (2010) contended that the discrimination against women in terms of participation and representation in politics is universal and has long historical standing dating back to the ages. Substantiating his claims, Nmah (2003) posited that, discrimination is not simply an African or Nigerian phenomenon but a global one. The only difference is that, in this part of the world, the move towards gender equality is very slow as compared to the developed countries. For instance, in some courts and police stations in Nigeria, women who propose to stand for as sureties for accused persons to secure bail are routinely disqualified simply because they are women. For the fact that democracy and its principles of freedom are the most cherished dictum in the world over, it appears that the values of democracy are is still largely elusive in Africa (Ikot Abasi inclusive). At the same time, it can be adduced that political participation which is a sine qua non of democracy and allows for diverse interest and representation of both men and women cannot effectively thrive when women are excluded from the scene. Drawing from the above excerpts, socio- discrimination against women in Ikot Abasi has its root in the character and content of our social milieu which prefers to celebrate the male folk as unique beings, fit for the public space and down play women as weak, feeble minded and so, reserved for domestic purpose only. This tendency has gone several miles in disfiguring the apparent role of women in politics, thereby according them low level of participation and representation in the 21st century politics.

Economic Implications of Gender Discrimination in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area

There is economic implication of gender discrimination against the female gender in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area. The colonial era did not allow women into the labour force and did not permit them to earn wages, take credits, loans or acquire land. According to Ekpo (1999), in most clans in Ikot Abasi, women lack access to power and resources to improve their lives. Globally women own about 19.9% of agricultural in developing countries, and produce about 10% of food in many developing countries. They earn 10% of income (NDHS, 2023). They are the sole bread winners in one third of the world families. Subsequently, in many parts of Nigeria, the majority of farmers are women and they produce over three quarters of the food but in return receive less than 10% credits. (2023). In Ikot Abasi, the situation is the same as regards womens economic fate (Ekpo, 1999). In a personal interview with Obong Uyanya Ekpo (Pers.Comm.)(2024, September 12), in his office he confirmed that the economic fate of women has not changed. The economic situation in Ikot Abasi and other cultures is sexist with bias, prejudice, favoritism and subordination directed towards the women. Ikot Abasi women contribute significantly to the upkeep of the family; unfortunately, their economic power is limited and controlled by men. Greater wealth is accumulated in Ikot Abasi through land and

palm fruit cultivation, both of which are acquired through purchase or inheritance. Discriminatory practices in Ikot Abasi land do not give room for female inheritance and the purchasing power of the land is not open to women.

Educational Implications of Gender Discrimination in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area

Education according to Peretomodic (1992) is a way through which a society ensures its stability by making people learn expected behaviour and rules of polity. It is the contribution of a community towards the growth process of new entrants into the community, to equip them for new challenges and requirements. It is the transmission of the cultural heritage of the past to successive generations. Education, be it formal or informal, transmits values, norms, customs and traditions from generation to generation. The values transmitted are determined according to sex and gender. Against this educational discrimination gap, the Beijing platform of Action called for equal enrolment of girls and boys in primary and secondary schools by the year 2005. Ikot Abasi women are not exempted in educational discrimination. A survey of local men and women in Ikot Abasi shows that more men can read and write than the women because they were forced into early marriage and denied the opportunity to go to school (NDHS 2023).

Conclusion

The researcher has established that there is gender discrimination against women in Ikot Abasi and that it originates from religion and culture. It has affected the religious, socio-cultural, economic, political and educational status of women. Men and women do not have equal opportunities to contest for important positions in some churches for example Roman Catholic, Methodist Church Nigeria and Wings of Redemption in Ikot Abasi. Even many parents in Ikot Abasi also do not give equal rights of inheritance to males and females. Few women are allowed to be members of the village councils but they have no right to be the village head. It has also been established that the low economic status of women in Ikot Abasi is due to gender discrimination which originates from traditional religion. Land, as a major factor of production and economic wealth in Ikot Abasi is mostly controlled by men, palm plantations, raffia are owned by men. Rental and land tenure system do not favour Ikot Abasi women because of the laid down rules of religion in Ikot Abasi. Similarly, in politics, although women have shown great capacity and efficiency, they are not sincerely encouraged by the men and not given fair chances to compete. In the reigning politics of violence it is even more difficult for women to participate. Gender discrimination is largely responsible for the lack of active women participation in politics particularly in Ikot Abasi therefore; Government should institute educational programmes that favour women and female education.

Recommendations

- i. Religious leaders and institutions should create more awareness through teaching, seminars and workshops on the implementation of socio- religious discriminations against women in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area.
- ii. Traditional leaders, Government both State and Local Government levels should enact laws to protect women against harmful practices which encourage violence. Women therefore should report cases of traditional cultural practices which involve violence to appropriate law enforcement agencies. Women should put away aggressive behaviors which trigger violence from men.
- iii. Women should not be timid and shy but brave and courageous. They should be bold and ready to face challenges and team up with one voice in all matters affecting them in Ibibio

land. Sectionalism, tribalism and personal conflicts should be shunned in favour of unity, collective concern and collaborative efforts. The few women who are favourably disposed should master and table the problems of women whenever there is an appropriate opportunity to do so.

- iv. Government should do more in creating awareness on women participation on politics by creating a level ground for both men and women in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area. Husbands should allow and encourage their wives to take part in politics. Political meetings should be held by politicians in the day time to enable women attend such meetings. Nocturnal meetings should be avoided as women do not like to be out at night for safety reasons.
- v. Local Government Area should institute educational programmes that favour women and female gender

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